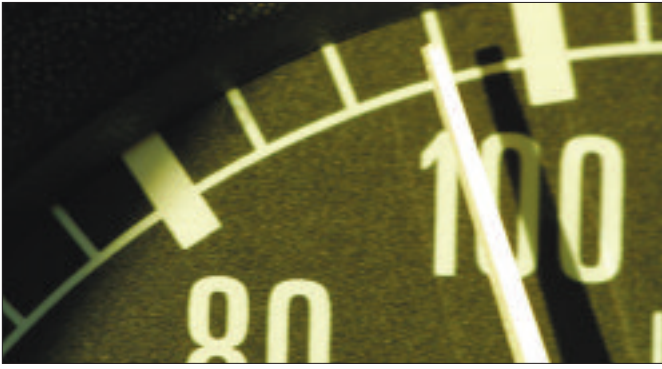


Les auteurs documentent l'utilisation des technologies en ligne par les universitaires et découvrent une apparente contradiction entre le confort de la connectivité numérique et l'anxiété causée par la distraction et un sentiment d'isolement. Ils analysent ces constations en pensant à la compression du temps et au rythme « non précipité » qu'exigent normalement la réflexion et la pensée critique.

No time to think?



Technology, far from freeing up an academic's time, has compressed it to stressful levels, argue Heather Menzies and Janice Newson. What does this mean for the future of the university as a site of creative and critical reflection?



The role of the university as a cultural institution appears to be changing dramatically. Yet, academics themselves are often too busy, too distracted, or too stressed to participate in the debate we think should attend this significant cultural shift.

In our pilot study of Canadian faculty's use of time, involving 80 academics at universities across the country, 58 per cent of our participants said that their ability to stay focussed on their work had decreased. Forty-two per cent said that their susceptibility to being distracted by the amount of information and communication coming at them had increased. Fifty-one per cent identified with the statement: "I don't have enough free chunks of time in which to think," reinforcing the findings of an Icelandic study that documented the loss of the "timeless time" academics normally covet for reflecting on their research and writing.

Superficially, much of this busy-ness can be attributed to the new technologically-enhanced work environment. Academics are routinely on-line with their students, colleagues, research partners, and even research subjects from around the campus and around the world. Equally, their quick and easy on-line accessibility exposes them to many others' expectations and demands on their time.

The shift to a wired-to-the-world campus is also entangled with deeper changes in academe, beginning with universities' responses to the dramatic funding cutbacks to post-secondary education dating from the mid-1970s. As under-funding became entrenched, universities adapted organizationally, by centralizing budget-related decision making and adopting a managerial style focussed on strategic planning and "accountable" performance, in contrast to the more dialogic, collegial style of traditional campus governance.

Universities also began to reposition themselves closer to business and government as new organizations like the Corporate Higher Education Forum identified university research as critical to Canada's economic competitiveness, and governments adopted strategically-focused funding policies to steer universities in this direction. University-business partnerships and spin-off research helped to rescue universities from their funding woes while delivering cutting-edge advances to business and the economy. High-tech businesses made "in-kind" donations of technology, which, augmented by government grants for equipment and connectivity, resulted in a swift and thorough retrofitting of university campuses.

By the late 1990s, an on-line infrastructure had been put into place that facilitated not just the more centralized and data-centered approaches of university administrations, but also the extensive collaborations between academics and university

administrations on the one hand, and numerous new partners in business, unions, the non-profit sector and government departments on the other.

At the same time, as indicated by our survey, this new infrastructure permeated the culture and began to transform the way academics went about their work. Our participants reported widespread and regular use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for everything from web-based instruction and student chat groups to e-mail, e-research, on-line reporting, curriculum planning, consultation, and research collaboration.

For most academics, it seems, ICTs are simply the new "tools of the trade" and accepted as part of what higher education has to be in the twenty-first century, to attract students and to keep current and on the breaking edge of research. The findings of our pilot study suggest that academics have adapted to the new medium/environment to the point of ease and comfort, though not without anxiety and asking some deeply troubling questions.

On the one hand, the majority of our respondents (especially women) reported enhanced productivity and a greater sense of connectedness to students as well as to professional networks owing to their use of on-line technology while, on the other hand, 30 per cent reported feeling isolated (again, especially women).

Moreover, not only did 69 per cent report that they do not thrive on the time pressures and fast pace of the new working environment, but 45 per cent also reported feeling anxious about keeping up with work demands frequently. Another 12 per cent feel this chronically. Forty-seven per cent feel as though they're fighting to keep control on occasion, while another 27 per cent feel that way frequently. Similarly, 57 per cent indicated that they

A majority of academics are not reading as deeply and reflectively as they used to, nor as they'd like to

are "reacting, not acting on my own initiative" on occasion, while another 19 per cent feel this way frequently.

Equally significant we think, 65 per cent reported a decrease in their ability to follow through on commitments of a more professional and informal nature (as compared, for example, to externally driven agendas).

We surveyed academics about their allocation of time and their use of technology because our concerns go beyond how overworked and stressed academics are these days, however important this may be as a health and safety issue. Indeed, a majority or substantial minority of our respondents experience one or more of the common symptoms of stress, from sleep deprivation, to short-term memory loss, problems concentrating, and strained relations with colleagues and friends.

But we wanted to know whether deeper changes might be at work behind the fog of fatigue and culture of overwork in which many academics are operating. We believe it significant, therefore, that an overwhelming majority of academics (64 per cent) are not reading as deeply and reflectively as they used to, or as they'd like to.

In similar numbers, they're not reading as broadly and inter-disciplinarily as they used to, or as they'd like to. Instead, the majority indicated, they are skimming sources for useful bits of

information. A time-crunched coping mechanism? An adaptation to a more instant-results oriented knowledge culture? Perhaps both, and they're mutually reinforcing.

For us, they point to the sometimes specious efficiencies of the time-compressed digital environment, as suggested by Dutch sociologist Ida Sabelis. She argues it's becoming more difficult for people to "de-compress," to slow down enough to think deeply, compromising that most vital aspect of human communication: "the expression and exchange of meaning."

In follow-up interviews, we asked some of our participants to interpret these time-and-attention shifts and to comment on what these shifts might imply for changing the role of universities and academics in society. For instance, what does it mean that with on-line communication, some academics feel more "in touch," while a sizeable minority now feels more isolated?

What we discovered, at least tentatively, from the two dozen interviews we conducted, is that academics are drifting toward a more broadly distributed, yet superficial, sense of presence and engagement.

A professor of occupational therapy at one university confessed, "I feel very connected to people I don't expect to see. But what I do find is that people I expect to see, like my colleagues who are in the same building, I may not see." When she does see them, it is at meetings. But then, "I find I'm often now quiet in meetings, when I'm not by nature quiet. And I think part of it is because I'm now with people who I only see at meetings! And so, it's like meeting quasi-strangers...."

There is an urgency for academics to take up these issues because of what they portend for the future of the university

A professor of English at another university laments, "There's the absence of voice and all of the lateral thinking that goes on when you actually have a real conversation, instead of just a focused interchange....The actual isolation from people in a local community has increased enormously."

Interview comments like these alongside the questionnaire responses suggest to us that it's not that academics aren't in touch and engaged with each other and others. It's more that the nature of that engagement is changing, and the trade-offs made in the quotidian management of life seem to value quantity more than quality, and instrumental goals more than reflection.

For example, when we asked participants to reflect on Marcel Proust's lament for the loss of a way of "being in time" that allowed for deep memory association and creative thinking, 15 per cent said they thought their capacity for this had increased, while 41 per cent said that it had decreased. As well, nearly 30 per cent identified with the statement: "I can't slow down enough to be in touch with myself and my innermost thoughts," and "Everybody is too busy to just talk."

Oxford University time geographer Nigel Thrift argues that a new fast-subject temporality is permeating academia, infused in the medium of new organizational practices such as performance and productivity measures and through the general application of logistical reasoning to expedite information flows. Yet when the information flow in question is learning material that people,

being people, digest at their own particular rate, some apples-and-oranges contradictions emerge that bear thinking about.

Social theorist Dik Pels advocates for "unhastening" the academy, arguing that through re-structuring, universities have shifted position in public culture and no longer occupy a slow zone separate from, and offering ballast to, the faster-paced zones of business and politics. Instead, the "infrastructural routines" associated with the wired and managerially governed campus are integrating campuses with the previously separate institutions of business and political administration, to the possible detriment of a democratic public culture.

Other studies of academic life have observed that faculty members' participation in departments, faculty councils, and academic senates has dropped to a critical level, suggesting that bringing to bear professional and academically focussed judgments on university decision-making has become a low priority in academics' allocation of their time.

There is an urgency for academics to take up these issues because of what they portend for the future of the university as a site of creative and critical reflection. It is particularly urgent in light of their role as educators of today's students, whose lives are so encased in the speed and immediate pay-offs provided by technology-enhanced connectivity.

Should academics not be concerned whether they, by their own, even if enforced, superficial, multi-tasking presence and engagement, fail to challenge and provide an alternative to students' self-reported "consumerist" approach to education and their expectation of instant, ubiquitous service?

Should they not instead be attempting to model a university education that is about sustained dialogue in learning communities and asking questions about the long-term public good?

One of our interviewees, a professor of mathematics, worries about the demise of weekly collegial seminars where faculty would share their research information with students and each other:

"We are becoming loners.... We are creating in our offices....because we have more access to information and we have tools to do things faster, but we are not sharing with other people The big questions aren't being asked anymore ... I feel that we are giving students the wrong idea about what learning is. I think the students are now coming to believe it's just reading a lot, being familiar with a lot of information, trying to get information somehow. We are not teaching them to use that information, to process it and then to create something. I think ... this is what they call passivity. If they are passive, they don't create."

To be sure, some academics are actively resisting these trends, for instance, by modelling face-to-face contact and taking time for authentic dialogue as they encourage students to come in for brainstorming sessions.

Will others think this matters, too? Working collectively through faculty and other organizations, will they raise questions about the role of academics and universities in the cultural life of a democratic society and engage in a meaningful debate about them?

We'd like to think so. **AM**

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