THRIVING ON OVERLOAD

THE 5 POWERS FOR SUCCESS
IN A WORLD OF EXPONENTIAL INFORMATION

ROSS DAWSON

FOUNDING CHAIRMAN OF ADVANCED HUMAN TECHNOLOGIES GROUP

Praise for Thriving on Overload

IN THE NEWS…

"*Thriving on Overload* offers the five best ways to manage our information-drenched world."
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—**FAST COMPANY,** *Best Technology Books of Summer*
</div>

"A survival guide in this new era of exponential information."
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—**INVESTORS PODCAST NETWORK**
</div>

"I don't think I've found a book quite this dense with amazing resources since reading something like The 4 Hour Workweek."
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—**TREY LOCKERBIE,** *We Study Billionaires*
</div>

"*Thriving on Overload* will make you an information processing ninja."
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—**SMALL BUSINESS TRENDS**
</div>

"The ultimate guide to information mastery."
<div align="right">

—**STARTUP SAVANT**
</div>

FROM THE EXPERTS…

A practical and useful guide to what are perhaps the most fundamental skills for success in our era of unlimited information. Ross Dawson has written a how-to for turning a surplus of information into expertise, insight, and better decisions.
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—**NIR EYAL, Wall Street Journal bestselling author of Hooked and Indistractable**
</div>

If you read only one business book this year, make it Thriving on Overload. Finally, a book that provides actionable strategies to cut through the masses of information and find the diamonds that will make a difference.
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—**NICK ABRAHAMS,** *Global Co-leader of Digital Transformation at Norton Rose Fulbright*
</div>

Dawson's Five Powers in Thriving on Overload are just the tools we need to navigate the fast-evolving world we live in. If you've ever wondered where to start to prioritize your life, you must buy this book!
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—**JOYCE GIOIA,** *CEO of The Herman Group of Companies and author of Experience Rules*
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INTRODUCTION

Learning to Thrive

*Information is what our world runs on: the
blood and the fuel, the vital principle.*[1]

—James Gleick, author of *The Information*

I n 1970, Alvin Toffler in *Future Shock* presciently anticipated one of the central features of today's world. Toffler used the phrase "information overload" to illustrate his broader thesis that people were simply not able to cope with the increasing pace of change, writing that "we are accelerating the generalized rate of change in society. We are forcing people to adapt to a new life pace, to confront novel situations and master them in ever shorter intervals. We are forcing them to choose among fast-multiplying options. We are, in other words, forcing them to process information at a far more rapid pace than was necessary in slowly evolving societies."[2]

It was not a new concept. In his 1964 book *The Managing of Organizations*, Bertram Gross wrote, "Information overload occurs

when the amount of input to a system exceeds its processing capacity. Decision makers have fairly limited cognitive processing capacity. Consequently, when information overload occurs, it is likely that a reduction in decision quality will occur."[3] Over a half century later, it is fair to say his prediction has been borne out.

In 1990 the genius of Tim Berners-Lee created the protocols underlying the World Wide Web. Three decades later there were over 500 billion web pages, all instantly accessible by over 5 billion internet users around the world.[4] The same year 64 zettabytes (that's 64 with 21 zeros after it) of data was produced, fiftyfold more than 10 years earlier.[5] If written in books stacked on top of each other, the pile would stretch to the moon and back over 300 million times.[6] The growth of information production continues to be exponential, pointing to even more staggering figures in coming years.

From that superabundance we can only ever expose ourselves to a miniscule fraction. Yet during the course of a single day in 2021 the average American consumed over 11 hours of media.[7] Two years earlier over 30 percent of the adult population (let alone teens) declared they were "almost constantly" online during their waking hours.[8] We are subjecting ourselves to close to as much information as is humanly and physically possible (though don't doubt that we will find ways to push it further).

Despite the extraordinary benefits of easy information access, for many the unwavering onslaught of news is at best wearying, and often a daily source of stress. In early 2020, 66 percent of Americans reported being "worn out" by the amount of news.[9] This sense of overwhelm is becoming pervasive around the world.

I have personally observed the global ubiquity of the phenomenon. Over the last years I have traveled to 32 countries to deliver keynotes and strategy workshops to organizations in the diverse fields of financial services, professional services, technology, media, retail, healthcare, education, government, and many others. In every case my clients expect me to understand not only the state of their industry today, but also what is shaping its future,

with concrete examples, as well as addressing their distinctive geographic context. To deliver value to my clients I have to keep current on a universe of information and news across an extraordinary array of domains. Perhaps it's not surprising, then, that the question I am most frequently asked at my engagements is "How on earth do you keep on top of so much information?"

In this book I will share the practices and insights I have developed through a lifetime of immersion in information. I began using the phrase "thriving on information overload" and formally researching and developing best practices in the field 25 years ago. I was designing the initial offering of my first company, helping traders and analysts in investment banks to create value from unlimited information. Since then, I have worked consistently to refine my methodologies, shaped by my work as a futurist spanning almost two decades. My approaches have served me and my clients very well and continue to help me keep abreast of the extraordinary pace of change in our world today.

I will combine these with invaluable insights I have gleaned from some of the world's most extraordinary entrepreneurs, investors, executives, professionals, authors, and researchers who appear effortlessly on top of what is happening in their industries and the world at large. I call them "information masters," those who are completely at home in a world awash with information, capable of transmuting vast mines of data into the solid gold of insight and effective action, generating success and results far beyond their peers.

What these people have in common is that they have all put in the effort required to develop five intertwined powers, distinctive capabilities that are intensely relevant in today's world of overload. We are not born with these powers; they are capacities that each one of us can build and improve. By cultivating them, we all can learn to thrive amid overwhelming excess.

Thriving on Overload starts from the premise that who we are, our identities and lives and destiny, are framed by our relationship with information. Humans exist amidst information. This

includes everything we take in through our senses, now massively augmented and amplified by an explosion of content of every imaginable type. As part of our very real and necessary evolution, we must learn to flourish in today's unprecedented information-intensive world.

Perhaps the most fundamental step to thriving is to reframe our perception of our experience from one of overload to that of abundance. With abundance, we have no obligations, only choices. Shifting your mindset can allow you to experience this plenitude as joyful and liberating, treating the information landscapes we live in as places to play, to taste and savor, to appreciate as a gift completely unparalleled in human history.
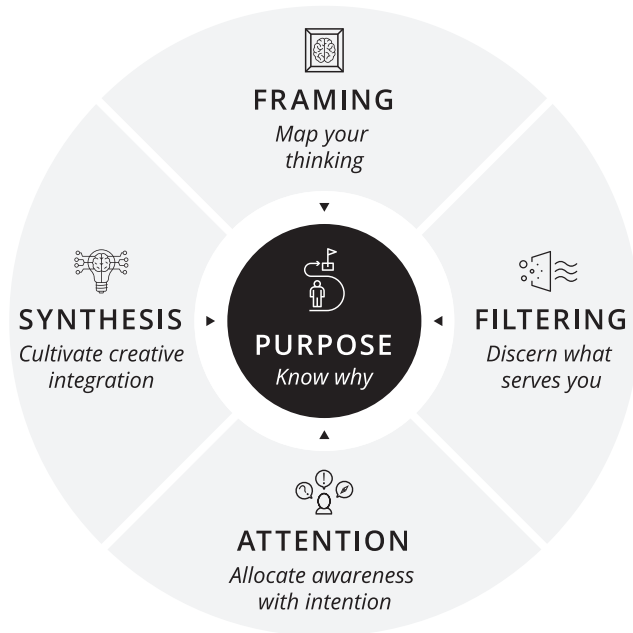
The skills that you develop and the quality of your choices enable you to make the most of today's veritable cornucopia of mind fodder. This book, if you use it well, will give you those skills and choices.

The Five Powers of Thriving on Overload

In this book I will take you on a journey to explore the five powers in detail and show how you can enhance your capabilities in each of these domains, so you too can thrive. Whether you feel you are drowning in information, or are already an information master, you will find perspectives, tools, and insights you can apply to improve your capabilities. The vital powers you need to prosper amid exponential change, shown in Figure I.1, are laid out in the five main chapters of this book. These five powers are inseparable. They are parts of a whole, the elemental capabilities that, when integrated, create the superpower of thriving amid excessive information.

The Power of Purpose
Living amid excess, we must make the choice to improve our relationship with information. This requires us to become clear on *why*

FRAMING
*Map your
thinking*

SYNTHESIS
*Cultivate creative
integration*

PURPOSE
Know why

FILTERING
*Discern what
serves you*

ATTENTION
*Allocate awareness
with intention*

FIGURE I.1 The Five Powers of Thriving on Overload

we are keeping up with its ceaseless flow. Understanding our purposes for engaging with information shapes the *how* of our habits and daily practices.

There are six spheres of our life where we should consider our purpose for engaging with information: identity, expertise, ventures, society, well-being, and passions. The objective is not to come up with a fixed purpose. It is better to frame our information quests as journeys to help us refine our intentions and discover our path.

For many of us, the selection of our areas of expertise defines our career, life, and potential to contribute. As participants in society, we need to choose what news is relevant, who matters to us, and what we need to know to have a positive impact. In Chapter 1 you will consider your various purposes to guide you to an improved relationship to information and greater clarity on your path.

The Power of Framing

Any piece of information in isolation is close to meaningless. To make useful what we learn we need to form relationships, discern patterns, and build frameworks that describe the most important connections. These frames help us define a clear scope for our areas of interest and expertise, point us to where we need to be paying attention, and enable us to make sense of new ideas and information in context. Mapping our thinking dramatically accelerates knowledge development.

In Chapter 2 you will learn a range of ways to perceive and capture the links between concepts. The human brain can often best understand and process relationships visually, making visual frameworks especially useful in creating knowledge. These can be complemented by software that can capture and elucidate our thinking as it develops.

I will show you a variety of ways to create useful frameworks that help you filter information and develop refined expertise and insight. Among them is a simple process I have developed over the last 15 years for creating visual landscapes of the future, which have been invaluable in refining my own understanding and attracted many millions to view, share, and apply them.

The Power of Filtering

It is a simple fact that human cognitive capacity is limited. To find what is relevant to us we need to cast our nets wide, yet we must take care not to try to take in more than our brains can process. We need to learn to discern the information that serves us, transcending our biases and identifying the gems amid the profusion.

In Chapter 3 I will guide you through the criteria in selecting your portfolio of information portals and the sources at the core of your information habits. Choosing the best media formats for each type of content you engage with, whether they be print, text, audio, video, conversations, or more, will drive your ability to capture value.

In addition to pulling what you need toward you, we all experience excessive incoming information. Developing explicit

incoming filters and communicating these clearly can help limit how much you need to sift through each day.

The Power of Attention

We know we need to pay attention to what matters, and not let ourselves be distracted by what doesn't. Yet attention is not a single thing that you either have or don't have. Sometimes we need to be completely focused, diving deep to distill insights from dense sources and develop mental frameworks. At other times we need to explore, seeking specific information we require. Serendipity, the faculty of encountering happy accidents, is in fact often not chance at all. We can develop the skill of intentionally creating the conditions for felicitous connections with new ideas. We also need to understand that our attention is a finite resource; we can learn how to regenerate our capacity for focus. I will teach you the six different attention modes you need to distill value from information.

In Chapter 4 you will learn how to develop information routines that give you what you need to achieve your objectives without overwhelming you, as well as a set of practices to improve your capacity for attention, a foundational skill for success in a world of overload.

The Power of Synthesis

Synthesis—connecting and integrating disparate concepts—is the most distinctive human faculty. Its value is being amplified as the rise of artificial intelligence supplants many of our other capabilities. Only from the continuing act of sense-making and synthesis are we able to truly comprehend our chosen domains of expertise, perceive emerging opportunities, and make effective decisions in our work and personal lives.

In Chapter 5 I will help you build a wellspring of the elements that support our capacity for synthesis. At the foundation is openness to ideas, an attribute which confers powerful advantage in an accelerating world. We will learn other vital abilities, such as creatively perceiving connections to enrich the mental models

that are at the heart of our thinking. The ultimate outcome of our enhanced capability of synthesis is making better decisions and more successfully creating the outcomes we desire.

Chapter 6, the final chapter, consolidates the lessons of the five core chapters. It looks forward to the opportunities as well as the challenges of how information excess will evolve in coming years. The reality is our brains are evolving; we have the choice to make them better suited to the world of today and tomorrow.

Integrating the Paradoxes

Thriving on a surfeit of information is not something you can boil down to a set of simple steps to follow. If it were that easy, everyone could do it. In fact, you must reconcile many sets of what appear to be contradictory imperatives. You need to focus tightly and also scan broadly, delve into molecular detail yet see the big picture, develop clarity and acknowledge uncertainty, analyze into components and synthesize them into a whole, apply both rationality and intuition, be highly discriminating and also wide open to new information.

Astronomer and science communicator Carl Sagan observed, "It seems to me what is called for is an exquisite balance between two conflicting needs: the most skeptical scrutiny of all hypotheses that are served up to us and at the same time a great openness to new ideas."[10]

Neuroscientist and philosopher Iain McGilchrist in his cerebral bestseller *The Master and his Emissary* explores the complementary roles of the "exploratory attention" of the brain's left hemisphere and the "narrow attention" of the right hemisphere.[11] He posits that all knowledge entails cycling from the broad purview of the left hemisphere to the detailed apprehension of the right hemisphere, and then back to generate a comprehensive view. Our dance between perceiving minutiae and a holistic understanding of the world must encompass both. Neither is meaningful without the other.

Acknowledging and integrating these many paradoxes underlies our ability to excel across all the five powers. Through the book I will return to this vital theme to help weave together the powers into a whole, a set of capabilities that together are far more than the sum of their parts.

How to Read this Book

The primary intention of this book is to be useful to you, to help you thrive in a frenzied world, to enhance your information habits and routines to enable you to have a richer and more successful life.

In these pages you will find my advice on reading books, which of course also applies here. I suggest that you read the opening section (as you have), then spend perhaps 15 to 30 minutes skimming all the way through, looking at section headers, diagrams, and any immediately intriguing passages to get a sense of the book as a whole. I have written the book to be read from start to finish, but feel free to dive first into any sections you think may prove particularly useful for you. Read at the pace that best suits you, slowing where you think you can derive the most value, and speeding ahead through sections you don't find as compelling.

For the lessons in this book to be of value, you need to put them into practice. At the conclusion of every chapter, you will find exercises to apply for yourself the ideas you have encountered. Taken together, the exercises will help you build a personal "information strategy" that will make you more effective in your information habits and routines. The exercises will help you develop your capabilities in all five powers: in Chapter 1 to define your relationship with information and understand your *why*; in Chapter 2 to start developing useful frameworks; in Chapter 3 to select your portfolio of information portals; in Chapter 4 to design effective information routines; in Chapter 5 to enhance your abilities at synthesis; and in Chapter 6 to set a personal information action plan. I strongly encourage you to do the exercises, whether

you feel you are early in your journey or already proficient. Even the slightest improvement in your information capabilities will reap you rich rewards.

It would of course not make sense for this book to be excessively long, adding to your already substantial information burden. With the aim of making the book both as useful and as succinct as possible, at the end of the book I have provided a curated and annotated compilation of resources for those who wish to dive deeper, including lists of further reading, podcasts, educational courses, and apps. Extensive additional resources are also available at thrivingonoverload.com, including a podcast of all of the interviews for this book, downloadable exercise sheets, software reviews, and far more.

Learning to Thrive

Humans are intrinsically information-voracious animals. This has served us well as we have developed cities, civilizations, and technologies over the years, always building on the achievements of our predecessors.

We have created extraordinary technologies, including medical advances, remarkable materials, new sources of energy, and improved forms of transportation, by consistently drawing on developments around the world as they have emerged. Yet the heart of our progress, supporting and interwoven through all our other technologies, has been in information technologies, which have progressed at an exponential pace for decades.

These developments have wrought a world in which the perverse punishment for our hubris is a superabundance of information with the potential to drown us.

I believe that we all have a fundamental choice on whether we learn to thrive on overload—by experiencing it as abundance—rather than allowing it to overwhelm us. You and I happen to have been born in a time of unprecedented change and an explosion in

the creation and accessibility of information. Each of us can decide whether we will treat this reality as a problem or an opportunity.

I invite you to dive into this book and use it to enhance the capabilities that will allow you not just to cope with today's massive information overload, but to thrive on it, to prosper and succeed as never before, using these skills to create a better life for yourself and those around you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ross Dawson believes the future is ours to create. He is globally recognized as a leading futurist, keynote speaker, entrepreneur, and authority on business strategy. Ross is Founding Chairman of the Advanced Human Technologies group of companies, and the bestselling author of four previous books including the acclaimed *Living Networks*. Strong global demand has seen him deliver keynote speeches and strategy workshops to business and government leaders in over 30 countries, with clients including the likes of Boston Consulting Group, Citibank, Coca-Cola, EY, Google, Interpublic Group, News Limited, Oracle, Procter & Gamble, PwC, Roche, Visa, and Walmart. He appears frequently in media such as ABC TV, BBC, *Die Welt*, *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, the *New York Times*, Sunrise, Today, *VICE*, and many others.

For more information, visit rossdawson.com.

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