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Hyper-Active, Online, 24/7

By JEREMY RIFKIN

The whole world is rushing to join the Information Age revolution. Everyone wants to be connected. Indeed, the only debate today is how to ensure that everyone has access to the world of cyberspace.

But an equally important issue is beginning to loom: Is too much access as big a problem as too little? Is it possible that we are speeding up human activity at such a rate that we risk doing grave harm to ourselves and to society?

Recently, scientists showed that they can alter the speed of light, either by stopping it for an instant or by boosting it along. These experiments are opening the door to new technologies that could vastly speed up both computing and communications in the coming century.

We are, in other words, beginning to organize life at the speed of light—compressing time, accelerating activity and processing greater stores of information.

The techno gurus promised us that instant access would lighten our loads and give us back more time. Is it possible, instead, that the nanosecond culture is enslaving us in a web of ever-accelerating connections from which there seems to be no easy escape?

A new term—24/7—has entered our vocabulary. Around-the-clock activity, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Our always operating fax machines, e-mail, voice mail, PCs, Palm Pilots and cellular phones; our 24-hour trading markets, ATMs, online banking services and e-commerce; our television sets that are always left on; our open-all-night restaurants and drug-stores that we can go to any time we want—all of this hollers out for our attention.

Yet because these devices and services only increase the diversity, pace and flow of commercial and social activity, we feel like we have less time available to us than any other humans in history.

For example, online messaging is a great convenience. Except now we find ourselves spending much of our day frantically responding to each other's e-mail. The cell phone is a great time-saver. Except now we can be reached by anyone at any time. On several occasions, I've overheard businessmen answer work-related telephone calls while sitting on the toilet seat in the men's room. Does anyone doubt that time is fast becoming the most scarce resource?

Today, we find ourselves embedded in a far more complex, interdependent temporal world made up of ever-changing webs of human relationships and activity, a world in which every available minute becomes an opportunity to make another connection. Descartes' dictum, "I think therefore I am," has been replaced by a new dictum, "I am connected therefore I exist."

The tell-tale signs of our new time angst are everywhere. Stress-related illness is rising dramatically, and much of it is attributable, say the experts, to information overload and burnout. In the U.S., stress has reached epidemic proportions in the past decade—43% of all adults suffer adverse health effects because of stress, and job stress is estimated to cost U.S. industry billions annually because of absenteeism, diminished productivity, employee turnover and medical costs.

Around-the-clock commercial and social activity has led to a serious decline in the number of hours devoted to sleep. In 1910, the average adult was sleeping nine to 10 hours a night. Now the average adult in a highly industrial country gets less than seven. That's hundreds more waking hours a year.

But we are still biologically designed to go to sleep after sunset and awake at sunrise. Massive sleep deprivation, brought on by the frantic new pace of living, is increasingly being linked to serious illnesses including diabetes, cancer, strokes and depression.

Nowhere is the "speed of light" society having a greater impact than with the dot-com generation. Millions of kids, especially boys, are being diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in the U.S. Is it any wonder? If a child grows up in an environment surrounded by the fast pace of television, video games, computers and constant media stimulation, chances are that his neural development will condition him to a short attention span.

Social conservatives talk about the decline in civility, blaming it on the loss of a moral compass and of religious values. Has anyone asked whether the hyper-speed culture is making all of us less patient and less willing to listen and defer, consider and reflect?

"Road rage," "desk rage" and "air rage" have become part of the popular lexicon as more and more people act out their stress with violent outbursts in the automobile, at the office and on airplanes. In a click-click culture, everyone is poised toward a hair-trigger response.

Maybe we need to ask what kind of "connections" really count and what types of "access" really matters in the e-economy era. If this new technology revolution is only about speed and hyper-efficiency, then we lose something even more precious than time—our sense of what it means to be a caring human being.

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