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Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut

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His final descent into treachery was problematic and needs little scrutiny here. Indeed Martin reserves but a few pages to address the actual betrayal at West Point. By 1780 the Revolution had reached its nadir, and Arnold himself had discarded its ideals. With his commitment to virtuous service completely eroded, he forsook the cause to which he had dedicated so much energy. Therein lies the true tragedy of Benedict Arnold.

COLE C. KINGSEED
Colonel, U.S. Army

Shenk, David. *Data Smog: Surviving the Information Glut*. San Francisco, Calif.: Harper Edge, 1997. 250pp. \$24

For most of history, the quest for knowledge and its component, information, promised to improve the quality of people's lives. In this century many in the national security community have come to believe that more information will increase the quality of policy makers' decisions. But is information *power*? Shenk argues that technology has increased the amount of information available to such an extent that very little of it is of any use. Scholars, researchers, and decision makers can become stricken with "analysis paralysis"—either swamped in too much information that is of too little use, or forever waiting for the next piece of information to come in before taking action or making a decision. Shenk is not antitechnology but rather a technoskeptic: technology allows us to do what we do faster and in more abundance, but not always better. Technology does

not fix systemic organizational problems; applying it as a cure-all increases implementation costs and does not lead to solutions of management difficulties. Moreover, it is not a substitute for sound thinking and good policy.

For the first time in history, then, increasing the amount of information is not the automatic solution to a problem. While this book is written for a general, almost "pop," audience, it should be of interest to crisis decision makers and the intelligence community in particular. It is written in easy-to-understand, conversational language, which makes the author's points easy to generalize to other contexts.

What the book lacks, however, is a satisfactory suggestion for dealing with today's increase of information. The author suggests limiting our overload by decreasing our use of technology (the Internet, e-mail, faxes, etc.) to gather information, and increasing the amount of time set aside for reflection about a *reasonable* amount of data. This is a good start, but what is needed to deal with "data smog" is more rigorous thinking *about* the information and where a given piece of information "fits." In short, we need better theory and policy regarding what is being observed, sought, and so on. Pieces of information are like grains of sand—you should not need to see each grain to know that you are on a beach, and you should not need to see each grain to know that there will be high and low tides on that beach. We can know these things because we have a general theory of the sea. The result is the development of "rules of thumb," or shortcuts to information, which speed up its evaluation and interpretation and

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thus prevent analysis paralysis. Policy makers and commanders in the field do not need all the information that technology affords them, because, as Shenk points out, beyond a certain level of information the quality of the decision product diminishes. Increasing information results in a need for better frameworks for evaluating that information. *Data Smog* provides

little insight toward developing them; nonetheless, it is a helpful book for identifying information overload and its consequences, as well as an important first step toward solving the problem.

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