

UDC 39

DOI: 10.17223/2312461X/28/3

## SYNCHRONISATION AND DE-SYNCHRONISATION IN THE ERA OF THE SMARTPHONE

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**Abstract.** Speed has a financial significance, it is always a reason for investment. But still many innovations were abandoned because high speed doesn't always mean success. Smartphone rapidly conquers the world. People managed their lives perfectly well before they were colonised by the smartphone. Yet life had a different rhythm then. Our social interaction doesn't change much, but smartphone lets us run multiple processes at the same time. Smartphone compresses and destabilises time and space, but it also has a potential to expand space and make time more flexible. Smartphone makes consumption, communication and production more efficient. But it can also reduce the pace. Speed differs by country. Acceleration, fragmented time, and addiction to speed make stress. This is a problem in affluent classes in overheated countries. On the other hand, slowness and too many gaps are in least overheated regions. Contribution of the smartphone to the economy and overall speed is huge. But not everything accelerates: family organisation, religious values, cooking practices may not have changed at all. The fast rhythms required by the smartphone clashes with the slow rhythms in the natural and physical world. Life is polyrhythmic, and the smartphone can only synchronise a few slices of it.

**Keywords:** anthropology of time, smartphone, pandemic, social synchronisation, anthropology and globalisation

It just took a little over a decade for the smartphone to conquer the world following its introduction in the world market in 2007. By now, this ubiquitous gadget has virtually become an extension of the body for hundreds of millions of people. Everybody seems to have anecdotes about the time the mobile ran out of battery, they accidentally dropped it in the water or lost their network connection. Small social catastrophes happened every time. In the space of just a few years around the turn of the century, social life was reorganised by the (pre-smart) mobile phone, and it happened in such a frictionless and comfortable way that most of us barely noticed it, until, that is, we discovered how unpractical and unpleasant it was to leave it at home – or, conversely, what a relief it could be to spend a few hours without the pressures entailed by the mobile.

This essay concerns some of the ways in which temporality has been affected by the penetration of the smartphone into people's life-worlds. I am well aware of the fact that there are very substantial variations, but on this occasion, the focus is on generic, structural features of the smartphone, which apply in comparable ways everywhere, although they are obviously

expressed in specific, locally embedded ways in different societies. I shall show both facets: the diversity and the commonalities.

How on earth did we manage without it? This rhetorical question has become commonplace, often accompanied by a self-ironic smile. It is an empirical fact that people managed their lives perfectly well before they were colonised by this new piece of mobile technology. Yet life had a different rhythm then. Appointments were fixed days or weeks ahead. No micro-adjustment was possible, whereas it is now common, and has entered into everyday routines, to send a text from a bus or tram if one is a little late for a meeting. Before this possibility existed, there needed to be more flexibility. Conversely, you were free when you were not in and available, and allowed to fill the temporal gaps with anything or nothing. The temporal flexibility was, in other words, greater before the mobile internet, while the spatial flexibility has increased.

Before the mobile revolution, many relied on coin-operated payphones. They always carried coins (today, many societies are moving towards the cash-free economy). Besides, for many years, only a minority of the households had their own landline in a great number of societies.

The rhythms of life were different then. On holiday, people might buy a stack of postcards on the first day, write them during the next couple of days, buy stamps, and post them. There was always some excitement as to whether the cards would reach the addressee before the sender returned from holiday.

The postcard was phased out slowly, and it still exists, although it is unlikely that many of the cards which are purchased now are actually sent. In its time, the postcard nevertheless represented acceleration and enhanced efficiency. Writing and sending it was faster than writing a letter, and one got a pretty and evocative photo on the back as a bonus. Other future-oriented technologies were rendered obsolescent more quickly, frequently because they were replaced by other inventions that performed the same tasks with increased speed and efficiency. The airship may have been the most spectacular of these. Zeppelins have been compared with dinosaurs, with the lighter and more flexible aeroplanes playing the metaphoric part of the mammals that got lucky after the meteor strike 65 million years ago. The comparison is imperfect. A long succession of dinosaur families and species dominated life on the planet for several hundred million years, while the airship was a brief interlude, a poorer alternative to the aeroplane.

Less familiar and more easily forgotten, but no less promising in its time, was pneumatic mail. This technology consisted in a network of underground tubes through which cylindrical containers, which could contain up to 600 letters, were transported hydraulically. The speed could be as much as 50 kilometres per hour. Pneumatic mail was developed soon after the telegraph, and helped teaching modern people the art of impatience. Extensive networks were built in Paris, London, New York, Philadelphia, Osaka and a

number of other cities. Tubes connecting stock exchanges to telegraph offices were immediately of financial significance, and in Aberdeen, a tube connected the fish market to the post office, accelerating trade in a commodity with a limited timespan.

As pointed out by Jason Farman (2018), who describes the era of the hydraulic tube, a culture committed to speed never seems to get enough of it. The great advantage of the pneumatic tube system, and the reason why many cities in Europe, North America and Japan invested in the infrastructure, was its speed; it was substantially faster than the horsecarriage, especially in the increasingly cramped streets of growing cities. It helped create an addiction to speed. When you got used to connecting with your business partners in Brooklyn through pneumatic mail, the old postal system suddenly became intolerably slow. Similarly, a passenger used to travelling with Japanese shinkansen (bullet trains) would find the Oslo–Bergen railway connecting the largest cities in Norway comically slow; and an office worker accustomed to a powerful, current desktop computer would find it difficult to work with a Windows computer from the late 1980s.

In accordance with this argument, the pneumatic tube network was abandoned because it was too slow; it mainly connected post offices, and did not extend to private homes. You still had to get to the post office to send your letter or parcel, and the next post office still had to deliver to home addresses. In the same way as short- to medium-distance flights take less time than the transport to and from airports and the waiting in lounges, the time budgets for pneumatic mail did not add up satisfactorily. Although there is a lot of traffic in London's West End and on Manhattan, the car, bicycle or motorbike is, in sum, a faster mode of transportation. When pneumatic mail was introduced in the mid-nineteenth century, the alternatives were walking (or running) couriers and the horsecarriage. Today, naturally, the physical letter has also largely been phased out by faster alternatives, just as the postcard has been replaced by online messaging services.

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In the expanding global middle class, the smartphone is – among many other things – an entertainment machine, a bottomless and endless source of encyclopedic knowledge, a news service, an atlas and a weather forecaster. This aspect of the smartphone, which concerns information, can make it appear as a younger, shrunk and deterritorialised relative of the newspaper, the cinema and the television. It miniaturises, simplifies and accelerates.

To refugees who find themselves in one of their liminal phases, the smartphone is to a greater extent a descendant of the landline and the phone booth, the letter, the postcard and the physical meeting at the railway station or one of the other sites where newly arrived male migrants typically con-

gregate. It has turned sockets and free wifi into coveted, scarce resources, precisely because it is a multifaceted lifeline.

What these two otherwise very different groups have in common is that the smartphone in both cases contributes to the destabilisation of time and space. It produces simultaneity and instantaneity, it compresses time and space, but it also has the potential to expand space and make time more flexible. It enables new forms of personal freedom and offers a birds' eye view of the relevant social world, holding out the potential of a fluid, horizontal network society as an alternative to the hierarchical, more static society. It becomes important as a means to maintenance and expansion of personal networks for people who may have had a passive and indifferent relationship to the mobile before they were forced to flee, in this resembling a retired fisherman in England, who told researchers that he had used his smartphone a lot while his daughter lived in Australia, but now that she had moved back, the mobile was rarely used.

The difference between the way the temporalities of refugees and settled Europeans is affected by the smartphone should not be exaggerated. Much of the time, both groups simply use the phone to fill temporal gaps with games, music, social media or websites helping them to fight boredom.

In addition to all this, the mobile functions as a storage room and archive for refugees, since it makes it possible to freeze valuable moments in the past and store half-forgotten memories, a possibility which is enormously valuable to people who have been forced to leave everything behind and flee not only from places, but also from people they are close to. The smartphone is not a phone; it is a miniaturised, powerful time capsule that makes it possible to store, expand, and shrink time.

The world of the smartphone has brought time and space out of kilter. Networks, knowledge and consumption have been appified – if you can't get it into an app, it ceases to exist – and in this world, no borders are absolute, and everything becomes comparable with everything else in so far as it can be squeezed into an app.

It is possible that the sociologist John Urry (2001) is right in stating that sociology no longer should keep society as its central concept, but replace it with mobility; but it is probably more accurate to state that all that is solid melts into air, as Marx famously said: the concrete and tangible becomes abstract and invisible. This concerns time just as much as space.

Roughly in the same way as word processing erased the boundary between the first draft and the final version, and the electronic newspaper did away with the deadline – in a not too distant past, the deadline was at three-thirty in the afternoon; it is now continuous – there is no longer a definite 'before' and 'after' regarding appointments. They can now be adjusted until the very end, often in the form of the group chat or 'micro-coordination 2.0' (Ling & Lai 2016), as a continuous flow of adjustments, suggestions and so on.

In many areas, we continue to do what we used to before the coming of the smartphone. We exchange gossip about others and comments on the weather, ask each other for favours, buy services from others, ask how people are and brag about our children, criticise our boss or teacher, order books and pay bills. A main difference is that we can now carry out all these tasks, and many more, any time and anywhere, instantaneously and without friction. Far more people than before are now knowledgeable about each others' private affairs as the boundary between the private and the public has become indistinct, but the compression of time and space is perhaps even more striking than the changes in social interaction.

There is something uncannily unnatural about this way of relating to other people, as many came to realise fully only during the Coronavirus crisis, which forced great chunks of social interaction to migrate online. It can be compared to the way air travel compresses time and space. You go into a metal tube, take a seat, watch a film, eat and drink, read your book, chat with the sideman, ask for a cognac with your coffee, take a nap; and when you wake up, drowsily staggering out of the tube, you find yourself thousands of kilometers from home, in a different climatic zone, where people speak an incomprehensible language, engulfed by an unfamiliar smell of diesel, orchids, sweat and hot tarmac. Or you lie on a hotel bed in a faraway country, pull out your smartphone from your jeans pocket and update yourself on football results and text messages from home. You are nevertheless reminded of your location far from home because of the time difference. Once my phone rang at four in the morning while I was fast asleep in Malaysia. It turned out to be a colleague from home, who naturally had no idea that I was eight hours ahead of him. The world has become not only one place owing to global integration, but also one synchronised time, regardless of time zones.

Refugees en route spend a lot of their time waiting, often for indeterminate periods of time. Whether squeezed together in a dilapidated boat or spending their days in tented camps built by volunteers or by an NGO on a Greek island, or if they spend their days on the streets of Nijmegen, their situation is a permanent state of exception. They develop new concepts of place and distance, but time is also changed by the gadget in their pocket. Refugees without a formal legal status are typically seen as liminal, in a limbo state, between a past they have been forced to leave behind and several possible futures. In their case, it is highly pertinent to ask about the specificities of 'the future': when is it? The possible futures imagined by refugees waiting for their applications to be processed are paused, open-ended and indeed actively sabotaged by bureaucratic sluggishness and institutions of Kafkaesque impenetrability and Byzantine complexity.

Usually, refugees have smartphones, whether they are from Afghanistan, Mali or Syria. Waiting for the paperwork to be completed in a camp or waiting for their application for residence to be decided, they use the phone to

build and maintain social networks, communicating with family members at home or elsewhere, and obtain information enabling them to lay plans in both the short and the longer term. Their dependence on the smartphone was graphically illustrated in a photo taken in the main railway station in Budapest in the summer of 2015 and reproduced on news sites across the world. The photo depicted a long row of men, lying on makeshift mattresses near a wall and trying to rest while their faces were illuminated by the flickering, bluish light from the small screens.

The significance of the smartphone for temporal coordination can barely be overestimated. In a not too distant past, when *le transport* did not come in time (the ‘people smugglers’), you had no other choice than wait in the designated meeting place for them to arrive. You may now ask the driver or captain in real time why he is late. You can later use GPS to locate yourself accurately, send a message to your uncle in Munich about being on your way, ask your cousin in Düsseldorf whether he still has a job for you in the informal sector, and update yourself on the kind of border control you might expect along European borders, which parts of the Mediterranean are least militarised and where it may be safe to cross the border. This form of access to immediate contact with the outside world has enormous significance for people who cannot rely on formal channels for coordination and information sharing.

Time and space are compressed in this way. Where you happen to be does not interfere with your online activity, and this is highly significant for people who are on the move and rarely sleep two nights in a row in the same place. A landline would have been useless for them. To refugees, moreover, the smartphone functions as an archive and a personal museum. It is not just used to fill the present and plan the future, but also to sequence and memorise the past. Just consider what your electronic address book says about your life. Getting their hands on it would be a major scoop for your future biographer, but if you are an undocumented migrant, it is also highly interesting for the police in a country where the state has an expressed ambition to know as much as possible about those who find themselves within its boundaries. This ambition has become even more urgent following the outbreak of the Corona pandemic in spring 2020.

The online person shrinks and compresses time, spreads it out (as when we wait for a day or two before responding to electronic messages), watch an entire season of a TV series at a single sitting rather than watching one installment a week, and micro-coordinates with friends and family to preclude the need of shoehorning meetings in-between existing appointments. In sum, the smartphone makes consumption, communication and production more efficient. It is a generous gift to global capitalism, relying as it does on increasing speed and efficiency.

It is therefore worth reminding oneself of the fact that the smartphone can also contribute to reducing the pace, as when you sit abandoned and cold in a

refugee camp on a Greek island, killing time by watching music videos from your youth or reading and re-reading messages from friends, NGOs, relatives and others; you may play old games or read about the poet Rumi on the Farsi version of Wikipedia. The nature of the mobile phone encourages the here and now at the expense of the there and then. It strengthens the tyranny of the moment (Eriksen 2001), but it can also be used to draw long lines backwards, sideways and forwards in time.

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Having said this, it is necessary to add that the Internet enabled touch-phone gives the pride of place to the here and now, whether you urgently need to know Beethoven's date of birth, when the driver will take you to Tamanrasset, or feel a sudden urge to speak with a friend who is in a distant place. When a friend of mine moved from England to the USA some years ago, he commented that our relationship would remain fairly unchanged. We saw each other physically just once or twice a year anyway, and on the Internet, it matters little where you are.

Synchronisation and acceleration are some of the most important effects of the smartphone, whether you are a refugee or safely settled, rich or poor, old or young. It is not least an indispensable tool for anyone who is engaged in an economic activity which requires coordination with others, especially in countries where the formal sector of the economy is weakly developed. In the market in Lusaka, Zambia, the women who buy and sell anything from vegetables to fabrics have recently discovered that the smartphone increases their productivity. Like one might expect, they may spend some of the quiet moments of the day chatting with friends and calling their mother, but they are also able to stay in contact with customers and suppliers in real time with the new gadget, which has spread in Zambia, like in many other African countries, lightning fast since around 2015 ([worldinternetstats.com](http://worldinternetstats.com)). Assume that you run a vegetable stall and have run out of asparagus beans before lunch. Just a few years ago, you would have to wait for the delivery boy to pass by on his rickety scooter some time tomorrow morning. You may now text the wholesaler and promise a 20% bonus if he can deliver the beans within an hour. Turnover increases for both parties, and the farmer who supplies the wholesaler has an incentive to weed and fertilise a bit more than usual.

In the affluent classes, complaints about excessive speed are common. Everything is too fast, it is said; it becomes difficult to concentrate on one thing at the time; life is already too overheated, and there is a great demand for brakes such as meditation centres, courses in mindfulness and apps (*sic*) which tell people to stand still and breathe slowly once an hour. This is not the case in a country like Gambia, where the rhythm of production, distribution and consumption is still leisurely. When I visited the country some years

ago, I noticed that at any time, a fleet of yellow taxis were parked in a large tarmac desert, while their proprietors were smoking, chatting, and waiting for customers. Most had been standing there all day. Before these services were appified in European cities, we also had to phone the switchboard, wait half an hour for a response and another half hour for the taxi to show up. We now press our touchscreen a couple of times and wait for about five minutes before the taxi appears. With a similar app, the Gambian cabdrivers could receive bookings instantly, and when there were none, they could have spent the unproductive time helping their uncle in the peanut field or sold soft drinks to tourists on the beach. Their problem is not acceleration and stress, but rather that there is too much slowness and too many gaps. As a rule, some of the least overheated countries are the hottest ones.

Calculating the contribution of the smartphone to the economy in different countries would have been an impossible task, not least because much of the increased productivity takes place in the informal sector, thus passing under the radar of those who measure GDP. Its economic contribution is nevertheless, beyond doubt, very considerable where it is implemented, owing to improved logistics and increased overall speed.

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Although the smartphone articulates temporalities differently in different societies, there are some important similarities in that it makes networks denser and lubricates activities with increased speed and efficiency. Allow me a sorting exercise.

First, there are differences in the ways the smartphone influences temporal rhythms. To most Africans, for example, smartphone use is staccato. Networks can be unreliable, and people run out of money. There are also differences in cultural styles and preferences (Protestants are likely to respond more promptly than Catholics, etc.). The time of the clock and the calendar is absolute in theory, but flexible in practice. On the mobile Internet, you are instantly available, but only when you wish so.

Secondly, different temporal regimes are brought to bear on different social relationships. Perhaps cousins can wait, but mothers cannot. And perhaps we may say that the North Atlantic Protestant cultures, fuelled by bad conscience and a puritan work ethic, are affected by the instantaneous temporality of the smartphone to a greater extent than the rhythm typically found in the bazaar of Marrakesh. Of course, a similar diversity of temporalities may be found within societies as well, not just between them. The retired fisherman in Norfolk is less harassed by interruptions and less stressed by fragmented time than his son, who works as a stockbroker in the City. It would nevertheless be interesting to see a systematic comparison between the rhythms of electronic communication in, let's say, Japanese society (re-



nowned for its efficiency) and the less accelerated Ghanaian bureaucracy. (Shortly before the Coronavirus lockdown, I visited a Ghanaian research institute. There were some newspapers in the common room. They were three months old.)

Clashes between temporal regimes are made visible when all in theory are synchronised, contemporary, here and now, at the same moment. When simultaneity is expected, differences between temporal rhythms are made immediately visible. For example, if an ambitious, efficient American scholar edits a book with a more laidback, but no less scholarly Portuguese colleague, she soon discovers how differently the two live in time. She sends him updates, place documents in their shared dropbox, reads drafts, stays in contact with publishers and sends out emails to contributors, and he responds... after some time. This kind of asynchronicity, as the reader will appreciate, foments conflict in addition to making temporal diversity visible.

When the Coronavirus pandemic brought the world to a sudden halt in March 2020, we were reminded of the importance of synchronisation in an economic system depending on just in time deliveries of goods and services. The supply chain is never stronger than its weakest link; the flow of logistics cannot be faster than its slowest node. Delays ramified, and recession was a fact. When the entire world is expected to be online simultaneously, we are constantly reminded that we are not perfectly synchronised. There are still gaps, delays and interludes.

Not everything accelerates in the era of the smartphone, not even in theory. Different parts of a culture change at different speeds, Margaret Mead wrote in a study of cultural change in Melanesia following the Second World War (Mead 1956). During the war, both Americans and Japanese came, on opposing sides of the frontline, with air cargo, clocks, electricity and a monetised economy. Certain parts of the Melanesian societies, accordingly, changed very fast. Other aspects, such as family organisation, religious values or cooking practices, may not have changed at all.

An important question to raise in this context concerns which parts of a culture remain relatively unaffected by the smartphone's inherent demand for simultaneity and accessibility. In large parts of the world it has become easier to transfer money, book restaurant tables, organise public meetings online or offline, coordinate the working day and stay in touch with children and spouses. At the same time, it is easy to see that certain important social institutions have not been deeply affected by the technology of simultaneity. Certain things can only be done slowly. A lecture at the university still lasts for 2x45 minutes, and there are still a few professors left who insist on using chalk and blackboard. Studies also indicate that on the whole, we do not seem to sleep less than before the smartphone either (Gershuny & Sullivan 2019).

The philosopher John Gray (2003) once said that when it came to science and technology, humanity had indisputably made great progress since antiq-

uity. However, regarding moral thought and ideas about the good life and the good society, it was as if Plato and Aristotle were our contemporaries. Development is neither unilinear nor universal; the term ‘progress’ is not always appropriate when we consider the great accelerations of modernity (Eriksen 2016). Food production can be accelerated perceptibly through the use of chemical fertiliser, hormone-enriched fodder and so on, but not indefinitely. A pregnancy still lasts for nine months. A tree still needs at least ten years to grow sufficiently large for a child to climb it. The fast rhythms required by the smartphone to justify its central place clashes with the slow rhythms regulating processes in the natural and physical world. As academics, we often experience the conflict between two temporal regimes placing contradictory demands on us: the pressure to produce more this year than last year, and the expectation that we should do a good and thorough job.

The clash between the immediacy, miniaturisation and compression of the smartphone, on the one hand, and the other, often slower rhythms in which we lead our lives, on the other hand, are not just expressed in differences between societies, but in the lives of individuals, as the example of the troubled academic shows. You may update your social media accounts several times a day, fill micro-gaps by communicating in real time within your primary network, and access facts in an instant while your dictionaries and bound encyclopedia are gathering dust. But perhaps you also cook slow Indian or Italian food, play the piano or listen to Bach; or you spend two hours a day in rush traffic while listening to slow media such as podcasts; or you water your plants, look after children or ageing parents, read Dickens and come to realise that learning how to think can only be achieved slowly, just as was the case before the electronic revolution.

The smartphone is synchronising in that it makes us all contemporaries, living in the same time-space which is disembodied from physical time and space. Precisely for this reason, it is also desynchronising – or, rather, it is a constant reminder that people will never be perfectly synchronised, since the disparate rhythms of life can never be uniform like marching soldiers or North Korean schoolchildren on the national day. Life is polyrhythmic, and the smartphone can only synchronise a few slices of it.

Статья поступила в редакцию 20 апреля 2020 г.

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**ВРЕМЯ: (А)СИНХРОННОСТЬ В ЭПОХУ СМАРТФОНОВ**

DOI: 10.17223/2312461X/28/3

**Аннотация.** Скорость имеет финансовое значение, она всегда была причиной инвестиций. Тем не менее многие инновации провалились, потому что большая скорость не всегда означает успех. Смартфон стремительно покоряет мир. Люди прекрасно управляли своей жизнью, пока их не колонизировал смартфон. Но тогда у жизни был другой темп. Наше социальное взаимодействие не сильно изменилось, но смартфон позволяет нам запускать несколько процессов одновременно. Смартфон сжимает и дестабилизирует время и пространство, но он также может расширить пространство и сделать время более гибким. Смартфон делает потребление, связь и производство более эффективными. Но он также может снизить темп. Скорость в разных странах отличается. Ускорение, раздробленное время, зависимость от скорости создают стресс. Это проблема богатых классов в перегретых странах. С другой стороны – медлительность и слишком большое количество простоев в наименее перегретых регионах. Вклад смартфона в экономику и общую скорость огромен. Но ускоряется не все: организация семьи, религиозные ценности, приготовление пищи могут вообще не меняться. Быстрые ритмы, требуемые смартфоном, конфликтуют с медленными ритмами в естественном и физическом мире. Жизнь полиритмична, и смартфон может синхронизировать только несколько ее фрагментов.

**Ключевые слова:** антропология времени, смартфон, пандемия, социальная синхронизация, антропология и глобализация