Entertaining massive information flow

By Jeff Davidson

The onslaught of information and communication seems to be a contemporary phenomenon in terms of the volume and frequency. Every day, 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.

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.

Soon, 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."

The time will come when, like on Star Trek, information becomes available on demand.

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, 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 of volumes became available in the span of a few decades.

The printing press represented a technology that could change society and benefit all of humanity. 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

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.

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, and a foreword. Progressive publishers added part or sectional dividers between groups of chapters. All such innovations helped, but still, the volume of information was unprecedented.

Today, we are all impacted by the onslaught of information. Search engines offer us some reliable results, often buried. 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

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to information overload. 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 now, we're stuck in a "nether-land" of massive information flows that 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, our technology will match our ambition. 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 everyday commands, and your request awaits on the computer screen built into your wall.

For now, a bumpy road awaits. The information anxiety you feel today is going to increase. With planning and forethought, however, 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.

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