

Hyper-tasking in an Itemized World: a Luddite's Lament

or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Cell Phone.

In his 1961 work *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, Daniel Boorstin outlines his concept of Pseudo-news as a shift in society's attitudes toward world events and their relative importance.

When the first American newspaper, Benjamin Harris' *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick*, appeared in Boston on September 25, 1690, it promised to furnish news regularly once a month. But, the editor explained, it might appear oftener "if any Glut of Occurrences happen." The responsibility for making news was entirely God's--or the Devil's. The newsman's task was only to give "an Account of such considerable things as have arrived unto our Notice."

We need not be theologians to see that we have shifted responsibility for making the world interesting from God to the newspaperman. We used to believe there were only so many "events" in the world. If there were not many intriguing or startling occurrences, it was no fault of the reporter. He could not be expected to report what did not exist.

Within the last hundred years, however, and especially in the twentieth century, all this has changed. We expect the papers to be full of news. If there is no news visible to the naked eye, or to the average citizen, we still expect it to be there for the enterprising newsman. The successful reporter is one who can find a story, even if there is no earthquake or assassination or civil war.

This change in our attitude toward "news" is not merely a basic fact about the history of American newspapers. It is a symptom of a revolutionary change in our attitude toward what happens in the world, how much of it is new, and surprising, and important.

Excerpted from: <http://www.cis.vt.edu/modernworld/d/boorstin.html>

Boorstin's comments, while directed at the national media nearly 45 years ago, provide a fairly prescient illustration of 21st century society's blind embracing of all things technological.

Technology, it's a good thing.

Proponents of modern technology are quick to point out the ways in which new technologies have improved the lives of those who use them by providing greater access to information, making the performance of many tasks easier, and thereby providing more leisure time. In fact, the last screen of the installation routine of the Windows 95 (or 98) operating system

boldly proclaimed *"now everything you do will be easier and more fun."* There is no doubt that our modern technology has afforded many luxuries unheard of even 20 years ago, but at what cost?

Clearly, few would argue that we should go back to creating our correspondence with Auntie's manual typewriter and carbon paper. Author and Civil War Historian Shelby Foote famously wrote his manuscripts longhand with a dip pen and inkwell. Foote explained in a 1990 interview with USA TODAY, "A good day's work would produce about 500 well-chosen words. The dip pen makes me take my time, and I prize that. And it reduces the hell out of the need for rewriting."

[http://www.usatoday.com/life/people/2005-06-28-shelby-foote-obit_x.htm]

In the last 20 years alone, technological advancements in the word processing field in have left countless innovations in the dust. Gone are the (hernia-inducing) IBM selectric typewriter, DOS editors (such as EdLin), WordStar (the first word processing package), DOS versions of Word Perfect, and countless iterations of Microsoft Office, all victims of technology's inexorable march toward making everything "easier and more fun."

Today, one can barely open a word processor without some annoying google-eyed paperclip asking if they can be of any assistance. And who could survive without the wise and wonderous interventions of Word's auto-format feature? *O wise and powerful Bill, how puny and foolish we all stand before you. Your gracious and benevolent software has wisely ignored our brainless pleas, and divined what it was that we really **meant** to type, nay, what we **should** type. No Brother, we would never dream of trying to create a simple (god forbid) NON-bulleted list, or include non-hyperlinked URL in a text (in a font style other than 10-point Times New Roman). And how foolish of us to even THINK about saving a document somewhere other than the My Documents folder. Thank you my liege, you are most judicious and powerful.*

I type, therefore I am.

Several studies have been performed to ascertain the effect new technologies have had on writing skills. A recent study at the University of Pittsburgh has revealed that at best, modern word processors (and more specifically spell-check software) has leveled the playing field between people with differing levels of language skills, often hampering the work of more competent writers while benefiting the more inexperienced.

[<http://www.wired.com/news/business/0,1367,58058,00.html>]

The above study (among others) has shown that automated processing has dumbed-down critical editing skills, while adding quick and easy polish. The term desktop *publishing* is revealing in that the software can quickly make documents (even nonsensical ones) "ready for press." Word processors are all about *production* regardless of content. Many of today's technologies are nothing more than publishing venues. Bulletinboards, MOOs, podcasts, and blogs, --like Boorstin's pseudo-news-- create something from nothing and serve only as noise in the channel. Boorstin points out, it has become the role of the News(paper) man to create news where none exists simply to "fill papers." Have we not, through technology, filled our lives with a vast sea of this self-created (and published) *pseudo-information*?

Entire industries have sprung up that advertise ready access to information, but what kind of information are we accessing? How do we separate the wheat from the chaff? As quality information has suffered in the avalanche of pseudo-information, a premium has been placed at the speed at which information can be *accessed*. Any information, if presented quickly (or on demand) is good information. The importance of information *immediacy* has supplanted the inherent value of the information itself.

What do you mean you don't have one?

The penultimate symbols of our just-in-time society are PDA's (Personal Digital Assistants) and cell phones. I own neither. As it turns out, I had no concept of how ubiquitous these things were. At a recent public event, the emcee took the podium and asked that everyone in attendance turn his or her cell phone ringers off. To my utter amazement, roughly 4,000 people simultaneously reached for their phones. Who are these people? What type of

information could they possibly possess or need that would require the capacity for instant transmission or reception?

I have often heard University instructors lament the scene that always ensues the moment their undergraduate classes end. Cell phones are immediately whipped out, voicemail checked, and calls made. A typical call: "class just got out." Who needs this information? Don't classes scheduled to let out at 3:00 typically end within 10 minutes either side of 3:00? Why do we need to know that you got out of class RIGHT NOW? How is this important? Is it not enough to know that class most probably ended at approximately 3:00?

Even friendly meetings with acquaintances are not immune to the insidious over use of technology. In the dark ages, students who intended to meet after class might have a conversation something like "My class gets out at 3:00, lets meet at Starbucks afterward." Common etiquette (and sense) would dictate that if class got out at 3:00, and the coffee shop was a ten minute walk, one could expect to meet up anywhere between five after and twenty past 3:00. Today, the conversation is much different. After agreeing on a meeting time, the first call might occur as soon as class is dismissed: "Class just got out, I'll be there in ten minutes." Don't we already know that it takes about seven minutes to walk to the shop? Who needs this information? A second message might ensue, something like: "I'm halfway there, god, I'm soo tired, order me a half-mocha double latte." Comically, a third call or text message might transpire relaying the critical information: "I'm at the corner, I can see you. can you see me?" What's next? Bowel function? Is there any conceivable measure by which these nuggets of "information" justify the use of cell phone technology?

Recently as I was setting up a visit to a customer in Philadelphia, the other party suggested that in lieu of directions, I should just call him when I got to the exit, so he could "talk me in." He was aghast to learn that his method would provide somewhat of a challenge, as I did not own a cell phone. Good thing I didn't tell him the heat in my car doesn't work, either.

Spinning Plates

Once inside the coffee shop, another example of ubiquitous technology asserts itself:

hypertasking. Undoubtedly, after our subject finds a table, the laptop will come out to take advantage of the provided Internet hotspot. Most certainly email is checked (often several different accounts), and maybe even an instant messenger is activated. Perhaps a news or weather ticker scrolls across the bottom of the screen. Our subject is now simultaneously connected to at least 4 sources of pseudo-information and is available for contact by several different means. What is she looking for? Have the prices for Viagra gone down? Have mortgage rates dropped? Does she even have time to engage in meaningful conversation, much less enjoy her coffee? Ubiquitous pseudo-information and instant connectivity have reduced our lives to an endless string of interruptions.

Once again, technology arrives to the rescue. Readily available 'groupware' packages provide scheduling and collaboration services that can manage and itemize our days into five-minute increments. Entire *families* can participate in web-based scheduling software to coordinate and schedule their lives. Sorry Aunt Edith, I really don't care that you have a colonoscopy next Tuesday.

That's just too much information.

It's sneaky, that technology. We seem to never give it a second thought. A tool to use. Technology means *progress*, like urban renewal. As technology advances, many things have become easier, but not necessarily more fun. As pseudo-news has evolved into the 15-second sound byte, so have our lives devolved into a series (or concurrence) of fragmented tasks amid a barrage of pseudo-information. Through the miracle of technology, the entire *planet* has anywhere, anytime access to anyone. Our life has become rapid-fire. Itemized and pre-determined.

I should spend more time reading the classics.

Could you email me one?