Information Overload: William Powers' *Hamlet's Blackberry*

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Exactly 50 years ago, Marshall McLuhan introduced the statement that "the media is the message." His book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), was a best seller and his statement quickly became a cliché. "The media is the message" means that each new communication technology has its own message and its own effects.

Gutenberg's first printed Bibles (circa 1454 AD) were a remarkably new technology. A printed Bible allowed people to read and interpret the Bible for themselves. Reading became a silent, visual activity for individuals, not a communal oral event in churches or other public gatherings. The new technology of printing even began to create questions about the established religion and its organizational structures. Similarly, today's communication tools (that is, the "media" in McLuhan's statement) affect both how we personally view our world and how we manage complex and extensive information in our workplace, our schools, and our personal lives.

McLuhan's message from 1962 is relevant today. A recent news article estimated that nearly 5 billion of Earth's nearly 7 billion people will soon have cell phones of some kind. The majority of U.S households now have cell phones for most family members, not to mention one or more personal computers. Add to these communication tools, the two or three television screens open at the same time in a household. Imagine how many hits one Google search question displays.

Talk about information overload! At home, at work, and even at play, we are linked to our electronic tools/toys. These links are now worldwide and increasing. Internet friends in South Africa, China, and Australia are routine. Everybody seems to be texting, watching television, or both. Tasks from work now intrude at home when our cell phone rings or when a work-related email arrives at our personal computer. Screens continue to blink and shift even while we are sleeping!

Information overload is the problem, especially with internet accessibility and linked communication tools. A discussion of this problem was what caught my ear when National Public Radio's Diane Rehm interviewed William Powers recently. William Powers is the author of *Hamlet's Blackberry: Building a Good Life in the Digital Age* (New York: Harper Perennial Edition, 2011). His book discusses McLuhan's statement, quoted above, and much, much more.

I recommend Powers' book, especially to people who feel lost without their Blackberry or iPod or who spend hours of every day at their PC answering 30, 40, or more emails.

The following newsletter is not intended to be a formal review of Powers' book. Instead, I will add a few references to *Hamlet's Blackberry* as I discuss my recommendations for ways to manage the

problem of information overload. The first recommendation directly refers to Powers' book; the other recommendations only indirectly draw on information from Powers' book.

1. **Consider ways for "building a good life in the Digital Age."**
2. **Choose tools for recording important and relevant information.**
3. **Add your personal observations and other interpretations as you record relevant information.**
4. **Choose a way to rapidly and easily retrieve relevant information.**
5. **Track the sources for all information, being careful not to plagiarize words, phrases, or even ideas.**

Recommendations 2 through 5 indirectly parallel ones I originally listed and discussed in the Managing Information entry for the *Franklin Covey Style Guide*, Third Edition (Salt Lake City: Franklin Covey Company, 1997).

1. Consider ways for "building a good life in the Digital Age."

As the subtitle to William Powers' *Hamlet's Blackberry* says, one goal of his book is to discuss ways for all of us to improve our lives despite using the complex and time-consuming technologies of this digital age.

William Powers is not a classic Luddite, one who views all technology as bad or evil. He is not opposed to technology, and he doesn't recommend smashing your Blackberry, iPod, or PC. His main concern is that the current rush for 24-hour connectivity provides more information and more public contact than we individually need. Even more evident is that our 24-hour connectivity is changing our social culture and perhaps even our mental habits.

The problem Powers is talking about is what I would call **Information Overload**. We find ourselves involved in a range of different tasks, so many, often, that we have trouble keeping up with everything. The result is Information Overload (also called Cognitive Overload). Cognitive overload occurs when we are tracking so many tasks and so many problems that we begin to lose our mental edge. Frustrations build and anxiety takes over when cognitive overload takes over. Cognitive Overload signals that a person needs to simplify, simplify, simplify. In the Powers family, one way to simplify was to declare a weekly Internet holiday (from Friday bedtime to Monday morning). During the holiday, family relationship and personal activities were the focus.

Problems with overwhelming information are why I decided to focus this Shipley newsletter on techniques for managing information, especially suggestions for allowing us to record, analyze, and retrieve important information (and keep our sanity in the process).

Powers wonders if many of us, in our absorption with our technological toys, haven't lost an appreciation for the solitude of our own thoughts and feelings. In a delightful Chapter 3: Gone Overboard (pp. 37-65), Powers describes the feelings of isolation, even relief, that occur when he drops his mobile phone into the harbor at Cape Cod, frying its electronics. His initial reaction is a

relief that for a time, perhaps only a day or two, he won't have to answer calls from colleagues, even family members. The chapter becomes a meditation on what happens and the indirect implications when we can't access our interactive, world-wide internet and all of our linked digital toys.

In the two final chapters (pp. 209-233), Powers explores ways to protect or preserve our disconnected private lives.

In the first of these two chapters (pp. 209-221) Powers surveys very briefly ideas and techniques for solitude or mental recuperation, as discussed by Plato, Shakespeare, McLuhan, and a few others. What seems to tie all of these thinkers together is that they all valued the world of the mind, not merely technological artifacts.

In the last chapter (pp.223-233), Powers discusses the time his family declared an Internet Sabbath (that is, no internet from bedtime Friday until Monday morning). I won't spoil the chapter by telling you how the Powers family fared**. I do recommend you buy Powers' book if you want to find out how if their Internet Sabbath was a personal benefit.**

2. Choose tools for recording important and relevant information.

An individual needs a system of information management that allows for easy and efficient retrieval of relevant and useful information, whatever its source. This goal is important because today's technology-driven culture provides computer and Blackberry users with complex and extensive information.

Biographers of Teddy Roosevelt report that he had a photographic memory. He did not need to take elaborate written notes about things he read because his memory for exact words and phrases was exceptional. One biographer noted that Roosevelt was famous for quoting exact statements years after reading them in books or articles.

The following suggestions are for the rest of us mortals, who likely have trouble remembering something we read only 10 minutes before. For most of us, we may remember an interesting quotation from the morning paper. But how many of us can quote it accurately? And it likely takes a few minutes for us to find the original newspaper article--assuming today's paper is still handy. What about a quotation we read a week or two ago? Likely gone in the fog of poor memory.

Many novice writers complain that they have nothing to write about. Similarly, many weak but even experienced writers write documents that turn out to be thin and unconvincing. Such writers are often suffering from both a shortage of information and a scarcity of personal ideas.

Recommendation for Writers: Weak and inexperienced writers should begin collecting memorable facts, useful quotations, and other relevant information. Such recorded information can then become the starting point for well-developed, competent documents.

The preceding recommendation links to a common teaching recommendation for people who want to improve their writing. Yes, practice writing every time you can. But even more important, read everything you can lay your hands on. Read all types of writing. Reread, as time allows. Research shows that folks who are widely read almost always are good writers.

As an example of the problems writers sometimes have, years ago I hired two experienced teachers to write materials for a textbook project. The two teachers' combined teaching experience was over 20 years, and they had written dozens of lesson plans and other classroom materials. Sadly, their written textbook materials for my project were thin in content and weak in their organization. Weeks would pass before they would submit few pages of draft text, most of it not usable.

The major problem with these teachers' written materials was a lack of substance—neither effective real-world examples nor a convincing logic trail leading to conclusions or generalizations. These teachers seemed unable to access personal examples, memorable quotations, or other convincing information. So their textbook pages and student exercises were thin and lacking in content.

What information should be collected or recorded? No easy answers exist. A writer of biology would likely keep an eye out for quotes with biological implications. Similarly, a tax accountant might comb the *Wall Street Journal* for current economic data and good quotations about investment strategies. All people have their own personal list of priority topics. A stamp collector, for example, will spot a quote about stamps when most readers would not even notice it.

Assumption: The best writers of business, scientific, or technical documents are those with a rich storehouse of information and examples. The richer an individual writer's remembered and recorded information, the richer and more professional the resulting writing is likely to be.

How to record relevant information: All sorts of tools exist for recording information that you want to retain for later use. These range from an expensive fountain pen and quality parchment to the latest in computer software.

The most primitive tool for tagging key information is a colored sticky note on a key page or next to a printed column of text. This approach is weak because it assumes that stacks of books and other publications are stored in an office, often on the floor. But this "piled higher and deeper" approach still works, and many of us learned to us this system when we wrote short term papers in school. But no one would claim this approach is efficient!

William Powers in *Hamlet's Blackberry* (pp. 153-155) suggest bound journals or scientific notebooks as a more organized and efficient system for recording key information. Powers especially recommends the published Moleskine journals, which are available in Barnes and Noble and other bookstores. Moleskine volumes come in all sizes and designs, so anyone can locate quality format that encourages regular recording of key information. And bound journals are easily combined with color coding, tabs, and other marking signals for different topics and types of information.

As a second example of record keeping, Powers (pp. 165-169) describes a hybrid system of recording that was used by Benjamin Franklin. Franklin's recorded information linked to his list of thirteen desirable personal virtues. Each day he recorded events related to his work on each virtue. At the end of his life, Franklin looked back at his system of daily recordkeeping and credited it with his success in many endeavors. His daily written notes reflected his disciplined approach to life, and they likely provided a rich source of ideas for Franklin's written documents, including his popular sayings for Poor Richard's Almanac. My favorite Franklin saying is "Fish and Visitors stink after three days." Franklin's writing is surely not thin or vague!

Many types of software programs also exist for the recording of brainstormed notes and other records, such as an archive of relevant and valuable quotations. In these instances, computer technology for records and retrieves personal information.

3. Add your personal observations and other interpretations as you record relevant information.

Recommendation: As you record relevant information (recommendation 2 above), be sure to add your own personal observations and interpretations. So this recommendation builds on recommendation 2.

Establish an internal dialogue with each recorded fact, quote, or example from recommendation 2. This dialogue highlights key details in the recorded information. More important, your added observations and interpretations engage your own creative powers. You are continuously asking the information: "Why am I recording you?" Or the variation: "What should I remember when I return to this information days or weeks from now?"

Most of us can likely recall underlining a sentence or two in a textbook. If we didn't add a marginal comment, we could later only guess what we were thinking when we underlined the text. So, clear marginal observations/interpretations are essential if your recorded information is to be useful sometime in the future.

As a simple example of information that I might record, I ran across the following quoted lines from "The Watchful Tree," a poem by Chris Anderson, published in *The Next Thing Always Belongs*, a poetry collection from Arlie Press (not dated):

> The way every season contains the next
> and foreshadows it.
> The yellow leaves in the summer green.
> The shining branch, deep in the heart of the tree.
>
> These lines are quoted on p. 52 of the *Oregon Quarterly* (Winter 2011).

Marginal Comments on Anderson's Poem. Many current conditions foreshadow things to come. The child foreshadows the man/woman to come. Or a worker's inattention to details foreshadows future problems. How directly does a single current action actually cause a future event? Are legitimate current problems a valid excuse for later events? How obvious should a foreshadowing be?

Assume that I decided to record Anderson's lines in my journal. I could perhaps copy those lines at the top of a blank journal page. Then I could add the preceding paragraph to that page as my current interpretation/application of the lines.

Optionally, I could record Anderson's lines in the center of a blank journal page and then add multiple interpretations in a circle around the quote. The circle of interpretations or examples becomes a graphic, showing that all sorts of events or questions comment on the quoted lines.

Routine Graphic Options. Practice making your journal pages pictures of your thoughts. Our visual perceptions are very sharp—thus helping us to remember highlighted or emphasized information. So I recommend adding sketches, highlights, stars, arrows, smiley faces, and all sorts of graphic flags to the information recorded in a journal.

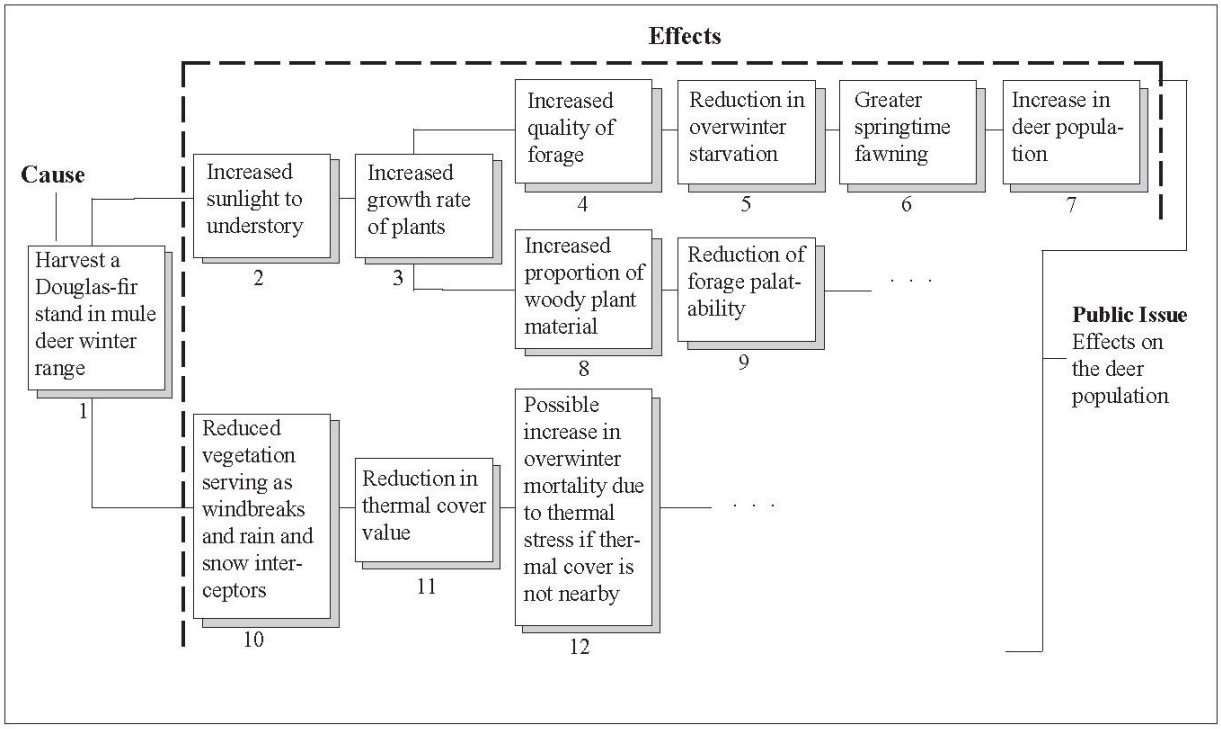
Shipley Group newsletters; The Shipley News (Vol. 56) July 2007 and The Shipley News (Vol. 61) November 2008, encourage writers to consider using graphic storyboards as a planning tool**.**

The use of graphics in a recorded journal comes weeks or months before a more formal storyboard, but the goals of the two techniques are similar: To encourage an individual or several individuals to interpret and to visualize key information.

A More Sophisticated Graphic Option. The flow chart below is a sophisticated graphic that might have come from someone's scientific field notebook (or the recorded notes from a team's brainstorming session). Its actual source was a small group of Forest Service biologists meeting nearly 20 years ago. They were asked to brainstorm the effects of a single Forest Service field event. The result of their collaboration was this flow chart, with its list of possible effects. This flow chart is an interim visual of what might occur. Actual future conditions would depend on the amount of rain/snow, the effects of predators on surviving deer, etc.

Given the uncertainties, the chart is an intermediate planning visual. Also, the team of biologists did not attempt to write formal text, with paragraphs and sentences. Instead, they considered this flow chart an early provisional version of the information to be developed and interpreted later. Still, as a planning tool, the biologists could and likely did keep detailed notes/recorded ideas about the effects. They could then return to their notes when they needed to.

This flow chart appears on p. 68 of the Shipley Group's *How to Write Quality EISs and EAs*, Third Edition (Salt Lake City: The Shipley Group, 1998-2005).



Example 34 (Section 4.2.1.2)—Flow chart showing cause-and-effect relationships. *This flow chart schematically captures the cause-and-effect relationship behind the public issue of the effects on the deer population. Note that the initial cause (the harvest of Douglas-fir stand) potentially has both beneficial and adverse effects. In this flow chart, we have not attempted to separate direct from indirect effects. In an EIS or EA you must discuss all effects, but you need not separate them into direct and indirect categories. NOTE: the numbers under each box are for reference purposes; they do not indicate the sequence of the effects.*

The reprinted caption for the above flow chart presents possible interpretations of the content recorded in the flow chart. It now appears as a formal caption because this is how it appears in the Shipley training manual. This caption could be broken down into a number of interpretive comments on the flow chart itself (assuming that it appeared in a draft form in a bound journal).

4. Choose a way to rapidly and easily retrieve relevant information.

Retrieval is crucial, especially if you have an extensive collection of relevant information. Most retrieval depends on a system of categories so that as you record something, it is flagged with the certain color, a key word/phrase, placement in a certain file (electronic or paper), or its row and column in an electronic spread sheet.

Without a retrieval plan, your journals and their records will be a chaotic mess. So set up a retrieval scheme and stick with it.

Step 1 in a retrieval plan is to identify the priority topics you want to record and add to your journal (or computer archive). Take time to break each priority topic into its likely constituents. As an example, if I wanted to collect information on environmental impacts, I might have the following list of constituent subtopics:

Environmental Impact/Effects

Direct impacts

Indirect impacts

Cumulative impacts

Short-term and long-term impacts

Adverse impacts

Beneficial impacts

And so on . . .

With this list of subtopics, the next step is to assign each subtopic to one or more pages in a journal, perhaps using color-coded tabs. Then as you come across examples, record them and, of course, add your own comments and interpretations.

Other techniques can help with this retrieval step. Perhaps you start a spread sheet with rows and columns devoted to topics and subtopics. This is a time-consuming process, but one that is useful if you have a very large data file of information to record.

And, of course, a computer search tool is the easiest retrieval tool of all.

5. Track the sources for all information, being careful not to plagiarize words, phrases, or even ideas.

Always record the exact source for all information you decide to record. This recommendation reinforces what most of us learned in our academic training. Sadly, missing or inaccurate citations are all to frequent. I recently asked Google for information about “Plagiarism and journalism” and got extensive lists of instances where professional journalists either failed to cite sources or actually stole text and claimed it as their own.

As you record interesting quotations or other relevant facts, always comment on why the recorded information is relevant. Such thoughts help provide a context for a cited fact or quoted passage. Shipley Group newsletter 55 (June 2007) is devoted to “NEPA Analysis and the Best Science.” The premise of this newsletter is that good citations become credible sources if they have a clear and stated relevance to a problem being discussed.

Feature Article
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The Shipley Group is currently developing a series of workshops designed as an interactive live web-based training. The first workshop is scheduled for 7-9 February 2012 additional information on this and other web based training may be found on the Shipley Calendar http://www.shipleygroup.com/environmental/index.html?pg=calendar