Information Overload: A Problem of Many Ages
By Jeff Davidson

The onslaught of information and communication seems to most to be a contemporary phenomenon, and in terms of the volume and frequency, it undoubtedly is. Every day, thousands upon thousands of hours of video are posted on YouTube. Google and the other mega-search engines add untold numbers of references. The sheer number of new websites that are born each day stupefies the imagination, exceeding 100,000. Soon, the sum total of information available online and on electronic devices globally will exceed one zettabyte: the number 1 followed by 21 zeros.

From many perspectives, this crush of information is wreaking havoc on the populace. We have no role models and few other clues as to how to proceed effectively in a world that keeps showering us with information, much of it vital and necessary. However, corollaries from previous times do exist.

In 1453, when the Western world was introduced to the Guttenberg printing press, Europe's educated elite faced an explosion of information. Whereas books had previously been painstakingly printed and copied by hand, millions of words and thousands upon thousands of volumes became available in the span of a few decades.

A Technology Unlike All Others

The printing press represented a technology that could change society and benefit all of humanity. After all, medical texts that circulated through universities and academia empowered physicians everywhere. So, too, legal, scientific and artistic texts broadened humanity's understanding of the larger world. However, intellectuals were soon swamped, as more information became available to any one individual than was ever presumed possible.

The need to house, preserve, categorize, and maintain the growing output of books came quickly. Public as well as private libraries sprang up. More authors followed: in huge numbers, scholars devoted their time and effort to transferring their thoughts and notes to texts that would encapsulate their brilliance forever. A wider and wider range of books became available. Larger and larger compilations on the same topic appeared. Encyclopedias came into being.

Guttenberg's invention impacted society in virtually every way, and thus became transformative. Within three decades, more than 20 major capitals throughout Europe boasted modern printing presses. As the volume of books published increased, the cost of producing books dropped to less than a fifth of what it had been 30 years earlier.

More Navigable Books

By the turn of the century, great volumes of new texts flooded the marketplace, often surpassing in popularity the age old wisdom of Greek and other scholars. Intellectuals began to complain about the flood of information. No less than Voltaire remarked, "The multitude of books is making us ignorant."

Not unexpectedly, new books appeared which discussed how to best employ the knowledge within books. Books emerged on note-taking, on organizing, and on remembering what one had read. At first, no organized system for categorizing and cataloguing these volumes was employed. The typical bookstore would simply feature books – no shelf talkers, no category signage – on a shelf arranged (at best) alphabetically, using the author's last name or the title of the book itself. Out of this morass, sorting techniques and methods of classification emerged.

Within books themselves, reader-friendly conventions appeared. It seems incredible, but early books routinely lacked tables of contents, indexes, and in many cases, separation by chapters. All of these conventions became standard fare, and readers came to appreciate and then expect them. Authors began including a preface, an introduction, a foreword, and in some cases an afterword. Progressive publishers added part or sectional dividers between groups of chapters. All such innovations helped, but still, the volume of information was unprecedented.

Information Unabated

Today, we are all impacted by the onslaught of information. Typical search engines offer us some reliable results buried within a lot of crap. What we share with those of the Guttenberg era is the stress and anxiety over how much information we are subjected to, coupled with the inability to effectively identify, encapsulate, organize, and capitalize on information that could be vital to us.

The manner in which information is gathered today, mainly via the Internet, coupled with our over-exuberance in gathering it, leads to information overload situations for most individuals. We are enticed by the dazzling array of websites and data that are ours for the price of a click. Rarely do we contemplate how we are going to handle such resource inflows. We are eager beavers when it comes to gathering information and sharing it with our friends and associates, even if they silently wince at the thought of yet another missive coming their way.

For the foreseeable future, we're stuck in a "nether-land" of massive information flows that quite easily exceed anyone's ability to keep up. Lacking contemplation and forethought as to how we will set up our file structure, label file folders, and assign what information goes where, we are lost in a sea of too much competing for our attention. We have too little mental energy to address the problem and, invariably, too little time to revisit what we've collected.

One day soon, our technology will catch up with our ambition. Until then, a bumpy road awaits. The information anxiety you feel today is going to increase. The time will come when, like on Star Trek, information becomes available on demand. No need to type in a URL or download anything; simply announce what you want, using plain English commands, and presto change-o, your request awaits on the computer screen built into your wall. If you don't receive exactly what you were seeking, simply rephrase the question, and by the second or third try, the ubiquitous information highway will deliver exactly what you seek.

For now, with planning and forethought, and the strength to say "no" to so much of what we could be gathering, each of us has the ability to effectively reign over our own information kingdom.

Jeff Davidson is "The Work-Life Balance Expert®," has written 59 mainstream books, is a preeminent authority on time management, and is an electrifying professional speaker, making 805 presentations since 1985 to clients such as Kaiser Permanente, IBM, Novo Nordisk, American Express, Lufthansa, Swissotel, America Online, Re/Max, USAA, Worthington Steel, and the World Bank.

Jeff is the author of "Breathing Space," and "Simpler Living." His 60 Second Series with Adams Media, including the 60-Second Organizer, 60-Second Self-Starter, and 60-Second Innovator, are popular titles in China, Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Italy, Poland, Spain, France, and Brazil. Jeff has been widely quoted in the Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Christian Science Monitor, New York Times, and USA Today.

Cited by Sharing Ideas Magazine as a "Consummate Speaker," Jeff believes that career professionals today in all industries have a responsibility to achieve their own sense of work-life balance, and he supports that quest through his website www.BreathingSpace.com and through 24 iPhone Apps at www.itunes.com/apps/BreathingSpaceInstitute