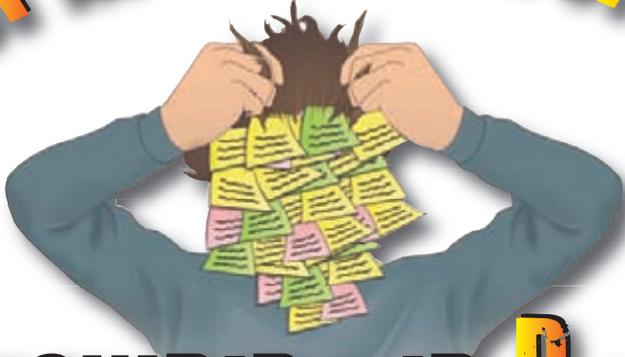


Information Overload



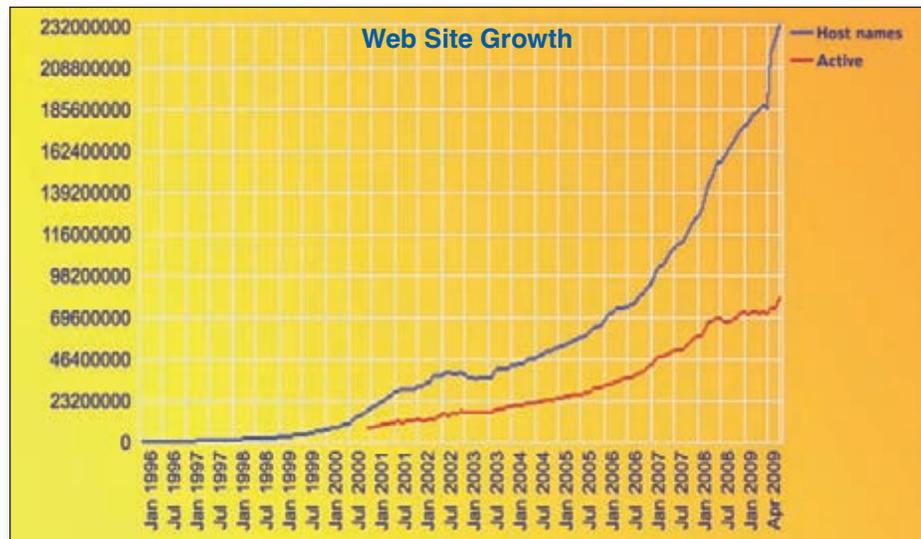
Drowning in Data

"I've been uplinked and downloaded. I've been inputted and outsourced. I know the upside of downsizing; I know the downside of upgrading. I'm a high-tech lowlife. A cutting-edge, state-of-the-art, bicoastal multi-tasker, and I can give you a gigabyte in a nanosecond."
— George Carlin, *Ode to the Modern Man*, 2004

In recent times, some tout information more valuable than gold, a valid consideration given what we see about productivity and results when the flow of data is wide and fast. Yet how much is too much information? When does the life-supplying river of facts morph into a drowning torrent? Can we find a balance? Where is all this information coming from anyway?

Let's take the Internet: just how big is the world wide web anyway? Bigger than the world?

Yes, it would seem so. There are an estimated 230.1 million Web sites¹ currently, and growing by 30 to 50 million every year. With a plethora of information literally at our fingertips, we can watch a video of how to build a treehouse; we can find a recipe for homemade strawberry crepes; we can research the best instant remedy for bee stings; or more useful, we can find equipment for sale. For industry it means greater sharing of knowledge and resources. Greater



amounts and faster flow of information can translate to greater productivity, reduction in errors, more efficient time usage. But being connected has been also negatively attributed as a costly distraction.

According to Basex.com, "An overloaded work environment can threaten an organization's efficiency.

Organizations of all shapes and sizes have already been significantly impacted by the problem of information overload, which can cost individual companies millions of dollars in lower productivity and throttled innovation and costs the U.S. economy an estimated \$900 billion per year."

"[It] is a blessing and a curse," said Marsha Egan², a professional efficiency coach. "What's happening is this fabulous technology that enables us to send instant messages and instant emails all over the globe in milliseconds. But anything used to excess can become a liability. Because people can be connected 24/7, many of them are."

Egan recommends that clients limit themselves to checking email no more than five times a day. Responding instantly to every note that hits the inbox drains more time than people might realize, she said.

"Every interruption has a recovery time," she said. "If someone walks by the office and says, 'What did you think about the game last night?' ... It takes you twenty seconds to answer. But then you have to remember where you were."

Are we attributing waste to this "overload evil" unduly? Interruptions and overlapping events are a part of every day, irrespective of the technology in front of you. Tech blogger Craig Roth⁹ doubts the assertion that information is solely to blame: "then you catch yourself interrupting people because you actually need to and they 'tsk tsk' you saying it was unnecessary to them. Then you find that of the twenty-eight percent of your day that is supposedly wasted, really only a few percent of it can truly be recovered without treating every day like a nine hour sprint."

This data bombardment comes from all directions: email, flickr, texts, tweets, blogs, instant messages, and don't forget social media notices. For example, Cnet.com reports that more than eight billion minutes are spent on Facebook every day. While the degree and schedule of participation is an individual choice, the question may be if anyone really needs 1,279 virtual friends? Studies show, that often the price for this connection is unjustly paid by the employer.

And then there are the social media notices. For example, Cnet.com reports that: **What exactly is**

Information Overload? Specifically, this term refers to the difficulty a person might have understanding an issue and making decisions caused by the presence of too much information.³ Despite the recent spike in information exchange, the term is not a "new" concept; it was first mentioned in a 1964 book by Bertram Gross, The Managing of Organizations.⁴

If the amount of information necessary to sort through in 1964 seemed like a vast sea, certainly the amount available since might be oceans. The growth has been exponential. What are the options? If

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Overload Awareness

True to our celebratory nature, the inaugural **Information Overload Awareness Day** was held in August 2009 and on October 20, 2010. See www.informationoverloadday.com for suggestions to reduce the overload:

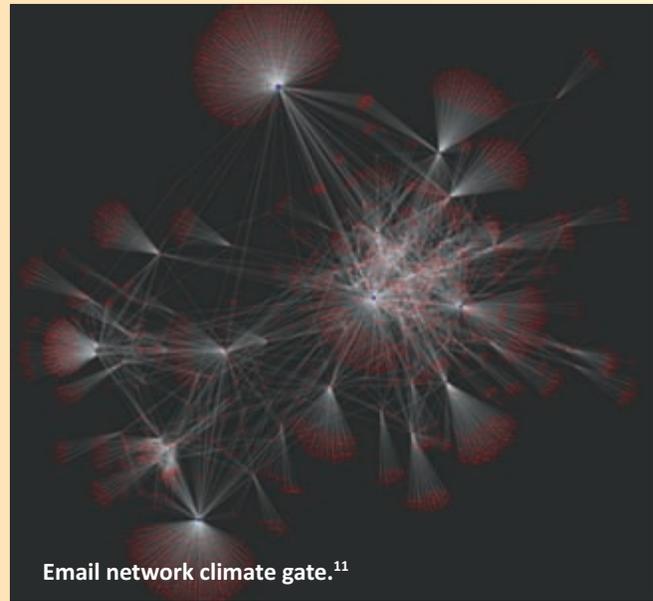
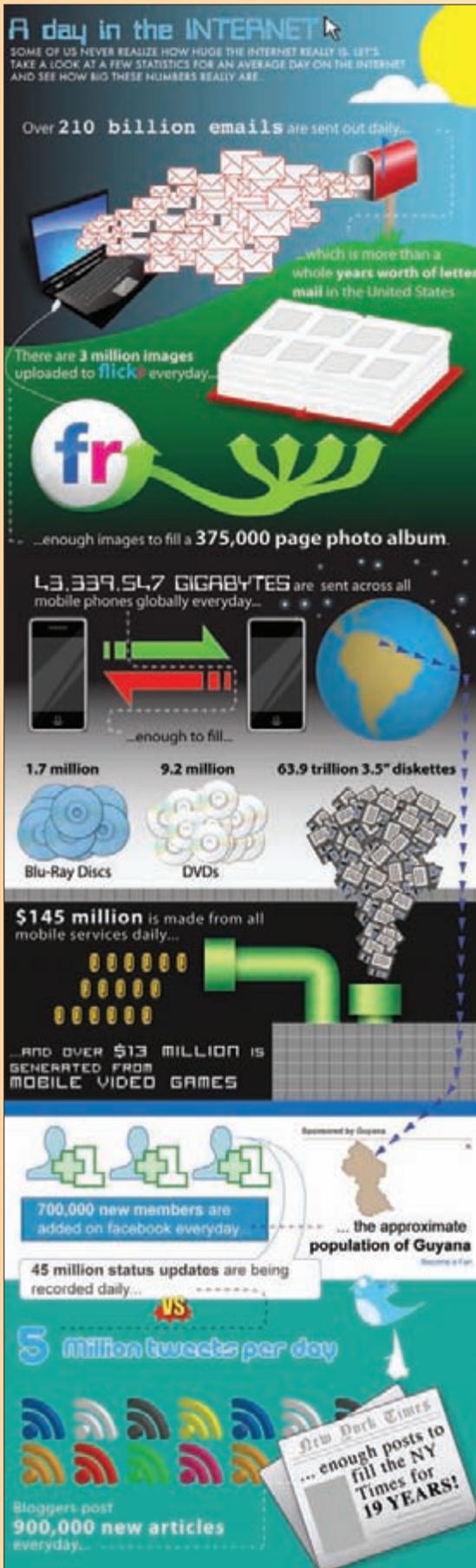
EMAIL

1. Send only those e-mails, IMs, and texts that have to be sent. This includes replies.
2. Only use reply-to-all when absolutely necessary.
3. Cut back on the number of recipients in the "to" and "cc" fields.
4. Resist the urge to forward.

SEARCH

1. Use more and better keywords to narrow your search.
2. Use Boolean search arguments such as "not" and "near" to cut down on results.

The advertisement features two water towers at the top. The one on the left is rusted and labeled "Neglected", while the one on the right is clean and labeled "Preserved". Below them is a large sign with the text: "Don't Neglect Your Tank - Preserve It!". Underneath the sign, it lists "Caldwell's professional tank services include: TAP-ONE - Extended warranty program" and "TAP-ON - Full-service on-going maintenance". At the bottom, the Caldwell logo is shown with "Since 1887" and "Water - Energy - Industrial". Contact information for Rick A. Smith is provided: Phone 605.270.1675, Fax 502.810.0989, rsmith.sd@caldwelltanks.com, and www.caldwelltanks.com.



you have an extra \$699 laying around, you can purchase a 36-page report that outlines how the world's largest semiconductor chip maker Intel Corporation has handled it. Check it out at <http://bsx.stores.yahoo.net/inwaroninov.html>.

Credible Information

Information on the Web has historically had questionable integrity, as there are even Web sites to authenticate the validity of other claims of information, such as www.snopes.com. Forwarded emails are also a source of grimace for those seeking truth in their daily read. One of the most recent verbs⁵ added to the English language, “google” originated from the Google Search Engine, acclaimed for its complex and intricate algorithm. Yet users routinely look at the top twenty results, regardless of their skill in forming an accurate search term. The results are displayed two dimensionally and rely on interpreting HTML instead of comprehending what the information is truly presenting.

One promising change upcoming is Web 3.0 which boasts descriptors tags, marking the change from a display of information to actually understanding what the information is. “Ultimately, Web 3.0 will allow for creation of software agents that can locate and combine information from varied sources on the Web and create a view that’s appropriate for you and your preferences,” reports Abhijit Kadle⁶, an e-Learning Web reviewer. “The level of data integration Web 3.0 will offer is mind-boggling. A thoroughly articulated semantic Web wouldn’t actually return a bunch of links on search. What you’d get is a multimedia report that would draw from all available sources on the Web. It would include content from Web sites, from journals, from various repositories, from blogs and other user generated content.”

Experiment: Stop what you are doing. What do you hear? What do you see? What is your body feeling? Notice what is happening around you. Is there any movement? What about extemporaneous background sounds? Did you hear and see those things only a few moments ago? Sure you did, but did you notice them? Certainly not all of them, if any of them at all. ¹²

A Picture Is Worth A Thousand Words

Other technological advances designed to make sense of it all center around imagery. Our brains are complex and use not only integrated connections, but also images to organize and summarize. Mimicking nature has forever proven useful in forging returns. Along this vein, Microsoft Live Labs developed a project in 2009 to create Pivot⁷, a visual search engine that interacted like Tom Cruise in the film *Minority Report*. Although the project was orphaned, the development of imagery and natural manipulation of data is in hot pursuit. In fact, the applications are immense; especially in the medical field⁸, imagery organization of data in

three-dimensional pictures is vital to make sense of a large amount of data quickly.

Filter Failure

You may not have time to wait for others to fix the overload for you, however, or wait for an invention that organizes the information for you. You are in luck. We have technology in place, both in our electronic devices and between our ears, that does the job: Clay Shirky¹⁰, tech guru and speaker, remarked poignantly, "It's Not Information Overload. It's Filter Failure." Using email filters, spam filters, RSS feeds, and other software manipulation, we can set up custom filters to our liking, hence reducing the amount of attention we must use up

just to gather the information that is most useful. However there are not without hiccups: emails get missed or some unwanted pass through. The best filter we have is our own attention, and we are skilled at it.

Information Is the Water

We are to information as fish are to the water. We swim in it, but we do not have to drown. It can be around us but not overwhelm us. Says Shirky, "If you have the same problem for a long time, maybe it's not a problem. Maybe it's a fact." ¹²

Since 1997, Jen Sharp (JenSharp.com) has served business and government across Kansas and the US and even internationally, specializing in web development, design & programming including e-Learning, ecommerce, content management systems, and other small business solutions. Her work has earned National and International awards: krwa.net was named Best Web site in 2002 from the National Rural Water Association.



¹ Schonfeld, Erick (May 8, 2009) Techcrunch.com Netcraft.com.

² CNN Tech (2010) <http://articles.cnn.com>.

³ Yang, C.C.; Chen, Hsinchun; Honga, Kay (2003). "Visualization of large category map for Internet browsing". *Decision Support Systems* 35 (1): 89-102. doi:10.1016/S0167-9236(02)00101-X.

⁴ Gross, Bertram M. (1964). *The Managing of Organizations: The Administrative Struggle*. pp. 856.

⁵ google. (n.d.). *Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition*. Retrieved February 01, 2011, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/google>

⁶ Kadle, Abhijit. (October 2009). *The Semantic Web cometh*. From www.upsidelearning.com.

⁷ Brewer, Brett. (June 2010) *Overcoming information overload?* From <http://venturebeat.com>.

⁸ Bloom, Michael. (May 2010) *Handling Information Overload*. From www.rt-image.com.

⁹ Roth, Craig. (August 2009) *Overload Awareness Day*. From <http://knowledgeforward.wordpress.com>

¹⁰ Shirky, Clay. (2008) *Web 2.0 Expo New York. It's Not Information Overload. It's Filter Failure*. <http://web2expo.blip.tv/file/1277460/>

¹¹ Fin, Al. (July 2010) *Information Overload: Visual Images Make Data Coherent*.

¹² Jones, Kevin. (February 2010) *Overcoming Information Overload*. <http://engagedlearning.net/post/overcoming-information-overload/>

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