Time’s Books

Compiled and Edited by Jo Alyson Parker, jparker@sju.edu


This book is, despite some flaws, one of the best books available on current issues in social time. The title and subtitle accurately sum up the central theme, though failing to capture the book's depth. A quick summary: Temporal rhythms between individuals, social collectives, and natural environments defined humans for millennia; heartbeats, event commemorations, and daily and seasonal rhythms were coordinated. Fundamentally temporal, humans are also technological, creating and being shaped by tools, which we “entime,” permitting us, and eventually requiring us, to do some things faster. (A one-hour walk becomes a five-minute drive, altering both space and time.) Technologies are (following McLuhan) extensions of the human body and mind or nervous system. Writing is an extension of human language and memory.

Control over technology may be lost or attenuated, a process which McLuhan called “autoamputation” (and which others, in different contexts, have called “alienation”). A technologized society creates its own rhythms, which may or may not fit with more traditional natural rhythms (for example, circadian rhythms and night work). Capitalism intrinsically expands in space and accelerates time. Capital tends to overaccumulate in one region and needs to expand into others. In a globalized economy, however, it reaches natural limits, which to some extent, but also with limits, can be overcome by increased speed and flexibility in capital movements. Around 1980, according to Hassan, the need for capital flexibility in investing and disinvesting in different markets overcame the machine-based clock-timing logic of early capitalism (Henry Ford type industrialism) and created the networked (information) economy wherein workers can communicate from different locations rather than working mostly in more precisely timed factories.
But the emphasis on faster communication comes at a price. There is a difference, Hassan goes on, between knowledge and information. Knowledge may be direct (fire burns) or mediated (Washington crossed the Delaware River). Information becomes knowledge through a process of validation by experience. Mediated knowledge is at first provisional, with an ongoing verification process. As information multiplies, however, validation through experience becomes, in proportion to available information, more difficult—information overload. We are distracted and cannot attend, give attention, to more and more of what is “out there.” This is a function not just of more socially available information but also of natural limits and changes in mental functioning as a result of new communication technologies.

The technology of writing, Hassan goes on, made civilization possible. It gave stability to words on paper, fixing them socially in time and space, augmenting the capacity to organize on a much larger, and longer lasting, social scale. Narratives that were formerly individual or tribal, mythologized on a generational time scale, extended in duration. The act of writing and reading wired the human brain in a certain way, attuning it to the rhythm and pace of the worlds made possible by the new technology. As technologies proliferated, accelerated and became more complex, a new technology—the clock—was needed to provide order and structure in social activity. The mentalities created by machine and writing came together in the printing press and, driven by accelerating capitalist competition, pushed societies further in the direction of speed and complexity. Concomitant with this situation was a process of ever-diminishing returns in human ability to control and direct social trajectories and synchronize human action with the ever-increasing acceleration. In our new society, Hassan says, information flows but has no time to consolidate into knowledge.

The flaws in Hassan's book are minor, and with some exceptions, not substantive. The book, for example, has many proofreading mistakes of the spell-check-only variety, but these do not diminish the more important points. Hassan is very good in describing the development and problems of social time, less so in attempts at prescription. In a chapter entitled “Canon,” for example, he argues for restoration of the study of a canon of significant works in Western thought but insists that the canon itself cannot be defined—it is the “process of canonicity” that matters. By this he means works that serve as a social reference point over a long period of time, stabilizing social consciousness, inculcating habits and routines. Humans especially, he says, since we are born unfinished, with a lack of instinct for survival, cannot automatically filter