High-speed living enforces a live-for-the-present mentality that obscures history and memory. We must restore a balance of the past, present, and future. The Human Cost of Speed

The airplanes that first attempted to break the sound barrier were ripped apart when they tried to penetrate the turbulent pressure waves rushing ahead of them. Only redesigned aircraft - with thinner, swept-back wings and streamlined fuselages - permitted test pilots to puncture the invisible wall of compressed air.

The principles of physics that explain the sound barrier can also help us understand the origin and nature of stress in our lives. As the velocity of everyday life increases - as we fly faster and faster through the atmosphere of daily experience - the "aircraft" encounters a turbulence it was never designed to withstand. As our speed increases, invisible pressures build up, pressures strong enough to shatter the structural integrity of our personalities and our relationships. Ultimately, we may lose control, or the craft we may disintegrate.

The simple solution, of course, is to slow down. But if we cannot slow down - or choose not to - the only remaining answer is to redesign our lives, to adapt structurally to our newfound speed. But what does "adapt structurally" really mean? An aircraft can be given swept-back wings that help it break the sound barrier, but we are human beings, not machines. What parts of our lives can we alter? And if the stress each of us feels is experienced socially as well as individually, what changes must society as a whole make to accommodate itself to faster times?

The answers to these questions will ultimately define the quality of American life. For the adaptations we make to speed alter the fundamental nature of our existence, not only in terms of our behavior but also in terms of our priorities. A faster society is a different society, different not merely in its velocity but in its values. Not stress but rather our accommodations to it will determine the future character of our civilization.

Social Acceleration

In 1970, Alvin Toffler described the symptoms of a new disease he called "future shock." According to Toffler, future shock was a psycho-biological condition induced by subjecting individuals to "too much change in too short a time." Toffler argued that technological and social changes were taking place so rapidly that people could no longer adapt to them. "Future shock," he wrote, "is the dizzying disorientation brought on by the premature arrival of the future. . . . [U]nless man quickly learns to control the rate of change in his personal affairs as well as in society at large, we are doomed to a massive adapational breakdown."

Since the publication of Future Shock almost 30 years ago, the rate of social change has radically increased. Largely responsible for this increase has been the rapid development and deployment of older technologies and the swift introduction and growth of new ones. Supported by an electronic network of instantaneous communications, our culture has been transformed into a globally integrated system in which the prime and unchallenged directive is to keep up with change.

The computer received scant attention in Future Shock - and understandably so. After all, the first word processor did not appear until 1970; the first silicon chip, not until 1971; the first personal computer, not until 1975. Even as late as 1984, only eight out of 100 American households had a computer. In just two years, however, the figure doubled. And by 1994, there was a computer in more than one out of every three American homes. Meanwhile, computer speed was increasing at a rate of 55% a year, and e-mail and Internet use were just starting to become commonplace.

At the same time, other technologies were revving America up. Sales of cell phones and fax machines, numbered in the low hundreds of thousands in the 1980s, climbed to 7 million a year in just a decade. And by 1997, some 2 million Americans were carrying electronic pagers.

Yet more important than the popularity of any one of these technologies is their combination, which radically reinforces and intensifies their individual impacts. It is their electronic linkage that keeps pictures, sounds, and data continually coursing on a nonstop, high-speed track, saturating our environment with instantaneity. And the more that society depends upon electronic information flow and entertainment, the more our everyday lives need to keep up with its speed-light pace, since our economic and emotional existence is wired into its circuitry.

Without question, this speed can be exhilarating. It brings us what we need and want faster than ever before. But that same speed can also add stress to our lives.

For example, in a national survey conducted in 1986 by the Louis Harris organization, one out of three Americans said they lived with stress nearly every day. And six out of 10 said they experienced "great stress" once or twice a week. In 1994, two out of 10 people questioned reported feeling great stress almost every day, according to the findings of the Prevention Index survey.

In addition, use-of-time studies by University of Maryland sociologist John Robinson have revealed a progressive increase in hurriedness over the years. In 1965, 25% of those surveyed said their lives were "light paced." By 1975, the figure had risen to 28%; by 1985, it had climbed to 32%. And, more recently in 1992, Penn State researchers Geoffrey Godfrey and Alan Graefe put the figure at 38%, almost a 50% increase from 1965. Strikingly, those who lived in small towns felt as rushed as those who lived in big cities. Just as strikingly, both groups felt their lives were hurried not only at work but also at play.

The presence of stress in our lives is also revealed by the printed word. In the last five years, almost 400 articles on stress and time management have appeared in popular national magazines. In addition, there are some 900 books currently in print on these topics. All these publications do more than just show that stress is a popular subject. They also demonstrate how little control we seem to have over it.

Like it or not, we've all been drafted into an army, a peacetime army that fights on the battlefield of everyday life. We wage "time wars" to use author Jeremy Rifkin's term: wars between the slower pace our minds and bodies crave and the faster tempo our technology demands. We are all combat veterans of such wars.

Warp Speed

As the speed of everyday life has risen, Americans have come closer and closer to an invisible "sound barrier." Already we can feel the fuselage shudder as it begins to enter a zone of air turbulence that can rend it apart. Already we can feel the controls becoming resistant to our will.

When we land, the engineers debrief us and then expertly redesign our plane. Soon we are airborne again, questing anew for greater and greater speed, striving once again to break the barrier that stopped us before.

But unlike the science of aerodynamics, the design modifications we accept represent changes in ourselves. In order to maintain acceleration, we will need to accommodate the quality of our lives to the demands of an artificial environment composed of incredibly swift but unfeeling electrons. Thus, it will not be the plane alone that will be transformed, but its pilot as well.

What lies on the other side of the barrier is not simply more speed, but another version of ourselves that we are already becoming. Like the crew of the Starship Enterprise, "boldly go[ing] where no man has gone before," we are approaching a velocity called "warp speed," a velocity that can warp our behavior and our most basic values even as it describes us to the world.

Warp speed produces its effects by changing our relationship to time in two ways: First, warp speed disengages us from the past. The speed of our ascent leaves the past far behind us, like a receding landscape viewed from the rear of a roaring rocket, a landscape so progressively miniaturized by increasing velocity that its features lose all recognizable form. Traditions become incomprehensible and history becomes irrelevant. Memories are a blur.

Second, warp speed plunges us toward the future. The features of the future rush toward us like the fireballs of a meteor storm, blinding us to what lies ahead, hidden in the cosmic night. Brilliant inventions, glittering products, glistening data, and luminous celebrities - each brighter than the last - swarm past us in successive waves, dazzling our eyes.

Nullifying a vision of the past and negating a true view of the future, warp speed isolates us in the present. Marooned there, we turn to the present as our exclusive source for fulfillment. We are mesmerized by our sole source of security in a cosmos where all other foundations have been stripped from us by our onrushing speed. Hurtling through time, we cling to the moment.

The Power of Now

As we travel at warp speed, we fall under the sway of a new force, the power of now. The power of now is the intense energy of an unconditional present, a present uncompromised by any other dimension of time. Under its all-consuming power, the priorities we live by are transformed in a final act of adaptation to electronic speed. Our lives cease to be what they
once were, not because life itself has changed, but because the way we see it has been altered.

The power of now replaces the long term with the short term, duration with immediacy, permanence with transience, memory with sensation, insight with impulse.

Unlike the monastery or the desert, where mystics once attained a transcendent perspective by withdrawing from the world, the realm of now is an environment of constant internal stimulation and flux, a continually altered cosmos that offers us no fixed horizon. As a consequence, our lives come to be characterized more by their random trajectory than by any reasoned destination.

The individual, the family, and society at large are all being transformed by the power of now. Not only is it altering their nature, it is changing the very meaning these words have in our minds. Thus, under its influence, both reality and our understanding of reality are being reshaped.

The Fluid Individual

The power of now immerses each of us in an atmosphere of transience and flux. We float on the current of an electromagnetic sea whose waves are visible on the screens of television sets and computers. Even as it seductively entertains or informs us with its content, each medium indoctrinates us with its form, a form characterized by instantly changing images. As a result, we become progressively desensitized to the importance of continuity and wholeness in our lives. Inured to what is temporary, we lose touch with the permanent.

In a culture fed by a fast-moving electronic stream, those who "go with the flow" to find excitement and fulfillment inexorably speed up their lives. More than simply inducing stress, the prolonged acceleration of behavior can lead to marked changes in personality, changes evident in one's superficial appearance and inner sensibilities. Through dietetics, steroids, and plastic surgery, people seek the transformation of the outer self in the shortest possible time. Meanwhile, through psychotropic drugs and teachings that promise shortcuts to happiness and well-being, they seek the transformation of the inner self as well.

By assigning the highest priority to speed, the power of now undermines the value of those experiences and activities that require slowness to develop: psychological maturation, the building of meaningful and lasting human relationships, the doing of careful and responsible work, the creation and appreciation of the arts, and the search for answers to life's greatest problems and mysteries. At the same time, by encouraging the immediate gratification of the senses, the power of now obscures the need to cultivate those skills and virtues - patience, commitment, self-denial, and even self-sacrifice - without which no civilization can long endure.

Fulfilling the need to feel a certain way, satisfying the desire to look a certain way, the power of now shapes the individual within and without. Like a chameleon, whose colors change to match the background it sees, human beings in our lives today are changing to fit the background they see - their environment. Though the fulfillment of such a dream may be far off, a time machine of sorts already exists - in fact, one more powerful than Wells's imagination could ever have conceived. The machine is designed to respond to the potentially unstable moods and variable sentiments of a large populace. The only stabilizing influences on a democracy are its traditions. A speed-driven hyperculture, however, is anti-traditional. Focused almost exclusively on the present and thereby deprived of long-term historical memory, citizens in a hurried society tend to lack the knowledge and perspective they need to make wise political decisions. The nature of the power of now thus poses a profound challenge to the longevity of our republic.

The Time Machine

Over a century ago, H.G. Wells wrote The Time Machine, a tale of a daring adventurer who traveled through the fourth dimension. Journeying at breathtaking speed, he landed on an Earth he barely recognized, a future world of both savage desolation and tender promise, in which creatures of darkness battled creatures of light in a struggle that would determine our planet's destiny.

By the standards of 1895, Wells's machine was state-of-the-art - "a glittering metallic framework" fashioned of ivory and brass and transparent crystal. The device was fitted with a saddle and two white levers, one for moving forward into the future, the other for moving back into the past. Accustomed as we now are to space exploration, we may consider Wells's design technically naive. But simplistic as it was, it nevertheless embodied a visionary concept: that human beings, by their inventive genius might someday be able to break the restraining bonds of time and travel to other eras, future or past.

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Their most socially acceptable option is to look and act young and not dwell on the past. As a result, the family and society itself come to lose one of their most precious possessions: a sense of connectedness with the past that could, like a gyroscope, stabilize them in turbulent times.

It is no accident that the life of the family is endangered today. Long-term commitment, so necessary for family survival, is an alien concept to our society. The idea of continuity is also alien. Continuity emphasizes the meaningful connections of parts, female and male, young and old, into a living whole bonded by common purpose, a whole in which energy (for the family, the energy of love) is given and shared. The increased incidence of family breakdown today contributes to an atmosphere of impermanence that affects every human relationship in society. Family fragmentation has become the rule rather than the exception.

One thing is certain: Never before in history has a civilization been so deprived of the cohesiveness of family that is necessary as a defense against the centrifugal force of change.

In a fluid social environment, the acceleration of one activity tends to induce acceleration in other activities. Thus speed begets more speed. While electronic connectivity gives contemporary culture its cohesion, it also sustains its acceleration. The end product is a "hyperculture," a culture whose most distinguishing trait is a pathological, self-justifying speed inimical to humane values. In such a culture, so-called deviant behavior, including violent and criminal acts, is not an anomaly but is in fact consistent with society's highest goal: Get as much as you can as fast as you can.

Democracy is peculiarly susceptible to a hyperculture's power. While all forms of government change to some degree, democracy is especially vulnerable because it is designed to respond to the potentially unstable moods and variable sentiments of a large populace. The only stabilizing influences on a democracy are its traditions. A speed-driven hyperculture, however, is anti-traditional. Focused almost exclusively on the present and thereby deprived of long-term historical memory, citizens in a hurried society tend to lack the knowledge and perspective they need to make wise political decisions. The nature of the power of now thus poses a profound challenge to the longevity of our republic.

About the Author

Stephen Bertman is an educational consultant, speaker, and professor of classics and modern languages, literatures, and civilizations at Canada's University of Windsor. He is the author of several books, including Doorways Through Time: The Romance of Archaeology and Cultural Amnesia (forthcoming). His address is 5415 Piccadilly Circle North, West Bloomfield, Michigan 48322. Telephone 1-248-6615948.

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