

Book Review

Hassan, Robert. 2008. *The Information Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

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For the last two weeks, in cafes, public transport and after communing with my laptop, Robert Hassan has been anticipating my questions and using well-known examples such as Google, Microsoft and Facebook to enthusiastically engage with the taken-for-granted notion of the information society. Each time Hassan's book, the *Information Society* (part of the Digital Media and Society series), is cracked open and resumed, it seems as if the author simply picks up where he left off in his chat with the reader about how he has made sense of this incarnation of the information society. It is easy to be cynical about another book on this topic. After all, when surrounded by coffeehouses filled with laptops and commuters with iPhones strapped to their heads and an emphasis on the provision of late-breaking news, the genie has been let out of the bottle and the fact that we live in an information age seems self-evident. However, Hassan's conversational text re-visits a subject that it is perhaps timely to review in light of the numerous social, technological and commercial forces that continue to enshroud and saturate our public and private spaces with the architecture that enables data conduits to flow. Hassan responds specifically to the technological evangelical calls of 'technology' as individual empowerment is to weigh up how life within the information society can be a technology-as-servant dream for some and nightmare for others.

Hassan begins by recognizing that our current pervasive technologically-enabled condition has a historical component that he sees as reaching back to the Industrial Revolution. He then assembles what he deems are three key interdependent processes that form the basis of his interpretive framework: neoliberal globalization, the information technology produced by this globalization and the results of these two combined forces are the acceleration of time and compression of space. It is around these three pillars that Hassan convincingly asserts that neoliberal ideology, and its widespread acceptance by government and business, is the engine that fuels this movement and acceptance; one in which individuals are as flexible, efficient, always-on and embracing of speed as the technologies they use.

Hassan demonstrates that he is well-read though prone to offering extensive accounts from his personal and professional life which, whilst giving the book a conversational feel, do not always give his points as much bite. For example, when Hassan compares the use of ICTs by an American techno-enthusiast conference attendee and a Chinese gamer who stabbed a fellow gamer for selling his virtual sword, it's not simply about technology enabling seamless integration between online and offline lives, but also raises questions about the role of the ways in which social status is conferred via ICTs. Nonetheless, Hassan provides key tools for considering the state that we are in and some of the morally ambiguous consequences related to the choices one makes regarding how and the degree to which one participates in the information society. This is abundantly clear when he links 'social acceleration' (Rosa 2003) to what he calls 'the network effect.' He writes:

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The network effect thus presents us with a choice: which is either to get connected and speed up your mode of communication - or be left behind. To ignore the network effect is to miss out on what might be important information, to lose out on opportunities or to be ignorant of changes that can affect us in our everyday lives. In the information society, to be in the position of unconnectedness is to run the risk of sinking rapidly from the social, economic and cultural radar (p. 9).

This point is central to how (and whether) the individual is positioned to evolve with the on-going, accelerated socio-technological (re)adjustments that feature in the rapid-fire lifeworlds inhabited today compared to thirty years ago. Hassan shows that speed is the key; it is the critical factor on which technological systems, commercial enterprises and individual effectiveness is constructed and assessed.

What is also pleasing is Hassan's essential inclusion of the degree to which 'information technologies can measure and control processes in society means also that they can *track* and *scrutinize*' (p. 63) information on the individual to compile a psychographic portrait of the individual that is of commercial and governmental interest.

In only seven chapters, Hassan ably illustrates and unites themes from the need for speed, the death of distance, information commodification and controlling entities in the Information Society. All of this gets the reader to his main point that the 'logic' of the information society 'stems from the conjunction of neoliberal globalization and the revolution in the development and application of computer-based technologies' (p. 219).

This book does a grand job of introducing topics, concerns and theorists (e.g. Daniel Bell, Marshall McLuhan, David Lyon, Mark Poster, Kevin Robins etc.) to anyone new to discussions of society and technologically-mediated changes and is seeking a text that surveys a corner of this area. Hassan reminds the reader that the acceleration of everything and glut of information leaves little time for reflection and thus he calls for, '... Being yet more reflective and analytical, in spite of the imperative of "social acceleration", and it means a conscious effort to be intellectually aware of the deep and abiding links between the in the information society, as it is presently constructed, and neoliberal globalization' (pp. 222-223). It does leave one to wonder precisely **who** will actually embark on the pursuit of conscious reflection when there is so much to do so as not be on the wrong side of the ICT wave.

References

- Rosa, H. 2003. Social Acceleration: Ethical and Political Consequences of a Desynchronized High-Speed Society. *Constellations* 10(1): 3-33.