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Boredom as Information Processing: Revisiting Orin Klapp (1986)

Monotony has long been seen as a prime driver of the experience of boredom. But as Prince once sang, there is “Joy in repetition”. Orin Klapp, a sociologist writing in the mid 1980’s, captured this in his book *Overload and Boredom: Essays on the quality of life in the information society*. Klapp melds ideas from information theory and existential philosophy to cast boredom as a challenge of extracting signal from noise. At a low rate of information change we may see both ritual and redundancy – the former redolent of Prince’s exhortation to joy, the latter a recipe for boredom. But at a high rate of information change we also see boredom – the incapacity to make sense out of a chaotic barrage of information; like trying to drink from a firehose. In this talk I will present the evidence to support this notion from behavioural experiments that cast boredom as a signal of rising opportunity costs, to computational models that show boredom to be a driver of exploratory behaviour. This casts boredom as a self-regulatory signal with a particular goal – not merely to eliminate itself, but to promote engagement with the world.