

SOCIETY IN THE INFORMATION AGE:  
ON KNOWLEDGE AND THE PACE OF LIFE

by

MATHIAS RICKEN

Computer Science 300, Rice University

March 26, 2003

SOCIETY IN THE INFORMATION AGE:  
ON KNOWLEDGE AND THE PACE OF LIFE

*How does the increased pace of life affect the way in which we acquire knowledge about the world around us?*

The increased pace of life has many effects on the way people gather information. With the enhanced pressure to get tasks done in a timely fashion and to meet deadlines, the idea that information could be processed faster if only it were possible to collect it more swiftly seems logical. The consequence is a constant impatience with whatever a person is dealing, be it a computer, the web, or another person. This anxiety even penetrates the barriers of home; the speed of the tools at work creates an expectation of swiftness everywhere.

With assignments to be accomplished quickly, people have the natural desire to immediately get down to the important. Not only do they want information fast, they also want the right information. Very often, long texts might seem static, too rigid, outdated before they can even be used. Selling points, sound bites, and the irrefutable evidence of pictures are more appealing, more suitable for bricolage and instant problem solving. Even better, live video gives the impression of being in touch with the present. The flood of information leads to its devaluation: Who wants to read old newspapers? Who reads anyway?

Other aspects of collecting information have changed our lives as well: Many devices are now mobile, wireless, and allow us to read news anywhere and contact others at anytime. Our need to stay informed, though, has made information about ourselves accessible as well, giving friends and colleagues knowledge of our whereabouts and making us constantly available. Many of my friends have cell phones or check the away messages of friends online to their benefit, but at the same time, they are forced to impart an equal amount of information about themselves.

The technology that lets us do all these wonderful things is so pervasive that there is hardly any escape from it. Even worse, the mere existence of technology encourages its use, so that many people find themselves multitasking instead of focusing on one chore. This, of course, is different from person to person, and not every task that is done in parallel gets the same amount of attention, but it is an often-occurring by-product of the availability of technology. Gadgets can give people the possibility to be in several places at once, but they cannot improve their attention; as a result, gadgeteers are neither here nor there. The vast number of information outlets demands a user's attention, and while it now is possible to get better information faster and more often, it is uncertain if it is actually used better. It is conceivable that the flood of data causes some kind of information overload, that friction--both in the data itself and in the brain--prevents adequate use.

Unfortunately, it is easy to get addicted to this current of news. People watch news while they work out or read, check their email every five minutes while doing work, and

take their cell phones on vacations. This phobia even lets some be afraid of missing something while they are engaged in consuming information: Should I be watching HBO instead? What happens in North Korea while we are in Iraq?

This behavior, while it may be useful to individuals in the professional sense, has implications outside that realm. As mentioned above, it gives away part of a person's privacy and shelter: Home becomes a ready room, an office for lower-intensity work. The use of technology to stay connected affects other people as well: In many careers, connectivity is a requirement by now; when people began to fulfill that requirement, they automatically raised the bar for everyone. This could be seen as some kind of corollary to Metcalfe's Law: The punishment of not being part of a network increases with the square of the number of users.

With the widespread view that technology eases the burden placed on us by these modern times, there is a rush for more tools and even faster processing. Many might not realize that the blazing speed at which life rushes by is created by technology, and that there could be a circular relationship: Technology quickens the pace of life, and the pace of life demands technology.

(Question by Dr. Gorry)