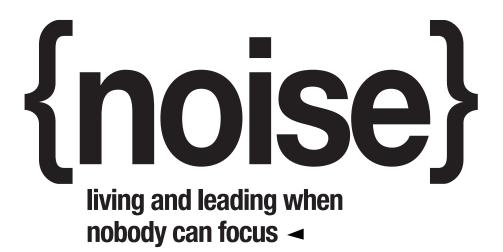
Joseph McCormack



WILEY

{noise}

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This book is dedicated to all of my brothers and sisters (Mary Carol, Jean, Matt, Peg, Annie, Kate, John, and Patrick), a constant source of encouragement, laughter, inspiration, and love. From my childhood to the present day, they are the best family one could have. In particular, I dedicate this book to my late brother Johnny, my best friend and closest collaborator, whom I miss dearly every day and work hard to honor.

CONTENTS

Foreword

Preface	xix
How the Book Is Organized	xxii
How to Read This Book	xxiii
Acknowledgments	xxv
Part ONE	
WEAPONS OF MASS DISTRACTION	1
Noise, Noise, So Much Noise	3
Kenny Chesney Gets It Right	
Hearing Decline and the Loss of Focus	
Access to Information Will Only Increase	
Attention Spans Will Remain Elusive	
Our Minds Will Become Anemic and Impenetrable	
Hub? We're Going Collectively Deaf	11
	11
So, Why Do We Tune Out? A Variety of Reasons	
The Impact of the "Elusive 600" on Our Listening	
How Words Become Worthless—and Triggers for a Tune-Ou	lt
My Mom Thought I Had a Hearing Problem	

xv

viii CONTENTS

2		
J	Brain Basics: Are Your Penguins Falling Off the Iceberg?	19
	Our Brains Are Changing	
	Working Memory in Decline	
	Brains Are Like Computers	
	We're Losing Impulse Control	
	Our Brains Get Hooked	
	How Often Do We Check Our Smartphones?	
4	Living in an Info Junkie Crack House	31
_	Training and Education Will Be the Gateway Drug	-
	Impending Health Impacts?	
	A Potential Threat to Consider	
	Who Can Stop This?	
	More Brain Celery	
	,	
	Part TWO	
	THE BIG TUNE-OUT IS COMING (IMAGINING THE UNTHINKABLE—SIX SHORT STORIES TO WAKE YOU UP)	41
5	Always Stuck at School	43
	Serious Triggers	
	New Protective Behaviors	
	Terrified Parents	
	Disturbing Statistics	
	Our Children in Isolation	
	Is It Addiction?	

Contents ix

6	A Misleading Leader	5.	3
	Streaming Information		
	Losing Momentum		
	Powerful Monologue		
	All Talk, No Action		
7	The Loss of Civil Discourse	6	1
-	Her Civic Duty	· ·	•
	Uninformed and Confused		
	No Respect		
	Tower of Babel		
	Catching Her Attention		
8			_
U	Mind-Filled Momentum at Work	6	7
	Connected While Exercising		
	Last-Minute Briefing		
	Driving Connected		
	Yet More Tasks and E-mails		
	Diving Right into the Weeds		
	Trying to Salvage Success		
n			
J	2050: A Parenting Odyssey	7.	7
	Technology Was Only a Mild Interrupter for Them		
	A Carefree Time		
	Deep Loss of Daily Contact		
	Struggle to Disconnect		
	Technology Is with You Everywhere You Go		
	It's Just Living for Them		
	Why Did We Worry So Much?		
	Parenting Without a Voice		
	Fighting a Force		

X CONTENTS

10	Safety Briefing with Near-Tragic Results	85
	Part THREE	
	TIME FOR YOU TO TUNE IN: AWARENESS MANAGEMENT (AM 101)	93
11	Awareness Management 101	95
	Lighting the Path Before Us Lives Can Become a Blur	
	Missing the Moment Entirely	
	Our Minds Are Spinning Beach Balls	
	The Elusive 600: Your Enemy or Your Friend?	
	Runaway Thoughts	
	Waking Your Mind from Mindlessness to Mindfulness Directed, Undirected, and Misdirected	
	Commit to "Awareness Management"	
	What If We Don't Manage Our Awareness?	
	AM Pre-set Buttons	
12	Take Aim: Set Your Sights on What Matters Most	109
	Essentialists versus Non-essentialists	
	No More Deafening Noise	
	Pointless Routines	
	A Minimalist Decision: Keep It Simple	
	Aim Small, Miss Small—Tips to Direct Your Focus Post It: Simplicity Isr't Complicated	
	Post It: Simplicity Isn't Complicated To Simplify Is a Deliberate Decision	

Contents xi

13	Saying No to Noise Just Say No The Power of Self-Mastery Overcoming FOMO No, Here's How You Do It Addictions Weaken Willpower Running to Yes on the Road Toward No Self-Control Is a Personal Way to Stop the Noise Impulse Management: A Few Daily Distractions Feel the Peace of Singlemindedness Five Small Steps to Make That Little Word a Big Part of Your Life	123
14	Quiet Time: Restoring and Recharging Your Mind Dimly Lit Dinnertime: Our Brains Barraged and Batteries Drained The Extrovert Ideal and the Allure of Open Spaces Why Be Quiet? (I've Got Something to Say About That) Risky Isolation Rewarding Isolation Steps Toward Quiet Contemplatives in the Middle of the World	135
15	Present Listening: A Gift Worth Giving Now Why Is It So Exhausting to Listen? Professional Listeners: It Pays to Be Interested, Not Interesting Becoming a Present Listener—Seven Critical Considerations A Special Reward for Special Forces Selling Yourself Short with Others The Payoff of Present Listening	149

xii CONTENTS

Part FOUR

GETTING OTHERS TO DIAL IN: FOCUS MANAGEMENT (FM 101)

159

16 Focus Management 101

161

Changing an Environment That Doesn't Want to Be Changed Putting Fun Back into a Party The Role of a Focus Manager A Program Manager for a Life Filled with Simplicity and Clarity FM Pre-set Buttons

17 Wanted: BRIEF Communicators

169

When So Many Words Become Worthless
Losing the Meaning
You Can Change It
Message Lost in Translation
Winston Churchill's Brevity Memorandum
Concise Communication: A Necessary Curriculum Requirement
BRIEF Basics

18 Communicate Like a Magician

Clarity Is Your Number 1 Priority

181

Brain Science Behind Sleight of Hand The Power to Make the Restless Rest A Baker's Dozen of Communication Techniques, Tips, and Tricks

Preparing the Environment for Noise Abatement 191

The Failure of Open Floor Plans Screens Everywhere at Work Contents xiii

	Home Rooms Unplugged	
	Old-School Schools	
	Remaking Healthy Environments to Filter Noise Naturally	
20		205
20	Herding Cats: Facilitating to Focus More, Fidget Less	205
	The Joy of a Canceled Meeting	
	Teaching Students to Tune Out Need Some Help Leading at Home?	
	Fundamentals of Facilitation: At Work, School, or Home	
	Making It Easy for Everyone to Work, Learn, and Live Together	
	Part FIVE	
	PRE-SETS: SIMPLE PROGRAMMING FOR	
	NOISE REDUCTION	215
21	Personalizing Your Pre-sets Personal Pre-set Programming: Customize Your Settings to	217
	Manage the Noise	
	"The Lineup": Playing to Win by Keeping Score	
22	That Sounds Wonderful	235
Recom	mended Reading	239
Notes		241
Refere	nces	249
	the Author	257
	The BRIEF Lab	259
Index		<i>261</i>

FOREWORD

oe graciously mailed me a pre-release copy of *NOISE*, the book you're now holding. After reading it, I conducted a little experiment:

I disabled my e-mail alerts, shushed my social, and nuked (most of) my notifications.

Muzzled. Gag-ordered. Zipped.

Mind you, I didn't delete any of my accounts. I've in no way pulled a Henry David Thoreau and left the digital city for the analog woods altogether. This is neither a "Finished with Facebook!" freakout, nor a "malaise of modernity" manifesto. Rather:

I simply realized I was done with being *distracted*. Field Notes from Three Months in a Quiet Place:

- Once you get below a certain threshold of "omnipresent sound and fury," you start to take more notice of those few distractions that *do* sneak through. Like a single person gabbing in a library, you *hear* them more intensely than any single, screaming voice in a crowd. Case in point: I found myself wondering, "Is it in *any* way acceptable that *Yahoo! Sports* is daring to bother me about Florida Atlantic Football Coach Lane Kiffin right now? On a Tuesday morning? This is a library!" So, I turned off those notifications, too.
- You start to develop a calming, confidence-building sense of flow and control. You begin ... [Scout's Honor: As I sit here writing this,

xvi FOREWORD

my Apple Watch taps me on the wrist to let me know that Americans eat 554 million Jack in the Box tacos a year, and no one knows why. Sorry WSJ ... You're now shushed too.] Nuts! I lost my train of thought. What was I saying? Oh yes: You begin to realize that context-switching is a productivity killer, and that every time you're dragged off course by an unexpected distraction, you've just lost real time and money. Your mind takes time to accelerate into whatever it is you're focusing on next. Too many "nexts," and you're forever stuck in first gear.

• My various digital *assistants* had become my digital *bosses*. By constantly demanding my attention, my phone had pulled rank and began to call the shots. I'd really like to finish this Foreword right now, but *bossypants* has swooped in and demanded that I focus on tacos. By simply resetting my relationship with my devices to *pull* as opposed to *push*, I find that they're profoundly less ... pushy. Suddenly, my phone is back to taking orders as the trusty personal assistant I'd originally "hired" way back in 2007.

This important book, *NOISE*, is ultimately about Attention Economics. About the idea that a "wealth of information creates a poverty of attention, and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it."

Nobel Prize—winning economist Herbert Simon wrote that quoted bit in 1971. Before smartphones. Before the Web. Before cable TV.

Nearly 50 years on, Joe McCormack brings us the means to prosper in this "poverty." *NOISE* isn't a radical license to unplug and live in an uninformed bubble, but a playbook to help us be radically intentional about the sources—and formats—of information worthy of our precious time and attention. Not earplugs: a hearing aid.

Foreword xvii

Consider *NOISE* both a challenge and an encouragement to attend to your plan—not the next "ding."

—Mike Bechtel
Futurist, Deloitte
Professor of Corporate Innovation, University of Notre Dame

Addendum

Moving beyond digital interventions, I've since posted a paper sign outside my home office door that says: "Dad's Busy Earning Your Roof, Meals, & Allowance. Emergencies Only!"

I hear racing footfalls of my 7- and 9-year-olds, building to a crescendo.

Knock Knock Knock.

"Dad's working, guys. Is it an emergency?"

"Yes. Well ... kind of."

"Okay. What's up?"

They proceed to throw open the door to notify me that a new season of *Stranger Things* has just dropped.

Unable to shush my children, I consider disabling Netflix.

PREFACE

an you stop the flood?

Your best bet is to get out of the way or find a boat to float to safety. We are in an unnerving moment in history: information is becoming more of a threat than a reward.

You can't get out of its way, so how do you handle all of it and not have it overwhelm you?

When I wrote *BRIEF: Make a bigger impact by saying less* in 2013, my biggest concern was helping people learn to be clear and concise. Basically, get your point across or get dismissed.

Dedicating myself the past few years to spreading the message that "less is more," I am alarmed by a growing trend that the need for brevity reveals: information is so readily accessible that it is now burdening us.

It all sounds like senseless noise.

Focus is a huge problem. People's attention spans are shrinking, and it's no joke. It's harder and harder to tune in to the essentials and tune out what drowns us.

There are two sides to the coin.

Certainly, one side of the issue is brevity—cutting through the clutter. Essentially, think of it as an adaptive strategy: get to the point before someone tunes you out.

Yet, the other side is how to avoid tuning into nonstop static in an always-on, connected life. How can we stay mentally focused when faced with such information inundation? XX PREFACE

As I start seeing progress on one side of the issue, developing lean communicators and setting a higher communication standard, I feel there's also a larger battle we are losing.

The point of this book is to set off an alarm: the world is going deaf. We've gone far beyond the promise of the information age and are now so consumed by it that it threatens our existence.

Here's a dire picture of our world moving forward:

- Managers don't know how to talk to their subordinates.
- Leaders cannot rally their distracted followers.
- Spouses talk past each other, and relationships suffer.
- Children constantly tune out their parents.
- Parents can't listen to their kids.
- Fans follow sports but don't really watch the games.
- Sales professionals don't comprehend what their customers really need.
- Civil discourse is lost in senseless arguments and pointless persuasion.
- Days are wasted consuming empty brain calories.
- Progress, insight, and learning stall.
- We all grow apart.

Our lives in an information age are like facing a tsunami. Being able to hold onto something sturdy, permanent, and solid means a chance to survive and thrive. Giving into the endless sources of distraction and empty information means getting swept permanently out to sea.

The threat of infobesity is profound and potentially permanent for generations to come. Preface xxi

What matters most to me is helping people get better at surviving this calamity. I've spent so much time over the past few years witnessing a deep erosion of focus that I'm motivated to help those willing, interested, and able to withstand the societal shift that threatens our ability to communicate and connect with each other.

We need to maintain what makes us really human.

Our focus as a society is dwindling as our addiction to screens, technology, distractions, and interruptions grows. We're becoming mentally anemic, consuming useless information with little value.

This is an enormous issue that will forever change our lives. Will the implications of incessant information consumption make us all collectively deaf to one another?

This was my motivation writing this book. How can we adapt when getting drowned out in so much noise in all facets of our lives?

It's time for noise abatement.

{noise}

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

PART	1	Ш	III	IV	V
QUESTION	WHY?	WHY WORRY?	HOW DO WE IMPROVE?	HOW CAN WE HELP OTHERS?	WHAT'S NEXT?
TITLE	Weapons of Mass Distraction	The Big Tune-Out Is Coming	Awareness Management (AM 101)	Focus Management (FM 101)	Pre-Sets: Simple Programming for Noise Reduction
IN SIX WORDS	Noise, noise, always so much noise	Short stories to wake you up	Be aware of your own awareness	Get others to tighten their focus	Practical daily challenges to dial in
THE GIST	Our brains are being barraged and it is seriously affecting a broad spectrum of society	Each of us feels the impact of information overload in very personal and permanent ways	It is a personal responsibility to manage how and when we choose to control our attention	We can help others around us by taking practical steps that will make them feel quick relief	Like you dial into a radio by pre- programming stations, these challenges quickly get you ready to focus
YOUR FEELING	Curious		Captivated		Committed
BOTTOM LINE	The more information we consume, the less we retain	Infobesity is a serious societal shift that we must address	There are simple things we can do to regain our brains	We can influence how others improve their focus	We can drown out noise with clarity and control

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

NOISE is designed to make it easier for you to maintain focus while reading the book. Intentionally, I have included periodic breaks to allow you to go deeper on a thought or take a short break with a brief insight. Here is what's inside for you:



SOUNDBITES:

These simple insights remind us how to protect ourselves from more noise and concentrate more intentionally. They are short and sweet suggestions meant to produce clarity, focus, peace, and calm.



NOTEWORTHY:

These are full-page features that shed light on noise abatement, whether it's about an innovative person, a published work, or a key idea to improve attention. In each case, I make it clear why it's worth our careful consideration.



NOISE MAKERS:

Throughout the book, I have included a series of illustrations that help capture not only what causes so many distractions and so much inattention, but also where that impact is felt throughout our daily lives.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The title of this book is a story unto itself.

For several months, the initial project operated under the working title *In One Ear, and Out the Other.* Though catchy, it didn't completely capture and communicate the true essence of the book's message. One day, I had a brainstorm session with my close collaborators, project manager Ania Waz and editor Karen Quinn, in my office in suburban Chicago.

Through that clarifying conversation, *NOISE* emerged. I cannot thank both of them enough for their untiring commitment from beginning to end on this journey.

Excited and energized with the new title, I started spreading the word to my co-workers, collaborators, and close friends. For a year, the vision got clearer, and people's enthusiastic reactions motivated me onward. In particular, my siblings never stop encouraging me, specifically my sisters Peggy and Ann, and my brother Matt—all of my family, for that matter.

I've always seen this book as a companion to *BRIEF* and, in some ways, even a prequel. Designing the cover, I knew the two titles needed to look like alike—almost siblings—paired and meant to be read together since their content goes hand in hand. I cannot thank enough Megan Palicki and Joan Bueta, two talented designers, who also helped me with the first book and for whom I have the highest admiration for their creativity, taste, and strong brand sense. They didn't disappoint and brought the vision to life, not only with the

xxvi ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

cover but also with their many illustrations. Thanks again for being there for me and staying part of the family.

I also counted on a number of individuals for ongoing support in writing this book. First off, Brian Neill and Vicki Adang at John Wiley & Sons. Also, Joyce Duriga, Marc McCormack, and Mickey Novak, with research and editing.

My co-workers continue to believe in me and my vision. In particular, I need to thank Charley Thornton and our team in Chicago who lead our corporate practice. As for my Southern Pines, North Carolina, team, I appreciate the constant support and funloving spirit of Michelle McKinney, Steve Cain, and Jill Catron, who encourage and affirm me day to day as we serve our military clients.

Finally, I need to thank my clients, both present and past, for taking on our challenge and asking us to do even more for them. Setting an elite communication standard is only a viable vision if there are people, teams, and organizations with the commitment, courage, and discipline to embrace it every day. Thanks for stepping up and setting the tone.

Part One

Weapons of Mass Distraction