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"Why chasing the "now" has taken over our existence"

"PRESENT SHOCK, When everything happens now" by Douglas Rushkoff

"This is the moment we've been waiting for, but we don't seem to have any time in which to live it."

Nobody can yet foresee the full impact of the high-speed updates of the global information on both our present and future, and the chain reactions this can provoke. Some of its consequences are emerging as new episodes in a contemporary thriller that once again confirms that reality nearly always is more interesting than fiction, and trying to analyze phenomena is like chasing a moving target. The "now" turns into "recently" faster than you can click the next link, and if you pause to blink or breathe, feedbacks might have already have taken place, with new and unexpected results. Douglas Rushkoff is an American media theorist who takes a multidisciplinary approach to the constant pursuit of the present in his latest book "Present Shock", and with the reading of it in recent memory, you can find numerous examples of the phenomenon he describes in the daily news feed.

A few days after Edward Snowden revealed the surveillance program Prism, that story has managed to bounce back and forth several times, with implications for Obama's impending visit to Berlin, but an instant opinion poll shows that the majority of American support the monitoring program. Thus the gap widens – still it's just the rest of the world that thinks that the U.S. has painted itself into a corner, while the vast majority of Americans themselves have been convinced, ever since they learned to recite the US constitution in primary school, of their nation's special status and its natural right to take any measures to allegedly protect U.S. interests.

Reports on the Prism affair puts a strong focus on Edward Snowden's person, where he is now and when he checked out of the hotel, and the news that Assange gives him tips on where he is seeking asylum must have generated lots of clicks. There has always been a love of fast news, but today it seems like the contrast is even greater between the instant updates and the more viscous and in-depth information flow. There is simply not enough time to read the slow flow while checking updates to the quick one.

Via a search for "Boundless Informant" you can find out that the NSA via this tool raised 3 billion data entries only in March 2013, just from American computers. More interesting than to ask where Snowden is each moment, are the long term consequences of the NSA's access to backdoors to servers at companies including Microsoft, Facebook, Google and Apple. Will these companies be able to prevent such violations in the future, and if not - how does it affect the behavior of their billion customers?

The gap between the increasing need to protect privacy against intrusion and the need to share this a wide group of "friends", often in an unprotected environment of open public networks, has grown into something you could call an abyss, where it would be surprising if not a lot of information fell down, especially given today's virtually unlimited capacity for the collection and storage of information. Many have suspected that not only the neighbor at the internet cafe sees you online but also Big Brother, but the extent of this spying is now proving to be much greater than what could have been imagined.

Around the world, an increasing number of servers is storing millions of reports of things that just happened, static frozen moments in people's lives. There is an seemingly insatiable and highly addictive need to capture the ever-elusive present, document it and present it to a world that is supposed to have time to take part of countless others' documented "recent moments" – whether you call it narcissism or just communication. There will certainly be no mass exodus of users away from Facebook or Google - addiction is too strong and the alternatives too inaccessible, but there

could still be consequences of their violation of privacy, for example through these social media's ability to accelerate the power of mass protests.

How much of life is lived still offline today? In five years? And from where do we take the time we use to stay updated? The 40-hour week in Sweden turns 40 this year, and the amount of leisure time has not increased, at least not in terms of time to do "nothing special". Time is instead more scarce than ever, and much of the time you could possibly free up through smart IT solutions is still spent by your computer. In this way, the word "time saving" simply lost its relevance, and we continue to contribute to the seemingly endless expansion of the electronics industry at the expense of what used to be called leisure time. In March 2012, Swedish women spent on average 81 minutes per day on Facebook and males 64 minutes – probably even more today. A survey last fall showed that on average, people are looking at their smartphones 150 times / day, and that still does not include phone calls. We feel phantom vibrations of the phone in our pockets, even when it is not there, and is there a better cure for the feeling of boredom and emptiness you feel when you've been offline for a long time than to throw yourselves out on the web, to some of your favourite sites?

Sometimes the Swedish media debate suffer from a kind of feedback loop, with the same voices repeating the same ideas, but there are many international thinkers and researchers who bring interesting perspectives, such as David Harvey, applying Marxist analysis on the production's relation to time and space, Hartmut Rosa who writes about the effect of acceleration on different levels and James Gleick, whose book "Faster" (2000) was one of the early works on the subject. In the U.S., Douglas Rushkoff received considerable attention, because of the way he connects concepts in a multidisciplinary and sometimes somewhat spectacular analysis. His book "Life Inc" from 2009 – unfortunately ignored by most Swedish media – described the increased commercialization of human existence, in a kind of historical materialist perspective that could remind you of Leo Huberman's groundbreaking book "Man's Worldly Goods" (a classic, published 1936) and the expectations on Rushkoff's new book "Present Shock" was high.

While waiting for the book to come, I wondered if it would bite its own tail, and fall victim of the hysterical chase for the present of its theme. Writing and publishing must have taken at least a year, and it seemed like a contradiction that a book about how the present constantly becomes outdated would still be worth reading. Perhaps it would have passed its sell-by date?

But this is no overnight sensation, in reverse – it's a thoughtful interdisciplinary journey with digressions in many directions, sometimes bordering on a kind of cyber-existentialism with various perspectives on the present and future. No one can accuse him of simply repeating what has already been written on the subject, there are plenty of new angles, thanks to the amount of associations between different themes. It is recommended, out of respect for the subject, to avoid jumping around in the book - since Rushkoff himself is constantly zapping between different subjects, it is advisable that you read the book chronologically, and perhaps thereby disproving his thesis that our ability to follow the linear narrative is being replaced by a chronic zapping.

Rushkoff succeeds, despite some typical American "wordiness", in being both very stimulating and highly interesting, and the cross-connections he makes are often sparkling. More or less in passing, he included a passage about neuroscientific research on how impulses guide our decisions. Advertising campaigns and sales strategies are often based on research about the instinctive decisions in the reptilian brain that can be measured by magnetic resonance imaging and other physical tests. Neuroscientists, often with generous grants from the industry, puts focus on the customer's behavior in the store, making choices between different products, and provide data so that the companies can influence the customers right there, at the expense of considerations related to common sense and responsible consumption.

Rushkoff goes from an exposition of the classical time-terms "chronos" and "kairos" and their relation to information technology, over to giving a historical perspective on the introduction of the

monetary system and how industrialism made workers sell their time in the form of wage labor, instead of just selling the product of the work. An industrial product consists of compressed time, "leverages the time of production into a frozen moment of shopping" and trading of derivatives on the stock market is about to take out the value in advance. All these lines of thought are linked together through easy-to-understand - but sometimes slightly neckbreaking - reasoning, with concepts such as "time compression", "overwinding" and "spring loading". Rushkoff gladly coins his own words such as "digiphrenia" (what happens when trying to do things simultaneously is pushed too far), and "fractalnoia" (overconfidence in a symmetry between the large and small, as in fractals).

He takes good advantage of the opportunity to mention who ultimately has an interest in the chase after new experiences with new gadgets, which expire at rocket speed and must be replaced by the next generation: "we're turning life into a set of monetizable experiences where the meter is always on." The cycle is accelerating, and almost all political parties affirm acceleration in the name of growth. If we don't shop, with our own or borrowed money, we become unemployed, right? First, we sell some of our time to get the money. Then we buy things that we spend the rest of our time with.

Those who create these new products belong to the category "always-on people" which makes them less critical to the functions that reduce individual freedom. Today we do not just use gadgets to measure time, but they also tell us when we should do various things. Maybe it's time for people to take control of technological development instead of letting the industry set the pace and actually, in the long run the issue is, in Rushkoffs words, to "reclaim our time."

Annika Westman, June 2013