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7 Stacking and Continuity

On Temporal Regimes in Popular Culture

Thomas Hylland Eriksen

THE FIRST REAL AMERICAN SOAP OPERA to hit the Scandinavian markets was *Dynasty*. It was introduced to a curious and excited audience in the same year that multichannel viewing appeared in the same countries, thanks to satellite and cable transmissions. The year was 1983, and like many thousands of others, my friends and I went into the kitchen and turned on our old black-and-white set on the first evening of *Dynasty* to find out what this was. After a few weeks we reckoned we had understood the basic message and ceased watching the program since we had other things to do (chiefly wearing black clothes while hanging in the bars of grim concert venues that had been redecorated to look like abandoned factories). The years went by. Six years later, I traveled to Trinidad to carry out ethnographic fieldwork. In Trinidad, it turned out, a considerable proportion of the population followed *Dynasty* (although other soap operas, particularly the lunchtime show *The Young and the Restless*, were even more popular). I rented a TV set and began to watch *Dynasty* again, since a golden rule of anthropology admonishes its practitioners on fieldwork to try to do whatever it is that the natives do.

I had been absent from the series for six years, and it took me about thirty seconds to get into the narrative again. Like other programs of the same kind, *Dynasty* was tailored for the multichannel format. It was being produced in the awareness that the viewers would restlessly finger their remote control while watching, ready to switch channels at the first indication of inertia. It

presupposed commercial breaks every seventh minute or thereabouts, so the cliffhangers were overdone and frequent.

The cost of this breathless, accelerated kind of drama is a lack of progression. Like other serials of the same kind, *Dynasty* is a story that stands still at enormous speed. Instantaneous time precludes development. As late as the 1970s, most European countries had one, two, or a maximum of three national television channels. Many were state run and free of commercials. Until the early to mid-1970s, programming in black and white dominated the schedule in many countries. One of the most popular drama series at the time was *A Family at War*, written by John Finch. This fifty-two-episode series, which was a deadly serious narrative about an English family during the Second World War, was characteristically slow and cumulative. If one had missed just one episode, one lost the narrative thread, since the persons and their relationships changed as the story unfolded. It presupposed loyal, patient viewers who did not have to cope with competition from a plethora of noisy alternatives. In this way the series could be based on a rhythm in which particular events slowly reverberated through the cast, leaving their imprint on the future direction of the action. Whereas *Dynasty* was based on the explosive moment, *A Family at War* was based on linear time and organic growth.

I have chosen this example not because it is in itself particularly interesting but because it illustrates a fundamental change in our culture from the relatively slow and linear to the fast and momentary. This change is roughly the same as that which Urry (1999) refers to as glacial versus instantaneous time. Television has become over the past couple of decades an ever-faster medium, and the same change has taken place with radio, which generally seems to become more hectic and breathless the more channels one has to choose between. The relationship between the two TV series is further analogous to the relationship between the World Wide Web and the book. The book is sequential: you begin on the first page and read it in a sequential order. The writer controls the drift of the reading and is therefore at liberty to construct a cumulative, linear plot or argument. The reader reaches ever-new plateaus of knowledge or insight as she or he moves through the text. This, at any rate, is an ideal depiction of the art of reading.

There are several crucial differences between the Web and a library of paper publications. Above all, information on the Web is not really organized, be it alphabetically or in any other way. Different themes and pages are linked together in partly random ways. The Web is not hierarchical either, given that the millions of sites in existence are all accessible at the same level.

Active users of the WWW have for years intuited that it is a dense and cumbersome jungle that grows a little darker and denser every day. When one surfs the Web in search of information that seems not to be there (despite millions of hits on Google), it is tempting to conclude that the Web is a real-world incarnation of Jorge Luis Borges's philosophical fable about the library of Babel. This mythical library contained, apart from all books that had been written, all the books that could have been written—that is, every possible combination of the letters of the alphabet. Everything is available out there, but everything else is also available, and like almost everywhere else, Murphy's Law operates on the Web as well: under normal circumstances, one will find that everything else first. As a cultural sociologist expressed it: the Internet is like the large oceans. They are full of gold, but it costs a fortune to exploit even a tiny fraction of it. The Web is uncensored, democratic, and chaotic. Everything is already stacked on top of everything else there, but it still grows a little every day.

Filters against fragmentation do not remove fragmentation. The most important tool needed to navigate on the Web is neither a superfast computer with lots of RAM, a broadband connection, or the latest news in Web browsers (although all of this helps) but good filters. As mentioned several times already, there is no scarcity of information in the information society. There is far too much of it. With no opportunity to filter away that available information that one does not need, one is lost and will literally drown in zeros and ones.

Many are willing to help Web users to find their way, not least because it can pay off. Several of the greatest economic successes in cyberspace are companies that have specialized in Web searches. The oldest is Yahoo! The currently most popular is Google. It is sometimes said that the home pages of these search engines are the only Web pages that can rival the major pornographic sites for popularity. In their simplest form they function as digital indexes. If, for example, you want to map out the movements of saxophonist Didier Malherbe during the last few months, or you want to read about the current political developments in Kosovo, or you want to find out about the latest operating system from Apple, you type the keywords, and in a matter of seconds you get a list of links to relevant Web sites—usually a useless list containing thousands of links. Then you narrow the search to include, say,

"+ Apple + OSX + download," and soon you will have a manageable list of less than a hundred hits. You have reduced the universe to that microscopic segment you are interested in right now.

Searching with Google or a similar engine is not much more advanced than searching a digital phone book. New methods for filtering information are continuously being developed, however, whether the aim is to help frustrated Web surfers to protect themselves against unwanted information or to sell them goods. The methods used in the latter instance are often inventive and seductive. For a few years I have been greeted regularly by Amazon Web sites in the following way—like millions of other customers: "Hello Thomas! We have recommendations for you!" This greeting is followed by a few "hot titles" in subject areas that fall within my fields of interest (according to Amazon's software). Often, however, filters are less than functional. If you feel the world is not chaotic enough, I recommend an evening of reading with Yahoo's categories as a point of departure.

In the old days most of us tended to accept the information we were offered, whether it came from the daily newspaper or the radio news. Today the freedom of choice is unlimited. Via the Web one can listen to midwestern C&W channels, subscribe to specialized news services—say, one can refuse to take in distressing news about war, terrorism, and natural disasters; one can follow Malaysian weather or the Johannesburg stock exchange daily; or one can read everything about the latest productions from Hollywood and nothing else. These kinds of tailored services are available from several sources and in several formats (email, Web, cell phone). At Microsoft News one may choose one's personal categories from business and health to weather, sports, and travel; America Online has Web centers with material on everything from cars to research and local news. Other kinds of services include UnCover Real, which offers to email you the table of contents of your favorite journals regularly.

In a world where there is a surplus of unclassified information, there is a pressing need for this kind of filtering; it is also evident that if these kinds of filters (and greatly improved versions of them) become sufficiently widespread, there will eventually be little left of the national public spheres. There is, then, no guarantee that the neighbor has heard about the government's latest budget cuts or the most recent plane crash. It may even be that he or she was so busy following software developments at Apple that he or she is blissfully unaware of the perpetually tragic state of the national English football team. Unlike the good old media (such as newspapers and nationwide television channels), news on the Web is placeless and without clear priorities. Everything is in principle equally important as everything else, and besides, distance is bracketed, which entails that it is no more difficult to access the electronic edition of *The Hindu* than the corresponding edition of *The Independent*.

Since everything is available on the Web and there exist no fixed, socially shared routines for distinguishing between wanted and unwanted information, each individual is forced to develop her or his own paths, creating her or his own personal cuts of the world. (In software marketing jargon this is called customization.)

A telling image of the direction developments are taking is the currently popular system for digital storage of music, MP3 (which is about to be replaced by superior successor formats such as AAC). At the time of this writing, most people still buy music on CDs, which are a direct extension of the old vinyl LP. Like a printed book or newspaper, a CD is a finished, completed product with a beginning, a middle, and an end. One cannot cut and paste the content according to whim; even if one is mighty sick of the overexposed first movement in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, one cannot replace it by an overture from one of Wagner's operas. One may like it or not, but that is how it is.

MP3 is a file format for compressed transmission of music. As is well known, there are both virtual players (for use on the computer) and physical players of the iPod variety, and there is a considerable amount of free music on the Web (much of it accessible via controversial and probably illegal file-sharing applications), which anyone can download. There are also paid services, the most popular being Apple's iTunes Music Store, and one may thus in principle buy, say, Beethoven's Fifth in MP3 format. What one then pays for is a password that allows a single download of the entire symphony (or, if one prefers, one or two movements of it). When one then has the symphony in MP3 format, one can finally evade that tiring first movement, or for that matter the sluggish second movement; one may edit the work just as one wants. Unlike a completed CD, an MP3 playlist contains only pieces that the listener has actively chosen, such as—say—a tune by Oasis, the second movement of Mahler's Fourth, the first movement of Bártok's Second String Quartet, two Beatles classics, and a live recording of Miles Davis with John Coltrane from 1959. Then one may copy the entire thing onto a portable MP3 player for use in the car or on the tube.

MP3 is a concrete example of the logic of the Web. In principle everything is available out there, and each individual user puts together his or her own personal totality out of the fragments. MP3 relates to the CD as the Web relates to the book. The Internet fits perfectly, and is also in at least two ways an important contributing cause, with the prevailing neoliberal ideology. The WWW (and multichannel television, and MP3, and "flexible work") offers freedom and choice by the bucket. On the deficit side of the balance, we have to note, among other things, internal cohesion, meaningful context, and slowness.

Fragments replace coherence. We are slowly moving toward the main point of this essay, and as a prelude I will add yet another facet in the description of the Internet. Marshall McLuhan (1994) once wrote about the difference between a haptic and an optic culture, a contrast that refers to varying usage of the senses under different regimes of information technology. Premodern people lived, according to McLuhan, in a "haptic harmony"—all senses were equal and functioned as a totality, a unity. The "auditive-tactile" senses (hearing and touch) were essential both for experience and for knowledge. With literacy the visual sense gained the upper hand and suppressed the others. (In Plato this has already come about; just think about his cave allegory!) Humans thus became increasingly inhibited and narrow-minded. Writing gave us "an eye for an ear," and to McLuhan this entails something of a fall from grace. To him the pure, linear text is a fragmenting and reductive medium that removes the reader from a total experience with the full use of all his or her senses. In television McLuhan saw an opportunity to recreate that sensory unity that the advent of writing had destroyed, and he had a great—some would say incomprehensible—optimism on behalf of this new medium when he wrote his most important books in the 1960s.

A decade and a half after his death, McLuhan was launched, by the California technology-and-lifestyle magazine *Wired*, as a patron saint for the Internet. Much of what he said in general about new media (especially television) fits the World Wide Web surprisingly well. As far as I am concerned, I agree with the main thrust of McLuhan's argument, but my conclusion is the exact opposite of his. It is not the book but television that functions in a fragmenting way. The book relates to the WWW as single-channel television relates to multichannel television, and linear time is a valuable resource that we cannot afford to waste. In this context it is tempting to propose a whole series of contrasts that may illustrate the transition from industrial to informational society, from nation-building to globalization, from book to monitor. Table 7.1 depicts the dimension of such changes as we have moved from an industrial to an information society.

The tidal waves of information fragments typical of our kind of society stimulate a style of thought that is less reminiscent of the strict, logical, linear thinking characteristic of industrial society than of the freely associating, poetical, metaphorical thinking that characterized many nonmodern societies. Instead of ordering knowledge in tidy rows, information society offers cascades of decontextualized signs more or less randomly connected to each other.

The cause of this change is neither the introduction of the World Wide Web nor multichannel television as such. It is instead the fact that there is rapid growth in every area to do with information but no more time than formerly available to digest it (see Eriksen 2001 for a full analysis). Contemporary culture moves at full speed without moving an inch. Put differently: the close cousins of acceleration and exponential growth lead to vertical stacking. Since the flanks are reserved for small groups with special interests (e.g., progressive rock, theoretical physics, veteran buses, social anthropological method, Greek poetry), more and more of each special interest is stacked on top of others in the middle. Translated from the spatial metaphor to the temporal dimension, this means that since there is no vacant time to spread information in, it is compressed and stacked in time spans that become shorter and shorter. High-rise buildings appear in the center, sprawling bungalows in the suburbs.

TABLE 7.1 Dimensions of the Change from an Industrial to an Informational Society

Industrial Society	*Informational Society*
CD/vinyl record	MP3
Book	WWW
Single-channel TV	Multichannel TV
Letter	Email
Stationary telephone	Mobile telephone
Lifelong monogamy	Serial monogamy
The era of the gold watch	The era of flexible work
Depth	Breadth
Linear time	Fragmented
Scarcity of information	Scarcity of freedom from

The logic that characterizes *Dynasty* and similar multichannel, commercial financed television series is the same as that which entails that the most competitive news programs are shorter than the others, that commercials become shorter and shorter—and, yes, I will offer more examples eventually.

The concept of vertical stacking is taken from a book that deals with of all things—progressive rock, a musical genre that was particularly popular among long-haired and great-coated boys and men in the first half of the 1970s, which was forced more or less underground when punk not only made the dominant youth culture jeer dismissively at anyone daring to go onstage with stacks of synthesizers but also made it a virtue not to be able to play an instrument properly. Like everything else, progressive rock was reawakened by Internet-based retro waves in the second half of the 1990s—sometimes, it must be conceded, with disastrous results. The North American philosophy professor Bill Martin (1997) has tried, in his broad defense plea for rock groups he admires (including Yes, Rush, and King Crimson), to explain what, to his mind, is wrong with the computer- and studio-based dance music of the last decade, including house, techno, drum 'n' bass, and other genres that have little in common apart from the fact that they can be described as varieties of nonlinear, repetitive, rhythmical dance music. This is music that in Martin's view lacks progression and direction, music that—unlike, say, Beethoven, Miles Davis, and Led Zeppelin—is not heading anywhere. Enjoyment of such music is generally undertaken by entering a room full of sound where a great number of aural things are happening, and staying there until it no longer feels cool, like. Martin's preferred music is linear and has an inner development—although it may often be partly improvised. About the new rhythmic music, he has this to say:

> As with postmodern architecture, the idea in this stacking is that, in principle, any sound can go with any other sound. Just as, however, even the most eclectic pastiche of a building must all the same have some sort of foundation that anchors it to the ground, vertically stacked music often depends on an insisting beat. There are layers of trance stacked on top of dance, often without much in the way of stylistic integration. (Martin 1997, 290)

Martin doubts that this music will be capable of creating anything really new. "The vertical-stacking approach implicitly (or even explicitly) accepts the idea that music (or art more generally) is now simply a matter of trying out the combinations, filling out the grid" (ibid., 291). I will not invest my personal friendships with trance adepts in support for this argument, but inadvertently, Martin offers an excellent description of an aspect of the tyranny of the moment. There are layers upon layers on top of each other, every vacant spot is filled, and there is little by way of internal integration. Stacking replaces internal development.

The exceptionally gifted musician and composer Brian Eno is both godfather and pioneer in much of the new rhythmic music. Already in the 1970s he had developed the musical concept "Ambient," that is, nonlinear music that could function as an aural wallpaper but that was also intended to be "as listenable as it was ignorable," as the liner notes of *Music for Airports* put it.

Few know the field of rhythmic music better than Eno. In 1995 he kept a diary, and he published it (presumably an edited version) the following year (Eno 1996). On September 8, 1996, he made a sketch of the "phases" of popular music since the breakthrough of rock 'n' roll. He proposes ten phases plus an eleventh one, which he locates to the near future. What is interesting in our context is Eno's category number 10, that is the period 1991–1995, up to the time of writing. Whereas the other eras have labels such as "synth pop, 4th world" or "Glam," he characterizes the 1990s like this: "See '64–'68, add '76–'78." In other words nothing new, just rehashes of former trends. As a moderately interested bystander, my distinct impression tends to confirm Eno's view: for several years now we seem to have everything at once. Every imaginable retro trend exists, at the same time as the big names of bygone eras remain big today, or—as in the case of the Welsh crooner Tom Jones—are being reawakened by nostalgics. Apart from nonlinear, repetitive dance music, the 1990s saw major breakthroughs of pop groups that sounded roughly like the Beatles, heavy metal groups that took up the challenge where Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin left it in the mid-1970s, "neo-psychedelic" bands that sound vaguely like the Soft Machine of 1968 or the Pink Floyd of 1967—and at the same time, the really big names remain artists like Dylan, the Stones, and Santana, who have been around for forty years.

Just as progressive politics is fueled by a linear faith in progress—a strong, moral idea of development—progressive rock (and many other kinds of music) had an inbuilt faith in progress. The musicians wanted to take their kind of music to new heights, break with the past, create something new and better. Martin discusses the difference between this concept and the new nonlinear music as an instance of the modern/postmodern contrast, which is unfortunate, as modernist contemporary music has been nonlinear for nearly a hundred years.

There are two general points emerging from this idiosyncratic (and far from representative) discussion of trends in popular music that may be linked directly to the issues at hand. First, stacking of trends implies that there is no change but mere recirculation. Rock and pop may be surface phenomena, but they are also barometers. When Beatles clones like Oasis, geriatric groups like the Stones, and chubby crooners of the generic Phil Collins type (who would have believed, in 1975, that this man—at his best he played the drums like an octopus on speed—would turn into Elton John?) are the undisputed masters of the field, this may be symptomatic of a culture unable to renew itself. As Martin (1997) expresses it: no real creativity but a continuous stream of new combinations. As a general point, the filling of gaps characteristic of what I have elsewhere (Eriksen 2001) spoken of as the tyranny of the moment is seriously detrimental to creativity. The new arises unexpectedly from the gaps created by slack in time budgets, not from crowded schedules.

Second, the rock or jazz listener's situation is radically different from that of the listener who opts for the new rhythmic music. The latter's music goes on and on; the former's has a beginning, a long middle (internal development), and an end or climax. Interestingly, Indonesian gamelan music has been a significant source of inspiration to many of those who work with repetitive music, among them the minimalist composer Steve Reich. This is music developed in a traditional, ritualistic culture with no linear concept of development. The link with gamelan music is far from uninteresting, considering McLuhan's (and my own) view to the effect that an essentially nonlinear way of being in time is being strengthened in contemporary culture.

To readers whose relationship to gamelan music, minimalism, trip-hop, and progressive rock is relaxed and perhaps even indifferent, this discussion may seem a bit esoteric. But there is more to say about the matter before we leave it entirely. Somewhere in his enormous work about the information age, Manuel Castells (1996, 1998) has chosen to include a paragraph about new age music. He regards it as the classical music of our era (a debatable assertion, but all right) and describes it as an expression for "the double reference to moment and eternity; me and the universe, the self and the net" (Castells 1996, 308). Desert winds and ocean waves create the backdrop for many of the repetitive patterns that make up new age music. It is a droning, timeless, and lingering kind of music, an antidote to the quotidian rat race but also perfectly symmetrical to it, since it brackets the passage of time.

Put differently: when growing amounts of information are distributed at growing speed, it becomes increasingly difficult to create narratives, orders, developmental sequences. The fragments threaten to become hegemonic. This has consequences for the ways we relate to knowledge, work, and lifestyle in a wide sense. Cause and effect, internal organic growth, maturity and experience—such categories are under heavy pressure in this situation. The examples from music, which are clearly debatable (many of us have our passions here, don't we?), are chiefly meant as illustrations. The phenomenon as such is naturally much more widespread, and journalism, education, work, politics, and domestic life—just to mention a few areas—are affected by vertical stacking. Let us take a look at journalism first.

The law of diminishing returns strikes with a vengeance. In a profoundly pessimistic and critical pamphlet about the misery of television, Pierre Bourdieu (1996) develops a familiar but far from unimportant argument. He claims that the fragmented temporality of television, with its swift transitions and fast-paced journalism, creates an intellectual public culture that favors a particular kind of participant. Bourdieu speaks of these participants as fast-thinkers. Whereas the Belgian cartoon hero Lucky Luke is famous for drawing his gun faster than his own shadow, fast-thinkers are described as "thinkers who think faster than an accelerating bullet" (Bourdieu 1996, 29). They are the people who are able, in a couple of minutes of direct transmission, to explain what is wrong with the economic policies of the EU, why one ought to read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* this summer, or how racist pseudoscience originated. It is nonetheless a fact that some of the sharpest minds need time to reflect and more time (much more, in some cases) to make an accurate, sufficiently nuanced statement on a particular issue. This kind of thinker becomes invisible and virtually deprived of influence, according to Bourdieu, in this rushed era. (In a banal sense Bourdieu is obviously wrong. No contemporary thinker was, until his death in 2002, more influential than Bourdieu himself, and clearly he did not regard himself as a fast-thinker.)

Bourdieu's argument is congruent with the observation that media appeal has become the most important capital of politicians—not, in other words, their political message or cohesive vision. This is not an entirely new phenomenon; in the United States the first indication of this development came with John F. Kennedy's victory over Richard M. Nixon. Anyway, a result, in Bourdieu's view, is that the people who speak like machine guns, in boldface and capital letters, are the ones who are given airplay and acquire influence—not the slow and systematic ones.

What is wrong with this? Why should people who have the gift of being able to think fast and accurately be stigmatized in this way? In a word, what is wrong about thinking fast? Nothing in particular, apart from the fact that some thoughts only function in a slow mode and that some lines of reasoning can only be developed in a continuous fashion, without the interruptions of an impatient journalist who wants to "move on" (where?) in the program. Bourdieu mentions an example with which many academics will be able to identify. In 1989 Bourdieu published *La noblesse de l'etat* (The State Nobility), a study of symbolic power and elite formation in the French education system. Bourdieu had been actively interested in the field for twenty years, and the book had been long in the making. A journalist proposed a debate between Bourdieu and the president of the alumni organization of les grandes écoles; the latter would speak "for," and Bourdieu would speak "against." "And," he sums up sourly, "he hadn't a clue as to why I refused."

A topic Bourdieu does not treat explicitly, but which is an evident corollary of his views, is the diminishing returns of media participation following the information explosion. Before the 1990s, if one was invited to contribute to a radio or television program, one appeared well-prepared in the studio. One might shave (even if the medium was radio!), make certain to wear a freshly ironed shirt and a proper tie, and enter the studio in a slightly nervous state, determined to make one's points clearly and concisely. Nowadays, an increasing number of people in the know do not even bother to take part in radio or television transmissions, and if they do, their contributions frequently tend toward the halfhearted and lukewarm. As both viewers and guests on TV shows are aware, each program has a diminishing impact as the number of channels grows, and the higher the number of channels and talk shows, the less impact each of them exerts. It is almost as if Andy Warhol was deliberately understating his point when, directly influenced by McLuhan, he said that in "the future," everybody would be famous for fifteen minutes. (Today, he might have said seconds.)

A related effect of stacking and acceleration in the media world is the tendency that news is becoming shorter and shorter. A tired joke about the competition for attention among tabloids consists in the remark that when war eventually breaks out for real, the papers will only have space for the "W" on the front page. The joke illustrates the principle of diminishing returns (or falling marginal value). In basic economics courses, teachers tend to use food and drink as examples to explain this principle, which is invaluable in an accelerating culture. If you are thirsty, the first soda has very high value for you. The second one is also quite valuable, and you may even—if your thirst is very considerable—be willing to pay for the third one. But then, the many soda cans left in the shop suddenly have no value at all to you; you are unwilling to pay a penny for any of them. Tender steaks, further, are highly valuable if you are allowed to savor them only once a month; when steak becomes daily fare, its value decreases dramatically. The marginal value of a commodity is defined as the value of the last unit one is willing to spend money or time and attention on. Although this principle cannot be applied to everything we do (a lot of activities, such as saxophone playing, become more rewarding the more one carries on), it can offer important insights into the situation Bourdieu describes—how news, and more generally information, is being produced and consumed. In this regard it is easy to see that stronger effects are needed eventually, because the public becomes accustomed to speed and explosive forms of communication.

At the same time—and what is more important here—the people who actually produce news and other kinds of information, the journalists that is, experience the increasing crowdedness of their field. Readers, listeners, and viewers have less and less time to spare for each information snippet. Thus, editors working in every kind of press (from Web and WAP to paper) cut more and more. As an occasional contributor to the press and sometime interviewee, I have never heard an editor complain that particular pieces of journalism are too short. (One may, naturally, daydream about such a scenario: "Look, this interview that you have done, isn't it a bit on the short side? I mean, didn't he say other things as well? He comes through as a man of bombast and one-liners; wouldn't it be better to allow the nuances in his position to come through, in order to avoid his being misunderstood, and then we'll also avoid a stupid and irrelevant controversy in the paper afterwards. Will you give me another hundred lines before lunch tomorrow?")

News on WAP, at the time of this writing the latest vogue in accelerated journalism, offers stories of a length that make *The Mirror* look like Proust. As a compensation they can be updated every thirty minutes. To those of us who are not yet accustomed to this speed and brevity, this kind of journalism is like a persistent insect buzzing around the ear as we try to go to sleep. (Cell phone news = the mosquito problem in equatorial Africa.) Yet there is a marked tendency for such strategies to win, for reasons I have already elaborated. The marginal value of information falls dramatically after a certain

amount of images or words; it is pretty high during the first ten seconds, but then what?

The most common objection to this line of reasoning is that slowness seems to enjoy a renaissance in the media, at least in some European countries. For example, dedicated radio channels play classical music twenty four hours a day, and there is a "perceived need" (the pundits claim) for thorough, decent reasoning and solid journalism providing background information. This may well be the case in the world as it appears from Islington but hardly from Fleet Street. Broadsheets decline, and tabloids (which look more and more like printed television) increase. The people enjoying the "slowness renaissance" can be counted in tenths of percents, and on this scale there may be slight increases here and there; fastness is enjoyed by groups better measured in scores of percents. In Norway a radio program that allowed academics to read thirty-minute talks, called the *P2 Academy*, has been on the air for more than five years, and it covers black holes, juvenile delinquency, the concept of culture, and similar issues authoritatively and well.

The listeners love it. Both of them.

Information lint destroys continuity. Fast thinkers are favored, and the slow thinkers sulk, in some cases reacting through essays like Bourdieu's. He is far from alone; his attack on contemporary journalism stands in a proud lineage of socialist and conservative intellectuals decrying the vulgarity of mass-produced information. This tradition may have begun with Tocqueville's assault on the pragmatic, democratic, and superficial North American settler culture (although, if one reads him closely, Plato had something to say on the matter as well), but it reached its zenith with the Frankfurt School of the interwar years—Marcuse, Horkheimer, and, especially, Adorno. German Jews in the 1930s certainly had their own reasons for pessimism. This does not mean that they were necessarily wrong. When Neil Postman writes that today's students no longer use the word *because* in their exam papers, he points toward the same problem that Bourdieu discusses, which is further illustrated in Table 7.1 above. Coherence and causality slip away when restlessness, flickering gazes, and striking one-liners rule the roost. In his memoir Johan Galtung—otherwise a relentless optimist—writes this about his experiences with students in the 1990s: "And far too many suffer from chronic image flicker, a synchronic experience of reality as images rich in details, not as lines across time, causal chains, reasoning. One needs both, but the way it is today, the ability to think is slowly killed, to the advantage of the ability to see and hear, taste and feel—an orgy of the senses that gives little space for intellectuality" (Galtung 1999, 205, my translation).

In a recent report about the state of higher education in Norway the committee of authors has included a passage about "those students who choose to study full-time." As if studying was not primarily a full-time activity! As a matter of fact, most teachers at the university or polytechnic level in Europe have experienced a gradual change since the 1970s. The cost of living and consumption expectations have gone up, and most students are obliged to take wage work. Formerly, students worked primarily during vacations, eventually weekend and evening work became more common, and presently it is my impression that work and studies are best seen as a seamless whole where it is difficult to tell which activity is deemed the most important. In recent years I have had increasing problems arranging supervision meetings with postgraduate students because they have problems getting away from work. Studying is no longer simply what one does but an entry on the total menu of experiences that composes the life of a young, urban, and unattached person. This result is not, naturally, the students' fault. Like all of us, they are victims of vertical stacking. The range of activities that compete with studying grows every semester. There is always something urgent that needs to be done first, before one sits down with *The Phenomenology of Spirit* for six months or so. As every good academic knows, thorough learning of a complex curriculum requires long, continuous periods of concentration. Insomnia and anxiety. Reduced appetite for sustained periods. Problems in one's love life. Absentmindedness and aloofness from contemporary matters. (And in the old days, we would have added: Lots of black coffee and tobacco.) This kind of student is still around, but the great majority is of a different kind. When they appear in the lecture room, they are on their way from one place to another; they have a wide spectrum of activities to fill their days with, from clubbing to wage work, television zapping, Web surfing, and being with friends. If they want to be abreast with their surroundings and strengthen their career opportunities, they simply cannot disengage themselves for years of a slow, monastery-like existence. In the labor market attractive applicants have cvs that indicate diverse experience and high speed.

This new situation in academia—the falling marginal value of slowly acquired knowledge—also entails that it can no longer be taken for granted that the most brilliant students will be interested in pursuing a career in research and teaching. Universities may either adapt themselves to the market (which

is largely what is happening all over the Western world) and speed up their teaching, or they may redefine themselves as countercultural institutions that embody slowness, thoroughness, and afterthoughts.

The students' situation is comparable to my own, although my research time is not chopped up into useless fragments because of a pressing need for external wage work, cinema and concert attendance, evenings on the town, and so on but because of the prevalence of information lint. This includes tasks like replying to email, taking the phone, filing, responding to letters, booking flights, reading half-baked reports and other kinds of bureaucratic documents, and so on. Before one is finally able to sit down with something that might make a difference, there is always something else that needs to be done first. What is given priority in a situation where one has many tasks waiting to be done is either the first task that comes to mind or that which simply cannot wait. Not surprisingly, quite a few academics plan major works that never get beyond the drawing board. Academic books increasingly look like cut-and-paste collages with snippets of conference papers here and excerpts of journal articles there. We always have five minutes to spare for a given task, often even half an hour, but never five years. Since the growth in information is much, much faster than the population growth, there is inevitably more to relate to for each of us (in particular, those of us who are positioned as information switchboards). The marginal value of new information is nearly zero, and it is therefore easier to attract a crumb of attention if one wraps the information in packages of ever-decreasing size. Little packages that are stacked on top of each other to create wavering, thin towers that are soon tall enough to touch the moon.

The nimble stacking of blocks of decreasing size is a craft that spreads in many directions. Rhythmic dance music, the World Wide Web, multichannel television, journalism, studies, and research are some of the examples that have been mentioned here. One can increasingly combine the blocks according to whim (this is why techno music is such a telling example). This process can only be quantified and "proved" to some extent; its results can only be experienced. More and more of every kind of information is stacked, like gigantic Lego towers where the bricks have nothing in common but the fact that they fit (but they also fit with any other brick). It is not because of the phenomenal global success of Nescafé's main product that the term *instant* is a key concept for an attempt to understand the present age. The moment, or instant, is ephemeral, superficial, and intense. When the moment (or even the next moment) dominates our being in time, we no longer have space for building blocks that can only be used for one or a few configurations with other blocks. Everything must be interchangeable with everything else. The entry ticket has to be cheap, the initial investment modest. Swift changes and unlimited flexibility are main assets. In the last instance everything that is left is a single, overfilled, compressed, eternal moment. Supposing this point is reached sometime in the future, and both past and future are fully erased, we would definitely have reached an absolute limit. To paraphrase Paul Virilio: there would be no delays anymore (see, e.g., Virilio 1996). It is difficult to imagine this happening—there are many universal human experiences that only make sense qua duration. In several fields, however, the tendency toward extreme compression of time is evident, as witnessed in the realms of consumption, work, and the very formation of personal identity. A result is stacking, and stacking is the enemy of logic and coherence.

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