The Internet Is Thin

Idea In Short

Stop mistaking access for expertise. The internet is infinitely wide and an inch deep, so first-result knowledge collapses under two sharp questions. Since everyone holds the same flat data, competitive advantage lives in depth: build a point of view and publish evergreen content that compounds.

Life Before the Flood

Generation X remembers life before the internet, when 1994 marked a pivot: a crappy job, serious career angst and the dawn of unlimited information through the early Netscape browser, followed by homemade websites on GeoCities. It is almost cliche to say information and data are valuable, and yet now they are entirely free. What was rare became abundant. The pre-internet world demanded different muscles. Legendary fund manager Peter Lynch built his investment approach on primary research, visiting shopping malls and calling people to vet his theses, grit disguised as method.1 Ordinary analysts trekked to libraries to look up interest rate data for regression models. Anachronistic now, and instructive then: scarcity forced depth.

Information Carbs

Now that search engines have cataloged most human information, how much smarter have we become? We hold infinite access to facts, rumors and lies on every device. When a flood ravages Bangladesh, we know. When someone in our hometown gets arrested, we hear. When a stranger across the world divorces, we somehow have an opinion. The consumption pattern is high frequency and low involvement, information carbs: minimal nutrition, hyped energy, a dopamine spike and the inevitable crash. The volume statistics defeat any hope of keeping up. Hundreds of hours of video upload to YouTube every minute, a ratio that guarantees you will never drink the internet faster than it pours. Words like plethora and cornucopia are too small for this. Think hyperinflation, avalanche, deluge. And as in

monetary hyperinflation, the flood destroys value rather than creating abundance.

Noise Without Signal

Raw data is useless on its own. The United States tax code runs to thousands of pages, and the mortgage documents on a house exceed 300, and what do they really tell a reader? A bathtub full of junk mail communicates almost nothing. The Economist has noted that nearly 60 percent of email is spam. The signal-to-noise ratio keeps deteriorating precisely because publishing costs fell to zero, which means the scarce resource is no longer information. The scarce resource is the judgment to filter it.

Frail Knowledge

None of this argues for Luddism, because the post-internet world is obviously better in countless ways. The honest charge is different: abundance made many of us lazy thinkers. As Kevin Kelly explains in The Inevitable, we skim rather than read.2 We settle for the obvious answer, search result number one. We know the what without the why or the context. The result is frail knowledge, brittle and decorative. Two sharp questions from a boss, an executive or a spouse, and the confident answer collapses into I don't know. The strategic implication follows directly. If strategy means creating a set of activities that produce sustainable competitive advantage, the internet is not that. Everyone has access to infinite flat data, so flat data confers zero advantage. Look elsewhere.

Wide as an Ocean, Deep as a Puddle

Hence the thesis worth repeating to students and friends: the internet is infinitely wide and expanding, and only about an inch deep. Most of the web exists to sell you something, entertain you or persuade you. A seismic assault on expertise runs alongside, with growing disdain for scholarship and science, which should concern everyone. When websites chase page views, the incentives produce listicles and slideshows engineered for clicks, and what bleeds leads. Depth does not pay the advertising bills, so depth migrated elsewhere, to books, journals, communities of practice and the minds of people who still read slowly.

Reading for Depth in a Skimming World

Countering thinness begins with consumption habits, not just production. Trade ten shallow

articles for one long-form piece read completely, with notes. Follow the citations in anything important, because the second layer of sources is where skimmers stop and experts begin. Re-read the handful of books that shaped your field, since repetition builds the structural knowledge that single passes cannot. Ask the why and the under-what-context questions of every claim before repeating it, and be willing to answer I am still working that out, which is what honest depth sounds like in progress. An hour of this reading daily compounds into exactly the expertise the thin web cannot provide, and it costs less than the scrolling it replaces.

Have a Point of View

The personal response to thinness is depth, displayed in public. Everyone within reach gets the same cajoling: start a blog, start a podcast, do anything that forces you to create content and put it on display. As Seth Godin often says, ship art.3 Writing in public proves cathartic and fun, connects you to a wider audience and burns curiosity as fuel. It also builds the one asset the flood cannot devalue: a documented point of view.

Create Evergreen Content

Rather than pinging around the latest news, write, publish or record work with three-to-five-year value, assets that reflect your thinking. Prompts to start: How would you advise current clients to guard against Amazon? If you interviewed the five most provocative people you know, what would they say? What are you working on that could produce a fivefold difference in output? When did you last fundamentally change a long-held belief, and why? What would your one-page cheat sheet of career advice say? What broad topic could you write about for three years and rank among the best in the world? Which search term would you want to own? How would you legally earn 50,000 dollars in side income?

The conclusion is more encouraging than the diagnosis. You are more of an expert than you think. Get your thoughts on paper and own your content. The next time someone asks what you are passionate about, show them a portfolio instead of waving your hands. Depth is scarce, which makes it valuable, which makes it yours to build.

- 1Peter Lynch
- 2The Inevitable
- 3Seth Godin

Summary

Data hyperinflation destroyed information's scarcity value while making thinkers lazy. Skimming produces frail knowledge that shatters under questioning. The durable response is depth: own a topic, publish evergreen work and build a portfolio that proves expertise better than any claim of passion.