Review Article
No Time to Spare?
Time and technology

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Time is complicated to study and even harder to control. Leibniz, however, gives us a fairly simple definition of time. To him time referred to patterns in the sequence of 'things', as space refers to the coexistence of 'things'. Thus, without things time does not exist. This immediately reveals why time can be hard and simple at the same time. Time is a derivative of the constitution of our existence, and we make it hard on ourselves if we reify this notion; that is to say, if we turn time itself into an 'object' with measurable influences, a controllable object even. However, this is exactly what has happened in the course of modern history: with the invention of the clock, and the constitution of our existence with it, our activities, and at the same time our perception of time, have become more and more linear, consecutive, irreversible, measurable and predictable.

Conceptualizing time as a derivative of the constitution of our existence implicates that with this constitution our way of dealing with time and our perception of time can change as well. According to Manuel Castells, in his trail-blazing and voluminous *The Rise of The Network Society* (1996/2000), the far-reaching changes in the last decade of the 20th century as a result of information and communication technology (ICT), have indeed entailed a new perception of time. Castells refers to this new concept of time with the paradoxical term 'timeless time'. This timeless time would appear where the consecutive activities that characterize linear time were interrupted by the cross-connections between activities that come with our network society. Where the

'hypertext' of the World-Wide-Web (WWW) enables us to visit several very diverse documents at the same time, timeless time makes it possible to be in several places at the same time and to participate in more than one activity in one place. This may lead to a dramatic increase of activities and a coagulation of linear time. With this Castells means to say that with timeless time, linear time does not disappear altogether, but it becomes arbitrary and the assembly of activities gets to be much more important than their succession. In this circumstance, human existence assumes the air of a continuous chain of events with a dissolving notion of time. Castells illustrates this with such diverse matters as, for example, the speed of transactions at global financial markets, the 'just-in-time' management of organizations, the increasing labour intensity of workers combined with their decreasing years of employment (in their course of life), or the assail on biological time through medical technology – for example, we manipulate life and deny death (as long as we can).

On the one hand it is a pity that Thomas Hylland Eriksen in *Tyranny of the Moment* does not explicitly refer to Castells' analysis of time. Eriksen describes the same themes of time and technology and his notion on the tyranny of the moment bears a strong similarity to Castells' timeless time. On the other hand it is fairly comprehensible that Eriksen more or less passes on Castells' analysis, as he broaches these subject matters from a different, in many ways opposite, point of view. Where Castells puts the link between new technology and time in a macrosociological perspective, looking for historical changes in societal sectors, Eriksen approaches the issue from a microanthropological perspective, seeking the (unintended) consequences of technological innovations for our perception of time and the life world of individual persons. He goes about this not in terms of a bulky, well-wrought ethnography, but in the shape of a concise, at times humorous monograph. On top of this, the book offers its readers practical tips for politics and personal life.

The core of Eriksen's argument is that the flow of information in many areas leads to the filling of 'gaps' in time. Existence becomes a succession of repleted moments, without a 'before' or 'after', or a 'here' and 'there'. Even the 'here' and 'now' is threatened by the next moment, which makes it hard to live in the 'present'. According to Eriksen, we then live, 'with our gaze firmly fixed on a point about two seconds into the future'. This tyranny of the moment greatly affects the perception of our existence. For users of advanced ICT, for instance, it gets harder and harder to attract and keep the attention of others. The information recipients, on the other hand, might find that a slow, continuous perception of time and the control of our own time are becoming scarce. The book revolves around these kinds of paradoxes. Time-saving techniques can even lead to time loss, and the enormous growth of the flow of information through ICT can lead to a better understanding but just as easily to (more) confusion. If so, the thing to do is not just to gather as much information as possible but also to filter

and sort out the data. Eriksen's own encounters with such paradoxes actually triggered him to write the book – to him it turned out to be almost impossible to steadily work on any remotely sizeable scientific project, and this he illustrates with several appealing and familiar situations from his personal life, his busy household and his job at the university.

Eriksen, among other things, links the fragmentation of the present-day (post)modern society, in the fields of labour, care and consumption, with our different perception of time. It even seems that the entire construction of our personal identity, which continuously needs to be reshaped and maintained, is more and more subject to change. He agrees with Richard Sennett who poses that the possibilities and flexibility of the new economy might exist at the expense of the workers' well-being. They might not always be expected to be at the office on time, but they do need to be within reach, always and everywhere. This way it is easy for the job to colonize their (our) leisure and private lives. In this context Eriksen mentions that family life is comprised mainly of activities that are particularly time-consuming, like the care for and rearing of children, activities that cannot be easily and swiftly done with, but which require 'slow time'. The transfer of knowledge, in which parents seem to be dropping behind their children, and the difference between the generations, as the ideal of the young seems to apply to everybody, may also present a problem to the family. Furthermore, Eriksen stresses that activities in the field of consumption and entertainment, due to time pressure and the need to control things, often paradoxically assume properties of the work sphere. Those who want to do more and more frequently will have to take up several activities at the same time and/or complete them in less time. Eriksen also points out some perverse consequences of modern technology like the decreasing average speed as a result of increasing passenger travel.

The cogency of *Tyranny of the Moment* does not so much lie in the typifying of the hurried existence of our information society, as in its definition of several basic principles. Eriksen analyses the dynamics of time structuring in the light of the notions 'speed', 'exponential growth' and 'stacking'. Referring to Paul Virilio, he starts out by remarking that, due to increasing speed, we live in an era in which the connection between 'distance' and 'duration' is gradually becoming less relevant. The world seems to be getting smaller and things are changing so fast that new products sometimes appear to be outmoded by the time they are introduced. Eriksen claims that speed is contagious. Speed may lead to a lesser eye for quality, to simplification, to a lack of attention and precision. A second mechanism behind the tyranny of the moment, Eriksen states, is exponential growth. According to this principle the scope doubles itself during regular intervals. For a longer period of time this evens the way for a continuous and scarcely alarming growth but after it has reached a critical stage it suddenly manifests an explosive spurt, a bit like the multiplying of bacteria in perishable

foods. A similar pattern of exponential growth, Eriksen says, is pre-eminently part of electronic information but in no way limits itself to such virtually inexhaustible markets. Eventually the exponential growth will lead to a concentration of all sorts of information, consumption, moves and activities in ever-smaller time units. Speed and exponential growth both amount to 'stacking', Eriksen's third principle. To illustrate this he, among other things, touches on the difference between the WWW and a book. Whereas the book offers a prestructured chain of information, the WWW presents a disorganized and random collection of information. Any individual can tap fragments of information from the WWW, but these fragments lack an overall interpretation. It is up to the individual to lay this down. If this doesn't happen there will only be a collage of information instead of a cumulative insight. Another thing stacking could lead to is the slacking of attention and a declining appreciation for additional information, which, according to Eriksen, is the reason that news reports seem to be getting shorter and shorter.

One of the evident merits of *Tyranny of the Moment* is in the formulation of the three principles for the changing of time structures and time perception in the light of information society. However, Eriksen fails to systematically work them out and the relations between speed, exponential growth and stacking often remain blurred. Furthermore, it is not always clear to us why some of the consequences of new technology that Eriksen brings up should be a result of the exponential property of growth. Wouldn't the same consequences occur in case of proportional growth? In this regard the book mainly raises questions that call for further research. Another merit of the book is that Eriksen discusses the important themes of time and technology without getting bogged down with technological deterministic reasoning. He repeatedly emphasizes that the consequences of technological innovations greatly depend on political, economical and cultural circumstances. Eriksen: 'Technological change always points in several possible directions'. At some points he does tend to ascribe changes in the perception of time implicitly or too lightly to the developments in ICT. On the other hand, he expresses a rather broad view on technology. This is most obvious in the chapter on the meaning of the book, the clock and money in the development of modern societies. For instance, in this chapter he typifies money as some form of information technology. The information society he regards in terms of a reinforcement of the long-term modernization process or, as he sees it, an increasing abstraction of society.

Eriksen is particularly critical of the consequences of modern technology. He is not, however, altogether sceptical. His plea is for more attention to the unintended consequences of new technology and a reflexive attitude towards time and technology, to give ample room to the advantages and to avoid negative effects. Things that can be accomplished fast and easy should be done fast, but with activities that require a lot of careful attention we should take our time. In

view of the accelerating effects of numerous ICT applications, Eriksen feels that there is mostly need for measures to protect our 'slow time'. In the final chapter he offers some practical tips to do so. One thing he proposes is to grant employees the right to, apart from the holidays, be 'off-line' for at least a month a year, and to create mobile phone-free zones. In short, Eriksen renders an appealing and versatile argument on the problematic of time and technology but hardly elaborates on earlier theories and analyses on time. He positions his propositions next to those of others, like those of Castell, discussed at the beginning of this review. By doing this, *Tyranny of the Moment* – in a wording of the book itself – is rather a contribution to the stacking of information on time and technology than to the further development of our scientific insights on these subjects.

Reference

Castells, M. (1996 / 2000) *The Rise of the Network Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.

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