

Around the World in Eighty Milliseconds

By Simon Pelletier

A long time ago humans didn't have a car to take them places far away. They had their feet, a horse, and if they were really lucky they might go somewhere on a sailboat. This meant that most people in their daily life didn't travel very far. They kept to within an afternoons walk of their home. There was a slowness to this style of life that was directly related to a persons physical movement. Life was slow because walking was slow. Humans didn't know this was "slow" from lack of comparison; the fastest method of travel would have been the horse.

Travel was relegated to professionals, the desperate – think the Irish potato famine or nomads. Nomads, like the Inuit, have a geographical presence that stretched thousands of kilometres and so their concept of home was amorphous. Comanche people had a similar situation but on the Great Plains in central North America. Nomads traveled across the stretch of a season. Hunting or foraging in a certain region, following the migration of a herd of ungulates. Most days they would keep their sphere to whatever could be covered on foot, in a day.

So what happened when we started increasing the ability for humans to travel? By increasing the speed of travel we unlocked time.

Time is a one dimensional space that keeps track of change. We measure it by the rotation of the sun. As the sun changes we take notice. It's morning and then it's evening. It's winter then it's summer. These are distinct periods of change.

Humans measure themselves in seasons, in years, and in events. The Dionysian era – denoted by BC and AD – centred around the death of Jesus Christ. We measure things in relation to what has happened in the world.

Humans have increased the speed with which they can achieve things. When I drive across Canada, the twenty four hundred kilometres that would have taken a season now can be done in two days. In theory I could have gone back and forth across western Canada forty or fifty times in the same time as it would take a horse to go west. It's in this manner that humans have changed their relationship to time. You could say that we've increased our lifespan. That even though we grow old and die, in the same number of rotations around the sun as our very ancient ancestors, we get more events out of the same period than

humans of the past.

Digital communication has taken this concept into the mental space – which used to follow the physical sphere because all information had to travel with a human. Information doesn't need to travel with a human anymore. It can travel by itself. And it can travel at the speed of light. The news of the day used to be the events that were a walk away. But now they include the entire set of events across the span of the Earth.

There is more potential new information created and transmitted everyday than one can consume in an entire lifespan. Before the modern era new events usually occurred in the village, and we villagers would share them with one another. We would have a keen sense of our small insular world. We would know people intimately. We would know their smells, their sayings, their understandings, their stupidity. Not only that but we would have had a real and tangible connection to the natural world because of our direct interaction with it. A farmer knows the plants because she touches them and smells them, she's sees them rise up to meet the sun and hunker down to escape the cold. The link between the villagers is intimate, the link between the humans and the small piece of natural world they dwell in is tight. And these villagers, even though they would know nothing the "modern" human knows, had a sense of understanding that is deep. An understanding that would be limited to the few people they live in community with and the geographic space they exist in.

Modern humans have a greater sense of understanding collectively through their ability to research, transmit, and store knowledge. On an individual level they are much poorer. They have many more superfluous connections with other humans, but fewer deep ones. They have a much broader sample of geography, but a more superficial taste. They have a more active mind, but one less able to concentrate. They have access to more material means but less of a connection to them.

Through technology and energy we have acquired a faster and broader interaction between human to human connections and between human to earth connections.

But the human being is losing its intimate connections. They are bombarded by the expanded sphere of humanity and no longer notice the intricacies of the natural world. No longer does one learn the small intimate details of a collection of people who they are forced to spend their entire life around. Or come to know the small intricate details of the a wooded trail between two parts of the village. And so while humanity is becoming ever richer, human beings are becoming ever poorer.

All this from a simple increase in speed.