

Are You Cultivating Knowledge, or Just Consuming Information? by Gregory Ciotti

Quality output demands quality input.

As healthy food fuels the body, so does brain food fuel the mind. Garbage in, garbage out as they say.

Amidst the “sky is falling” debates over how TV and the Internet are making us mindless drones, this is the real issue to keep in mind — we need to be cultivate more than we consume.

It’s an important concept worthy of regular revisiting.

To begin, let’s explore a theatrical look on what is at stake when we don’t take our information diet as seriously as our nutritional diet.

Drowning in a Sea of Irrelevance

Below is a visual adaptation of passages found in the book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

Comic: by the wonderfully talented Stuart McMillen, the artist who was also behind *Supernormal Stimuli*. You should subscribe to Stuart’s newsletter to hear about new comics he has coming out in 2014.

More Diving In, Less Checking In

The principle of evaluating how we spend our time is sound, but the discussion these days often mirrors the prose above.

It is exaggerated, and more closely resembles a doomsday prediction than actual advice.

What's left out is the fact that emerging technologies are a double-edged sword. Whether the internet is a mindless distraction or the greatest educational tool ever invented is all in how you use it.

To be clear, there is a real risk in “excessive passivity” — the habit of merely consuming information put in front of you, rather than actively cultivating knowledge in areas that are valuable to you.

But addressing this problem can be done in a much more pragmatic way. Consider it a habit audit, or an honest look at how you are spending your time.

In Steven Covey's bestseller *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, he describes this as evaluating your Circle of Control vs. your Circle of Concern.

The idea is that you should be seeking out relevant, useful information that you will apply to your life far more often than you let random information interrupt you.

The Circle of Control is anything that relates directly to you; situations where you influence the outcome, like the skills you build, the projects you create, or the habits you engage in. Basically, information that improves how you spend your time.

It places emphasis on your attention as a valuable, limited resource, and something you should guard as such.

If you give it away freely, you may develop the “fear of missing out” that causes mindless interaction with information that isn't relevant to you.

Consider the news. While trying to stay updated on current events is a noble goal for any citizen, think about what you give the news, and what it gives back — you give your attention, energy, time, and emotional reactions, all for information that you can rarely utilize.

What some scandalous politician did in a country you don't even live in may creep into your Circle of Concern, draining your focus via an issue that you cannot use later in any meaningful way. Put simply, 99% of what you will see won't matter to you.

Compare that to time spent cultivating knowledge on a topic you care about, or on a skill you wish to develop, and you can see that who and what you give your attention to has a significant impact on the type of person you become.

Understanding where your time is going is far more important and practical than demonizing TV, the Internet, or mainstream news.

Expanding Your Circle of Control

The act of “cultivating” simply means getting past service-level information and building on education that goes beyond the basics.

When you say that you are going to expand your Circle of Control, what you really mean is that you’re going to reduce irrelevant information and spend more time exploring the depths of those topics relevant to you.

This can take place in a variety of ways:

- * Improving job skills. The sentiment that education begins when school ends is one to not take lightly. Funny that we use terms like “investing” in reference to our time; when’s the last time you invested in developing the skills you use at work? It could become the single best investment in your portfolio.

- * Experimenting with new interests. You can look at other people’s vacation photos on Facebook, or you could read *How to Travel the World on \$50 a Day* and take the first step in planning that backpacking adventure you’ve put off. You can watch *Shark Tank*, or you could pick up a few business books.

- * Creating more work/art. We’re all strapped for time. It’s often the case that the most productive thing you can do all day is say “No” to things that don’t matter. MIT professor Alan Lightman only checks email once every 3 months; imagine what you could create if you just said “No” to much smaller commitments.

- * Getting intentional with your learning. The shocking truth is out: I still read the news. But I seek out my interests, I don’t just accept what’s on the front page. For instance, I always read Maria Konnikova’s fascinating coverage of the brain because it’s proven to consistently be in my wheelhouse.

Of course, not all information can (or should) have utility. My random binge sessions of watching *The Office* re-runs certainly can’t be passed off as “research” for some skill I’m

developing.

What matters is I feel satisfied with where my time is being spent as a whole. That's the most important takeaway of all — are you giving priority to your Circle of Control? Or is your Circle of Concern eating up too much of your attention?

This is why I think that the “news is bad for you” arguments are missing some context. Health and happiness are determined by how you spend your time overall. It's the compounding interest that produces the biggest results, not individual swings.

Not watching the news but spending the resulting free time poorly is like not eating red meat, bragging about it, and then chowing down on 3 square cupcakes a day.

Whether your guilty pleasure is the news, celebrity gossip, stupid/silly TV shows, or whatever else, feel free to indulge once in a while just like you would with a snack — just make it a priority to evaluate and develop your Circle of Control.

How you spend your time is how you spend your life, so we should all try to invest wisely.