

Part One

Weapons of Mass Distraction

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1 Noise, Noise, So Much Noise

To the hard of hearing, you shout.

—*Flannery O'Connor*

We're all connected, all day and in every way. Smartphones, laptops, tablets, and smart watches. Screens in cars, airports, gas stations, classrooms, offices, hospitals, and hotels. The constant buzzing of a 24-hour news cycle. The list goes on.

What? Did you just miss that? Maybe you got another text, news alert, or notification?

The daily experience is to consume information at every turn. It's nearly impossible to avoid the barrage from morning until night. How much of it is relevant? What's useful for us, and what is simply a waste of time and energy?

Our brains are hard at work, making it harder to focus and easier than ever to get distracted. Our attention spans are rapidly eroding, and we're now at risk. Over the years, we adapt. Many of us don't even notice this decline because we're too busy fixating on the next distraction, text message, e-mail, meeting invitation, social media post, or funny video clip.

Infobesity is the new normal, and it can have dire consequences. Here's a snapshot of where we consume information:

- **Overflowing e-mail.** Our inboxes are flooded with messages; most of them are irrelevant and yet they keep coming over and over to be read, judged useless, and then deleted.
- **Smartphone notifications.** Throughout the day, our phones vibrate and sound the alarm to be picked up and checked.
- **Checking our devices.** For most of us, it's the first and last thing we do every day.
- **Social media streams.** We fear missing out on the latest posts and updates and try to keep up on the steady stream of commentary and tidbits being shared every few seconds by our personal and professional networks.
- **24-hour connectivity.** While we sleep, the flow of information doesn't stop and can be consumed on every imaginable device, at any time.
- **Texting and messaging.** Immediate ways to communicate that we can't seem to resist sending or receiving.
- **News feed frenzy.** A story breaks and unleashes the frenetic obsession to cover, repeat, recycle, rehash, argue, and opine until the content and audience are left exhausted.
- **Time spent online.** The amount of time online exceeds offline in the age of information overload and constant consumption.

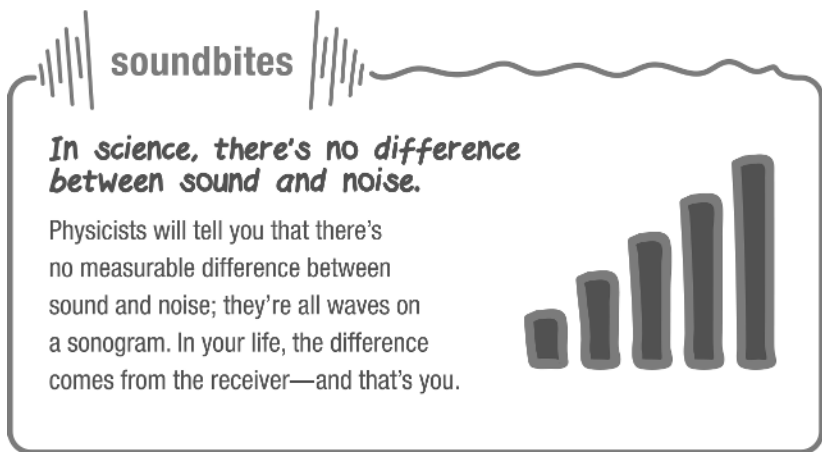
All of this feels like nonstop, won't-stop noise.

There's a serious impact when we expose ourselves to these alarming conditions all day long. In a life with always-on access to information, we now face a shrinking, elusive attention span and an overstimulated, overfilled brain.

What can we do to adapt and manage this new reality?

Kenny Chesney Gets It Right

The country singer Kenny Chesney laments this common condition wonderfully in his song “Noise.” His lyrics tell the story of how our society has taken a turn for the worse, with so much noise surrounding us that there is no room for silence. We don’t ask for it, but we’re bombarded with constant chatter from talking heads and distractions from digital devices, and we can’t escape it anymore.



Hearing Decline and the Loss of Focus

When I was in college in Chicago, I remember an elderly Jesuit philosophy professor opening every lecture with an impassioned, personal, public service announcement. He would warn us of the impending threat of loud music on our hearing. It was in the late 1980s, and boomboxes and rock concerts were all the rage, along with the advent of portable music devices like the Sony Walkman. His dire concern, backed by extensive research, was that too much loud music would make us all deaf.

And once that happened, he said sternly, we wouldn't be able to fix the permanent hearing loss.

Sorry.

There is a close connection between hearing loss and declining focus. You have loud music and volume levels and constant information and attention spans. You have listening capacity and mental retention. Noise affects our ability to hear; information overload affects our ability to pay attention.

It's the perfect storm. Let's take a look at how these things will impact our future.

Access to Information Will Only Increase

Kevin Kelly is a *Wired* magazine co-founder and thought leader on the future of communications, launching the first virtual reality conference in early 1990. In his book *The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces That Will Shape Our Future*, Kelly imagines our world down the road.

He predicts that in the future people will own few things but will have access to everything.

“In the coming 30 years the tendency toward the dematerialized, the decentralized, the simultaneous, the platform enabled, and the cloud will continue unabated,” he writes. “As long as the costs of communications and computation drop due to advances in technology, these trends are inevitable. They are the result of networks of communication expanding till they are global and ubiquitous, and as the networks deepen they gradually displace matter with intelligence.”¹

It won't matter where you live in the world, this access will be for everyone.

Other industry leaders predict the following:

- Access to the Internet will be universal. Connectivity will be constant and there will be no need for signing in to a particular stream.

- Cars will be seamlessly connected and allow users even more time to connect and communicate in traffic because they'll be self-driving.
- With everything online and apps running our lives, access to digital information will be needed for every facet of life, from payments, to work, to personal activities, and healthcare.
- Privacy will be available only if you are willing to pay extra for it.
- Information will find us instead of us needing to find it, in countless moments throughout our day.

Some of these predictions are already beginning to come true.

Attention Spans Will Remain Elusive

More and more information is competing for our attention.

Our brains feel divided, yet we somehow enjoy it. There's a reward when we see a comment on social media or a like or share online. Any type of immediate online response reaction (like liking, clicking, swiping, or sharing) increases the release of dopamine in the brain, which makes people more inclined to keep swiping, clicking, and scrolling.

Because most of these interfaces are impersonal and subject to our instantaneous and shifting reactions, our communication with each other becomes less personal, affecting how we view and interact with each other. It's harder to pay attention to people because they don't behave the way technology does. These interactions with devices and applications mimic personal connectivity but won't be real, giving us a false impression that we have a lot of friends or a lot of connections.

Our real, authentic, personal connections will decrease as we consume more noise.

With more interruptions from technology, it will be very hard for people to concentrate on the task at hand without being distracted.

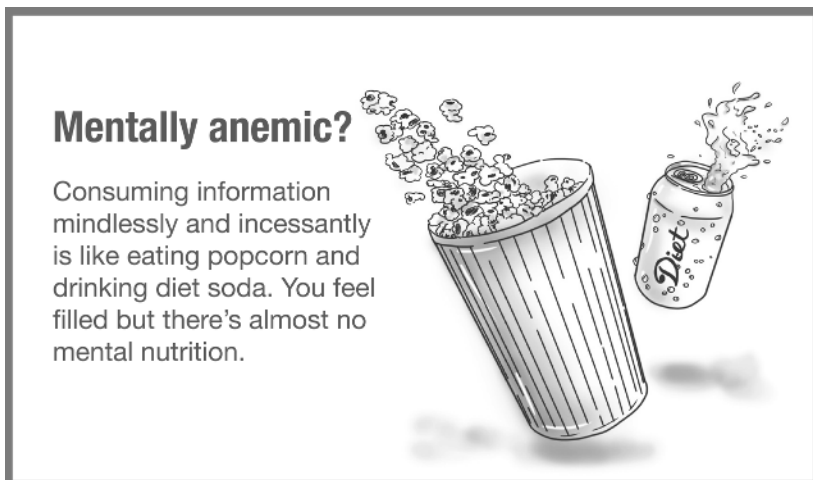
Constant interruptions, continuous distractions, and persistent loss of focus will challenge leaders to engage and maintain focus on strategic objectives for long periods of time. If leaders can't accomplish this quickly, the likelihood of people losing interest and moving on to something else will increase. Parents and teachers will struggle too.

Our Minds Will Become Anemic and Impenetrable

It's really the game of chasing and consuming useless information. You're never getting to the core of something that has substantive value. You're consuming information that is superficial. You're never getting substance, just spending loads of time skimming the surface.

It's like drinking Diet Coke and eating popcorn all day long. If there isn't any substantial food in your diet, you will grow weak and get sick. That's what happens when people spend the majority of their time online or playing games and using social media. As technology becomes more pervasive and people spend more and more time consuming these barren brain calories, they will become empty mentally and emotionally.

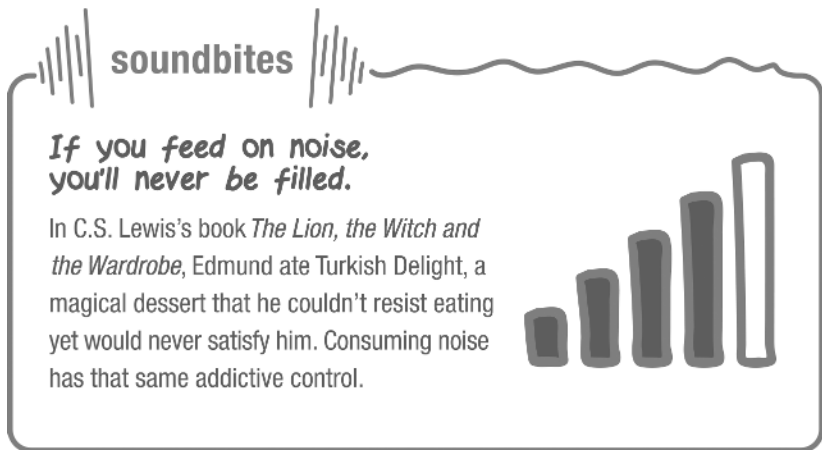
They will become isolated, frustrated, and hungry.



When we give in to distractions, our brains are divided and start to weaken. When we can access information anywhere and anytime, our brain constantly looks for ways to snack rather than eat a healthy meal. We're nibbling on so much junk rather than focusing on a few things that are substantial and essential.

We quickly lose our focus and get in the habit of feeding on distractions rather than avoiding them.

Our brains then start to completely rewire themselves to seek the reward of ingesting empty information. It gets consistently tricked into thinking that it's filling itself with quality information, but it's just consuming useless information and dumbing itself down.



soundbites

***If you feed on noise,
you'll never be filled.***

In C.S. Lewis's book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Edmund ate Turkish Delight, a magical dessert that he couldn't resist eating yet would never satisfy him. Consuming noise has that same addictive control.

All of these factors and harmful effects rage around us—and within us. It's real and it hurts us all. Think about your diminishing focus in those terms. It is your brain, and you're really at risk.

[Brief Recap]

The nonstop noise of ubiquitous access to information is isolating us and shrinking our attention spans, overfilling our addicted minds with the empty calories of useless data.

{Tune-in}

There is an impending threat of losing focus as we constantly consume all this noise.