

It's time to manage the noise, or the noise will manage you.

Noisy lives are the new normal. Our days are filled with always-on access to digital devices, boundless data, endless choices, and mindless chatter that erodes our ability to concentrate, think, and create. Information is now more of a threat than a reward.

Attention is becoming our most precious personal resource.

When our brains are filled to overflowing, we mindlessly tune out what really matters. We all risk becoming mentally anemic by digesting empty brain calories all day. We need to develop practical strategies to protect our minds from the barrage and strengthen where, when, and how we focus.

A practical, encouraging plan to defend ourselves every day.

Joseph McCormack has forged some old-school answers to a new-world problem. In this captivating follow-up to his first book, *BRIEF: Make a bigger impact by saying less*, he explores how the onslaught of information overload and constant connectivity is rewiring our brains for the worse. What's more, he shows leaders, employees, parents, and everyone else how to survive the tsunami of noise, regain our ability to concentrate, and help those around us too.


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Part One

Weapons of Mass Distraction

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.

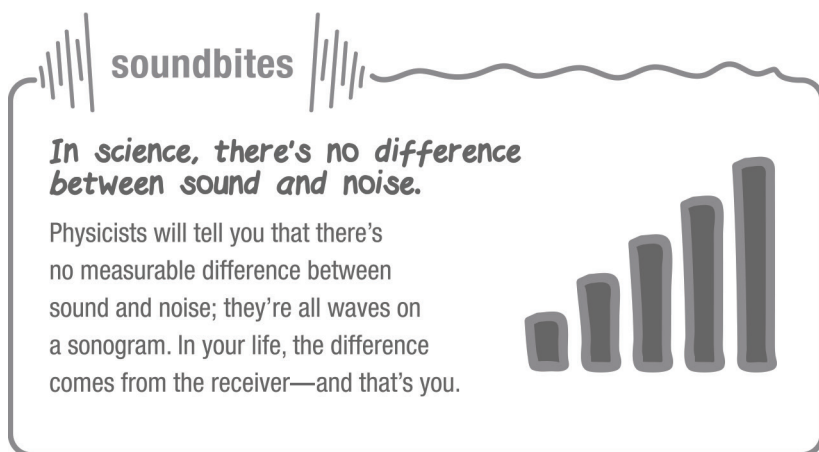
All of this feels like nonstop, won't-stop noise.

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.

Mentally anemic?

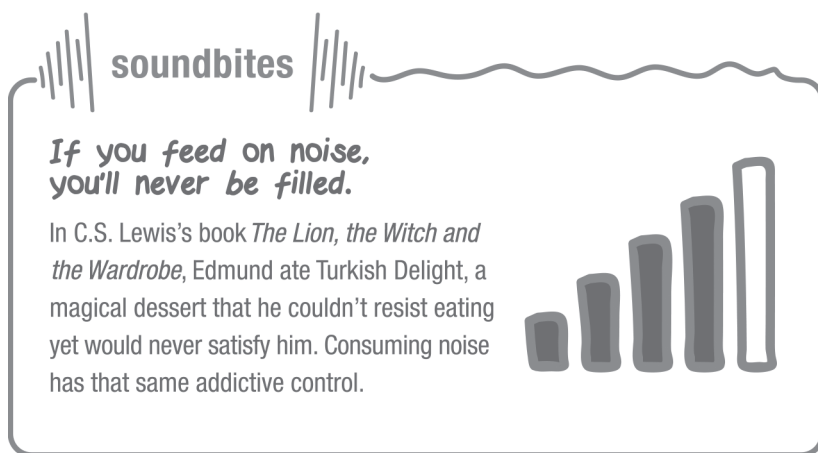
Consuming information mindlessly and incessantly is like eating popcorn and drinking diet soda. You feel filled but there's almost no mental nutrition.



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.



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.

2 Huh? We're Going Collectively Deaf

We've all heard the expression "in one ear and out the other." It says everything about the tendency to tune out.

So where does this infamous phrase come from? Reportedly, the first recorded use was from Geoffrey Chaucer, the Father of English Literature, in his poem "Troilus and Criseyde" from the late fourteenth century.

The original is written in old English but is translated like this:

These words he said for the moment all/ to help his friend, lest he
for sorrow died:/doubtless to cause his woe to fall,/he cared not
what nonsense he replied./But Troilus, who nigh for sorrow died,/
took little heed of anything he meant:/one ear heard it, at the other
out it went.¹

We can all relate to what Chaucer wrote. We've all tuned out information or chosen to ignore it, yet the reasons we do this varies from person to person.

So, Why Do We Tune Out? A Variety of Reasons

Here is a brief sampling of what's going on when we are so dialed in that we decide to check out:

- **“It really doesn’t apply to me.”**

This reaction is driven primarily by relevance versus irrelevance. You don’t need to pay attention when you are convinced the information is meant for someone else. If you have kids at home, this is the predictable response when you tell them that it’s time to do the dinner dishes. “You clearly weren’t talking to me, so I didn’t even hear you ask.”

- **“I was daydreaming and totally spaced out.”**

In a moment, your mind begins to wander, and everything you might hear instantly vanishes. Your brain goes elsewhere—to a magical place. This happens when people get stuck in a long meeting and “awaken” later to discover they didn’t hear a single word. Or when they hear a safety announcement on a plane and drift off to think of other things.

- **“I don’t agree at all with the person.”**

The tune-out is practically immediate when you don’t share someone’s opposing opinion or a distinct perspective. And the more they try to convince you that you are wrong, the faster your listening shuts down. Verbal sparring on talk radio provokes these responses, as do political debates.

- **“I don’t understand at all. It is beyond my comprehension.”**

When a subject-matter expert starts to geek out and go into painfully deep details, you’re forced to opt out of the conversation. Naturally, it feels like they’re speaking a completely different language that is nearly incomprehensible. Trying to

listen just reminds you how incapable you are of grasping the material. Imagine listening to a physics graduate student describing their doctoral dissertation when you barely passed high school science class.

- **“I choose to ignore because listening is too painful.”**

After listening or reading a little, your brain hurts, and the pain is intolerable. This might be because the person is confusing, complaining, criticizing, or just all over the place. Realistically, there's pleasure in seeking silence and escaping from the “noise” they are generating.

- **“I already know everything.”**

Talking to a know-it-all is no fun. There's no place for you to contribute when your thoughts are interrupted and finished midsentence. They know all the answers already. To continue along just means losing any small role you might have as the conversation gets hijacked, the tables are turned, and it turns into a monologue.

- **“I was preoccupied with something much more important.”**

There are times when your head is dealing with urgent matters, like handling a crisis at home, working a complex problem, or planning an important career-defining event. In any of these moments, you might be incapable of hearing anything else that doesn't relate to what's squarely on your mind at the time. Imagine someone telling you about their weekend adventures when you're worried about having a tough conversation with your boss a few minutes later. You don't tune in because it goes in one ear and out the other.

What does this all mean? Our brains can't capture everything that's coming our way, for a variety of different reasons, in a host of

distinct scenarios. You may have even more reasons than what's been shared here, but these are a few prominent ones.

The Impact of the “Elusive 600” on Our Listening

While we are having a conversation with someone or reading an e-mail, we can simultaneously be talking to ourselves in our head, maybe about the same subject or about something completely different. It's an inner monologue. It happens to all of us. Imagine what you're thinking when you feel what you're hearing is boring, complicated, or irrelevant.

At The BRIEF Lab, we teach a core concept called the “Elusive 600” that I learned from Sharon Ellis, a seasoned communications expert and close friend. Sharon blew my mind when she explained how the brain processes about 750 words per minute, yet the average person speaks or reads about 150 words per minute. In essence, our minds “overprocess” by 600 words per minute.

When I explain what happens in these terms, it makes sense to people. A lightbulb goes off, shining light on something they've all experienced yet had no term to explain. It's as if they are now aware of their awareness.

According to Ellis, while we are listening to someone talk, our brains start to say very specific things to us. In some moments, we tune in. “This is vital; I need to listen,” or “How interesting,” or “Is that a squirrel I just saw?” or “What am I going to have for lunch?” Yet, in many more cases, we just check out completely. “This doesn't apply to me,” “I've heard this all before, and it was a waste of time,” or “I don't follow what they're saying—I can't keep up.” Whatever the triggered response, our Elusive 600 is a reality, and it needs to be managed.

The Elusive 600 at work

750 WPM
MENTAL
PROCESSING

- 150 WPM
RATE OF
SPEECH

ELUSIVE 600 WPM
(WORDS PER MINUTE)

They're loving all of it.

Keep nodding.

What's for lunch?

I'm lost.

► Our brains have the capacity to think faster than we speak.

Often the information we are processing isn't organized well, or at least our brain says it's not easy to follow. It shuts down and then shuts off. There might be too much information (TMI), or it is not in the right order, clearly presented in a way that requires minimal effort.

This is one of the reasons I wrote the book *BRIEF*, to help people present clear and concise information to a listener's Elusive 600, triggering the right responses, at the right moments, and minimizing the tendency of someone's brain to head in a completely different direction.

Imagine that you are on a video conference and the person speaking starts going off on a tangent. The "deep dive" information might be vital, but it triggers our Elusive 600 to say, "Hey, this sounds hard and confusing, I don't know where this is going. Maybe I should just take a coffee break."

It takes very little to trigger the Elusive 600 to work against, not for us.

How Words Become Worthless—and Triggers for a Tune-Out

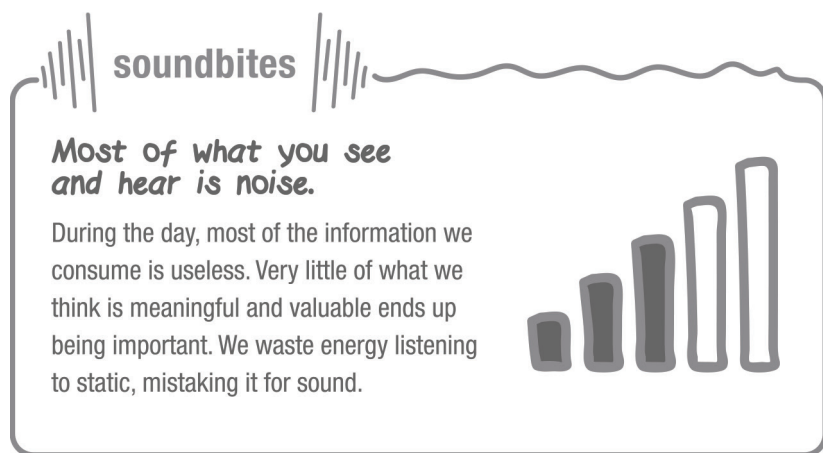
This also happens when people use a lot of buzzwords when speaking. We hear these all of the time: "We need to move the goalpost" or "We have to empower our enterprise" or "We've gotta move the needle and run the numbers" or "We're sending cascading, relevant messaging to our key stakeholders" or "We need to find organic synergies."

When we speak this way, we trigger people to ignore us. To the Elusive 600, it sounds like static. Once this happens, it's almost impossible to regain their attention again.

Hard selling and persuasion don't work for me and probably don't for you. I have a saying—"tell me; don't sell me"—that I share in

our courses. Nobody wakes up and wants to be sold, convinced or swayed. It is an immediate turn off, and it sends the Elusive 600 into defense mode, looking for the catch and pushing back.

When you sense a person coming toward you, trying to win you over and overpower you, your mind is going to resist and your listening and demeanor change. The irony is that the more we try to be persuasive, the less our audience is going to hear. Statistics show that salespeople have a trustworthy rating of about 3%, and 9 out of 10 people dislike salespeople.² That doesn't mean you can't be convincing, but the harder you try, the less effective you are, because the audience's listening really starts to shrink.



My Mom Thought I Had a Hearing Problem

An example from my own life paints the picture of what too much information and “noise” can do to a person.

I grew up in a large Catholic family. I'm the sixth of nine children. If you've ever been around big families, especially those with young children, you know there is a lot of clamor and chaos. When I was an infant, my mom worried that I might have a hearing problem because I wasn't reacting to verbal cues like my older siblings.

One day, a family friend was at the house. He was a doctor, so my mom shared her worries with him.

He asked her if she had a newspaper. The request momentarily puzzled my mom but she gave him one. He came to my crib, leaned over and crumpled the newspaper by my ear. Immediately, I turned my head.

The doctor said to my mom, “Joe doesn’t have a hearing problem. It’s just loud around here. He’s become immune to the noise.”

Information overload is our noise. We are bombarded with it, and it affects us negatively and permanently. Some may feel they can live with it, almost like they’re used to it, yet the noise is deafening and damaging, and we have to find ways to manage and mitigate it.

[Brief Recap]

The biggest threat we face is that our brain is so constantly bombarded by information that it shuts down. Tuning out can be immediate, hindering productivity, learning, and relationships. What we let in and what we consciously or unconsciously ignore has a real impact.

{Tune-in}

Listen, information overload is a threat to all of us.

NOISE: Living and leading when nobody can focus.

By Joe McCormack

We hope you enjoyed your free sample of *NOISE* by Joe McCormack.

Please consider [purchasing a copy](#) and/or [writing a review on Amazon!](#)



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