Watch Your Information Diet

Idea In Short

Author Clay Johnson's information diet concept draws a direct parallel between abundant, cheap food and abundant, cheap information: both are easy to over-consume mindlessly, and both carry real consequences when consumed without discipline. Applying that lens to how people follow politics and current events reveals just how much of daily information intake is engineered for engagement rather than genuine understanding.

Voting as a Civic Habit

Participating in elections is a basic civic right worth exercising consistently, even while acknowledging that national and state elections often accomplish less structural change than campaign rhetoric suggests, functioning partly as marketing and partly as the ongoing allocation of resources among competing interest groups.1 That mix of civic duty and healthy skepticism about outcomes is not a contradiction; both can be true at once.

A Striking Incumbency Pattern

Public approval of national legislatures in the United States has often sat in a strikingly low range, yet the same voters who express broad frustration with the institution as a whole tend to re-elect their own individual representative at a remarkably high rate, sometimes exceeding ninety percent. That gap between institutional disapproval and individual re-election consistency has drawn considerable analysis from political scientists and journalists alike, who point to name recognition, incumbency advantages and structural factors as partial explanations.

Gerrymandering and Its Disputed Effects

District boundaries drawn to concentrate voters of one political affiliation, commonly called gerrymandering, is frequently cited as a contributing factor behind polarized, safe districts

where a general election carries relatively little competitive uncertainty. Some odd, irregularly shaped districts illustrate the practice vividly. Whether this fully explains incumbent success rates remains genuinely debated among analysts; some researchers argue structural factors matter less than name recognition and fundraising advantages, while others view district design as a primary driver, and reasonable people continue to disagree on the relative weight of each factor.

Political Coverage Runs Shallow

A common observation among careful thinkers is that mainstream political coverage across print, television and radio often stays only surface-deep, favoring simplified narratives over the root-cause analysis genuinely complex problems require. Solving complicated, cross-cutting policy problems typically demands agreement on end goals, real listening across disagreement, and a willingness to accept shared sacrifice, none of which fits neatly into a short broadcast segment or a viral headline.

Food and Information Share a Structural Problem

Author Clay Johnson's information diet concept draws the parallel directly: food and calories have become abundant and cheap, which often produces mindless eating and, at scale, measurable public health consequences. Information follows an almost identical pattern, abundant, cheap and easy to over-consume without any real nutritional value.2 News outlets frequently cater primarily to an existing audience's expectations, social media platforms are engineered to maximize engagement rather than understanding, and sensational content reliably outperforms nuanced content because it more effectively triggers fear, anger, disgust or outrage.

Empty Calories, Empty Information

Just as not all food carries equal nutritional value, not all information carries equal intellectual value. Consuming only information that already confirms an existing worldview functions like a diet of empty calories, filling but not genuinely nourishing. Responsibility for that intake ultimately rests with the individual consuming it, which means actively seeking out well-reasoned, challenging material rather than passively accepting whatever an algorithm happens to surface.

Building Genuinely Critical Habits

A disciplined information diet means staying willing to challenge assumptions, including the assumptions of recognized experts, and pushing consistently toward root causes rather than settling for a surface-level explanation that merely feels satisfying in the moment. Negative political advertising, a durable feature of campaign strategy precisely because it reliably works on audiences, offers a useful daily reminder of how much persuasive content is optimized for emotional reaction rather than accurate understanding.

Applying the Discipline Beyond Politics

The same information-diet discipline applies well beyond elections and news coverage. Professionals evaluating a market opportunity, a competitor's strategy or an internal proposal face an identical temptation: reaching for the first plausible-sounding explanation rather than digging toward the actual root cause, and gravitating toward data that confirms an existing hunch rather than data that might genuinely challenge it. Building the habit of pausing to ask what evidence would change a conclusion, rather than only seeking evidence that supports one already reached, transfers directly from how a person consumes news to how that same person makes decisions at work.

Holding Complexity Without Collapsing It

A well-known novelist once observed that the test of a genuinely first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind simultaneously while still retaining the ability to function effectively.3 That capacity, tolerating real ambiguity rather than collapsing every issue into a simple binary, may be the single most practical skill a disciplined information diet ultimately builds.

- 1Voter Turnout
- 2Information Overload
- 3F. Scott Fitzgerald

Summary

Abundant, cheap information invites the same mindless over-consumption abundant, cheap food does, and both carry real costs. Watching an information diet as deliberately as a food diet, seeking depth over sensationalism, is a discipline worth building for anyone who wants to think clearly about complex problems.