

Tyranny of the moment

Fast and slow time in the information age

Thomas Hylland Eriksen

London: Pluto 2001.

This is a slightly edited and tweaked version of the eponymous book (*Øyeblikkets tyranni*) published earlier in the same year in Norwegian. Although there has been lots of change since 2001, there has also been considerable continuity. I still defend the main argument developed here.

Cover text:

This surprising and original book argues that *slow time* is a main scarce resource in the information age. Parents, readers, pensioners, wage workers, executives, unionists and politicians have a common cause here.

Using a wealth of examples, the book offers an accurate and wide-ranging diagnosis of this hurried era. It shows in which ways phenomena such as soap operas, correspondence, the youth cult, advertising and "flexible work" are connected to a logic of acceleration and fragmentation, with information technology as a driving force, and how they are connected with the history of modern society.

At the same time, the book indicates that there are deep contradictions in technology-driven contemporary society. Who would have expected the time-saving technology — from the filofax to e-mail and the mobile phone — to result in time being scarcer than ever? As availability approaches one hundred per cent, the struggle now concerns the right to be unavailable, the right to live and think more slowly.

The problem is illuminated by demonstrating that there is exponential growth in everything to do with communication. Electronic media have not reduced the output

of printed media. The Internet has not reduced air traffic. Fax and e-mail have not reduced the use of the telephone. On the contrary, all of this and much more is stacked in tall piles of information and activities that lead nowhere. The moment becomes so overfilled that it excludes everything else.

Tyranny of the moment depicts a culture about to become its own worst enemy; where evolution is about to turn into involution. Anyone who is familiar with the feeling that they never get important things done because there is something else they have to do first, needs this book. In order to understand their own time and their personal situation, and in order to be able to do something about it.

Summary of contents

The book reveals unintended consequences of technological change, in particular showing how the computer revolution and the massive growth in information, associated particularly with the 1990s, encourage a restless, fleeting mode of being, and a superficial, hurried culture, which is inimical to fundamental values. This kind of analysis, it is argued, should underlie a new kind of social movement which takes the social organisation of time as its starting-point for a critique of contemporary technocracy.

1. Introduction: Mind the gap!

The communication revolution of the last decades has resulted in some surprising unanticipated results. Technology that ostensibly should help people save time, has instead led to a situation where time is scarcer than ever. The extreme availability of information has not led to a more enlightened population, but to more confusion. When a fast rhythm meets a slow rhythm, the fast one is bound to win, with serious consequences for culture, intellectual life and the very fabric of society. These are problems that need to be understood well in order to be dealt with politically.

2. Information culture, information cult

The term has already become a cliché; this chapter explains what it entails. It is not a "post-industrial" society, but one where information technology is all-pervasive in production and consumption. Its implicit accompanying ideology is liberalism (in the

European sense) and it has a strong individualist bias. In the information age, time is compressed and events are squeezed into ever-decreasing periods. Other people's attention becomes a main scarce resource for various economic enterprises; conversely, slow time becomes a scarce resource for individuals (or "consumers", as they are sometimes called).

3. The time of the book, the clock and money

This chapter shows the continuities between the information age and earlier periods in Western history; and reveals the importance of information technology for thought and social life. "If it is true, as Benedict Anderson has argued, that the printing press was a precondition for nationalism, it is about time that we ask what wireless communications and the Internet are preconditions for." The chapter focuses on implications of selected information technologies – the printing press, money, mechanical time, musical notation.

4. Acceleration

The last 150 years described as the history of acceleration. The cigarette has replaced the pipe; corn flakes have replaced porridge, computers have to be replaced every second year because they become "too slow", the dissemination of news happens increasingly simultaneously, without delays; and so on. The chapter contains many examples, both from the late 19th century (which was also an era of globalisation and accelerated change) and the late 20th century – including the growth of telephone networks and international aviation, the replacement of letters with e-mail, *Readers Digest* books, WAP telephones and a comparison of the spread of the "Love Worm" (the ILOVEYOU computer virus) with the spread of the Black Death.

5. Exponential growth

This chapter demonstrates that exponential growth is a main characteristic of the information age. Often associated with global population growth, exponential growth curves are much clearer (and steeper) in everything to do with information technology (from the growth of amazon.com and Microsoft to the number of books published annually). However, other forms of communication also seem to grow near-exponentially (the number of TV channels in the world, the number of air

passengers, the number of tourists...). During the last 30 years, there has been produced more information than during the previous 5000 years! When an exponential growth curve becomes vertical, time has ceased to exist as duration. This chapter contains about a dozen graphs.

6. Stacking

An implication of the growth curves discussed in the previous chapter is vertical stacking: Each moment is filled with an increasing amount of information, and cumulative growth, linearity, slowness suffers from it. The relationships between the book and the WWW, single-channel TV and multi-channel TV, techno versus traditional pop etc. illustrate this point. The past and the future are both marginalised, and it is argued that the lack of political visions typical of this turn-of-millennium period is in part a result of a situation where "life stands still at a tremendous speed".

7. The Lego brick syndrome

This chapter connects the analysis of the information revolution with developments in some main social fields – labour, family life, consumption. It argues that accelerated change as it appears in people's everyday life (where it is often lauded as "flexibility") is a serious threat to collective projects, including the family, and that the youth cult characteristic of popular culture indicates a disdain for maturing and (what I hesitate to call) organic growth.

8. Slow time

The pattern described in the previous chapters creates new forms of scarcity, notably associated with slow time. This final chapter indicates ways in which the tyranny of the moment can be countered by non-Luddite means, at the levels of private life, the professions and politics.

Tyranny of the Moment deals with the most perplexing paradoxes of this new information age. Who would have expected that apparently timesaving technology results in time being scarcer than ever? And has this seemingly limitless access to information led to confusion rather than enlightenment? This is to do with time and technology, and the ways in which technology affects the way we live in time. These may seem large philosophical questions that ought to be treated with great deference and deep bows in the direction of Kant, Bergson and Heidegger. However, the issues have recently announced their arrival right at our doorstep by entering everyday life.

Tyranny of the Moment : Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age. A study of the universal dilemma of the scarcity of time. Saved in: Bibliographic Details. Main Author: Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. Format: eBook. *Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age.* Pluto Press, Sterling, VA, 180 pp. Fazey, I., Fazey, J.A., Fischer, J., Sherren, K., Warren, J., Noss, R.F., and Dovers, S.R.. 2007. The Concept of Information Overload: A Preliminary Step in Understanding the Nature of a Harmful Information-Related Condition. *Ethics and Information Technology* 9(4):259-272. Honor©, C. 2004. In *Praise of Slowness: How a Worldwide Movement Is Challenging the Cult of Speed.* *Tyranny of the Moment* deals with some of the most perplexing paradoxes of this new information age. Who would have expected that apparently time-saving technology results in time being scarcer than ever? And has this seemingly limitless access to information led to confusion rather than enlightenment? Eriksen argues that slow time "private periods where we are able to think and correspond without interruption" is now one of the most precious resources we have. Since we are theoretically 'online' 24 hours a day, we must fight for the right to be unavailable "the right to live and t

The story about the tyranny of the moment is about to begin, with a short overview of some characteristics of this era, the period after the Cold War. This era came about so fast that the best research still consists in trying to catch up with the present. The following chapter pursues some selected paths back in cultural history, emphasising the history of information technology and not least its unintended consequences. Time is hacked up into such small Eriksen (Tyr) 01 chaps 20/6/01 12:07 pm Page 6 6 *Tyranny of the Moment* pieces that there is hardly anything left of it. The fifth chapter calls attention to a particular kind of mathematical function, namely exponential growth.

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