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# Not So Fast

*Sending and receiving at breakneck speed can make life queasy; a manifesto for slow communication*

By JOHN FREEMAN

The boundlessness of the Internet always runs into the hard fact of our animal nature, our physical limits, the dimensions of our cognitive present, the overheated capacity of our minds. "My friend has just had his PC wired for broadband," writes the poet Don Paterson. "I meet him in the café; he looks terrible—his face puffy and pale, his eyes bloodshot. . . . He tells me he is now detained, night and day, in downloading every album he ever owned, lost, desired, or was casually intrigued by; he has now stopped even listening to them, and spends his time sleeplessly monitoring a progress bar. . . . He says it's like all my birthdays have come at once, by which I can see he means, precisely, that he feels he is going to die."

We will die, that much is certain; and everyone we have ever loved and cared about will die, too, sometimes—heartbreakingly—before us. Being someone else, traveling the world, making new friends gives us a temporary reprieve from this knowledge, which is spared most of the animal kingdom. Busyness—or the simulated busyness of email addiction—numbs the pain of this awareness, but it can never totally submerge it. Given that our days are limited, our hours precious, we have to decide what we want to do, what we want to say, what and who we care about, and how we want to allocate our time to these things within the limits that do not and cannot change. In short, we need to slow down.

Our society does not often tell us this. Progress, since the dawn of the Industrial Age, is supposed to be a linear upward progression; graphs with upward slopes are a good sign. Processing speeds are always getting faster; broadband now makes dial-up seem like traveling by horse and buggy. Growth is eternal. But only two things grow indefinitely or have indefinite growth firmly ensconced at the heart of their being: cancer and the corporation. For everything else, especially in nature, the consuming fires eventually come and force a starting over.

The ultimate form of progress, however, is learning to decide what is working and what is not; and working at this pace, emailing at this frantic rate, is pleasing very few of us. It is encroaching on parts of our lives that should be separate or sacred, altering our minds and our ability to know our world, encouraging a further distancing from our bodies and our natures and our communities. We can change this; we have to change it. Of course email is good for many things; that has never been in dispute. But we need to learn to use it far more sparingly, with far less dependency, if we are to gain control of our lives.

In the past two decades, we have witnessed one of the greatest breakdowns of the barrier between our work and personal lives since the notion of leisure time emerged in Victorian Britain as a result of the Industrial Age. It has put us under great physical and mental strain, altering our brain chemistry and daily needs. It has isolated us from the people with whom we live, siphoning us away from real-world places where we gather. It has encouraged flotillas of unnecessary jabbering, making it difficult to tell signal from noise. It has made it more

difficult to read slowly and enjoy it, hastening the already declining rates of literacy. It has made it harder to listen and mean it, to be idle and not fidget.

This is not a sustainable way to live. This lifestyle of being constantly on causes emotional and physical burnout, workplace meltdowns, and unhappiness. How many of our most joyful memories have been created in front of a screen?

If we are to step off this hurtling machine, we must reassert principles that have been lost in the blur. It is time to launch a manifesto for a slow communication movement, a push back against the machines and the forces that encourage us to remain connected to them. Many of the values of the Internet are social improvements—it can be a great platform for solidarity, it rewards curiosity, it enables convenience. This is not the manifesto of a Luddite, this is a human manifesto. If the technology is to be used for the betterment of human life, we must reassert that the Internet and its virtual information space is not a world unto itself but a supplement to our existing world, where the following three statements are self-evident.

### **1. Speed matters.**

We have numerous technologies that can work with extreme rapidity. But we don't use these capabilities because they are either dangerous (even the Autobahn has begun applying speed limits, due to severe accidents) or uncomfortable (imagine turbulence at 1,200 miles per hour) or would ruin the point of having the technology at all (played back faster than it was recorded, Led Zeppelin's syrupy metal sound turns to tinsel).

The speed at which we do something—anything—changes our experience of it. Words and communication are not immune to this fundamental truth. The faster we talk and chat and type over tools such as email and text messages, the more our communication will resemble traveling at great speed. Bumped and jostled, queasy from the constant ocular and muscular adjustments our body must make to keep up, we will live in a constant state of digital jet lag.

This is a disastrous development on many levels. Brain science may suggest that some decisions can be made in the blink of an eye, but not all judgments benefit from a short frame of reference. We need to protect the finite well of our attention if we care about our relationships. We need time in order to properly consider the effect of what we say upon others. We need time in order to grasp the political and professional ramifications of our typed correspondence. We need time to shape and design and filter our words so that we say exactly what we mean. Communicating at great haste hones our utterances down to instincts and impulses that until now have been held back or channeled more carefully.

Continuing in this strobe-lit techno-rave communication environment as it stands will be destructive for businesses. Employees communicating at breakneck speed make mistakes. They forget, cross boundaries that exist for a reason, make sloppy errors, offend clients, spread rumors and gossip that would never travel through offline channels, work well past the point where their contributions are helpful, burn out and break down and then have trouble shutting down and recuperating. The churn produced by this communication lifestyle cannot be sustained. "To perfect things, speed is a unifying force," the race-car driver Michael Schumacher has said. "To imperfect things, speed is a destructive force." No company is perfect, nor is any individual.

It is hard not to blame us for believing otherwise, because the Internet and the global markets it facilitates have bought into a fundamental warping of the actual meaning of speed. Speed used to convey urgency; now we somehow think it means efficiency. One can even see this in the etymology of the word. The earliest recorded use of it as a verb—"to go fast"—dates back to 1300, when horses were the primary mode of moving in haste. By 1569, as the printing press was beginning to remake society, speed was being used to mean "to send forth with quickness." By 1856, in the thick of the Industrial Revolution, when machines and mechanized production and train travel were remaking society yet again, "speed" took on another meaning. It was being used to "increase the work rate of," as in speed up.

There is a paradox here, though. The Internet has provided us with an almost unlimited amount of information,

but the speed at which it works—and we work through it—has deprived us of its benefits. We might work at a higher rate, but this is not working. We can store a limited amount of information in our brains and have it at our disposal at any one time. Making decisions in this communication brownout, though without complete information, we go to war hastily, go to meetings unprepared, and build relationships on the slippery gravel of false impressions. Attention is one of the most valuable modern resources. If we waste it on frivolous communication, we will have nothing left when we really need it.

Everything we say needn't travel at the fastest rate possible. The difference between typing an email and writing a letter or memo out by hand is akin to walking on concrete versus strolling on grass. You forget how natural it feels until you do it again. Our time on this earth is limited, the world is vast, and the people we care about or need for our business life to operate will not always live and work nearby; we will always have to communicate over distance. We might as well enjoy it and preserve the space and time to do it in a way that matches the rhythms of our bodies. Continuing to work and type and write at speed, however, will make our communication environment resemble our cities. There will be concrete as far as the eye can see.

## **2. The Physical World matters.**

A large part of electronic communication leads us away from the physical world. Our cafes, post offices, parks, cinemas, town centers, main streets and community meeting halls have suffered as a result of this development. They are beginning to resemble the tidy and lonely bedroom commuter towns created by the expansion of the American interstate system. Sitting in the modern coffee shop, you don't hear the murmur or rise and fall of conversation but the continuous, insect-like patter of typing. The disuse of real-world commons drives people back into the virtual world, causing a feedback cycle that leads to an ever-deepening isolation and neglect of the tangible commons.

This is a terrible loss. We may rely heavily on the Internet, but we cannot touch it, taste it or experience the indescribable feeling of togetherness that one gleans from face-to-face interaction, from the reassuring sensation of being among a crowd of one's neighbors. Seeing one another in these situations reinforces the importance of sharing resources, of working together, of balancing our own needs with those of others. Online, these values become notions that are much more easily suspended to further our own self-interest. Not surprisingly, political movements that begin online must have a real-world component; otherwise they evaporate and dissolve into the blur of other activities.

It is almost impossible to navigate the Web without having to stutter-step around ads and blinking messages from sponsors. In using this tool so heavily, consumers aren't just frying their attention spans, they're forfeiting one of the large sources of information that comes from face-to-face interaction and business. A butcher can tell you which cuts of meat are the freshest; an online grocer may not. That same butcher, if he is good, might not just remember your preferences—which an online retailer can do frighteningly well—but ask you how your mother has been doing, whether you caught the latest football game. These interactions remind us that we are more than consumers; they remind us that we are part of the world in a way no amount of online shopping ever will.

If we spend our evening online trading short messages over Facebook with friends thousands of miles away rather than going to our local pub or park with a friend, we are effectively withdrawing from the people we could turn to for solace, humor and friendship, not to mention the places we could go to do this. We trade the complicated reality of friendship for its vacuum-packed idea.

## **3. Context matters**

We need context in order to live, and if the environment of electronic communication has stopped providing it, we shouldn't search online for a solution but turn back to the real world and slow down. To do this, we need to uncouple our idea of progress from speed, separate the idea of speed from efficiency, pause and step back enough to realize that efficiency may be good for business and governments but does not always lead to

mindfulness and sustainable, rewarding relationships. We are here for a short time on this planet, and reacting to demands on our time by simply speeding up has canceled out many of the benefits of the Internet, which is one of the most fabulous technological inventions ever conceived. We are connected, yes, but we were before, only by gossamer threads that worked more slowly. Slow communication will preserve these threads and our ability to sensibly choose to use faster modes when necessary. It will also preserve our sanity, our families, our relationships and our ability to find happiness in a world where, in spite of the Internet, saying what we mean is as hard as it ever was. It starts with a simple instruction: Don't send.

—John Freeman is the acting editor of Granta magazine. This essay was adapted from his book "The Tyranny of E-Mail," forthcoming from Scribner.

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