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Of Slowness in the Age of Speed

Guest Editor's Foreword

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Introduction

Nowadays, when we are trying to understand the social reality that surrounds us, we turn to the slowness–speed dichotomy more and more. This dichotomy is becoming the most important one in our experience of the reality instead of social structures and relations that are somewhat constant in time. It is a basic experience that the bases of our world change more than once, even within one generation, and the generation gaps are becoming shorter and more confused. It does not take an in-depth analysis to realize that we do not read, write, learn, buy, communicate, have fun, and so forth as we did ten years ago. And we suspect that the actual situation is about to change soon. This is not a new situation. The basic premise of the European culture is the belief in progress.

The time concept behind this belief is a future orientation. The progress myth teaches us that the reason we live for is always somewhere in the future, that is what we must reach, that is what we need to mobilize all our resources for.

The experience of progress, of change often goes together with two other experiences. One is the experience of crisis, of which Durkheim said in his work entitled 'Suicide' that together with the phenomenon of anomie it becomes the constant and normal state of society (Durkheim 2005, 216). This thought is expanded by Ulrich Beck, who uses the expression 'risk society' to describe our future-oriented, quickly changing, and unpredictable society (Beck 2003). The other experience that comes with the experience of change is acceleration, the experience of speed. The presence and reality altering the quality of speed has been brought to attention by others too: in 1909, F. T. Marinetti says in The Futurist Manifesto published in *Le Figaro*: 'We declare that the splendour of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed.' Even so, at the beginning of the 20th century, it was unthinkable how much of a fundamental conversion factor the experience of speed will become, how deeply ingrained in

our lives it will be. Speed is becoming a social-philosophical category instead of an aesthetical one with which we can grasp the reality of our era.

This study, however, does not focus on speed but on slowness, to be more precise, on the possibilities of slowing down in the era of acceleration. In order not to exceed the boundaries of this study, we will be focusing on the problematic of digital literacy and our question is whether why and how should we include slowness in our digital literacy? Should it be part of it at all?

Obviously, we cannot understand slowness without speed. They are co-relative, co-dependable concepts, each meaningless without the other and each understandable through the other. Speed exists where slowness is relative to it and vice versa. Thus, I will first speak of speed as a phenomenon that characterizes more and more our daily lives. This relation allows us to speak of our age as the 'age of speed'. Further, I will expound on this expression.

The age of speed

It is not a coincidence that *Age of Speed* is the name of a 3D on-line car-racing game in which one competes with very fast future cars. The only goal here is to drive as fast as one can to win first place and to move on to the next level.

Speed racing perfectly symbolizes the state where speed is above all other values. Comfortably reaching any destination: in the beginning, car travel was a symbol of freedom of movement. A racing car, on the other hand, does not have a destination and the scenes that we pass are not of any interest. The only important thing in car racing is the space that needs to be crossed quickly, and thus the single most important thing is speed.

Nowadays, car racing is neither the only nor the isolated instance where speed is the determining factor. Speed is becoming omnipresent along with the experience of instantaneousness. We are 'set' to speed. Speed has become the main factor in our work, in sports, entertainment, mechanical areas, communication, and in war strategies. If we mean to update something, we speed it up. That is how fast food and speed-reading are part of our lives and also why a gym in New York offers speed yoga.

German sociologist Rosa defines three categories regarding the tempo of modern social life in her book entitled 'Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity' (Rosa 2015). She highlights technological acceleration, which applies to the fields of transport, communication, and production, the acceleration of social change which presents in cultural knowledge, social institutions, and personal relations, and also speaks of the acceleration in the pace of life.

This social situation is foreseen by Paul Virilio, who – reacting to the ongoing changes in politics, strategics, and urbanization – recommends the introduction

of dromology (the science of speed) in the seventies (Virilio 1986). Dromology interprets reality in the context of speed. Virilio underlines that in our age 'space' and 'area' are more and more replaced by the time factor, that is to say, the relation between them, which is speed/velocity. Speed in itself is unconceivable; it is not an independent phenomenon but more like a relation between phenomena. It is also interpretable as the compression of space, the reduction of spatial dimensions. Rüdiger Safranski names the disappearance of distance the fundamental trait of the globalized world (Safranski 2006).

Another characteristic of the age of speed is also noted by Virilio through the title of his book: 'The Information Bomb' (Virilio 2000). The expression itself was created by Albert Einstein, who said that the information bomb, along with the demographic and atomic bomb, is one of the three great dangers of the future. Noting the production and consumption of information in our days, we can accept the fact that this bomb has already exploded. Not coincidentally, sociologists and researchers use the expression Big Data to describe our current situation, which means that the quantity of data can only be expressed in exabytes. Big Data refers to the amount of data produced in one day worldwide, which doubles every 18 months. We are coming to realize the possible benefits that this amount of information can provide to companies and customers if structured and analysed, but we can also see the dangers of it (Boyd and Crawford 2012).

The myth of progress – as I mentioned before – is the defining myth of our society. The experience of change brings along the experience of acceleration, of speed also. Acceleration and speed carry possibilities, but they also carry dangers, the realization of which has given a new value to slowness, deceleration. What dangers are there exactly?

Great speed can cause physical and mental illness. The name of the physical illness it can cause is kinetosis, or motion sickness. It is called motion sickness because it is brought on by motion, any kind of motion, car, bus, ship, plane, or even by virtual reality or movies. It is caused by the conflicting information of the seen and perceived motion, in other words, the brain cannot correlate the information about the motion as provided by the eyes and the inner ear. The psychological illness caused by the modern, fast-paced lifestyle they call hurry sickness. Hurry sickness is the state of a person under stress who is always in a hurry and is unable to unwind. It presents with permanent fatigue and exhaustion.

In our age, the brain is flooded with information that it needs to process. This leads to us paying attention to more than one thing at a time, to perform parallel tasks with great speed, in other words: to multitasking. It is already known that multitasking per se is not possible, the brain can only focus on one thing at a time; thus, multitasking only means quickly switching from one task to the other. This process is an energy drainer which in the long run makes us less effective. Neurological studies have also proved that by multitasking not only effectiveness

decreases but also the ability to concentrate, and it is correlated with stress and also with a dependence on new stimuli. That leads the brain to crave for new and new stimuli and to neglect tasks that require longer mental input. Some studies have also shown the thinning of the limbic cortex, which is the part of the brain responsible for thinking (Loh and Kanai 2014).

The altering effect of speed is present not only on a physical and psychic level but also on a more general, though scientifically less verifiable, phenomenological level. It is noted again by Virilio that acceleration changes the situation of a person within the world and also the perception of self of the said person. Virilio says that the new telecommunication techniques destroy physical distances and alter forevermore the perception of reality and the social and political structures that were dependent on it. Real-time technologies destroy the present, they distantiate the present from its 'here and now,' and what takes shape as a result is far removed from the actual presence of the world. If information can be communicated in an instant from whatever distance, then the concepts of near, far, horizon, and distance have no meaning anymore. There is no more delay between event and reaction, and thus the interval needed for critical thinking and conclusion is also lost. Humans have already reached the speed which exceeds their ability to comprehend information. The acceleration of perception causes chaotic perception, which leads to information deterioration in communication. Virilio calls this process the de-realization of reality, which changes the place of humans in the world (Virilio 1992, 90).

Due to the dangers of speed becoming more and more widely known, slowness is rediscovered by many. There are movements like the slow life, slow cities, slow food, or slow design that call slowness, leisureliness the leading principle of activities. The concept is not simply an overturn. The need for speed is so deeply ingrained in our attitudes toward things that changing it is very difficult. Isolated changes cannot change general tendencies. To present this difficulty, I will raise the question of deceleration, of slowness in regards to digital literacy related to an area that has been primarily defined by speed.

Digital literacy and slowness

The pairing in the title seems unlikely: why would one need slower Internet or computer? Why the question at all? The need for acceleration and speed is so deeply ingrained in our society that all requests for deceleration seem anachronistic.

At the same time, it is not a coincidence that instead of the expression 'computer or Internet usage' I use the more general term digital literacy. Literacy is a much wider term than ability or even knowledge. Literacy means a certain permanence because it involves the knowledge of basic things, a type of normative knowledge that encompasses all things that need knowing, so to say.

In the past years, literature regarding learning has emphasized more and more the need for critical and self-reliant use of the technologies of the information society. Expectations have synthesized in many concepts which show a rather confusing system (Lankshear and Knobel 2008). There are discourses about information and electronic literacy, computer literacy, media literacy, and digital literacy, of course. In regards to my study, it is more convenient to use the digital literacy term because the 'digital' clearly signals my intention to dissert on the literacy and communication relating to IC technologies.

In Martin's interpretation, digital literacy means the collective of abilities, orientations, and consciousness that allows us to use digital tools and institutions to appropriately identify, reach, integrate, synthesize digital sources as well as to realize and evaluate new knowledge and to communicate (Martin 2006). This description shows that digital literacy is advantageous in gaining knowledge as well as in participating in the information culture. At the same time, there is an unspoken presumption in the description. The appropriate usage, the effectiveness primarily means speed, as in the quicker access to and process of information in quantity and quality alike and the speedier communication.

Let us take a computer for an example. The computer, just as the mobile phone or the Internet, can be interpreted as accelerator equipment. The computer quickens the search for information, but also the systematization and process of information. A search engine is much faster in attaining information than pouring through index-cards or shelves of books. Editing a text in a word editor is incomparably quicker than doing it on a typewriter. Speed, in this regard, is a gain as it liberates us from a set of redundant and unnecessary operations. But we see more and more the drawbacks of this speed. Optimizing and cutting operations carries the risk of cutting bits of information, relevant contexts might be left out, which damages the quality of the received and processed information. On certain fields, the advantages and disadvantages occur at the same time. I will discuss two of these fields from the scientific research area.

We do not need to detail the impact of electronic texts upon reading and writing cultures. Authors of the 'secondary literacy' (Crystal 2001) spoke of a new linguistic phenomenon, the 'netspeak,' which has a different system and grammar than traditional linguistics. The appearance of electronic texts has eased research work since it is much easier to find a great amount of texts, but at the same time the drawbacks of this quick access are felt: we try to read the electronic texts quickly, skipping, and superficially to filter the essentials and move on to the next text. We try to eliminate this problem by printing out texts that we wish to peruse more deeply. We actually try to decelerate ourselves by printing out texts because printed texts can be held, highlighted with markers, and notes can be made on the sides; in other words, they can be studied in depth.

The same applies to digital archives: compared to traditional libraries, in digital libraries we get to be at the source within seconds, so we move on quickly. A traditional library commands a slower pace, requires physical and mental presence. In the library, our focus is on the books, and we are absorbed by reading, the books leading to other books, and thus gaining more knowledge.

Due to digital literacy, we all learn to use electronic texts and digital archives. This way, we actually speed up our encounters with texts in a qualitative and quantitative meaning as well. This acceleration, however, has dangers. The speed with which we manage texts conflicts first and foremost with our speed of thought. Our thinking speed is actually much slower than our ability to access texts, and the brain cannot take up the pace. The text-processing capability is slower, the critical thinking requires slow processing and 'critical distance,' as Virilio uses the concept (Virilio 1991). The fragmented, multitasking, and shifting focus cannot immerse in a topic because the speed of acquiring is inversely correlated with in-depth analysis and the ability to track surroundings. And to fulfil our need for information stimuli we always choose the many small tasks instead of a singular great one.

Word processing programmes have a linguistic effect (Balázs 2009). Computer-facilitated writing favours over-writing, which increases the occurrence of 'spoken language' and phatic elements that carry little meaning. Second, electronic texts have less cohesion. If texts are created without a word-processing programme, the ability to plan and execute correct sentences gains greater importance because rewriting is time-consuming. Using a computer, these abilities lose importance because rewriting and correcting is a quick process.

These are only a few of the speed problems related to digital literacy, but they already point us to notice the tendency that will have negative outcomes. These all signal that the question of deceleration is valid.

Of the possibilities of deceleration

Nowadays, we have come to realize the negative effects of speed in many areas of everyday life. Back in the days when people tried to slow down the attack on a fortress, they made a moat around it. We are encountering this effort on the area of eating, design, and many areas of everyday life. CEOs in overdrive create programmes to unwind, which they administer in quick and targeted trainings. There are new bestseller books on deceleration as Carl Honore's 'In Praise of Slow' (2004) and 'The Art of Stillness' by Pico Iyer (2014). These books proclaim the art of selection and a qualitative life, and the ideas formulated in these works are advertised in TV shows and quick interviews. But constructing moat becomes inconceivable if we try to apply it on a field that requires progress and speed to exist. Until digital literacy inherently means accommodating newer and newer

organizer, planner, editor, and processor programmes and until communicating platforms are expanding and becoming more complex, the introduction of deceleration is increasingly difficult in digital literacy.

It is also hard to define what slowness would mean in the field of digital literacy. Not a slower computer or Internet, for sure. Though handling vast amount of information has become easier by the use of digital technological tools, speed has become an obstacle in the area of processing and learning information, leading to fragmentation and superficiality. That would mean that factors impeding processing must be moderated if not eliminated.

The great obstacle in this change is innovation itself. This is also highlighted by Hans Jonas in regards to the essence of modern technology. He emphasizes two basic features of modern technology. One is the compulsivity of application, which means that possibilities developed on a small scale are applied on a crescent scale until the application becomes a necessity. Another is the irreplaceable nature of technology. Once technology enters an area of our lives, it slowly becomes irreplaceable (Jonas 1985). Unlike in fashion, in technology there is no going back to an earlier stage. In technology, an old invention will never be a new invention again. That constitutes a problem because we expect technical novelties to know more and to be faster. And high-speed tools are subject to the first law of dromology, which states that greater speed will eliminate lesser ones. Following this law, technological tools with greater speed will soon supersede those which are slower, and by being applied on a growing scale they will become irreplaceable.

After describing these correlations, it almost seems that in the age of speed deceleration or the introduction of any kind of slowness is impossible, and yet the main obstacle in the way of endless acceleration is the human itself bound by its physical and psychological limitations. This factor will probably become a decelerating factor holding back the overdrive of speed. Seems that we are living in a transition period, where the natural balance between technical possibilities and the user has not yet set in.

Virilio has an idea regarding the symbolics of this field. He says that next to the hall of Machines we should put a Hall of Accidents, where the Hall of Machines would commemorate the great technical achievements of humankind, whereas the Hall of Accidents would take stock of the negative effects of those achievements (Virilio and Lotringer 1983, 31). All technical innovations bring along a new type of accident. The invention of the ship brought shipwrecking, trains brought on derailments, and electricity brings electric shock. The point of such a Hall would be to highlight and draw attention to the degree we, the inventors and makers of these technological tools, do not govern our own inventions. They are affecting us, they change our lives oftentimes in a negative way. How effective this would be is hard to say, after all, as Virilio says: ‘We cannot institutionalize slowness, it is not within the competence of authority’ (Virilio 1992).

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