

# Pressed for Time

*Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism.*

By Judy Wajcman. Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015, 215 pages.

**D**o you feel ever more rushed, with never enough time to do everything you want and expect to do? Is this connected with new technologies, which go faster and faster?

But wait just a minute: weren't new technologies meant to make work and life more efficient? Technologies are supposed to be labor-saving, so why should there be less free time than before?

The paradox of time pressure is the topic of Judy Wajcman's book *Pressed for Time* and her contention, in short, is "It's more complicated than it seems on the surface." Scientists and workplace managers think of time as a linear, constant flow, but people's perceptions of time are varied and complex.

To begin, not everyone experiences time the same way. Those who constantly feel rushed tend to be affluent and have high-powered jobs, often with family responsibilities as well. There is a significant gendered dimension to the experience of time pressure. More women have paying jobs but they still carry out a much larger proportion of unpaid work in the home, so they are especially prone to feeling overwhelmed and short of time.

Wajcman addresses these and other issues in a careful, scholarly style. She cites a considerable body of research about people's use of time, perceptions of time, use of digital technologies, and much else relevant to time as a social and psychological facet of life today. There are also all-encompassing theses about social change and the acceleration of life, especially as linked to capitalism. Wajcman presents the evidence and sorts through the arguments, and in so doing questions many conventional views.

For example, it is commonly thought that household technologies such as dishwashers and microwaves save time, but studies show that, to the contrary, the time spent washing and cooking has changed little. With this and other examples, Wajcman shows that fixating on technological change distracts attention from accompanying social change. She argues it is necessary to look at change as a sociomaterial practice, namely an interaction of social and technological factors. The introduction of household technologies has been accompanied by changes in expectations for hygiene, child care, and domestic work.

Wajcman challenges the usual view that information and communication technologies, epitomized by the smartphone, have meant that work is infiltrating home life. Instead,

she questions the traditional distinction between spheres of work and leisure, or public and private, seeing it as increasingly irrelevant. The usual thinking is that private life should be protected, but cultural change is making that idea obsolete. Many people now desire to use their phones to manage their time, so even when at home, they may be connecting with friends and family who are not physically present.

This brings up another conventional idea that Wajcman questions: that face-to-face interactions are more valuable or real than ones mediated by technology. She cites evidence that face-to-face time has not been decreasing but is instead supplemented by other ways of interacting, which can make for a richer life.

While questioning many assumptions about technology and time, Wajcman does not jump to the opposite pole and suggest that everything is rosy. She regularly emphasizes that time pressures are especially acute for mothers and that people with good incomes can enhance their leisure — for example high-intensity activities — by offloading some of their domestic tasks to others, who are most likely women and mothers with considerable time pressures of their own. Wajcman thus exposes much of the writing about time, work, and leisure as based on

unacknowledged assumptions about social class and gender.

Wajcman continually emphasizes that treating time as a uniform measure is not suitable for understanding the way different people experience time in different circumstances. Instead, it's possible to talk of different temporal regimes, namely different parts of life that are experienced in different ways, for example as rushed, intense, or drawn out. What is fascinating is that people's feelings about the causes of time pressure may not correspond to what is actually happening. One example is email, often seen as the source of time pressure. Wajcman points out that because email is asynchronous, dealing with it can be postponed so that at the end of a period of intense or extended activity, the accumulated batch of emails seems symbolic of time pressure. Actually, though, the other activities chewed up much more time but they are not identified as a cause of time pressure because they leave behind no accumulation of tasks.

Wajcman's most important point is that people's changing experiences of time should not be attributed solely to technological change. New technologies, everything from vacuum cleaners and cars to ATMs and smartphones, undoubtedly affect time use and experience, but not in any straightforward way, because people's habits and expectations change along with the technology, leading to new patterns of human-technology symbiosis.

In some ways, new technologies have led to time-wasting, at least from the point of view of households. Faster and more convenient transport, especially the car, has encouraged people to live further from their workplaces, so commuting times remain much the same. Rather than spend time on preparing meals, people now spend more

time shopping and traveling to get to stores. One solution is home delivery, for example buying goods via Amazon. In the U.S., this can be seen as a return to routine home delivery of meals and goods of over a century ago. In these and other examples, technologies on their own do not lead to a particular outcome, but always interact with social conditions, expectations, and habits.

Wajcman highlights that people's understandings of what makes them feel "pressed for time" are often limited. When people feel rushed, they correctly identify their own feelings but may not appreciate how these feelings arise, as noted in the examples of emails and housework. Wajcman also highlights that theoreticians of digital capitalism who present sweeping interpretations may unconsciously be assuming all of society reflects their own experiences and fail to appreciate that time experiences vary considerably from person to person and are shaped by gender and social class.

Wajcman did not set out to provide a manual for coping with feelings of being harried, but within her systematic analysis of evidence and arguments are clues for doing so. One of the challenges is that in many circles, there is greater status in being busy, in having every moment filled with one or more activities. Being unoccupied is seen as unattractive and unfulfilling, and boredom is to be avoided at all costs, most commonly by going online. Wajcman sees the ubiquitous checking of phones as a way of coping with otherwise uninteresting times, and in general is positive about the way people are handling their own situations.

While Wajcman's perspective is a valuable counter to the determinist view that people are at the mercy of technological innovation, there is another factor in time use:

the concerted efforts of "attention merchants" (1) to colonize people's time, most commonly for commercial purposes. People may voluntarily spend their time watching television, playing video games, or checking Facebook, but at the same time their attention to screens is being sold to advertisers.

It is also possible to use other bodies of evidence to interrogate time usage. Researchers in the field of positive psychology examine activities for their capacity and likelihood of making people happier and more satisfied with their lives. A key finding is that most people know when they are happy but systematically misunderstand what made them happy in the past and what will make them happy in the future (2). For example, most people think they will be happier during leisure activities than during work time, but measurements often find the reverse. Expressing gratitude, being optimistic, helping others, and physical activity are well documented means for increasing happiness and are far more reliable and potent than earning more money and owning more material goods. Positive psychology thus can be used to make recommendations for spending time and using technology that are quite different from typical patterns.

Another relevant body of research is about expert performance. To become extremely good at any activity requiring skill — chess, swimming, violin, research — requires thousands of hours of dedicated practice (3). Those committed to acquiring the highest levels of excellence must set a priority on regular practice, which necessitates different attitudes towards time than held by those content with doing well enough to get by.

An underlying message in *Pressed for Time* is that people have the capacity to change their attitudes

towards time: feeling harried is not inherent in contemporary life or an automatic consequence of technology. Instead, it may be better to feel positive about being extremely busy, just as thinking that stress is beneficial can actually change the body's response to stress (4). When people have greater understanding of the factors that affect their understandings and feelings about time then, as in the cases of advertise-

ments, happiness, and expertise, they may be in a better position to forge their own paths. In this, the insights in *Pressed for Time* are a valuable contribution.

### Reviewer Information

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### References

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- (2) S. Lyubomirsky, *The Myths of Happiness: What Should Make You Happy, but Doesn't; What Shouldn't Make You Happy, but Does*. Penguin, 2013.
- (3) A. Ericsson and R. Pool, *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise*. Bodley Head, 2016.
- (4) K. McGonigal, *The Upside of Stress: Why Stress Is Good for You (and How to Get Good at It)*. Vermilion, 2015.

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## Not So Fast

*Not So Fast: Thinking Twice about Technology*. By Doug Hill. Univ. of Georgia Press, Oct. 15, 2016, 240 pp.

**I**n 2014, I had the good fortune of meeting Doug Hill in the flesh at the first *IEEE Conference on Norbert Wiener in the 21st Century* (<http://21stcenturywiener.org/>). It was one of the highlights of the conference for me. I was attracted to Doug because of his outward simplicity but at the same time deep inner profundity. It did not take long for us to get talking of our mutual interests. For instance, we've both been influenced greatly by the French philosopher, sociologist and lay theologian Jacques Ellul (1), popularly known for *The Technological Society* (1964) (2), (3). Hill is an investigative journalist by training, an award winning writer (4), with a specialization on the philosophy of technology.

In *Not So Fast*, Hill wastes no time in getting his point across. Chapter 1 opens: "Let me begin by stating the obvious: We live in an era of technological enthusiasm." In his book, Hill attempts the impossible and pulls it off. He hits us with the hard facts, one after the other. And we can either take his word for it, or refute him page after page, until we realize, that the evidence is overwhelmingly stacked against us. In effect, Hill tells us "where we are at" with all

this techno-deluge, even if we don't wish to admit it. He makes a point of highlighting the technological utopianism we have begun to believe and dream about, only to bring us down crashing the very next moment with the startling realities.

The book contains quotes from people we all look up to in the tech and business world, representing thousands of hours of research to craftily support the central thesis: "not so fast." Hill proclaims in no

"Lively, fast moving, always entertaining, 'Not So Fas' offers a grand overview of the extravagant hopes and dire warnings that accompany the arrival of powerful new technologies. Blending the key ideas of classic and contemporary thinkers, Doug Hill explores the aspirations of those who strive for the heavens of artifice and those who find the whole enterprise a fool's errand. This is the most engaging, readable work on the great debates in technology criticism now available and a solid contribution to that crucial yet unsettling tradition."

—*Langdon Winner*, author of *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought*; *Professor, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute*