

Introduction

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Our times are witnessing intense debates about overflows. Our lives, at home and at work, allegedly create the necessity of living with too much: too many objects, choices, options, activities, and emotions, as well as too much information. Bestseller titles abound, such as *Affluenza: When too much is never enough* (Hamilton and Denniss, 2005), *Distracted: Erosion of attention and the coming dark age* (Jackson, 2008), and *Overwhelmed: Work, love and play when no one has the time* (Schulte, 2014), accompanied by survival guides containing instructions for coping with everyday overload. Dystopic visions of accelerating overflows come together with utopian longings for a more balanced, even minimalist life of order, neatness, and rationality, complete with such antidotes as ideas for achieving ‘the smart home’ and ‘the smart office’ – ways of managing overflow with the help of new technologies.

Overflow and its acceleration in everyday life lead to a number of concerns about a wider societal change. How should abundance in domestic consumption and corporate finances be handled? Are social media making life shallower and attention weaker? What about managers’ and administrators’ complaints about overflows at work making them lose their Panopticon vision and the feeling of control? Time and resources are spent trying to control or cope with overflows in a variety of situations. People have to learn how to handle the steady inflow and outflow of stuff at home, while navigating a rapidly growing landscape of choices ranging from consumer goods and lifestyles to pension schemes and healthcare options. In corporate settings, new managerial solutions are developed to handle blockages and overspill in work processes, caused by things and people alike.

A uniting theme in this debate is ‘too much’; but how much is ‘too’ much? And too much of what? In addition, and perhaps most important: why ‘a problematic excess’ rather than ‘a delightful abundance’? It was such ambiguities and tensions that motivated us to develop a research project on the management of overflow. Situations and sites where flow is seen as turning into a positive or negative overflow offer the opportunity to understand some basic problems and potentialities – both in the lives of individuals and in corporations and public organizations. Surprisingly, there is still a lack of research in this field. (For an overview of earlier research, see Czarniawska and Löfgren, 2012.)

In our project, we looked at the various shapes and forms of overflows, and the different functions they serve. It is a transdisciplinary research project, and its participants have explored a wide range of cases using a variety of field techniques. Our research team included management scholars, ethnologists, and economic historians, permitting us to explore overflows in different social, economic, and historical contexts. Thanks to this varied perspective, we have been able to problematize many taken-for-granted notions of overflow and how it can be handled, and to distinguish general characteristics of overflow management shared in this diversity.

Our first question was: where do we look for overflows? There were several obvious answers to that question: overconsumption, waste and its management, digitalization and news media, administrative practices, and information overload. Gradually, other fields were explored; altogether we examined 31 cases in the three edited books that emerged from the project, and others were published in a special issue of the *European Management Journal* (2017) which we co-edited and which included contributions from researchers outside our project.

This volume summarizes seven years of research, drawing on and adding to the insights presented in the two earlier books from the project. The first volume, *Managing overflow in affluent societies* (Czarniawska and Löfgren, 2012), began by exploring earlier research in the field and then developed a conceptual framework that was put to work in a number of case studies. The second volume, *Coping with excess: How organizations, communities and individuals manage overflows* (Czarniawska and Löfgren, 2013), brought another theme to the foreground: the social and moral dimensions of evaluating overflow in terms of positive or negative, as a problem or as a potentiality. We return to the findings of these earlier publications as we reflect upon the cumulative work over the years.

This has been a fascinating research journey through diverse landscapes and problem areas. Take, for example, the several studies dealing with the home – a place often overcrowded with things, activities, and emotions. There are parents struggling to handle a steady inflow of objects from toys to clothes, developing new strategies for discarding and recycling, while their teenagers are learning the delights of navigating in clouds of music on the Internet – there is never too much of that one! There is the wearied husband accusing his wife of letting her work overload spill over into the home. After all, overflow may be hiding behind a seemingly manageable everyday existence, slowly building up, only to surface in sudden situations or conflicts. ‘Look at this flat! We can’t continue living like this!’

Another set of studies focused on work settings, an area with a constant need to navigate accelerating flows of information. We have learned about impressive skills for handling overflow developed by certain professionals – from the Istanbul stockbrokers who make split-second decisions about buying and selling, to journalists in news agencies forced to pick a news item out of the 100 available. There are scholars trying to handle and condense immense amounts of research material and university students learning to select or ignore, while scrolling faster and faster through Google lists.

From the start of this project, it was clear that focusing merely on contemporary situations would conceal too many aspects of the phenomenon. From a longer perspective, it is possible to see how overflows come and go and how they are dealt with in disparate ways. How was an overflow defined and experienced in 1880, 1960, and 2017? Our earliest example dealt with a growing extravagance in nineteenth-century French funeral practices.

The historical cases introduced the question of why overflow debates emerge in certain historical contexts and not in others. Recent debates about sustainability have focused on waste – an issue that becomes especially remarkable when one compares its treatment with studies from the 1950s and 1960s, when the focus was on growing or anticipated overconsumption. Such worries took different forms in different parts of Europe. In Western Europe, there was a great deal of moralizing about new consumer habits in the working class, which was entering a world of relative abundance. In Eastern and Central Europe, images of Western consumption created dreams and longings which threatened the political system and forced politicians to develop other strategies for creating controlled abundance.

The historical perspective helped us to understand why the present, rather than the past or the future, is usually seen as the site of problematic overflows. The present may be experienced as chaotic, overloaded, and unmanageable; the past often comes to stand for order, harmony, and a simple, uncluttered life (Bauman, 2007). The future, in turn, if not a dystopia in which nothing can be saved, can be envisioned as the time when rational decisions, planning, and effective management will create a well-ordered utopia.

In the following, we explore three main themes that have emerged during our studies: the interpretative framework or frameworks used in the analysis of the management of overflow; the moral dimensions of overflow; and skills and devices developed to manage or cope with ‘too much’.

What’s in a word?

The concepts ‘excess’ and ‘abundance’ have been subjected to a variety of approaches in public debates and in academic research as such labels are rarely neutral, containing, as they do, hidden overtones or undertones. There is strong metaphorical power in the ways in which ‘too much’ was and is represented; the two competing research concepts of overload and overflow serve as a good example. *Overload* has held a dominant position for at least a century and is often used when talking in terms of sensory overload or information overload (Lipowski, 1975). A vertical metaphor, it depicts growing pressure – always defined as negative, and often favored by psychologists (see, e.g., Ledzińska and Postek, 2017). We opted for the horizontal metaphor of *overflow*, which is open to a wider range of interpretations. When overflow is judged to be bad, or at least problematic, it can be portrayed as flooding an area or spilling from one area to another, as in the overflow of work into the home – or, less dramatically, it is seen at least as *spillover*. Overflow also attracts other metaphors – for instance *shallowness* – and it can be used to describe a situation in which slow growth, a constant trickle, is suddenly seen as ‘too much’, because it can no longer be contained. ‘We need to deal with this situation urgently!’ A sense of emergency arises as overflow is dramatized.

Overflow is defined in dictionaries as the excess or surplus that cannot be accommodated in the space available. This neutral definition permitted us to formulate multiple research questions. Who decides what space is available, and how is this decision made? Who decides what ‘accommodate’ means, how is this decision made,

and who or what will be doing this accommodation? Who – or maybe what – decides on the excess and surplus, and where does ‘just the right amount’ end?

All overflow management begins when someone (or something – like software or Artificial Intelligence) diagnoses an occurrence of overflow. But for something to be overflowing, a border, a limit, or a frame must exist (or be put into existence). This is why the notion of *framing*, as used by Michel Callon (1998), has guided our studies: there can be no overflow until some flow has been framed. Framing means defining, and defining permits borders to be imposed. As the economic term ‘externalities’ suggests, the difference between what is and what is not within the frame can be crucial. Who decides what is in and what is out? How and why? Is it healthcare administrators who define a growing number of patients as a problem, or the patients who think there are too few treatment options? Negotiations, or even battles, may occur over the border’s position and how one should deal with overflows created by it.

If an agreement on overflow has been reached (at least within some community or group), the next issue is to decide whether that overflow is good or bad. Ambiguity occurs in both organizational and individual cases. Yes, we are receiving too many orders for the things or services we produce, and it is throttling us, but isn’t it proof of our success? Yes, I have too many books already, but this new one on Amazon is absolutely necessary. Yes, checking Facebook every 15 minutes fills my head with too much information, but I may miss something truly important if I don’t. Such ambiguity has a tendency to linger, but if it is resolved, different paths will be chosen to deal with the overflow.

If the overflow is considered a good thing, it will be experienced as enjoyable abundance (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) or described in other positive terms: the delights of overflow, swimming in it, giving in to it, losing oneself in it. There are many historical examples of a longing for abundance – dreams of cornucopia, Cockaigne, or Schlaraffenland. There are rituals celebrating abundance: various forms of bingeing (Wilk, 2014), for instance, in which frugality or restraint gives way to wild spending sprees. There are festive occasions on which overdoing something signals a break from the everyday and humdrum.

For whom is abundance a problem and for whom is it a boon? What one culture defines as necessity, another may see as excess, and such differences can exist even in the same society among different levels of the social hierarchy. Our studies made it clear

that uses and definitions of a concept such as overflow are culturally charged, and framed by the social and historical context in which they are applied. Consequently, new types of overflows, or even old kinds in new settings, necessitate new or renewed ways of managing them. The very term ‘managing’, however, has a double meaning in English: controlling and coping. Thus, the ways of dealing with overflow could be divided into learning to live with overflow or learning to control it, depending on the interpretive frame chosen. To define something as an overflow is already a way of controlling it, whereas living with an overflow may turn out to be a way of reproducing or even magnifying it. Do attempts at dealing with overflow generate new competences, routines, and coping strategies – for organizations and for individuals?

The term ‘flow’ attracts attention to liquidity, and therefore flexibility, which often carries positive connotations. But liquidity can be also associated with other phenomena, such as leaking (Cochoy, 2013), and may provoke discussions about stoppages and blockings, which happen when stuff on the move piles up and creates messes. How do people react when things get out of hand?

A moral economy

Our studies revealed that overflows are primarily reported in certain settings and situations: *experiential*, such as overflows of sensations, emotions, and information (including money, as the diagnosis of overflow is a product of accounting); and *actual*, such as overflows of things, people, and space. The diagnosis obviously has an impact on the ways of managing or coping that will be pursued and the choice of a label to describe the phenomenon. Yet there are similarities to all these manifestations of overflow: the strong moral and emotional charges in the definition of overflows and the ways of handling them. This moral dimension is often linked to a perception of overflow or overload as a problem or a challenge (a euphemism for problems in management-speak), rather than as a possibility or an opportunity. The moral dimension is often found in the politics of overflow, which can be about planners trying to handle fears of future overflows or, at present, the ways of dealing (or not dealing) with the refugees.

So, why is the idea of overflow as enjoyable abundance so rarely encountered in people’s reflections and experiences? Some worries about excess and abundance have their roots in ‘bourgeois morality’ (Ossowska, 1956/1986; McCloskey, 2006), as evidenced in debates

about overconsumption – as lively today as two centuries ago. What differs is the type of consumption that is seen as problematic in a given historical context. In disputes attempting to define the problem, there are often disagreements about what is necessary (essential, required) and what is unnecessary (superfluous, extravagant). A strong class dimension often underlies these debates.

If overconsumption is one strong theme in overflow discussions focusing on commodities and lifestyles, another prominent theme is information overflow. New technologies – from the printing press to the recent world of social media – always seem to produce a new abundance of information. The history of mass media contains many such examples. Encountering new technologies, people first feel overwhelmed or flooded with new possibilities, but sooner or later the difference between the blissful and the stressful will emerge. The ever-accumulating e-mails become a constant worry, whereas abundantly surfing YouTube remains a delight. They may change places in the future, though at present it does not seem likely.

Management skills and devices

The issue of overflow caused by the media introduced another theme to our project: the kinds of strategies, tactics, skills, competences, and devices that people develop to manage overflow. Our examples revealed people learning to manage overflow in varied and sometimes surprising ways. Many of their tools and skills quickly become tacit knowledge, constituting a significant part of everyday practice, yet one that is difficult to transfer and verbalize. Choices are transformed into reflexes; habits nest in the body rather than in the conscious mind.

The net result is an impressive range of ways of coping and managing. There are a great many ways of selecting and de-selecting: categorizing, ranking, bracketing, filtering, and creating new kinds of orders and priorities. Then there is the wide field of routinization, in which overflow is domesticated. There are also many conscious or unconscious ways of ignoring undesirable information. Creativity in this field is truly impressive.

Choices of skills and tools depend on what has to be managed. Coping with too much stuff at home and at work calls for ever-newer techniques and devices for moving, sorting, storing, and discarding. It often amounts to a great deal of body work, with busy hands rather than busy minds. Handling too many activities requires the development of multi-tasking, sequencing, and prioritizing routines. Coping with too much information requires filtering mechanisms

of selecting, ranking, and ignoring. Digitalization has created new tools – a world of algorithms, Google lists, Amazon recommendations, guides for choosing everything from hotels to healthcare; but also personal knacks of scrolling, deleting, skipping, and saving.

Observing the development of these skills and devices helps to provide an understanding of how a threatening or unmanageable overflow can be domesticated into a manageable flow. What was seen as a chaotic and stressful overflow yesterday may become a manageable situation today.

Several key insights can be gleaned from these numerous studies. It is striking that many of the ways of tackling overflow in homes and in formal organizations are conducted ad hoc. People experiment with different tools and approaches, often improvising and re-inventing.

Attempts at managing overflow can also be professionalized and commercialized. A body of consultants has emerged, offering advice to individuals, families, and organizations. There is already a long list of books and pamphlets teaching overflow navigation, which often leads to new types of overflow, creating openings through which problems spill over into a new arena. Thanks to digitalization, for example, service providers and administrators turn the burden of navigating information overflow over to clients and professionals. This is a major transformative process which has accelerated over the last decades.

In the organizational context, it has become obvious that overflow – even of resources – does not always signal success; it may signify losses, leading to professional attempts to build better frames. The strategy of channeling becomes important here, as Franck Cochoy (2013) has noted. Managers should demonstrate that they channel flows – not that they are dealing with overflow, which is proof of failure. Some companies and organizations lose money because of overflows; others make money by devising new methods of framing, redesigning offices, or offering storage facilities. It needs to be added that some managers do understand the relationship between overflow and underflow and attempt to create a balance between the two.

As to individual coping strategies, the notion of *rational ignorance* (Downs, 1957) has become fashionable again in the face of the overflow of information that faces practically everyone (Lessig, 2017¹). But, as noted in previous volumes, *strategic ignorance* has always been a significant theme. People train themselves in selective hearing,

1 Keynote at the conference ‘The Digital Society’, Lund, 24 April 2017.

overlooking, turning a blind eye, forgetting, passing over, turning their backs on something, and developing various forms of ignoring what they consider superfluous. It is a fascinating seldom-verbalized learning process, which often remains at an unconscious level, but this does not make it an unorganized activity. People develop rules and routines for neglecting, although this is often couched in passive terms of missing something, forgetting, not noticing, leaving out ... To an observer, however, it seems to be a set of relatively coherent tools, developed to fit the setting, be it handling academic literature or stuff at home. In the end, rational ignorance turns out to be the most effective tool in overflow management, but it is a skill that must be acquired via trial and error, and it always needs to be adapted to the problem, the situation, and the preferences of the problem solver. No universal solutions exist.

This book

The three themes presented here are all explored and summarized in the nine chapters of this book. The volume begins with a historical perspective: the worries of the 1950s and 1960s about Western-like consumption overflow. In the first chapter, György Péteri presents the version of this debate as it unfolded in Hungary. How did such a socialist state handle consumer dreams and longings? Did the leaders in the Soviet Bloc perceive these longings as a threat to the system? Apparently, there were a great many consumer desires that the planned economy could not live up to: dreams of a car, a television, a washing machine. Péteri shows how socialist economies turned, at the same time, into economies of storage, in which vast numbers of products never found their way out of the factories, for the simple reason that consumers didn't need or want them. Warehouses were overflowing. This historical sketch acquires additional value in the light of the present (2019) political stance of Hungary.

In Chapter 2, Helene Brembeck moves the issue of overflowing warehouses into another time and place, describing how attempts to manage overflow at home have created a new industry of storage. It is in this landscape of storage, disposal, and waste that Brembeck examined the growing industry of self-storage facilities, which create temporary resting-places for things, slowing down their circulation.

In Chapter 3, Orvar Löfgren tackles the question of an overflow of people in public spaces, by comparing two debates: the debate that occurred when mass travel was institutionalized in the nineteenth century, and the debate surrounding the flow of refugees into Europe

over the past few years, with concerns about navigating in a sea of strangers. How did commercial and state organizations try to control these flows, and what coping skills did travelers need to develop?

Chapter 4 turns to questions of overflows in the workplace. In the history of modern office work, a great many strategies for overflow management have been developed – and discarded. Karolina J. Dudek's field study of a reorganizing company reveals how overflows of people, activities, technologies, and tools are met by the development of new coping strategies. The idea of the activity-based office is currently in fashion; yet, as Dudek says, it follows the classic logic of overflow management: to separate, purify, visualize, and subordinate to strict, new rules.

Chapter 5 remains in the workplace, but the author takes a different approach. Elena Raviola looks at a case of a corporation trying to meet a crisis of overflow and underflow through radical reorganization. Readers are invited to follow a Swedish media group that faced the crisis of print media as it dealt with a severe financial crisis and the threat of bankruptcy. Financial scarcity led to discussions about the type of excess to be battled: too many acquisitions of local newspapers, operating costs that were too high, and employers who deemed their staff to be overpaid.

Chapter 6 considers the issue of overflow in climate research. Jonathan Metzger documented the differences between groups of scholars who define what constitutes valid and robust knowledge for understanding the economic consequences of climate change. How can vast amounts of data be transformed and condensed into models of possible economic outcomes? Just as in Chapter 1, the political aspect is obvious. How are overflows enacted in this scientific debate? What controversies can arise from claims of overflow? And what types of rationale do the conflicting parties invoke?

Sabina Siebert, Robert Insall, and Laura M. Machesky take the theme of overflow in academic research into another arena in Chapter 7. Here the focus is on overflow in biomedical science publishing. Researchers complain that the top-tier journals are overflowed with manuscripts, making it difficult to get published. The authors of this chapter took this issue to journal editors, and a different picture of overflow emerged in their interviews. The editors used the metaphor of a champagne tower, claiming that manuscripts trickle down from high-ranking journals to lower-ranked ones.

The two final chapters address problems of overflow in the public sector, both dealing with attempts at using digitalization as a coping mechanism. In Chapter 8, Lars Norén and Agneta Ranerup examine

the online guides that emerged to help citizens choose among options in three welfare service markets: schools, pension schemes, and healthcare. As greater emphasis on freedom of choice has conquered the public sector, citizens face a rapidly growing number of choice situations. How do guides produced by public authorities compare with competing private ones, and what happens when the old genre of guides is transplanted into new arenas?

Barbara Czarniawska focuses on another transformation of the public sector in Chapter 9: the digitalization of services. At the outset, digital solutions have been seen as an antidote to a growing paper bureaucracy, but it seems that virtual red tape has simply replaced the traditional red tape. Following various attempts to navigate the digital bureaucracy – from applications for maternity leave to visa applications – Czarniawska documents the emergence of new problems. Is virtual red tape better or worse than the traditional kind?

Nine chapters, nine sites, where the puzzling and fascinating phenomenon of overflow is present. The research journey into these cases has led us to conclude that managing overflow is a transformative process, often an attempt to turn the unmanageable into a new type of order. In such reframing, new and creative forms of coping and managing may arise – or not. In his Afterword, Richard Wilk discusses the ways in which various approaches enter dialogues (or quarrels) and points to the potential for further studies of overflow which will allow the unearthing of hidden and surprising connections in everyday life.