



The Speed Trap

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The Speed Trap

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The alarm rings and you hop out of bed. Another day is off and running. A quick shower. Wake the kids and rush them through breakfast so they won't miss the bus. Down a cup of coffee. Shovel a bowl of cornflakes. Hurry out to the car, not forgetting a swift kiss on your partner's cheek. Hightail it to the freeway, making a mental note to grab some takeout Thai on the way home. (The kids' soccer practice starts at 6:15 sharp.) Weave back and forth looking for the fastest lane while the radio deejay barks out the minutes—8:33, 8:41, quarter to. Reaching work, you sprint into the building and leap up the stairs three at a time, arriving at your desk with seconds to spare. You take a couple of deep breaths, then remember that the project you didn't finish last night must be faxed to New York by 10:00. Meanwhile, you've got five voice-mail messages and seven more on e-mail, two of them marked urgent.

More and more it feels like our lives have turned into a grueling race toward a finish line we never reach. No matter how fast we go, no matter how many comforts we forgo in order to quicken our pace, there never seems to be enough time.

It wasn't supposed to turn out this way. As a kid in the 1960s I remember hearing that one of the biggest challenges of the future would be what to do with all our time. Amazing inventions were going to free up great stretches of our days for what really matters: friends, family, fun. But just the opposite has happened. We've witnessed a proliferation of dazzling time-saving innovations—jet travel, personal computers, Fed Ex, cell phones, microwaves, drive-through restaurants, home shopping networks, the World Wide Web—and yet the pace of life has been cranked to a level that would have been unimaginable three decades ago.

Curiously, there has been scant public discussion about this dramatic speed-up of society. People may complain about how busy they are and how overloaded modern life has become, but speed is still viewed as generally positive—something that will help us all enrich our lives. Journalists, business leaders, politicians, and professors feed our imaginations with visions of the new world of instantaneous communications and high-speed travel. Even many activists who are skeptical of the wonders of modern progress, the folks who patiently remind us that small is beautiful and less is more, look on speed as an undeniable asset in achieving a better society. Four-hundred-mile-an-hour trains, they assure us, will curtail pollution, and modern links across the planet will promote human rights.

Revving up the speed, in fact, is often heralded as the answer to problems caused by our overly busy lives. Swamped by the accelerating pace of work? Get a computer that's faster. Feel like your life is spinning out of control? Increase your efficiency by learning to read and write faster. No time to enjoy life? Purchase any number of products advertised on television that promise to help you make meals faster, exercise faster, and finish all your time-consuming errands faster.

Experiences like this are making me question the wisdom of zooming through each day. A full-throttle life seems to yield little satisfaction other than the sensation of speed itself. I've begun voicing these doubts to friends and have discovered that many of them share my dis-ease. But it's still a tricky topic to bring up in public. Speaking out against speed can get you lumped in with the Flat Earth Society as a hopelessly wrongheaded romantic who refuses to face the facts of modern life. Yet it's clear that more and more Americans desperately want to slow down. A surprising number of people I know have cut back to part-time work in their jobs or quit altogether in order to work for themselves, raise kids, go back to school, or find some other way to lead a more meaningful, less hurried life—even though it means getting by on significantly less income. And according to Harvard economist Juliet Schor, these are not isolated cases.

Schor, author of the 1991 bestseller **The Overworked American**, says her research shows that "millions of Americans are beginning to live a different kind of life, where they are trading money for time. I believe that this is one of the most important trends going on in America."

Fed up with what compressed schedules are doing to their lives, many Americans want to move out of the fast lane; 28 percent in one study said that they have recently made voluntary changes that resulted in earning less money. These people tend to be more highly educated and younger than the U.S. workforce as a whole although they are being joined by other people who are involuntarily trading paychecks for time off through layoffs and underemployment.

People want to slow down because they feel that their lives are spinning out of control, which is ironic because speed has always been promoted as way to help us achieve mastery over the world. "The major cause in the speed-up of life is not technology, but economics," says Schor. "The nature of work has changed now that bosses are demanding longer hours of work." After a long workweek, the rest of our life becomes a rat race, during which we have little choice but to hurry from activity to activity, with one eye always on the clock. Home-cooked meals give way to frozen pizzas, and Sundays turn into a hectic whirlwind of errands.

Yet there is a small but growing chorus of social critics, Schor among them, who dare to say that faster is not always better and that we must pay attention to the psychological, environmental, and political consequences of our constantly accelerating world. Environmental activist Jeremy Rifkin was one of the first to raise questions about the desirability of speed his 1987 book, **Time Wars**. "We have quickened the pace of life only to become less patient," he wrote. "We have become more organized but less spontaneous, less joyful. We are better prepared to act on the future but less able to enjoy the present and reflect on the past."

"As the tempo of modern life has continued to accelerate, we have come to feel increasingly out of touch with the biological rhythms of the planet, unable to experience a close connection with the natural environment. The human time world is no longer joined to the incoming and outgoing tides, the rising and setting sun, and the changing seasons. Instead, humanity has created an artificial time environment punctuated by mechanical contrivances and electronic impulses."

Rifkin closed his book with an eloquent call for a new social movement to improve the quality of life and defend the environment, a movement of people from all walks of life gathering under the "Slow Is Beautiful" banner. Perhaps appropriately, progress in forging such a movement has moved forward very slowly in the decade since **Time Wars** was published, while the pace of modern life has revved up considerably thanks to breakthroughs in technology and new economic demands imposed by the globalizing economy.

Is Slow Really Beautiful?

A number of these advocates of slowness gathered in Amsterdam last November for a conference hosted by the Netherlands Design Institute. Drawing an overflow crowd of designers, computer professionals, scholars, journalists, environmentalists, business leaders, and activists from around the world, the conference marked the first large-scale forum on the cultural and political implications of unmitigated speed in our ever-accelerating world.

Not everyone at the conference, which focused on the design and technological aspects of the issue, was convinced that speed poses any real problems. Some of the younger participants, were appalled that anyone would advocate slowing down the pace of life.

Historian Stephen Kern, a professor at Northern Illinois University whose book **Culture of Time and Space** chronicled the soaring velocity of life between 1880 and World War I, pointed out that "new speeds have always brought out alarmists." In the 1830s, he noted, it was feared that train passengers would suffer crushed bones from traveling at speeds as high as 35 miles an hour. Kern considers the current concern about the effects of our speeded-up lives a similar kind of hysteria. "Technologies that promote speed are essentially good," he said, adding that "the historical record is that humans have never, ever opted for slowness."

Danny Hillis, who pioneered the conceptual design behind high-speed supercomputers, disagreed with Kern, warning that our obsession with speed forces us to lose sight of the future and remain trapped in the present. He recommended cultivating what he calls "a new aesthetic of slowness." To illustrate what that might look like he told a story about how Oxford University replaced the gigantic oak beams in the ceiling of one of its dining halls. When the beams began to show signs of rotting, university officials were concerned that they wouldn't be able to find enough lumber large and strong enough to replace them. But the university's forester explained to them that, when the dining hall was built 500 years ago, their predecessors had planted a grove of oak trees so that the university could replace the beams when the time came.

In that spirit, Hillis is now at work with musician Brian Eno and others on designing the world's slowest clock, which will chime just once a millennium. He hopes that at a conference 3,000 years from now, people will look back on our time and see this clock as a symbol of "the moment when they took responsibility for the future. When they stopped believing in just now."

The prominent German environmental thinker Wolfgang Sachs shares Hillis' interest in devising an aesthetic of slowness and offers his own ideas about what form it would take. "Medium speeds will be considered an accomplishment, something well done," he says. "And when you see someone going fast, you shrug your shoulders, saying, 'What's the point?'"

Sachs believes that speed is an under-recognized factor fueling environmental problems. As he puts it, "It's possible to talk about the ecological crisis as a collision between time scales—the fast time scale of modernity crashing up against the slow time scale of nature and the earth." In his view, genetic engineering, with all its potential for ecological havoc, is an example of how we interfere with natural processes in the name of speeding up evolution. Sachs' recent report *Sustainable Germany*—which maps a route to a Green society—embraces slowing down as a key environmental objective, proposing to put 100 kilometer-an-hour (60 m.p.h.) speed limits on Germany's autobahns and scrap plans for a high-speed rail network. He also recommends strengthening local economies and cultures so that people won't have to rely as heavily on long-distance travel.

"A society that lives in the fast lane can never be a sustainable society," Sachs told the conference, adding that a slower society would also be a more pleasant, elegant place to live. "In a fast-paced world we put a lot of energy into arrivals and departures and less into the experience itself. Raising kids, making friends, creating art all run counter to the demand for speed. There is growing recognition that faster speeds are not just a natural fact of the universe. It's an issue for public attention. What has not been discussed before now is: What kind of speed do we want?"

Jogi Panghaal, a designer who works with community groups in India, defines the issue as not simply whether speed is good or bad, but whether the world of the future will allow a variety of

speeds. He worries that a monoculture of speed in which the whole world is expected to move at the same pace will develop globally.

India and other traditional societies of Asia, Latin America, and Africa are undergoing culture shock as the rule of Western efficiency bears down upon them. People who once lived according to the rhythms of the sun, the seasons, and nature are now buying alarm clocks, carrying pocket calendars, and feeling the pressure to move faster and faster. At the conference, Panghaal warned that inhabitants of the industrialized nations may feel this loss as much as the traditional peoples do because less modernized cultures provide inspiration for finding a slower, simpler way of living—including the two-week vacation in the Third World that has become a necessary ritual of replenishment for many of us.

Sachs and Panghaal raise the question of whether we will have any choice in determining the tempo of our lives or will we all be dragged along by the furious push of a technologically charged society. When I hear friends complain that their lives move too fast, they're not talking about a wholesale rejection of speed so much as a wish that they could spend more of their time involved in slow, contemplative activities. One can love the revved-up beat of dance music, the fast-breaking action on the basketball court, or the thrill of roller coaster rides without wanting to live one's life at that pace. A balanced life—with intervals of creative frenzy giving way to relaxed tranquility—is what people crave. Yet the pressures of work, the demands of technology, and the expectations of a fast-action society make this goal increasingly difficult to achieve.

Another speaker at the conference, Ezio Manzini, director of the Domus Academy design institute in Milan, sees hope for a more balanced approach to speed springing from the same source that fuels the acceleration of our lives: modern mastery of all that stands in our way. "This is the first time in history in which people think they can design their lives," he said.

In an age of technological marvels, we've come to expect that solutions will be found to help us overcome our problems. So if the problem now appears to be too many things coming at us too fast, we'll naturally begin looking for ways to slow down. Humans may not have opted for slowness in the past, but they have also never had to contend with constantly soaring speeds not only diminishing the quality of life, but also endangering the future of the planet. As Wolfgang Sachs declared to the audience in Amsterdam, "Slow is not only beautiful, but also necessary and reasonable."

How to Hasten Slowly

All this stimulating talk at a splendid conference is fine, but how do we even think about the enormous undertaking of slowing down a world that's been on a spiral of growing acceleration for more than a century and a half? Especially when the captains of the global economy dictate that speed is an essential ingredient of tomorrow's prosperity? How do we begin to apply the brakes in our lives when the world around us seems to be stomping on the gas pedal?

Right outside the theater where the conference was held, the city of Amsterdam itself seemed to offer an answer. More than almost any city in world, Amsterdam has consciously curtailed the speed of traffic, creating a delightful urban environment in which a bike rolling past at 15 miles an hour seems speedy. Strolling the narrow streets for just a few minutes, you encounter all sorts of shops, restaurants, nightclubs, parks, public squares, banks, and movie theaters—an impressive array of shopping and entertainment that would take at least an hour's worth of driving and parking to reach in most American cities. You're moving slower than in a car but experiencing much more.

Amsterdam's efforts have been widely imitated around the world by advocates of traffic calming, a burgeoning popular movement that seeks to improve safety and environmental quality by reducing the speed of cars. The spread of traffic-calming techniques like speed bumps throughout Europe, Australia, and now North America provides a sterling example of how a grassroots movement can bring about the slowing down of society.

This idea of calming could be taken out of the streets and into workplaces, government, and civic organizations. It's true that transnational corporations wield near autocratic authority in today's global economy, but a spirited worldwide campaign for shorter work hours, more vacation, and a less intense work pace might crystallize worker discontent into a potent political force that would undermine that power. Juliet Schor contends that additional leisure time, not further economic growth, will be the chief political goal of the coming age. (We've already seen the start, with women's groups and labor unions leading a successful campaign for family leave policies in American workplaces.)

But before any political movement can take hold, people need to begin thinking differently about speed and how important it really is. For 150 years we've been told (and believed) that the future will inevitably be faster than the present and that this is the best way to broaden human happiness. And speed *has* brought major improvements to our world. But in taking advantage of its possibilities, we have become blind to its drawbacks. While the acceleration of life that started with the first steam locomotive didn't crush our bones, it may have crushed our spirits. Our lives have grown so hurried and so hectic that we often don't take in the thrill of a sunset, the amusement of watching a youngster toddle down the sidewalk, or the good fortune of bumping into a friend at a bookstore. We can regain the joy of those things without giving up the World Wide Web, ambulance service, and airline flights to Amsterdam. Rather than accept that the world offers just one speed, we have the privilege, as Ezio Manzini says, of "designing" our lives.

How does Manzini himself do it? "Like everybody's, my life is in a hurry," he admits. "When I am at work I'm in the machine, and there is nothing I can do to move slow. But I try to be conscious that it is not a good way to live. And when I leave work, I try to switch off—slow down and do things that make me feel good, like go out to the country and relax. This is what you might call selective slowness. It's the beginning of consciousness that you can get out of the machine."

Wolfgang Sachs, who is project director of the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Energy, and the Environment in Wuppertal, Germany, says, "It's a struggle for me to slow down, as it is with many people. But the key is to be able to dedicate yourself to the proper rhythm, geared to what you are doing, whether you are playing with a child, writing a paper, or talking to friends." One thing that keeps his life from whirling out of control is walking to work each day. Those strolls offer him 20 minutes each morning and evening when he's out of reach of the rushing insistence of the modern world.

Juliet Schor has slowed the pace of her life by setting firm limits on when she works. "My work time is limited by my childcare hours. I don't work on weekends. My life outside of work has also been simplified. I rarely drive a car. I ride my bike. I just don't do all the things that make me crazy. And my husband, who is from India and has a much calmer approach to life, has been instrumental in helping me slow down. He has taught me to just do one thing at a time."

We all have a chance to slow down. Maybe not at work or in raising kids, but someplace in our lives. It might be turning off the rapid-fire imagery of television and taking a stroll through the neighborhood. It might be scaling back the household budget and spending Saturdays fishing or gardening instead of shopping. It might be clearing a spot on your daily calendar for meditation, prayer, or just daydreaming. It might be simply deciding to do less and not squeezing in a trip to the bookstore when you don't have time for a relaxing visit.

Manzini has another suggestion. "In Italy there is something called the movement for slow food," he says. "It's a group of people who have decided to promote the idea that there are things that matter more than speed. The idea of defending the quality of something that is slow is very interesting to me." Launched after the arrival of McDonald's in the heart of Rome, the group soon attracted 40,000 members in 40 countries.

That's how I've started the "Slow Is Beautiful" revolution in my own life—right in the kitchen, scaling back my busy schedule to find more time for cooking good meals and then sitting down to enjoy them in a festive, unrushed way with my wife, son, and friends. Even cleaning up after dinner can offer a lesson in the pleasures of slowness, as I learned a while back when our dishwasher went on the fritz. Before that I had always just tossed dirty dishes into the machine as fast as possible and hurriedly wiped the counters so that I could get on to more worthwhile activities. But when I was forced to wash dishes by hand, I discovered that although it took longer I had way more fun; I'd put some jazz or blues or zydeco on the stereo and sing along, or just daydream as I stacked dishes and glasses on the drying rack. What had been 5 or 10 minutes of drudgery, filling the dishwasher and desperately wishing I was doing something else, turned into 15 or 20 minutes of relaxation. Our dishwasher is fixed now, but I still find myself looking forward to cleaning up the kitchen. A lot of nights I wash the dishes by hand anyway, and when I load the dishwasher, now I do it slowly and without the slightest hint of displeasure.

Workers of the world, relax. You have nothing to lose but your microwaved burritos and your overstuffed Day Runners.

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