



Keeping Up with Information

**Interview with
Dr. Tracy Brower**

**For podcast release
Monday, January 24, 2022**

KENNEALLY: Too much information. If that's driving you insane, then you should know there are ways to focus and filter for information success.

Welcome to Velocity of Content from CCC. I'm Christopher Kenneally.

The information deluge is real. At CCC, we recently partnered with analyst firm Outsell, Inc., on an information seeking and consumption study to learn how copyrighted content is reused and shared in the workplace. From 2016 to 2020, the amount of work-related content sharing tripled. Executives shared content almost 25 times every week, usually with at least a dozen colleagues at a time. And when working at home, the frequency of content sharing rose by more than one-third.

Dr. Tracy Brower, a sociologist and author of two books exploring happiness, fulfillment, and work life, says recent research points to ways we can all be more selective about how we consume information. The key, says Dr. Brower, is making better choices. Dr. Tracy Brower, welcome to the program.

BROWER: Thank you. Thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

KENNEALLY: We're looking forward to this discussion and appreciate your joining us, because as we can all attest, information is ubiquitous. It can get so hard to tune in that we just want to turn off.

BROWER: Yeah, it's so true. I think this aspect of overwhelm is very, very real, and it can cause a desire for disengagement. It can cause confusion. It can even cause some disorientation. So it really is – I love your introduction about making choices and kind of managing the flow.

KENNEALLY: Information, though – we can't tune it out entirely. It's critical to what we do. It's critical to our work, to our lives. And it's also important and necessary for our ability to adapt and cope, which of course, adapting and coping is something we've all had to do during the pandemic. So really, information is a key to resilience.



BROWER: Yes, absolutely. You know, resilience is really about three things. Resilience is about really being in tune with what's happening, so staying aware. Resilience is about making sense of that information. What does it mean to me? What is my takeaway? What are my ways of perceiving against that information? And then finally, resilience is about improvisation, right? Pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, being creative, solving problems, figuring out how to respond. So information is a really important part of being resilient – staying aware, making sense of it, and then reacting, responding, and being proactive as much as possible.

KENNEALLY: And you're suggesting that we choose to sort of sharpen the focus, and there are three particular places that you think are important to look at more closely. The first of these is our feelings – just how information makes us feel.

BROWER: Yeah, absolutely. This is one of the primary ways that we filter our information. And I think it's really helpful to be intentional about this – not just to kind of do it by rote, but to really think about how something is making us feel. Sometimes, according to research, we will avoid information based on how we expect it to make us feel. So we may not want to look at the bad news. There's a wonderful mantra, don't ask questions you don't want the answers to. And there is some wisdom to that. Let's manage the flow. Let's manage it.

On the other hand, we can also learn a lot by getting out of our comfort zones, by pushing ourselves. Sometimes, hard, challenging information is good information. We get feedback about our performance that's tough, but we can get better. Or we get feedback in a relationship that's, ugh, hard to hear, but we can do better in our relationship. So I think it's this really important balance of staying away from information so that we can protect ourselves, but exposing ourselves enough that we can get better and continuously improve.

KENNEALLY: And it seems to me it's about modulating our response. It's about the way we respond. It's not the information itself.

BROWER: Yes, so well said. Absolutely. Information is so about how we interpret it. This may not be new news, but I think it's important news that how we're feeling affects how we interpret what's coming at us. In other research, you find that information can be relatively objective or relatively vanilla, but if we're feeling at odds or anxious or upset, we can view that much more negatively than we would if we were feeling more optimistic and positive. So our own feelings about things absolutely shape our perceptions of our incoming information.



KENNEALLY: OK, so we have to think about the way we feel about the information. We also have to reckon with how useful this information is.

BROWER: Yeah, absolutely. You know, this is really interesting and related to learning. One of the classic tenets of adult learning is that we tend to learn better when we're ready for that information, when that information has usefulness to us. And that is true about information as well. So we'll be much more interested in finding information about, I don't know, winter driving when we're just in the middle of a snowstorm, right – when that information has usefulness. So I think that's one of the other filters we can use. It is a beautiful and wonderful thing to be curious and to be broad and to be varied in the information that we're looking for. And what we will retain better and what will matter to us most is what's most useful to us in the moment.

If we just move into a new city, we're going to learn a lot about that. We're going to find out about all the newcomers' clubs. We're going to learn about the neighborhoods and learn about where we can meet new people. So usefulness is about timing. It's about relevance. It's about context. That's another way that we can think about filtering information so it's not just about overwhelm.

KENNEALLY: I love your example about driving in a snowstorm, because of course, it's going to be important – the choices you make when you're behind the wheel. But when it comes to usefulness, it's useful to have done some research before – make sure those snow tires are good, right? So there's a kind of intentionality. I think that's the word you used. You need to be intentional about seeking out information.

BROWER: Yeah, absolutely true – intentional about where you want to go next. You know, I think that's one of the interesting things about the times that we're going through, right? Really difficult times, really challenging times, times when things feel upside down in the way that they have in the last couple of years give us the opportunity to reflect, reset, reimagine. So we want to be thinking about what direction we want to go, where we want to work, who we want to be, how we want to continuously improve. That gives us a direction to be proactive, a direction to be intentional about what we want to learn and the areas about which we want to be curious.

KENNEALLY: And there's some hard lessons that we need to learn. So in addition to managing our feelings about information and sort of focusing on the usefulness of the information to us with whatever challenge we have professionally or personally is also a confrontation we need to make with the information itself. That's about whether we agree with it. There's an issue here around something that we hear a good deal about when it comes to misinformation, and that's confirmation bias.



BROWER: Yes, absolutely. This one's such a big deal. Confirmation bias is when we look for information that tends to agree with what we already believe. And these are really interesting times, because we're managing information flow, but also, there are lots of algorithms that are managing information flow. And we can find ourselves, even unknowingly, in echo chambers. Algorithms can work too well. So we're exposed to information that we already agree with, and we're not exposed to enough diversity of information.

So I think we want to be intentional here as well to expose ourselves to ideas that are new, expose ourselves to things that we may not agree with, in order to stretch our thinking, in order to infuse diversity, new ideas, in order to learn more, in order to challenge ourselves so that we can either shift our point of view or recommit to our point of view.

But I think we want to do that really, really intentionally. So this idea about agreement is critical to understand. We want to push ourselves out of our comfort zones. We kind of come back to the idea of feelings. We want to push ourselves out of our comfort zones so that we can learn. And I think we're in this period where we compare a lot to other people through social media. We're in this period that research tells us we're becoming increasingly polarized. And our opportunity to listen to each other, to hear information that's maybe new or different, is very much an opportunity to be part of a community, to think more broadly, and to really connect in new ways.

KENNEALLY: Well, I love that point about community and to sort of think of us all in this challenge together. That does, as you say, require us to push out of comfort zones. Innovation is often found at the edges. Maybe it's out not in your neighborhood, but in the neighborhood next to you.

BROWER: Yes, exactly. I love this idea of the adjacent possible. The adjacent possible is the thing that might be different than what we know, but related to what we already know. So when we push to the edges of our knowledge, we learn new things. Maybe I love my job in finance, and I realize that it has a real connection to talent and talent forecasting and how we compensate people. So I grow into an HR role, for example. Or maybe in my community, I love building, and I love my opportunity with Habitat for Humanity, but I reach beyond that a little bit, and I learn more about, I don't know, poverty in the community, and I learn more about how I can make connections and contribute to the community, because I've pushed my knowledge from one area to another area. So I think that's a really important one.

And there's something to mention here, too, related to happiness. That is there is a correlation between learning and stretch and happiness. When we learn something new, when we stretch, when we push ourselves, when we try something new, it tends to be



correlated with happiness. So that adjacent possible, that looking for information that might not always be comfortable, but pushes our thinking and stretches our opportunity to contribute, those can be really beautiful things.

KENNEALLY: Dr. Tracy Brower, author of *The Secrets to Happiness at Work* and *Bring Work to Life by Bringing Life to Work: A Guide for Leaders and Organizations*, thank you for speaking with me today.

BROWER: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

KENNEALLY: At Velocity of Content on copyright.com, we will link to Dr. Brower's column for Forbes, "How to Stay Informed Without Getting Overwhelmed," as well as to the information seeking and consumption study from CCC and Outsell, Inc. You can also learn more about Dr. Brower's research at tracybrower.com.

That's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for joining me on Velocity of Content from CCC.

END OF FILE