

Slow Technology to re-appropriate our lives

Sara Heitlinger

Queen Mary University of London
Media and Arts Technology DTC
Mile End Road, London, UK E1 4NS
sara@eecs.qmul.ac.uk

INTRODUCTION

More than ever before, Slow Technology can be seen as a political attempt to step outside the well-oiled machinery of capitalist production and consumption. By taking inspiration from other activities such as certain art and craft practices, mindfulness techniques and community gardening, which all encourage awareness and reflection, Slow Technology can provide small acts of resistance to the pressures of designing for efficiency and consumption.

As technologically-mediated communication places increasing demands on our attention, there is a sense that we are losing control of our time and lives [4]. If we are constantly online and available to interruptions from email, phone, text, and other social media, it becomes difficult to find time to slow-down and reflect. As the technological overload increases, and being busy becomes part of our identity, I believe that Slow Technology as a design agenda becomes ever more important.

How do we re-appropriate our lives from the daily requirements to work and consume? Drastic action may be required when the overload becomes too much: One family's response was to disconnect from all screen-based technologies for 6 months. Results were promising, in terms of increased sense of feeling connected within the family.[5] By drawing on other slow practices such as art and crafting, mindfulness mediation techniques and community gardening, can Slow Technology offer us a less reactionary route?

COMMUNITY GARDENING AND AUGMENTING OBJECTS WITH DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

In response to these concerns, I am currently engaged in PhD research in a community gardening project, looking at augmenting everyday objects with digital technology to support face-to-face connections between people. I am working at Spitalfields City Farm, which is a community-based urban farm in East London, which runs with the support of volunteers. Volunteers come from all walks of life, and see gardening together as a way to take time out from the stresses of everyday, to heal from illnesses, to connect with others, to get out of the house, to take pleasure in the gentle physical activity and to enjoy the slow pace of nature. I am working with farm staff and volunteers to design augmented objects that will generate narratives, encourage connections between people, and allow for enjoyable reflection.

Initial responses to contextual inquiries have revealed mixed attitudes to creating digitally augmented objects on the farm. For example, although there is a real issue around managing the watering of the plants, (mainly due to the inconsistency of volunteers' attendance), one gardener expressed horror at the idea of thirsty plants texting or emailing when they need care. Indeed digital technology is somewhat antithetical to the very embodied, slow processes on the farm, so it will be interesting to see how I can use participatory design methods to design augmented objects to connect communities. I hope to build on The Talking Quilt, a collaboratively-made hand-crafted object produced on the farm, which I helped to augment with digital technology (see my accompanying text on a Slow Technology artefact).



Figure 1. Slow technology: digital technology augmented with everyday objects at Spitalfields City Farm

Hallnas and Redstrom [1] state that a “key issue in slow technology, as a design philosophy, is that we should use slowness in learning, understanding and presence to give people time to think and reflect.” Gardening does this by helping us to become more aware of our bodies and our environment, to be in tune with the pace of nature and not an artificial clock. It allows us to step outside the pressures of work and consumption, to simply engage in an often repetitive but gentle activity. It has been used as therapy in the form of horticultural therapy[9], and indeed one of the volunteers on the farm came as a way to heal from a serious illness, and credits the farm with saving her life.

MINDFULNESS

The central aim of Slow Technology is to give people time to reflect. This also resonates with certain ideas around mindfulness, which originates from Buddhist spiritual practices [2] and has been described as a process of bringing a certain quality of attention to moment-by-moment experience [3]. It was developed as a path leading to the cessation of personal suffering [8]. I would argue that Slow Technology has the potential to help us become more mindful. Rather than adding to the competition on our attention, which can cause a sense of alienation and fragmentation, Slow Technology may help to lessen our suffering by focusing our attention on the moment-by-moment experience.

So does a Mindfulness App constitute Slow Technology? A brief search uncovers a plethora of mindfulness Apps for smartphones (“Do you want to find more balance in today’s increasingly stressful existence? Do you think that meditation seems difficult? Try the Mindfulness App” [6]) Is this simply a commodification of mindfulness, yet another opportunity to consume? Do these apps contribute to already existing feelings of inadequacy around efficiency and performing tasks, as well as our sense of enslavement to technological devices? Such assumptions warrant further examination, as the ratings indicate that these apps are helpful and popular. For example, the Mindfulness Bell app for Android has a four and a half star rating from 891 users. One user commented, “It has helped me practice mindfulness throughout the day and in all sorts of situations”[7].

CONCLUSION

Slow Technology must aim to address the increasing fragmentation and alienation we experience by being constantly online and available to communications technology, and to the increasing pressures to consume. It may do this by drawing inspiration from everyday slow activities such as gardening and mindfulness practices. It should aim to be a holistic practice, taking into consideration the environment, community and individual. And in this way it may help people to re-appropriate some sense of control over their lives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is made possible through an EPSRC-funded studentship at Queen Mary University of London, a RCUK Doctoral Training Centre.

REFERENCES

1. Halln L., and Redstr J., 2001. Slow Technology – Designing for Reflection. *Personal Ubiquitous Comput.* 5, 3 (January 2001), 201-212. DOI=10.1007/PL00000019 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/PL00000019>
2. Hanh, T. N. (1976). *Miracle of mindfulness: A manual of meditation*. Boston: Beacon Press.
3. Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003), *Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Context: Past, Present, and Future*. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 10: 144–156. doi: 10.1093/clipsy.bpg016.
4. Leshed G., and Sengers P., 2011. "I lie to myself that i have freedom in my own schedule": productivity tools and experiences of busyness. In *Proceedings of the 2011 annual conference on Human factors in computing systems (CHI '11)*. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 905-914. DOI=10.1145/1978942.1979077 <http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/1978942.1979077>
5. Maushart, S. *The Winter Of Our Disconnect: How One Family Pulled The Plug And Lived To Tell/Text/Tweet The Tale*. Profile Books, 2011
6. Mindfulness App, <http://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/the-mindfulness-app/id417071430?mt=8>
7. Mindfulness Bell App, <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.googlecode.mindbell&hl=en>
8. Silananda, V. U., *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness*. Wisdom Publications, 2002.
9. Wichrowski, M., Whiteson, J; Haas, F; Mola, A., Rey, M. Effects of Horticultural Therapy on Mood and Heart Rate in Patients Participating in an Inpatient Cardiopulmonary Rehabilitation . *Journal of Cardiopulmonary Rehabilitation: September/October 2005 - Volume 25 - Issue 5 - pp 270-274*