

# SLAVES TO THE MACHINE?



Digital technology is constantly evolving, enabling us to complete tasks ever faster and more efficiently. So why, asks **Judy Wajcman**, do we still feel as if we're pressed for time?



On Tuesday 30 June 2015, at a moment before 8pm Eastern Time, the entire planet got a bonus "leap" second. Leap seconds are a way of taking account of the fact that the earth's rotation is gradually slowing down. Our atomic clocks make this adjustment, as they are now better at keeping time than the earth is. The leap second is our periodic reminder that time as we know it is but a construct.

Yet everywhere we hear that the pace of life is speeding up, that the rate of technological innovation is accelerating – and that these two things are causally linked. From high-speed trading to speed dating, the world seems to be spinning ever faster. Being busy has become a lifestyle, something else that needs to be fitted into our lives. So time is at a premium.

If we believe the cyber-gurus of Silicon Valley, this speed will make our lives better by making us more efficient, allowing us to do many more things, faster and simultaneously. Digital devices are sold as time-saving tools that promote an exciting action-packed lifestyle; every new gadget is said to revolutionise

the relationship between people and technology. Marketed for a busy life on the move, they will help us make the most of time.

But if modern machines are supposed to free up time, why do so many of us feel rushed and harried? Instead of the post-industrial leisure society technological advances were supposed to deliver, we seem instead to be time-pressured, running ever faster to stay still. It's as if digital technology is pushing us into the fast lane, that we have become hostages to the machine.

This is the paradox of time in our digital age. Is the pace of life really faster and, if so, what role does technology really play? Why do we vacillate between regarding digital devices as the cause of time pressure and turning to them as the solution?

One of the many ironies of our networked age is that it intensifies our nostalgia for a slower, pristine past. Hardly a month goes by without a new book bemoaning our current state of busyness and distraction, blaming the hyper-connectivity of digital devices and advising on how to deal with digital

addiction. Digital Detox vacations are on the rise, offering the chance to disconnect from technology and "reconnect with yourself".

But, of course, it's not just a matter of unplugging your devices. It is certainly true that people feel rushed and pressed for time, with numerous surveys indicating a widespread perception of everyday life as harried, and a sense that leisure time is scarcer and more hectic. Time-use studies, however, where people keep detailed diaries about what they actually do, show that, overall, the amount of leisure time we have has in fact not declined over the last 50 years.

If we look at "quality time" with children, again, all the statistics tell us that the amount of time both mothers and fathers are spending with their children has actually been increasing, not decreasing. Furthermore, this increase is in active childcare, such as talking and playing, suggesting that parenting is becoming more intensive.

This gap between objective time and how we subjectively experience it points to the importance of the quality or character of time, and not simply the

amount of time we have. And this is where technology comes in.

I have been researching technological change for 30 years, and one thing I have learnt is that technologies never simply speed things up. This is because technology is not something separate from us. Rather, it makes possible what we do, and even how we think about time. Every major technological innovation comes hand in hand with new activities and experiences, creating new ways of working and socialising. Indeed, as often as not, its effects are counter-intuitive and contradictory, surprising even their designers. So the very same devices that can make us feel harried also enable us to take more control of our time.

Take our use of the mobile phone for instance, a device first marketed as a business tool, but mostly used, from the very beginning, for contacting family and friends. The take-up of smartphones follows the same pattern, with by far the most common activities being texting, taking photos and accessing information services. So a technology designed primarily for business use has become an essential tool for synchronising activities in a de-synchronised society.

Mobiles became ubiquitous as an organisational tool because of the way we live and work. The increase in flexible working hours, together with the rise of dual-earner families, has made co-ordinating with other people, even family members, much more difficult. These changes in working patterns and family forms are major sources of our sense of busyness, not our access to the technology. The issue is not so much a shortage of time as a problem of timing or scheduling. And the mobile is a great device in that context.

I would also argue against the notion that the time people spend texting and on social media is leading to a deterioration in the quality of communication. Again, research shows that even the social networking sites of the young are mainly frequented by those who know each other. In this way, mobiles can enrich social relationships and be an important tool of intimacy.

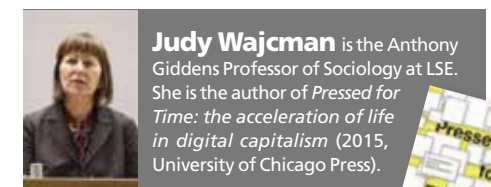
The same ambivalence characterises our relationship with email. The internet certainly allows messages to be sent at amazing speeds. If technologies existed independently and outside society, then surely faster technologies would save time as people would be doing the same things at a faster pace. At one level, this rings true – faster, more powerful computers enable us to process more information more quickly. Yet, paradoxically, we seem to end up with less time than before.

In reality, the internet is open to manifold usages. In some instances email, for example, may genuinely encourage faster decision-making, while, in others,

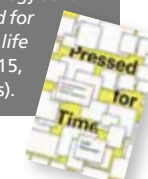
what is colloquially referred to as "information overload" may lead to inertia. Either way, what is clear is that technical velocity does not necessarily translate into greater efficiency. The significance of email lies as much in the way it has raised social expectations of communication and response time as in the actual speed of this communication.

After all, technological developments have always reshaped the relationship between space and time; think for a moment of the impact of the clock, the telegraph and the railways. Digital time is no different – ultimately it needs to be understood as a product of the ways in which humans use, interact with and indeed build technology. We are not passive victims of machines and digitalisation is an ongoing process, rife with contradictory effects.

If we feel pressed for time today, it is not because of technology, but because of the priorities and parameters we ourselves set. Machines reflect, as much as shape, our society and in their design, diffusion and use we can observe the contests and interests that form the underlying fabric of social life. The contemporary imperative of speed is as much a cultural artefact as it is a technological one. ■



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