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# Chapter 7. It’s simply too much! Coping with domestic overflow

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The environment of the typical consumer is a jungle of things, growing denser and denser: a house and a summer cottage; cars and a boat; TV, radio, and a record player; records, books, newspapers and magazines; clothes and sport clothes; tennis racket, badminton racket, squash racket and table tennis racket; footballs, beach balls and golf balls; basement, attic, and closets, and all they contain.

These are the words of Swedish economist Burenstam-Linder (1970: 90), in discussing the problems of domestic overflow in the 1960s. We met his book, *The Harried Leisure Class*, in Chapter 1– an example of a classic genre of cultural critique. He wrote about the way an accelerating consumption creates stress and time shortages, in which “meditation and poetry disappear and Lucullus and Venus are put aside,” as the blurb on the back cover reads.

Burenstam-Linder’s book was reissued in 2010 in Sweden, with a new foreword that stressed its contemporary relevance. Returning to the original version, I was struck by several things. The picture he painted of domestic life in the 1960s doesn’t strike me now as highly chaotic, but relatively unstressed, orderly, and restrained. Furthermore, his picture of life back then made me wonder how the rapidly accelerating domestic consumption of the half-century since the 1960s has been handled. In the following, I use his book as an entry into a twofold historical analysis of the management of domestic overflow from the 1960s to 2010s.

I start by exploring the intense debate on overconsumption in the 1960s, of which Burenstam-Linder was part. What types of overflows were generated, and how were they experienced and discussed in public? From there I move to my second set of questions – questions that Burenstam-Linder addresses, but sketchily. How do people develop skills and technologies for handling more? What abilities are necessary in order to be able consume more, to coordinate many tasks, or to digest more information? A historical analysis is helpful here, and I examine how some of the novelties that entered people’s lives during the half century between 1960 and 2010 were accommodated, made problematic or unproblematic, conscious or unconscious. The emphasis is on a number of coping processes, from routinization and multitasking to storing and ridding oneself of the overflow.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The historical material I use is acquired primarily from an earlier project on “My life as consumer” (Löfgren, 1998), in which I explored changes in domestic consumption from the 1950s up to the turn of the 21st century. It consists of a collection of life history interviews on domestic consumption covering the period 1960-1995, data from a project on museum documentations of contemporary homes and belongings that has been conducted since the 1970s, and media material on consumer habits and debates about overflow from the 1960s up to 2010. In exploring consumer changes and coping habits developed during this half century, I focus mainly on the fast-growing sector of the domestic media – the new gadgets and technologies, from Post-it notes to computers.

The media perspective is also helpful for understanding how people, objects, and technologies become actors in the home – in a Latourian sense of the word “actor” – not merely how the media frame notions of overflow, but also how they organize coping practices, like ordering and routinizing everyday life. During these five decades, the media have been seen as both causing and solving problems of overflow.

## The overflowing sixties

As noted in Chapter 1, Burenstam-Linder’s book was part of an international debate on post-war affluence and overconsumption. There were worried discussions in Swedish books, newspapers, radio, and television, on the problems of rampant domestic consumption. In order to handle the debate, a television series from 1967 used a common science fiction approach called *How will we live in the year 2000?* The message was that the future would produce both a high-tech domestic life and a new minimalism. People would be more rational and more sophisticated and controlled in their domestic consumption. Less would be more, and new technologies would help people make their overflowing lives manageable.

During the 1960s, Swedish consumption patterns were changing in several ways. A growing affluence created more room for consumption. As an advertisement executive said, back in 1967:

What is a need and a luxury today? With growing affluence, one after another of old luxury items have become what even the common working man cannot live without: car, radio, TV, all kinds of household appliances, fur coats, special leisure wear, all the kinds of temptations in leisure life that earlier were seen as unreachable. Not to mention all the small items for a woman’s daily grooming: lipstick, powder, things that a couple of decades back were seen as the devil’s sinful inventions, belonging more to the world of “easy women” – just like the first silk stockings.[[2]](#footnote-2) (Björklund, 1967: 988)

Although the debate about luxuries turning into necessities is a recurring theme in the history of consumption, the 1960s situation had its special characteristics. It was a question not merely of new temptations and economic opportunities, but also of an accelerating turnover of consumer goods. The cultural wear and tear of commodities came more and more quickly. From a marketing point of view, this increasingly rapid turnover and the shortened life cycle of domestic objects was an advantage. During the latter part of the 20th century, there was an intensified effort to produce cycles of fashion in new consumer fields. As early as the 1920s, producers imitated the ways of organizing and performing the fashion that Parisian haute couture had developed. Car producers were the first to borrow the technologies of seasonal rhythms of catwalking new products, but soon to follow were the manufacturers of domestic appliances – from refrigerators to radios. “Don’t stay with last year’s model or colors”! During the 1960s, there were heated discussions of what was called “built-in-obsolescence” (Löfgren, 2005).

The accelerating turnover was not only a question of marketing strategies, but also a change in consumer attitudes and habits. In 1970, the influential Swedish consumer debater, Lena Larsson, published her book, *Will our children want to inherit our candlesticks?* Like Burenstam-Linder, she attracted a great deal of attention. Her argument was that society was now entering a new era of “use and discard”. She admonished consumers not to be stuck in old consumer routines or to hang on to cherished objects, to learn the skill of ridding themselves of overflow. “Throw-away-ism” became a new concept.

This shift in consumer practices and homemaking was seen as generational, with a younger generation rebelling against the fixed and traditional consumer habits of an older generation. The transformation occurred on several arenas. There was a striking informalization of both public and private life in all arenas, from forms of address and deference to the development of casual manners in dressing, socializing, and interior decoration. Although the trend is international, for various reasons the informalization of Sweden was in some ways faster and more far-reaching than in most other Western countries (Löfgren, 1988), and it affected consumption in many ways.

Lena Larsson’s book mirrors this change. The rigid routines of older generations of homebuilders are contrasted to the flexibility of the new generation. A young middle-class family is chosen as an example of the new mentality:

Here, status is not owning things; there are no sets of fur­ni­ture in the conventional sense. There is no cleaning mania... They are content with open shelves, often from floor to cei­ling, where everything is visible, a big table and cheap fol­ding chairs. Roomy tables for work and play are needed, as are good beds. What is missing? The lounge suite, the easy chairs and the soft, expensive materials! No paintings, but rather easily changeable prints and posters. People are open for novelties if they are good – that is to say practical. (Larsson, 1970: 121)

This was avant-garde living among students and young middle-class professionals in the early 1970s. As I learned in my life history interviews, people still remember the inten­sive experimentation with new combinations. It was an era when second-hand buying and the swapping of “stuff” became part of young middle-class life, along with a critique of unnecessary and wasteful consumption. For older generations, a social stigma was still attached to second-hand buying. One woman recalls how her mother-in-law fought hard to keep a stiff upper lip when confronted with the young couple's improvised fur­niture made from boxes. Another woman remembers the symbolic sig­nificance of the sofa: "It was the symbol of bourgeois rigi­dity and drabness and we would never buy one."

The heavily media-exposed lifestyle of the radical subcultures of the 1968 Generation may have obscured the fact that the informalization of home life and homemaking was a much broader social movement. Magazi­nes were filled with advice for a simpler and more flexible way of living, for repla­cing doors with draperies and making new beds out of chipboard. The sale of etiquette books and mascara dropped drasti­cally, while the con­sump­tion of candles and soft cushions rose sharply. Informal coziness and flexible informality were now the ingredients for modern living.

New consumer habits were created and old routines dismantled. The parent generation had created its own rhythms and patterns of consumption. Many members of that generation had bought their furniture as "sets" when they married. A living-room set consisted of a sofa, two easy chairs, and a small coffee table; the dining set comprised four or six chairs, a table, and a sideboard. Styles were relatively conser­vative, and furniture was supposed to last a lifetime.

The owner of a men’s shop saw the two-piece suit disappear during the 1970s, as well as the hat. He remembered a time when consumption seemed to have a steady rhythm and was tied to seasons and stages in the life cycle. Young men bought their first suit for confirmation and a new hat for every May 1st; women wore their Sunday best every weekend and were advised to organize set weekly menus for the family. Weekly and seasonal rhythms organized much of consumption.

The new generation, it seemed, was finished with such ritualized consumption. “In the early 1970s you could dress just as you liked”, one of them said and then suddenly remembered the new emerging uniform of leather sandals, afghan coats, and flower power shirts.

When the 1980s were decried as a new era of over-consumption by the 1968 Generation, it was hard for them to see that the new spending spree was not only a revolt against what was seen as the anti-consumption of their generation, but that the informalization and flexibility of consumer habits developed by the 1968 Generation had also opened up new and expanding fields of consumption. Market expansion had earlier been limited by consumer habits tied to certain spaces and situations; improvisation now resulted in experiments with exotic foods, new colors, forms, and function. It was this heritage from 1968 that was taken further in the 1980s – namely that consumption should not only be fun and creative, but also faster: an improvised meal with a mix of new exciting elements, an experimentation with different fashions, a constant remaking of the home (Löfgren, 2008).

There are several lessons to be learned from this. The battles over consumption in the 1960s and 1970s show several paradoxes. Informalization was seen as a way of simplifying life with an anti-consumerist agenda. But as I have shown, it also opened up for expansions of domestic consumption in several ways.

For Burenstam-Linder and other critics, the 1960s seemed like an endless and rapidly accelerating spending spree that led to homes being overcrowded with commodities and activities. If one goes back to the detailed documentations of Swedish living habits during that period, however, another image emerges. From the perspective of today, consumption seems both restrained and limited. Again, there is a classic distortion at work. It is often the nostalgic past or the Utopian and rational future that come to stand for order and control; whereas the present often seems chaotic and overflowing with gadgets, endless choices, and options, as well as half-finished projects. Add to this, the class perspective. What also made the 1960s seem like a decade of consumption overflow to many middle-class observers was the fact that this was a decade of growing working-class affluence. Working-class families could now start to consume in ways that had previously been restricted to the wealthier.

## Domestic mediascapes

So much for the debates and perceptions of domestic overflow in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In retrospect, it is also possible to see that the 1960s were characterized by an accelerating influx of commodities and activities into the home. How were they handled? In the 1967 television series *How will we live in the year 2000?* the media especially facilitate a rational domestic life. The science fiction family of 2000 is online in many ways, booking theater tickets through a computer screen in the living room or contacting the kids in the playground using walkie-talkies. Futuristic scenarios like these were part of the strong technological optimism in the 1960s.

Exploring the growth and proliferation of domestic media since the 1960s, I use a broad approach, looking at what, for want of a more exact term, I will call “media stuff,” including all types of technology, from ballpoint pens and wall calendars to telephones and music players as well as media products like morning papers, missed telephone calls, to-do-lists, emails and Facebook news. It is this steady flow of items entering, piling up, hiding in the home, or leaving it that interests me, but also the ways in which media become active agents in organizing domestic life.

I want to tie in with Burenstam-Linder’s attempts to explore some strategies of managing overflow in a “commodity intensive consumption,” as in his examples of *simultaneous* and *successive consumption*. But first I turn, not to the science-fiction version of the year 2000, but to an actual inventory of media stuff:

Sony portable radio, Olympus XA2 35 mm camera with flash, VHS tape of three boxing fights, Lou Reed Live LP, Facit 9411 typewriter, Nirvana CD Case (empty), plastic toy stereo radio, roll of 35 mm Fuji film, Jim Reeves cassette tape, Sony widescreen color television, Nintendo Game Boy cartridge "Men in Black", 18 assorted photographs of suburban homes, Blockbuster video hire card, 2 AA batteries, Aerial from Sonny radio, Bugs Bunny Nintendo Game, Toy sunglasses with headphones, Fisher Price toy musical box with song “Raindrops Keep Falling on my Head”, Illustrated Guide to the Maldives, *Radio Times TV Guide* 16-23 May 1992, assortment of used Post-it-notes…

These examples come from a project by the British artist Michael Landy. In 2000 he embarked on a quest that started with a systematic inventory of all his belongings, from his white Saab 900 Turbo MS to forgotten paper clips wedged into the corner of the desk drawer. He then transported all his belongings to a department store in Oxford Street. Passersby could either peep through the shop window or step right in and inspect Landy’s possessions at close quarters. One by one the goods were placed on a conveyor belt that led toward total destruction, split up, sorted, shredded, and finally pulverized into a grey powder. Every single thing that he had once owned was to be buried, most likely in a car park in front of a shopping center in this anti-consumption manifestation (Landy, 2001).

When I leafed through Michael Landy’s catalogue of thousands of items, I was struck by the many media gadgets and products that surfaced. It was rather like reading a cultural history of domestic media from past decades. I was particularly struck by the fact that many of them are not to be found under the heading of "home electronics", but under other labels. Lists like his make one aware of how definitions of media technologies and products can be narrowed down in ways that exclude more mundane or too well-known media, from yellow Post-it notes to answering machines.

One way of seeing this is to turn to a project on documentation of domestic life that began in Swedish museums in the 1970s. SAMDOK, short for contemporary documentation, entered Swedish homes, interviewed family members and made meticulous documentation of all their belongings, from television sets to napkins. If one compares Landy’s inventory with a young family of professionals in 1978, for example, the differences are striking. There was a great deal of media stuff in that home as well, but of a different type and much narrower range – an issue to which I return later in this chapter.

To materialize the differences between these inventories, I decided to visit the nearby thrift store housed in a vast abandoned factory building. There was a special section for electronic media, endless rows of discarded machines and gadgets. In a way, it felt like walking through a museum of technological change since the 1960s. Music players started with fancy radio gramophones, impressive pieces of 1950s and 1960s furniture, combining radio, gramophone and storage space for records. The next section housed hi-fi stations (usually black boxes of gramophone, cassette player, and radio stapled on top of each other, with huge loudspeakers on the side). Such a machine was the pride of the 1978 home. There were portable cassette players and battery radios, as well as cassette Walkmans and CD Discmans, a box with assorted headsets of various styles from various periods. Similarly, there were impressive television sets from the 1960s with closing doors, looking rather like cocktail cabinets, on strictly functional grey plastic boxes. A big box was labeled “left over remote TV controls”. There were clumsy typewriters and slim travel typewriters; aging computers and old game consoles; handheld electronic games; and telephones in all sizes, from dial phones to yesterday’s cellphones. Answering machines and cameras came in all shapes and sizes, from the old box cameras and Polaroids to early digital ones. And then there were all those obsolete gadgets I found it hard to identify.

Several lessons can be learned from this exposé of domestic media from the 1960s to yesterday: the influx and diversification of new media and domestic technologies during this period in history and their increased mobility, with a constant emphasis on flexibility and miniaturization. “Portable” becomes a valuable sales argument for typewriters and music players, later for computers and telephones. Unlike the old radio gramophone, the dial telephone or the hi-fi set, they can move around the house and be introduced into new contexts and situations (Björnberg, 2003).

Thus new mediascapes can now be created in a number of situations, as images, sounds, and texts can be added to traditional activities. It is a world of media multitasking, but also one of individualization. Gradually family members acquired a personal and individualized media world, from the portable gramophone and the transistor radio, which gave the teenager’s room its own soundscape, later to individual use of laptops, cellphones and iPods. Although domestic media were previously found in specialized and sometimes even consecrated spaces, they gradually traveled all over the house and out into the open. In 1959, the transistor radio had its major breakthrough in Sweden and created what a commentator called a new “ear sore on trains, busses, boats and everywhere outdoors” (quoted in Björnberg, 2003: 54). New sounds overflowed the everyday. A decade later, when the Walkman and the headphone were introduced, the complaint was often that young people isolated themselves from the social world, creating their own media universe at home or in public.

The collection of discarded media in the thrift store also tells a story of rapidly changing fashion cycles. The box of yesterday’s assorted cellphones illustrated this short life span, whereas the box next to it containing yesterday’s trendy plastic covers for the telephones radiated an even stronger aura of rapid fashion changes.

Comparing the changing universe of domestic media from the 1960s to the 2010s raises the question of how people have learned to handle these new technologies and gadgets, combining them with other activities. There are slow processes of domestication taking place, and after a while they make new media technologies blend into the everyday until they escape notice. As a result, many coping practices also become invisible.

This situation is striking in the case of routines. As noted in Chapter 1, the introduction of domestic habits and skills often belongs to an undercurrent of everyday life, seldom reflected upon or even noticed. How is it possible to tease out these processes that turn activities and choices into routines and later into more or less unconscious reflexes?

## Making things work

After I gave up sleeping, it occurred to me what a simple thing reality is, how easy it is to make it work. It’s just reality. Just housework. Just a home. Like running a simple machine. Once you learn to run it, it’s just a matter of repetition. You push this button and pull that lever. You adjust a gauge, put on the lid, set the timer. The same thing over and over. (Murakami, 2001: 96)

The homemaker in Haruki Murakami’s short story has stopped sleeping and started spending the nights reading Russian novels, enjoying the nightly freedom from her snoozing family. It works fine, because the daily routines are just a flow without friction, she doesn’t have to invest much energy or emotion in the daily chores. Once a person has developed routines, everyday life takes care of itself. There is no excess, no overload, and no overexposure.

Through routinization, people integrate and absorb new tasks, skills, objects, and ideas into the everyday. Through repetition, these novelties are turned into effortless activities. It is a basic survival technique, or as Richard Sennett has put it: “To imagine a life of momentary impulses, of short-term action, devoid of sustainable routines, a life without habits, is to imagine indeed a mindless existence” (1998: 44). For most people routines are linked to order, predictability, and control. They can be seen as tools for organizing the flow of time, and in this process create temporal rhythms and patterns, by sequencing and synchronization. They can also be seen as manuals for what has to be done in everyday life or as maps of people’s lives where some activities are chartered in detail. As economizing devices, they may help to avoid myriad choices or reflections about options in recurring situations, something that may otherwise drive people crazy.

Routines are sometimes described with derogatory overtones as being banal and trivial, and the study of habituation and routinization is not a strong theme in contemporary cultural and social theory (Ehn and Löfgren, 2010). There may be several reasons for this. Colin Campbell has pointed to one: the interest in agency, the reflective, choosing subject of modern (and postmodern) life, breaking out of the fetters of tradition and custom. Such a focus, he reminds us, overlooks the fact that most of our everyday activities “are made up of myriad minor decisions which rapidly crystallize into routine” (Campbell, 1996: 163). Every new choice or willed action may be the starting point for creating a new habit, that will sooner or later turn the task into something taken for granted, as Campbell reminded his readers. The word *routine* is actually the diminutive of route, the making of small paths in everyday lives. Rather, these small repetitive actions should be seen as strong undercurrents of everyday life that gain power from their very invisibility or a tendency to be taken for granted. On the surface, they may all look like mindless repetitions, but they harbor all kinds of dynamics. Sometimes, in the inconspicuous practices of daily life, these small repetitive actions can subtly change larger social structures, cultural values, and gendered notions of self and society (see, for example, O’Dell 2006). They can create both stability and adaptability; they can conserve and liberate, as Feldman (2000) has noted.

Routines that help people to manage more things come in all shapes and sizes. One way of exploring that diversity is to look at concrete situations in which routines are combined in the management of overflow. Darrah, Freeman, and English-Lueck’s (2007) book, *Busier than Ever! Why American Families Can’t Slow Down* is an illustration of this process. Between 1999 and 2001, three anthropologists closely followed the daily activities of 14 dual-career families in California, and explored the coping strategies they developed to handle their busy lives. Most of these families saw busyness as a force in their lives, and believed that they had to adapt through various balancing and juggling acts. The survival techniques of these families include skills like *chunking,* or fragmenting tasks into smaller units; *prioritizing,* or making choices about the allocation of time, money, and energy; *tracking* people, activities, and ideas; *planning* and *synchronizing* the activities of family members; *simplifying* by trying to get rid of unnecessary “frills” in domestic life; and *buffering*, creating both buffers of time and material infrastructures.

In reading these ethnographies from 2000, one is struck by the significant role of domestic media in trying to keep life organized and balanced. This is a world of laptops, pagers, answering machines, cellphones, Personal Digital Assistant (PDAs – a new gadget in 2000), faxes, surfing, emailing, and watching video messages online.

Planning was one of the major coping strategies. Some families developed highly elaborate systems; others felt that they made few plans. On the whole, planning became an invisible activity until plans broke down and the whole situation had to be reorganized.

There was Jerry, who maintained three different calendars for different fields of activities, or the system analyst who used the whiteboard in his office not for diagrams, but for a to-do list for both home and work. Although he had PDA, he found it much quicker to jot down a few letters as a reminder. Often the ambitious attempts to keep track of daily tasks forced him to enter a time-consuming world: shopping for optimal record-keeping devices, buying software to help organize lists, trying to update the PDA. A parallel universe of intelligence gathering, to-do-lists, and schedules developed, as well as reading self-help books like *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* or going to seminars and workshops on coping techniques.

Planning could thus create even more stress and overload. There was the super-planner and high-tech Alex who found that updating his PDA required more and more of his time. He called his answering machine at home from work in order to remind himself about things to do. His wife had her own PDA, but never used it; she loved traditional tools, a tiny crumpled address book stuffed with business cards (“I would die without this!”), a small calendar in her purse, and Post-its all over her car and by her telephone at home. Again the readers are reminded about the ways in which some media – answering machines, telephone numbers scribbled on bits of newspaper, the collage of information on notice boards – have become so mundane that these California families no longer see them as media.

To the list of these routines could be added many more – ways in which people create rhythms in everyday life (Pantzar & Shove 2010), for example – bundling, sequencing, menuing, linking, and mixing tasks. There are coping strategies of cutting corners, speeding up, or being content with the half-finished.

Again, the problem is that hidden micro-routines become so natural that they are mere reflexes. To make them conscious or visible, another perspective is needed. They tend to surface in times of crisis. For the Californian families, efforts at controlling the everyday flow often broke down, creating situations in which everything had to be improvised and conflicts of priorities emerged. I now move to more radical breakdowns of domestic life.

## When much becomes too much

In an autobiographical novel, freelance journalist Felicia describes her breakdown into burnout. She remembers interviewing a female hotel manager who told her how she constantly developed her talent for multitasking. By buying a headset for her cellphone, she could vacuum her whole home while taking incoming enquiries from work. “This is something for me,” Felicia thinks. But that was in the old days, when she could combine any number of tasks. Now she has lost her skills of multitasking; it is no longer possible for her to eat pizza and watch television simultaneously or cook food while talking on the telephone. “Maybe I am becoming a man,” she thinks, “I can only do one thing at a time” (Dahlgren 2005: 71).

It is when routines break down that people experience overload. Life simply becomes “too much,” as flow turns into friction and stress mounts at work or at home. In the late 1990s, a new form of stress-related disease was in the forefront in Sweden. It was often called “the burnout syndrome” – defined as a personal collapse caused by overwork or emotional overload. The reasons for the near-epidemic development of such states (which show strong national, social, and regional variations) are not discussed here – interpretations vary. What interests me in this context is how people who described themselves or were described by others as burnout cases experienced problems of overload.

My background material is an interview study of persons who have lived through this tough crisis situation and ended up in long-term sick leave, trying to return to a normal life. Most of them are managers and administrators.[[3]](#footnote-3) In the past, excess was not a problem for them. It was their pride that “no” was not an answer. They were gluttons at work, stretching themselves thin, living an accelerated life that, in retrospect, was often characterized by a manic streak. Lars, who had built up a small electronic factory from scratch, described himself in this way:

Haven’t been able to say no. I always thought: speed up and it will be OK. I could walk through the factory and make twenty decisions in two minutes. I felt in full control, it was almost compulsive. What the hell, I could make anything work!

For Lars and the other persons I interviewed, life had changed abruptly. All of a sudden everyday life at work and at home became chaotic – just “too much.” They found themselves being sent home on long-term sick leave. Well-known domestic media became intrusive and destructive, the television screen flickered too much, telephone signals created anxiety, and music was overwhelming. They wanted to retreat to the bedroom, draw the curtains, and lie still in the dark. Even family could became too much, and Lars, for example, spent long periods alone in a summer cottage in stillness of the woods.

The flow of everyday life had turned into friction, its order into chaos; and it became obvious that their autopilots had been critical in dealing with work and home. Now they were at home on sick leave, with all the time in the world on their hands, but in a domestic world that also had become “too much”. Many everyday routines became Herculean tasks. “It could be a full day’s work just to take a shower and wash my hair,” one woman said. It was necessary to make decisions about the most trivial acts that had once been handled on autopilot: “I remember staring at a flowerpot for hours, trying to make up my mind if I should water the plant or not.”

In the crash landing of burnout, old routines and habits, these technologies by which people cope with their myriad tasks and decisions of everyday life, suddenly stop working. Life is out of step, out of sync; habits, drained of content, become meaningless or mysterious. One woman kept worrying for days about organizing a children’s birthday party for her young daughter; she felt that she had forgotten how to do it. The task turned into a gigantic and suffocating Project. Lars expressed it like this: “It’s damned hard to be on sick leave. All of a sudden you’re without routines, and it was the routines that kept life running at work. It feels like the floor is pulled away from under you…”

Through crisis experiences like these, it may be possible to understand how people develop competences and technologies for handling “a lot.” When the autopilot stops working, their routines become visible.

## Learning to multitask

One specific category of routines is multitasking, or what Burenstam-Linder described as simultaneous consumption. He criticized the tendency to try to combine too many things at once, and his multimedia villain is described like this:

… [H]e may find himself drinking Brazilian coffee, smoking a Dutch cigar, sipping a French cognac, reading *The New York Times*, listening to a Brandenburger Concerto and entertaining his Swedish wife – all at the same time (1970: 79).

Burenstam-Linder joined a debate that has been going on at least since the late 19th century. How much can a human being handle simultaneously? As Jonathan Crary (1999) demonstrated in his history of attention, it is a question that has interested brain specialists, psychologists, and marketing people . As far back as 1895, Max Nordau, in his book, *Degeneration,* worried about the kinds of overloads modern consumption and technology would present to humankind. Maybe future generations would be better at handling the stress:

The end of the twentieth century, therefore, will probably see a generation to whom it will not be injurious to read a dozen square yards of newspapers daily, to be constantly called to the telephone, to be thinking simultaneously of the five continents of the world, to live half their time in a railway carriage or in a flying machine and … know how to find its ease in the midst of a city inhabited by millions. (Nordau, 1895, quoted in Crary, 1999: 30)

Multitasking is a competence that must be acquired, and once attained, it is often invisible. “It just comes naturally,” as people often say. Drawing on a body of material in which different generations narrate their lives with television and radio, it is possible to see such competences gradually emerging.[[4]](#footnote-4) For the pioneer generations of radio and television users, intense concentration was needed to view a television program or listen to the radio. No distractions could be allowed; to follow the voices in the loudspeaker or the flickering figures on the screen the media required full attention. A Swedish ad from the late 1920s recommended bananas as the perfect food for radio listening, easy to handle and soundless to eat. Step by step people developed the skills of listening with half an ear or just glancing at the television set.

For people born during the 1940s, it was striking how the idea of combining food and media consumption was a touchy issue – one that became a growing habit in later years (Brembeck, 2010: 105ff). For children of the 1940s and 1950s, it was unacceptable to read, listen to the radio, or watch television while eating. Multitasking has always been surrounded by cultural constraints of the suitable and unsuitable.

If we turn to later documentations of domestic life in the 1970s in the SAMDOK project, media uses may seem routinized to a present-day observer. The families documented gathered every evening on the sofa to watch television, with a certain spot delegated to each person. But compared to earlier generations, they had acquired some new multitasking competences. The radio had already moved out of its once-sacred position in the living room; now there was a transistor radio in the kitchen. The first person in the kitchen each morning turned the radio on, and for the rest of the day it provided a soundscape for other kitchen activities. People had learned to listen to the news while leafing through the morning paper and having breakfast. Ironing boards were set up in the living room, so ironing and watching television could take place simultaneously. It felt restful. Special tapes were produced for entertainment while driving the car. Common at this time were worries about teenagers who insisted that they wanted to do their homework while listening to music – this was seen as the ultimate threat to intellectual work – from cassette recorders, which by then were found in teenagers’ bedrooms.

Compare these 1970s households with the 2006 family presented in *Time* (27 March 2006): “They’re emailing, IMing and downloading, while writing the history essay. What is this digital juggling doing to kids’ brains and their family life?” The reporter was visiting an American family of four that “occupy the same three-bedroom in Southern California, but psychologically each exists in his or her own little universe.” The teenage son was chasing images in Google for his Windows Media Player slide show, while he carried on several on-line conversations on his MySpace. Music was coming from iTunes, and somewhere on the screen was a Word file in which he was writing an essay for school. His sister had the same strategy. “You just multitask,” she explained to the reporter (Wallis, 2006).

In the early 2000s, multitasking was a popular theme in public debates and media. Was it efficient? Was it good? Had it been carried too far? Psychologists were called in to give their verdicts.[[5]](#footnote-5) Multitasking was seen, above all, in terms of the new communication media, computers, cellphones, and MP3 players.

Again, not to get trapped in the classic discussion of the breaking point of “too much,” these historical examples remind us not only of the way different generations and groups develop varying forms of multitasking skills, but also how some of them, often connected with new media, attract more attention than others. It is also striking that the pleasures of multitasking are rarely discussed, like the ways in which reading, listening to music, or walking can be enriched by adding new sensual inputs.

## Cluttering and de-cluttering

Stressful moments, overbooked weekends, plans and routines breaking down – these are some ways of experiencing overflow. But there is another key domestic arena in which overflow materializes right before our eyes.

Someone puts a white ceramic bowl on the sofa table as a pleasant design accent. There it is, simple, beautiful, and above all seductively empty. All of a sudden there is an empty matchbox in it, next to a couple of coins. The ice has been broken, and through a magic force, new objects are attracted: a cellphone charger, an old lottery ticket, an unpaid electricity bill, and some used batteries. Step by step a mountain is growing on the table, until one day someone gives the living room a searching look: "We can’t have all this mess!" Bowls, tables, and windowsills are de-cluttered. In these attempts at recreating order, it is important to remember where things really belong. “Anybody knows where this should go?” Right then the home stands out as a complex system of order, where archival rules for kitchen drawers, wardrobes, and bookcases are developed, transformed, or challenged by the members of the household.

When objects pile up, and gadgets go into hiding under sofas, coping practices of ordering, storing, and retrieving are put into action. The production of disorder is, of course, a cultural practice, mirroring changing ideas about order, categories, and taxonomies. Differences of class, gender, and generation, for example, are at work here. French anthropologist Jean Paul Filiod (2003) has discussed what he calls different modalities of domestic disorder, and similarly, Eric Abrahamson and David H. Freedom develop taxonomies of disorder at home or in the office in their book, *The Perfect Mess,* from 2007.

We have already met one of these cultural systems in Chapter 3, where the news agency skills and routines of categorizing and filing come to the foreground. What are the coping strategies developed at home, and what tools were put to use from the 1960s and 2010s?

A middle-class woman in her forties laments that she lacks her mother’s skills of keeping the home in perfect order, mending, ironing, and organizing. As she reflects, “but she had so much more space to store things in than I have in my modern apartment.” It is a common view that back in the old days, in the 1960s and 1970s, people had a totally different culture of storage: linen cupboards, rows of wardrobes, ample attics, basements. Living space was organized differently – and better!

What is most striking in this history, however, is the way storage technologies have expanded over the past few decades. Take an IKEA catalogue from 1969, and compare it with one from 2010, for instance. Storage is not a big theme in 1969, whereas the pages are bursting with smart storage technologies in 2010. There are sophisticated wardrobe systems, as well as boxes, containers, and labeling systems in all shapes and forms. As Cecilia Cassinger (2010) has pointed out in her analysis of IKEA, the company not only sells storage systems, but also increasingly educates its customers in “smart storage solutions” and ways of organizing their day. And other expanding storage industries like Shurgard offers extra space for cluttered homes.

Freedman and Abrahamson discussed this growing obsession with organizing and tidying up everyday life. This is a trend that comes and goes. Television shows, magazine articles, and books try to help people reorganize their cluttered homes and get rid of stuff. There are consultants who are ready to assist in these tasks. One of the gurus of the early 2000s was Dan Ho, the founder of *Rescue Magazine,* the host of a television show, and author of books like *Rescue from Domestic Perfection* (2006). His message was in the tradition of "less is more", and his tale one of a man obsessed by possessions, living a materialistic life overflowing with gadgets and the latest trends, in a stressful dual-career marriage that crash landed in divorce. Then he saw the light and started the quest for simple living. His message, like many others, contains a moral element. People who cannot control their stuff probably can’t control themselves.

Since the 1960s, there has been a constant flow of advice and tools for battling disorderly domestic overflows. There is, for example, the idea of creating a small home office with it’s own home archive. It can be anything from a portable plastic filing cabinet to a little corner with computer, desk, and drawers. Storage technologies were borrowed from the world of work: “Make sure you develop a filing system for your bills and documents, but also for cherished letters, photographs, home videos, and other memorabilia.”

What about other storage solutions for media stuff? Some of them can be viewed at the thrift store. There were many early tools for handling media overflow at home: photograph albums, elegant racks for displaying vinyl records, plastic carousels in bright colors for storing music cassettes, and wooden racks for CDs.

There has been a long history of predictions that modern media technology will solve problems of overload and cluttering. With the domesticating of new digital technologies, came the development of new habits for storage and retrieval. There were also promises of expanded storage space through the utilization of more powerful hard disks or online servers. Overflow took new forms.

One such new form manifests itself in the storage of family photographs. In the 1950s, amateur photography was still relatively limited, but with new cameras, cheaper film, color prints, Polaroids, and other novelties, an intensified snapshot culture developed. Photographical production started to get out of hand, and it was no longer possible to organize the flow of images into neat albums. New, improvised photographical archives in shoeboxes or drawers emerged in the basement, with occasional attempts at sorting and disposing. With the advent of digital home photography, this domestic production of snapshots accelerated even faster, but now overflow could be handled by digital storage, with intricate filing systems on the hard disk or a chaotic mess of hundreds of downloaded images, identified only by strange JPG number (Shove, 2007).

When Daniel Miller (2008) interviewed Londoners about their home possessions, he entered many homes bursting with objects, gadgets, and domestic technologies, but there were also exceptions. Compare, for example, his presentations of the lives of Marjorie and Malcolm. Marjorie was in her sixties, and lived on her own, but her home was full of mementos, keepsakes, and media stuff relating to kin and friends.

Marjorie’s house is where everything is kept, pretty much by everybody. There may be photos in every nook and cranny in her living-room, but they are nothing compared to the three suitcases of photos that she keeps upstairs…// But it’s not just the photographs; it’s the clothes, the keepsakes, the prizes, the toys, the souvenirs from holiday, the paraphernalia of fads. (Miller, 2008: 60)

Miller noted that this type of storage was not a question of hoarding or not wanting to dispose of possessions. Marjorie constantly refashioned herself and her home; stuff was constantly circulating back and forth between the living room and the boxes in the attic. New collages of photographs and old newspaper clippings were created on the walls; she watched old videos and rearranged knick-knacks. In these cycles of replacement and refurbishment, things were always on the move. In the seemingly cluttered disorder, there was a flow of new combinations and associations, producing anecdotes and story links among people.

For Malcolm, who lived down the street, Marjorie’s overflowing home would be a provocation. He was in his thirties and also lived alone, often changing lodgings. Growing up with a father who was a collector and antique dealer, he had developed a strong dislike of material possessions. He was constantly ridding himself of things that others would have saved. Books were given away as soon as they were read and clothes discarded.

For Malcolm the digital era had opened up new possibilities for keeping things and memories while dispensing with them as objects. He used his laptop as an archive and a storage space and devoted many hours to saving and editing photographs, texts, music, and messages. His network, as well as all his personal materials were sorted, contextualized, and filed in intricate systems. His material surroundings were minimalistic, whereas his laptop was bursting with stuff; yet life was kept in perfect order.

Marjorie and Malcolm represent two vastly different ways of storing, controlling, and handling their possessions and memorabilia, but for most people there are no fixed strategies or steady routines. They seek help from storage systems and techniques, and develop their own systems, from stashing and stacking to improvised filing and labeling systems.

Trying to install order or maintain control can become an overflowing task in itself, as some of the dual-career families in California experienced (Darrah, Freeman, and English-Lueck, 2007: *Busier than Ever! Why American Families Can’t Slow Down*) Consultants marketing their services of organizing and de-cluttering homes and offices often stress the time they can teach people to save. The orderly tasks of sorting and filing are seen as creative work, whereas the search for lost objects or information is often described as "mindless" activity – a waste of time. Abrahamson and Freedman (2007) argue that the opposite is more often true. A cost-benefit analysis will show that tidying and maintaining organized systems often steals more time than it takes to live with messiness. Searching for a lost paper or a CD is not simply a mindless activity; it often gives people a new overview of their possessions and can create surprising connections.

Above all, it is common for attempts at ordering and re-ordering to result in half-hearted attempts. Not everyone has Malcolm’s stamina. Competing storage and retrieval systems are developed in many households, and one should not underestimate the importance of other types of coping strategies: forgetting, ignoring, or overlooking.

## Media stuff on the move

My girlfriend is sitting on a living-room floor that is covered with cardboard boxes, photos, lecture notes, and CDs that haven’t seen daylight for years…

What will removal vans contain in the future if all our memories are gathered in an USB stick or a laptop hard disk, and the clothes we wore last autumn aren’t gathering dust in the closet, but on eBay? How will we view ourselves and our consumer past, when neither the content on our shelves or in our boxes any longer can tell us what books, computer games, DVDs, or records once meant something? (Jonas Grönlund, 2010: B9)

This journalist is feeling the nostalgia of the materiality of old media stuff as a way of connecting with the past.

In many homes, media stuff tends to gather as domestic driftwood, disappearing from sight even if it sits right in front of people. When artist Michael Landy cleaned out his home, he found several burial sites for domestic media. Old cameras, CDs, and cellphones where hiding in the corners, the bottom drawer, in boxes in wardrobes, or in the basement.

Reading Landy’s report, I started to think of my own abandoned media stuff, and descended into the basement, where most of it was still resting. Rummaging through the boxes and searching along the shelves was like going through media history. Here gathered all the technologies and products, waiting to be salvaged and brought back to life, or just carried away to the recycling station in the next spring cleaning. Here were old photograph albums, boxes of slides, reels of home movies, video cassettes, an old tape recorder, bunches of music cassettes, children’s drawings, a large collection of vinyl records, teenage diaries and scrapbooks, computer games, and a Nintendo machine. I returned upstairs to continue my hunt for dead or hiding media in cupboards and desk drawers, finding pre-digital cameras, a Sony Discman next to a cheap Walkman copy, and everywhere old cords, transformers, and used batteries.

All over the Western world there are such collections. Why is it that homes tend to become cluttered with old media stuff in all shapes and forms? Some people save objects as potential replacements. The old television set may end up in the basement as a backup if the new one breaks down (see the discussion in Caron and Caronia, 2007: 58ff).

But significantly, there often seems to be some magic or sentimental aura that protects these possessions from the garbage can. Going through my materials, I tried to grasp what these collections stand for: a family archive or shrine, a catalogue of media life histories, some fossilized technology, a burial site, or just unspecified junk?

A life history approach to media stuff may start by looking at the stations through which such objects as an aging Walkman or a television set move through domestic spaces and then out into a world that includes different kinds of transformations. Sliding down in the hierarchy may mean relocations to new spaces, but also new functions.

The most drastic transformation is, of course, to be re-located and re-contextualized outside the home. As mentioned, much media stuff, from television sets to CDs, ends up in flea markets or the local thrift store. Walking along the shelves of electronic appliances in a sense becomes a walk in what Will Straw (1999) has called "the museum of failures".

Straw was interested in the analysis of failed cultural commodities – those discarded and residual artifacts that are found at flea markets, in second-hand shops, at garage sales, and in thrift stores. Looking at the growing stacks of old vinyl records, he was reminded that recordings, like other cultural artifacts, do not simply succeed each other in time; they also accumulate in space. Tracing the trajectories of old vinyl records over the world, Shaw noted that

the records left unsold at the end of a yard sale are almost never thrown away, because we assume that someone, somewhere will want them and because we have a vaguely moral objection to simply destroying them. No one may want certain kinds of mid 1980s dance singles, or French-language Maoist books of the early 1970s, but there is still a resistance to throwing them out with other kinds of trash. And so we donate them to church rummage sales or charity shops, where they continue to sit, usually unsold, until they are moved along to somewhere else. A whole informal economy has taken shape around this passage, an economy shaped by the trajectories through which certain kinds of cultural commodities move as they seek to find a final resting place. (Straw, 1999: 3)

The final station for most media stuff is not the thrift store, but the local waste disposal station. At our local one, people are supposed to sort their trash into different containers, and the crew at the station supervises this process, while preventing people from reclaiming other visitors’ leftovers. The final destination is industrial recycling only! As a concession to the difficulties of performing a final burial, there is, however, a shed in which objects can be placed for reselling by a charity organization.

There is a special recycling space for electronics, and in these containers can be seen car radios, cassette players, an abundance of loudspeakers in all sizes and shapes, old telephones, and a wealth of computer equipment. All this waste is a highly visible reminder of the shortening life span of many media products, the result of successful marketing of the need for continuous upgrading (Willim, 2003).

Watching people throw away dead media stuff at the recycling station, one can sense the mixed feelings. Seeing the mess of mutilated media stuff in iron cages, some people hesitate before they let go of their belongings. "Maybe I should consider giving this telephone or computer to the charity thrift shed next door?" But on that door is a scribbled note: "We don’t accept old electronics." Dead media are not welcome here. The difficulties of recycling media stuff have led to export systems, sometimes thinly disguised as developmental help to Third World countries. In cities like Lagos, Nigeria and Guiyu, China, old computers and television sets pile up (Park, 2007).

Following the trajectories of objects, it is striking how geography and economy blend as relocations make re-evaluations easier – as Nicky Gregson (2007) has pointed out in her studies of letting go.

## Letting go

All these new resting places for media stuff tell us of a de-cluttering strategy that has been treated by Rolland Munro and Kevin Hetherington, in their discussions of the ways in which cultural analysis has neglected the process of disposal (a theme developed in Chapter 9.) In his analysis of the disposal of meaning, Rolland Munro has argued for the need "to excavate the sump in con-sump-tion" (2001: 109). Kevin Hetherington (2004) has taken this perspective into the realm of objects by. By looking at the mental and physical trajectories of possessions, Hetherington noted that the classic chain of *production 🡪 consumption 🡪 disposal* does not follow in an inevitable, discrete, and linear temporal sequence. He was interested in the power of the presence of the absent in processes of cultural lingering and haunting. He used Munro’s example of the lingering smell of yesterday’s fish in the refrigerator, even after it has been eaten or thrown into the trash. ‘The erasure of an object is never complete. There is always a trace effect that is passed on by its absence," he argued (Hetherington, 2004: 168). How do objects become transformed, move back and forth, and change both value and position? He compared such objects with the institution of double burials found in some cultures, a two stage ceremony conducted, to help the bereaved to adjust to the new situation. Similarly, there are the "first burial places" of a discarded object – the basement or the digital "wastepaper basket" of the computer ("Do you really want to delete this?") – stations that give people a chance to adapt to the transformation or loss. An unread memo must rest in the filing cabinet for a suitable period before it can be run through the shredder.

There are other kinds of vanishing, like the one that Elisabeth Shove and Mika Pantzar (2006) have called *fossilization*. Down in the basement there are media that nobody knows how to use or operate any longer. Looking into a box of old tapes, the labels of *Cr02, Metafine, Chrome,* or *Dolby C* have lost their meaning.

Media stuff forgotten in the attic or in the bottom drawer may have a haunting effect like dark matter – invisible and unknown, but still exerting a strange gravity. In other situations, retrieved media stuff may create pleasant and nostalgic memories. Here, a man talks about finding old boxes of mixed tapes in the basement:

I have put a bit of my soul into these mixes… I rarely play them, but it is fun to know that they still exist somewhere… Unconsciously I feel that the day will come when I am motivated to check out what I have kept… Opening such a box of tapes you are just caught up. You just have to listen and then all the memories come back. Directly. (Miller, 2008: B7)

Much media stuff is difficult to let go of. What is the feeling of tightening your grip or throwing an object away? A tension often exists among anxiety, guilt, and relief. Cleaning out the attic, the hard disk, or the desk drawer sometimes feels like a moral triumph, a fresh start of a new week or a new life. Motion and emotion are intertwined as people remove a physical load from their backs, while simultaneously dumping some of their emotional luggage, as Lynn Åkesson shows in Chapter 9. In throwing stuff in the recycling bin or hitting the delete button, one is letting go – but of what?

At the homepage, *Discardia*, where people are taught how to discard their belongings, there is a strong emotional tone:

Discardia is celebrated by getting rid of stuff and ideas you no longer need. It's about letting go, abdicating from obligation and guilt, being true to the self you are now. Discardia is the time to get rid of things that no longer add value to your life, shed bad habits, let go of emotional baggage and generally lighten your load. (www.metagrrrl.com/discardia)

People write to Discardia to describe how their lives have been changed, how they have become lighter and simpler. Sometimes the tone is that of an AA meeting, with a slightly religious atmosphere surrounding the trading of hints on how to learn to dispose of even cherished possessions or the sharing of memories of de-cluttering campaigns at home. One Discardian proudly told how she pulled out all her belongings on the living-room floor to sort out all the stuff "that no longer is a part of the life I want to live": a true ritual of material and moral cleansing.

In her interviews of people constantly moving furniture around in their homes, Pauline Garvey (2001: 53) discussed the ways in which feelings are changed by shifting the sofa or cleaning the kitchen. The movement of material possessions holds a dynamic, interactive role in this emotional process, she observes. This seems true for media stuff. The reshuffling of old records, computer files, and boxes of photographs or videos is also a way of reshuffling life; in a sense it can be the remaking of both the past and the present. New technologies also reorganize the ways in which people may store or dispose of media stuff. What is the difference between cleaning out a box of videocassettes or a bunch of digital photographs on the hard disk?

Media stuff constantly produces friction. There is the frustration of searching for a missing password or a DVD, the endless daily drudgery of moving stuff or getting stuck while downloading new software. Sometimes the unconscious helps us by blurring the boundary between losing and leaving behind, turning the active into passive, as in ignoring and forgetting. People develop cultural techniques like creative neglect or strategic oblivion.

## Flow and ebb

Consumption is a morally charged terrain in relation to acquiring, using, discarding, or saving. People are constantly facing problems of what constitutes too much or too little, right or wrong. I have used a historical perspective to illustrate such processes, starting with Burenstam-Linder’s discussion of overflow in the 1960s and the cultural optics that made him and many others see contemporary consumption as excessive and overflowing, creating a nostalgia for earlier times of simple living. From the perspective of 2010, his 1960s may seem like a time of restraint and order, and our present lives will probably carry a similar nostalgia aura in retrospective looks from the future. The recurring debates about consumption overflow often involves this type of distorting time mechanism.

Optics is just one aspect. The accelerating inflow of objects, technologies, and activities in Swedish homes since the 1960s has presented new challenges – not least in the sector of domestic media. In this chapter, have explored some of the skills of overflow management in domesticating new objects, information, and activities – from chunking and bundling to multitasking and strategic oblivion. In this process, objects or technologies also become actors. French philosopher Gaston Bachelard spoke about the intelligence of the drawer: “Once you had put something in it, even if you put it in a hundred or ten thousand more times, you could find it again in the twinkling of an eye, as it were. Forty-eight drawers! Enough to hold an entire well-classified world of positive knowledge” (Bachelard, 1994: 77). Robert Willim has discussed the framing power of software menuing, and the ways in which computer programs create their own routines, storage, and retrieval habits, “providing both a relief from frequent choice situations, and a major constraint on freedom” (Willim, 2006: 129). Mobile media make new kinds of multi-tasking and sociability possible. Planning devices may not only design people’s planning but also reorganize their priorities and their time horizons. There are processes of framing at work here.

The historical perspective is helpful in understanding what becomes visible or not. In the life of media stuff, some of it develops into the mundane, disappearing by blending into their surroundings, they are taken for granted, and thus made invisible, or turned into "epistemic wallpaper" as Nigel Thrift (2004) has described the routinization of media use. The same process is found in the development of multi-tasking. Well-established forms of multi-tasking slowly blend into one activity, and are no longer seen as a combination of tasks. Burenstam-Linder complained in 1970 of the newfangled habit of using electric razors, shaving while driving to work, but he never contemplated that the actual flow of driving a car is a classic example of multitasking. Once it is firmly embedded in the everyday, the various tasks involved merge into one – just driving.

In a similar manner, a new technology often presents the cumbersome learning processes involved in organizing a hard disk or using cellphone applications. In the various arenas of everyday life, members of the older generation have to ask: Should I go digital, or is it worth the effort? For the next media generation, this is no longer an option. They learn to master the new technologies at an early age, and their options become invisible. As was often said, back in 2010: “All I need is my smartphone”!

For developing and learning new coping skills, the home often supplies a context and infrastructure in which various routinizing techniques from sequencing to multitasking are made possible, as Kajsa Ellegård (2001) has noted. In a sense, it becomes a perfect laboratory for experiments of mixing, synchronizing, and sequencing tasks.

In the context of 1970, there was a general idea that new media would make everyday life simpler. That notion remains intact in 2010, but there is, of course, no unilinear development here. New technologies also create new types of overflow, with increasing choices and options. Increased miniaturization and mobility has also led to the media being dragged along into new situations. One side effect of this development has been explored by journalist Lynton Weeks (2006), who has interviewed what she called *Suburban Sherpas,* as exemplified in people who lug along a mobile mini-office with several pounds of multitasking capacities in their specially designed backpacks – not only an iPod or a pocket book to read on their commute, but also a laptop, a bottle of water, extra clothing, and snacks to keep their commuting blood sugar at an acceptable level.

For many observers, from Burenstam-Linder to latter-day critics like Maggie Jackson (2008), domestic overflows, above all, constitute a problem. For others, they may seem like blessings, enriching the everyday, providing a liberating range of options.

Any debate must take the framing of overflow into account. Who is speaking and from what position? Again, different backgrounds of class, gender, and generation, for example, come into play. Coping with overflow may be – for some people – an enjoyable experience, like the moral satisfaction of cleaning out their wardrobes, finding a nice flow in multitasking, or learning to live in a relaxed way with the perfect mess.

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1. This chapter draws on my research project, “Home Made: The Cultural Production of the Inconspicuous,” financed by the Swedish Science Foundation. The project looks at the way people handle all the seemingly mundane and unobtrusive routines and tools necessary for surviving modern everyday life. I also draw heavily on a collaborative book with my colleague, Billy Ehn, *The Secret World of Doing Nothing* (Ehn & Löfgren, 2010). Some of the materials have also been published in Löfgren (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This and all other translations of Björklund’s, Björnberg’s, Grönlund’s and Larsson’s works in this chapter are mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Anne-Marie Palm and I conducted 20 interviews in an interdisciplinary project on working life stress (see Löfgren and Palm 2005). Additional background material was also provided by my interview study with 18 managers in a city administration, all of whom were participants in a stress-prevention project. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This discussion is based upon questionnaires in which informants narrate their media life histories (see Löfgren 1990 for a discussion of the material), as well as a number of detailed documentations of contemporary family life conducted by Swedish museums in the 1970s and 1980s, in the SAMDOK project. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, for example, the feature “Multitasking is counterproductive,” CNN.com 2001, December 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)