

Speeding into the Void of Cyberspace as Designed

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“The internet was hardwired to be a surveillance tool from the start. No matter what we use the network for today – dating, directions, encrypted chat, email, or just reading the news – it always had a dual-use nature rooted in intelligence gathering and war....[Surveillance Valleyshows] the ongoing overlap between the Internet and the military-industrial complex that spawned it a half century ago, and the close ties that exist between the US intelligence agencies and the antigovernment privacy movement that has sprung up in the wake of Edward Snowden’s leaks.” – Yasha Levine, Surveillance Valley: The Secret Military History of the Internet

“My Dear, here we must run as fast as we can, just to stay in place. If you wish to go anywhere, you must run twice as fast as that.” – Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

Speed and panic go hand-in-hand in today’s fabricated world of engineered emergencies and digital alerts. “We have no time” is today’s mantra – “We are running out of time” – and because this mood of urgency has come to grip most people’s minds, deep thinking about why this is so and who benefits is in short supply. I believe most people sense this to be true but don’t know how to extract themselves from the addictive nature of speed long enough to grasp how deeply they have been propagandized, and why.

A key turning point in the creation of this mood of an ongoing emergency and tense urgency was the naming of the attacks of September 11, 2001 as “9/11.” “Quick, call 911” permeated deep into popular consciousness. The so-called “security” it elicited became a cloaked form of interminable terror. The future editor of *The New York Times* and Iraq war promoter, Bill Keller, introduced this emergency phone connection on the morning of September 12, 2001 in a *New York Times* op-ed piece, “America’s Emergency Line: 911.” The linkage of the attacks to a permanent national emergency was thus subliminally introduced, as Keller mentioned Israel nine times and seven times compared the U.S. situation to that of Israel as a target for terrorists. His first sentence reads:

“An Israeli response to America’s aptly dated wake-up call might well be, ‘Now you know.’”

By referring to September 11 as 9/11, an endless national emergency became wedded to an endless war on terror aimed at preventing Hitler-like terrorists from obliterating us with nuclear weapons that could create another “ground zero” or holocaust.

Mentioning Israel (“America is proud to be Israel’s closest ally and best friend in the world,” George W. Bush would tell the Israeli Knesset) so many times, Keller was not very subtly performing an act of legerdemain with multiple meanings. By comparing the victims of the

11 September attacks to Israeli “victims,” he was implying, among other things, that the Israelis are innocent victims who are not involved in terrorism, but are terrorized by Palestinians, as Americans are terrorized by fanatical Muslims.

Palestinians/Al-Qaeda/Iraq/Iran/Afghanistan/Syria versus Israel/United States. Explicit and implicit parallels of the guilty and the innocent. Keller tells us who the real killers are, as if he knew who was guilty and who was innocent.

His use of the term 9/11 pushes all the right buttons, evoking unending social fear and anxiety. It is language as sorcery. It is propaganda at its best. Even well respected critics of the U.S. government’s explanation use this term that has become a fixture of public consciousness through endless repetition. As George W. Bush would later put it, as he connected Saddam Hussein to “9/11” and pushed for the Iraq war, “We don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.” All the ingredients for a linguistic mind-control smoothie had been blended. Under Obama, it was Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, and Russia, and now Trump touts Iran as the great threat. So many emergencies following fast upon each other are enough to make your head spin.

This sense of ongoing urgency and dread was joined to the fast growing (and getting faster by the day) internet and cell phone world that has come to dominate contemporary life.

Permanent busyness and speed – a state of on-edge nervousness and panic with digital alerts – are today’s norms.

The majority of people live “on” their phones with their constant beeps, and the digital media have fragmented our sense of time into perpetual presents that create historical amnesia and digital dementia. In a so-called progressive world of consumer capitalism, the era of what the astute sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has called “liquid modernity,” time itself has become an online transaction, a liquid commodity that flows away faster than a scrolling screen.

We live in a use-by-date digital world in a state of suspended animation where “time is short” and we must hustle before our use-by date is past. The pace of private and public life has outrun most people’s ability to slow down long enough to realize a hidden hustler has taken them for a ride to Wonderland where the only wonder is that more people have not gone insane as they slip and slide away on the superhighway to nowhere.

John Berger, as only a sage artist would, noted this essential truth in his 1972 novel *G.*:

Every ruling minority needs to numb and, if possible, to kill the time sense of those whom it exploits. This is the authoritarian secret of all methods of imprisonment.

Today the vast majority of people, trapped by the manufactured illusion of speed, are in their cells, quickly texting and calling and checking to see if they’ve missed anything as time flies by.

Much is said about various types of environmental pollution, but the pollution of speed and its effects on mind and body are rarely mentioned, except to express gladness for more speed. The rollout of 5G technology is a case in point. Mental and physical health concerns

be damned. Back in the 19th century, when space and time were being first “conquered” by the camera, telegraph, and telephone, these inventions were described as flying machines. Time flew, voices flew, images flew. Soon the phonograph and film would capture and preserve the “living” voices and the moving images of the living and the dead. It was scientific spiritualism at its birth. Today’s comical research into downloading “consciousness” to conquer death by becoming machines is its latest manifestation.

That the clowns behind this speed culture are growing rich on this research at our elite universities that are funded by the Pentagon and the intelligence agencies doesn’t make people howl with sardonic laughter puzzles me.

Laughter’s good; it slows you down. I just had a good laugh reading an article about scientists wondering why new research “suggests” that the universe may be a billion years younger than they thought. I love their precision, don’t you? My students, in their learned helplessness and desire to be told what to do, have often asked me how long their term papers should be, and when I tell them probably 37 1/2 words, they look at me with mouths agape. What do you mean? one finally asks. I tell them that writing 37 1/2 words is much faster than having to think slowly as you write, and when you have nothing left to say, to just stop. A fast 37 1/2 words solves the thinking problem. Maybe you can text me your paper, I often add, even though I don’t do texting.

On a more serious note, a lifelong student of speed (dromology), the brilliant French thinker Paul Virilio, has shown how speed and war have developed together and how totalitarianism is latent in technology. Few listen, just as they did not listen to Jacques Ellul, Lewis Mumford, Neil Postman, and others who warned of the direction technology was taking us. Nuclear weapons are the supreme technological “achievement,” of course, devices that can eliminate all space and time in a flash. They work fast. Virilio says,

The speed of the new optoelectronic and electroacoustic milieu becomes the final void (the void of the quick), a vacuum that no longer depends on the interval between places or things and so on the world’s very extension, but on the interface of an instantaneous transmission of remote appearances, on a geographic and geometric retention in which all volume, all relief vanish.

As I write, I look down at my wristwatch lying on the desk and laugh. My sister gave it to me after her husband died. He had won it as a member of the Villanova track team that won the 4 man, 2-mile relay at the famous Coliseum Relays in Los Angeles in near world record time. Young men whose bodies were in motion to move across terra firma as fast as possible. No drugs produced in a technological chemical factory to aid them. No gimmicks. Just bodies in motion, unlike today. It is an analog watch that must be wound every day when the sun rises. But my brother-in-law never wound it because he never used it. He was saving it as a stashed-away memento in some sort of suspended time. I like it because it always runs a bit slow, unlike the Villanova flashes. I like slow.

In a brilliant book written in 1999 before the hyper-speed era was fully underway - *Speaking Into The Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* - John Durham Peters, while not especially focusing on the issue of speed and technology as does Virilio, indirectly explores the fundamental issue that underlies technology and its control by the elites. The problem with technology is that it is the use of a technique applied to physical things to control those who don’t control the machines. Today that is the Internet and digital technology, controlled

by those Virilio calls “the global kinetic elites.” Many readers might remember the iconic line from the film *Cool Hand Luke* with Paul Newman: “What we have here is failure to communicate.” That is our issue. How to communicate, and to whom, and who controls our means and speed of communication. Speed kills genuine communication, which may be its point.

Here’s what Peters has to say about the new media of the 19th century.

Media of transmission allow crosscuts through space, but recording media allow jump cuts through time. The sentence for death for sound, image, and experience had been commuted. Speech and action could live beyond their human origins. In short, recording media made the afterlife of the dead possible in a new way. As *Scientific American* put it of the phonograph in 1877: ‘Speech has become, as it were, immortal. That ‘as it were’ is the dwelling place of ghosts.

Despite our advanced technology today, we still die, but we live faster, which is not to say better. We live faster until modern medicine makes our dying slower.

Speed grants us the illusion of control, an illusionary sense of stop-time in the midst of techno-time, digital time, pointillistic time where so much is happening simultaneously across the internet and we “have” it at our fingertips.

Awash in cultural nostalgia that gives us a frisson of false comfort, we scroll the past as fast as we can. In the small town where I live, urbanites come in droves for nostalgia and create hyper-gentrification. I see them rapidly walking the country roads talking from their cells as bird song, rustling leaves, and lapping water passes them by, the technology serving as a shield from reality itself.

To realize that the Internet was developed as a weapon and has killed our sense of flesh and blood natural time to exploit us through speed should be obvious, though I suspect it isn’t.

The invention and control of the Internet by the Pentagon, the intelligence agencies, and their allies in Silicon Valley, as Yasha Levine chronicles in *Surveillance Valley*, is a fundamental problem that deserves focused attention. However, who can slow down enough to focus? As he says, “American military interests continue to dominate all parts of the network, even those that supposedly stand in opposition.” This includes Tor and Signal, two encrypted mobile phone and internet services highly touted by journalists, political activists, and dissidents for their ability to make it impossible for governments to monitor communication. Levine writes,

While Internet billionaires like Larry Page, Sergey Brin, and Mark Zuckerberg slam government surveillance, talk up freedom, and embrace Snowden and crypto privacy culture, their companies still cut deals with the Pentagon, work with the NSA and CIA, and continue to track and profile people for profit. It is the same old split-screen marketing trick: the public branding and the behind-the-scenes reality.

The Internet is, as he argues, an “old cybernetic dream of a world where everyone is watched, predicted, and control.” It is also where you are reading this, another article that will fast disappear from your mind as a stream of more urgent articles rush into print to push it aside.

We are homeless modern minds now, exiled from earth time, and if we don't rediscover our way back to a slow contemplation of our fate and the ontological reality of human being itself, I'm afraid we are speeding into the void.

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