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## The Origin of Slow Media: Early Diffusion of a Cultural Innovation through Popular and Press Discourse, 2002-2010

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Since the turn of the 21st century, people from diverse walks of life have begun to form a sub-cultural movement whose members reduce their overall time spent with media and/or their use of specific communication technologies in order to constrain the influence of digital devices and networks on their personal, professional, and family lives. For example, some people have adopted the Sabbath Manifesto ritual of unplugging as a modern way of observing a weekly day of rest, some participate in Adbusters' long-running Digital Detox Week campaign to disrupt corporate-commercial culture, and some reduce their use of fast, digital media in favor of slow, analog activities. The perspective of such groups and individuals who espouse these innovative cultural practices are typically not "Luddite" or "against technology"; rather, they recognize the various benefits and limitations of new forms of media and want to use it in a more deliberate way.

Recent attention to the concept of "Slow Media," in particular, suggests that we are observing a moment of transformation in the way that many people around the world think about and engage with mediated communication. With the term "slow" now established as familiar shorthand for leading a more balanced life (see Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness*), Slow Media can be understood as both a philosophy and a practice: First, it represents an appreciation or re-appraisal of "heirloom" forms of media, such as print or analog, and questions popular desire for ever-more information and ever-faster communication. Second, it espouses the practice of "slowness" in media production and consumption, which shifts usage toward slower mediated (or even unmediated) activities, often by temporarily or permanently reducing one's time spent with digital networks and devices.

When and where did the concept of Slow Media originate? For me, at least, the idea struck in 2009 as I was contemplating the always-connected, speed-obsessed, present-minded nature of human life in the 21st century. As detailed in the blog I began at that time (*slowmedia.typepad.com*), a handful of people seem to have autonomously generated a similar notion in recent years and made the perhaps obvious connection with the Slow Movement, best known for its food incarnation that has exerted great influence on affluent, industrialized societies during the past decade (see Petrini, *Slow Food*). A chance conversation about my Slow Media blog and year-long project of going offline with reporter Sally Herships, whose curiosity might have been piqued by her own ambivalence toward digital habits, led to a National Public Radio (NPR) broadcast in the United States and a spate of attention from the press and public-at-large (Herships, "A Slow Media Movement").

In this article, I create a snapshot of Slow Media's origins by looking at its early diffusion through popular and press discourse. I explore the following questions: Who first proposed the concept of Slow Media, and how did those people envision it? When and where did this subculture capture the journalistic imagination and enter the public agenda? Which primary sources and references have most influenced popular discussions of Slow Media, to date? Which news providers have afforded it the most attention? The empirical core of this study is an analysis of media texts such as articles, broadcasts, essays and blog posts collected from print and online publications. As someone who has served as an expert source on Slow Media to numerous journalists, I also draw on some of my own experiences. I focus here on three periods of development: the precursors who made autonomous proposals envisioning a cultural movement; the 2009 emergence of Slow Media as a cultural force; and the diffusion of this new ideology during the first year. I also discuss chronological, geographic and institutional patterns that show when and where people began talking about Slow Media, how the idea entered the public sphere, and which texts have been most influential in disseminating its principles.

My present goal is to introduce and describe early reports of the Slow Media phenomenon, posing a few questions for future research and leaving to other researchers some worthy tasks of theorization and analysis that are beyond the scope of this article. The concept of Slow Media is, of course, philosophically intertwined with that of Slow Food. In his extensive meditations on how slowness has improved the recursive relationship between eating and growing food, Petrini argues that while industrialization has yielded much good, it has also produced an unsustainable environment of monocultures and a technocratic worldview where speed has become a too-important criterion for judging human activities. His influential critique of food systems has many parallels with those addressing the impact of communication systems on popular thought and behavior, from Socrates to Thoreau, Ellul, McLuhan, Mander, Meyrowitz, Postman, Roszak, and others. Several writers who find increasing quantity and decreasing quality in messages problematic suggest that the modern digital media environment now risks producing a harmful monoculture, too (see Carr; DeZongotita; Freeman; Gitlin; Lanier; McKibben; Powers; Turkle). These books together signal that the techno-utopian thrust of the late 20th and early 21st centuries is facing a broad reconsideration, of which Slow Media is one part.

This study focused on identifying discourses about this subculture in the mainstream press and on high-ranking websites — in other words, sources that are likely to influence public knowledge about and attitudes toward Slow Media, though it goes without saying that press reports of a new sub-cultural idea do not necessarily result in widespread public adoption of its principles. The texts analyzed here were drawn from a database query of articles along with a Google query of websites featuring the term "slow media" in a context referring to a philosophy, practice or movement that addresses media production or consumption (rather than other unrelated phrases, such as "slow media response" or "slow media day," where "slow" does not modify "media") I limited the search to blogs and websites appearing in the first five pages of results, since these sources are typically the most relevant, the most visited, and the most linked-to. This search was supplemented by a few articles that I already knew about or that were otherwise brought to my attention. [1]

While Slow Media received a good deal of attention in stories produced by journalists, bloggers and other writers, only a small subset of this content featured original reporting that used first-hand interviews. The majority of people writing about Slow Media published either essays expressing personal opinion or stories using secondary sources, e.g. references or links to authoritative articles that were based on first-hand sources. The total number of texts that I found discussing Slow Media was 39. Of these, seven texts were original statements proposing the philosophy; seven stories offered original reporting based on interviews with people who engaged in Slow Media practices; 16 texts took the form of essays produced by people commenting on Slow Media (in response to discourses that others had originated); and nine texts

simply cited first-hand reports and essays, re-posting or linking to those original sources.

The original sources most frequently cited and most often linked-to in this selection of discourses include:

- the NPR story on Slow Media (marketplace.publicradio.org);
- the Slow Media blog (slowmedia.typepad.com);
- the Slow Media Manifesto (en.slow-media.net);
- the Slow Media Movement group on Facebook;
- the article about Slow Media in *Forbes* magazine; and
- the "Slow Media" entry on Wikipedia (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slow_Movement).

Judging by citation and link frequency, these sources appear to have exerted the primary influence on public discourse about Slow Media to date. Such criteria only serve as general indicators, of course, of the possible impact of any particular text. A second tier, so to speak, of potentially influential sources would include these: a story in *Monocle* magazine; a story in the *London Times*; a reference in *The Boston Globe*; and a story in the *Huffington Post* (some of these texts are listed under "Works Cited" and will be discussed anon in more detail).

In the next section, I will describe and evaluate three main periods of Slow Media's evolution that I've drawn from this selection of public and press discourses: individuals who made proposals between 2002-2009 presaging the subculture's emergence; media reports of late 2009 that helped launch Slow Media as a cultural force; and early diffusion of this new idea during its first year.

**Precursors: Early Proposals for Slow Media**

When I began blogging about my digital disenchantment, re-appreciation of heirloom media forms, and yearlong project of going offline, I wondered whether a Slow Media movement already existed or if I was the only one to have entertained such ideas. I came up with the term Slow Media, in the spirit of Slow Food, to describe the category of print and analog media forms including postcards, letters, landlines, faxes, records, and the like. (Rauch "Is There a Slow Media Movement"). My research later turned up several other people who seem to have independently made the same analogy and who had also suggested that Slow Philosophy offers important lessons about production and consumption not only of food but also of media. [2]

The earliest precursor that I found was Helen de Michiel, an independent filmmaker in California and director of the National Alliance of Media Arts & Culture, who held up the community-supported-agriculture movement as a model for developing audiences for artisan media productions. In a 2002 essay for the newsletter *Grantmakers in the Arts*, she said, "I would use the concept of 'slow media' to characterize a practice that all members of the media arts field hold in common: We share the ability to do a lot with little" (de Michiel).

Mary Winter, a writer for Colorado's daily *Rocky Mountain News* in 2006, focused on consumption of newspapers, magazines, television, radio, et al. rather than on media production. With a headline referring to a "Slow Media Movement" that did not really exist yet, her article recommended following a big, slow meal with "a big, slow book" (Winter).

A freelance designer based in Amsterdam, Joe Lamantia cited Adbusters' "slowdown week" and Dawdlr's collective postcard experiment as inspirations for "mediated experience that flows at a kinder, gentler pace," which he labeled Slow Media in a 2007 blog entry (Lamantia).

Matt Shepherd, a creative strategist in Quebec, asked whether Slow Media was a "movement or menace," in a brief 2008 post to his blog that doesn't cite an origin for the term (Shepherd).

The Facebook group named "Slow Media Movement" was created in early 2009 by Nick Jones, a computer programmer in North Carolina. The group's mission statement asserted that, "listening to music or watching films should be deliberate acts (…) best enjoyed without dividing your attention" (Jones).

John Freeman, author of the book *The Tyranny of E-mail*, published a manifesto in the *Wall Street Journal* in August 2009 espousing what he calls "slow communication." He mirrored Slow Media by instructing readers to fight "digital jet lag" and send fewer e-mail messages (Freeman "Not so Fast"; Freeman *The Tyranny of Email*).

In these proposals for slowing down one's media-related activities, the precursors mentioned numerous philosophies and practices that are poised to become guiding principles of Slow Media: using media in a more attentive and deliberative mode, doing more by doing less, strengthening local communities, stressing quality over quantity, promoting artisanal products, reducing time spent producing and consuming digital communiqués, and re-appraising heirloom forms of media such as books, newspapers, postcards and film.

When I coined (or co-coined, as it turns out) the phrase "Slow Media," I was unaware that anyone else had already put forth the concept. Subsequent blog posts reported my realizations, first, that de Michiel and Shepherd had previously used the term, and second, that such a Facebook group existed, though with only nine members at that time (Rauch, "Is There a Slow Media Movement"; Rauch, "More Signs of a Slow Media Movement"). [3] I was not especially surprised to find that other people had devised the notion, in light of both the rampant influence of Slow Food in developed countries and growing public concern about the unexpected negative effects of digital media on society.

**The NPR Story & its Aftermath**

This escalation in frequency and number of indicators pointing towards the emergence of a Slow Media subculture — the series of autonomous proposals (listed above), the Facebook group, the Slow Communication Manifesto, and my Slow Media blog, which served as point of departure for the story that aired on National Public Radio — created the context for this cultural innovation's de facto birth in late 2009.

A seminal news story on Slow Media was broadcast on Nov. 17, 2009, on National Public Radio's Marketplace program in the United States. Produced and narrated by Sally Herships, the story featured interviews with a Slow Media blogger and journalism professor (yours truly), the founder of a "Slow Media Movement" group on Facebook (Nick Jones), and two experts in information science and interactive media (Tom "Dr. E-mail" Jackson and Eric Bradlow, respectively). The original audio clip and a transcript of the Slow Media story were posted to the NPR website, which made these materials available for subsequent listening and linking. The NPR page also gave links to blogs written by me and by Herships, who recorded the results of a day-long experiment in "digital detoxification" – a common practice (also called "unplugging") in this subculture whereby people avoid certain forms of media such as cell-phones or computers for a chosen period of time, most commonly a day or a week – that she conducted as part of her reporting.

Dozens of online commentators and bloggers – some working at major news organizations (to be discussed in a later section) or posting at popular websites such as *CNET, Digitally Numb, Java Man's Yearning, Three Minds* and *W5 Blog* – picked up the story and pointed to the NPR.org story (see CNET; Justice; Sternberg; Zacharias). One example that underscores the significance of the Nov. 17 radio segment: On the very day of broadcast, the story was posted to a blog where a commenter noted that she had never before heard of Slow Media, but had already seen it

mentioned in three different places that day (Rowdy Kittens).

By the end of 2009, major publications such as the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Boston Globe*, *Huffington Post*, the *Times* of London and *Forbes* magazine were referring to "slow media" as a fait accompli, signaling that the concept was already established by that point (see Altman; Butterworth; Shea; Sozanski; Wark). Journalists and columnists started dropping the phrase "slow media" (often capitalized, or followed by the word "movement") into their writing with no attribution or little explanation. I'll highlight here three notable instances that merit discussion.

In an essay for the *Huffington Post*, Elissa Altman focused on the vinyl renaissance as a "grassroots reaction to universal hyper-digitization (perceived or otherwise)" that "extends far beyond the audio world." She asserted that there were also a lot of "Slow Media geeks" showing renewed interest in rangefinder cameras, film photography, fountain pens, handwritten letters, rotary phones, letter-press printing and artisanal books (Altman).

Futurist Richard Watson told the London *Times* that the phrase "slow media" would emerge in 2010 as people increasingly opted to consume information on paper rather than screens (paradoxically, he also predicted that letter writing, paper statements and bills, and mental concentration – acts that one would expect to be encouraged by a growing Slow Media orientation – were "on their way out"). Watson may not have known that the term had already emerged; he does, however, recognize several trends relevant to Slow Media: constant partial attention, digital isolation, a flight to the physical, expecting less, conspicuous non-consumption, and localism (Wark).

*Forbes* magazine published an essay by Trevor Butterworth advising print businesses to co-opt "slow media" as a means of rebranding newspapers and magazines. The article cited Dave Eggers' *San Francisco Panorama* and Tyler Brule's *Monocle* as examples of how "slow media" or the "slow-word movement" could lure audiences by providing better-quality products that preserve local print traditions (Butterworth).

And, *voilà*: Slow Media had become a recognized sub-cultural movement.


**Diffusion of the Slow Media Innovation**

As Watson predicted, Slow Media did "become a watchword" of sorts in 2010, as the term gained wider salience with the press and the public. An influential Slow Media Manifesto was posted at slow-media.org in January and cited widely in online forum/blog posts, including at BostonGlobe.com, Wired.com, and elsewhere (David, Blumtritt & Kohler). The subculture had captured the journalistic imagination by this time, with German public radio producing a story about it in February and Omaha's *World-Herald* and Montreal's *La Presse* following in March (see Buddenberg; Burkhardt; Collard). In April, an entry on "Slow Media" was added to Wikipedia, with links to the Slow Media Manifesto and my Slow Media blog, joining other concepts such as Slow Food, Slow Travel and Slow Money. Slow Media also got nods in stories as disparate as a *Christian Science Monitor* article in June about turning to slow lifestyles in the wake of big business and government failures (Burek) and a *Campaign* essay in July that urged slowness in branding politicians (Cridge).

In terms of geographic patterns, the Slow Media subculture has attracted attention around the globe. [4] The body of discourses collected in this study suggests that the idea has so far circulated widely in North America, developed in several European countries, and taken firm hold in Australia. Indeed, the *Sunday Mail* of Queensland covered the same ground as the *Times* of London in a story about generational differences that highlighted Richard Watson's Slow Media prediction for the new year (Passmore). Australia-based *Transformations Journal* issued its call for papers, available online by May 2010, for this very issue (Transformations Journal). The

Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Radio National devoted a whole program to the Slow Movement, with a substantial segment on Slow Media, in September 2010 (Future Tense). An article in *The Australian* quickly followed with an article that segues from the topic of Slow Media to the topic of media impatience with parliamentary independents who deliberate slowly (Simper).

In terms of institutional patterns, the news providers who afforded the most attention to the Slow Media subculture were, overall, public broadcasters. National Public Radio aired a watershed story on Slow Media in the United States, German public radio (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen, or ZDF) published a comprehensive online article about Slow Media, and Australian Broadcasting Corporation aired a long segment on Slow Media. Of the seven stories analyzed here that feature original reporting – e.g. interviews with people who have adopted Slow Media philosophy or practice – four were produced by or inspired by public broadcasters. The remaining three stories made no allusion to extant Slow Media coverage, public or otherwise, that might have motivated their own articles. (Blogs, however, have become a popular source of information among journalists, who identified me and other Slow Media proponents via our websites). Thus, one cannot definitively say whether public news organizations did – or didn't – play a role in spurring those other journalists to attend to the Slow Media phenomenon and further disseminate these ideas.

**Discussion**

I have presented here a snapshot of the origins of Slow Media, focusing on early diffusion of this new sub-cultural force through public and press discourses. Several people writing autonomously for newspapers, newsletters, Facebook, books and blogs proposed the concept of Slow Media during the first decade of the 21$^{st}$ century. The frequency of such discourses escalated in 2009, when Slow Media captured the journalistic imagination and entered the public agenda. The Slow Media blog, manifesto, Facebook group, NPR story, Wikipedia entry, and Forbes article had a notable role in disseminating this perspective and helping it gain traction. This overview demonstrates that while the phrase "Slow Media" has some salience in and for mainstream news, noncommercial media and alternative sources have paid a lot more attention to it. Public broadcasters, in particular, gave Slow Media substantial coverage on at least three continents.

As the quantity of digital messages continues to increase and the speed of transmission, processing and response accelerates, so does the number of questions about how news organizations have responded to the sub-cultural challenge put forth by Slow Media. Why has public broadcasting played such a prominent role? Why has mainstream coverage been relatively scarce? It could be too soon to reach lasting conclusions now, less than two years after the pivotal broadcast on National Public Radio. Perhaps there are structural reasons explaining why this NPR story moved onto the radar of an international public-broadcasting community more easily than it reached the broader press. Or, perhaps the subject of Slow Media did not resonate as much with journalists in the corporate-commercial sphere; for example, they might link their own survival to digital technology in ways that public broadcasters do not. In fact, rather than dismissing the Slow Media critique, one might expect print journalists to adopt (or, as some say, co-opt) the slogan and embrace its practices – as some magazines have done. This line of questioning might reveal contradictions and tensions in the ways that commercial and noncommercial organizations are repositioning themselves in the new media environment, which has become a complex hybrid of analog and digital forms.

While this study sketches the general contours of Slow Media's origins, emergence and diffusion, it probably does not represent the full range of worldwide discourses about this sub-cultural movement. Since the texts were largely collected from databases and online searches, I risk eliding *public* discourse with *web* discourse, when the Internet presents just one sliver of social

reality. The study also likely under-represents non-Anglophone discourses about Slow Media, since foreign-language sources were largely absent from the databases that I used. This selection of articles also was limited to texts published in English, with the exception of one German source and one French-Canadian source with which I was familiar. Many more intriguing texts about Slow Media are certainly lingering in the global public sphere, available for collection and analysis.

By constructing this preliminary history, I have assembled some early materials and provided some starting points from which other scholars can pursue future research on Slow Media and other aspects of the new subculture of media avoidance and resistance. This genealogy of Slow Media's evolution might encourage more attention to the topic, much as the discovery of so many precursors and far-flung proponents confirmed my own interest. The discourses described here not only document this developing subculture but also offer support for my theories that, first, the Slow philosophy is just as relevant to media habits as to other realms of daily experience and, second, Slow Media can make an important contribution to scholarly debates and public conversations about alternative ideals for media usage. In light of how digital devices and networks have become so integrated into modern life, the practice of routinely withdrawing from media represents a substantial achievement. More research is needed to understand *why* some people – whether influenced by the Slow Movement or the Sabbath Manifesto or Adbusters or something else entirely – diverge from the techno-utopianism and techno-determinism of mainstream culture and *how* they manage to resist digital media's incursions into their life-worlds.

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## Endnotes

1. My ability to gather texts from the Internet was constrained from July 1, 2010, to December 31, 2010, when I went offline as part of my Slow Media experiment.

2. This chronology assumes that blog entries were created on the dates posted at the corresponding websites, which may or may not always be the case.

3. The "Slow Media Movement" group on Facebook had grown to several hundred members by 2010.

4. The geographic spread of Slow Media discourses is sometimes easier to track via professional news organizations, whose locations are easy to determine, than via independent bloggers who often don't provide such information.

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