

Ethical Scholarship and Information Overload: On the Virtue of Slowing Down

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INTRODUCTION

As a philosopher of education, I think a lot about thinking. I reflect on what it means to engage ideas responsibly, to know, and to assert. I think about my identity as a scholar and the responsibilities that go along with it. What does thinking deeply and critically entail? When have I explored an issue thoroughly enough? I wonder when I really know something and how knowledge develops. Even more, I trouble over whether I have engaged a topic with sufficient attentiveness, care, and complexity, to then publish my own claims, publicly entering scholarly conversation. Issues such as these have ontological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions. What does it mean to contribute to academic conversations meaningfully and authentically? When I submit something for publication, do I really have something new or useful to contribute to the world, or am I publishing because I am supposed to, because that is the “product” I can offer, and can be assessed by, in an increasingly performance-driven world? Are there ethical dimensions to publication, including premature or excessive publication, that should concern me? Are there ways to increase the likelihood of creating scholarship that matters to people; that moves them, causes them to think, and ideally helps them to live richer and fuller lives?

In the not-too-distant past, academics worried about information scarcity, looking for gaps in the literature and research; in these spaces they could make their original marks. Yet today’s scholars hardly face this problem. Instead, we are often paralyzed by the unlimited amount of information available to us. When a simple Google search on any given topic yields hundreds of thousands of possible resources, we should be as concerned with information overload as we are with novelty. We should worry about the ways in which powerful ideas and conversations get lost amid the superficial, the redundant, and the rushed;

all likely outcomes when we publish for the sake of publishing. While most of us are loathe to admit to hasty publishing, we nonetheless sometimes engage in this because we've internalized that, when it comes to publication, more is always better. It is one thing for journalists, bloggers, and social media junkies to rush to enter the public discourse, yet what does it mean when scholars do this too?

In this essay I reflect on the question of what it means to do ethical scholarship in an age of information overload. Drawing from slow movements, I argue for the virtues of slowing down scholarly productivity as part of creating thoughtful, careful, and ethical scholarly communities. The ethics of slow involve focusing on quality, relationships, and meaningful contributions. Slowing down is a deliberate response to troubling epistemological and ontological realities. While academics are told to publish or perish, we are buried under the dizzying array of resources that we must weed through to even gain a cursory understanding of a topic. Professors are often assessed almost exclusively by output; the more they publish, the more accolades and grants they garner, and the better they secure their cases for tenure and promotion. While we gesture toward the importance of quality in scholarship, few administrators are concerned by faculty who publish too much, who given felt pressures, find ways to spin a potentially strong article into three or four publications, or who publish a slightly different (at best) version of the same research in multiple venues (even as I recognize we do often want to write to multiple audiences). And with the ever-growing number of outlets for research, from new journals and edited books, to encyclopedias and online resources, it has become easier to find a place for almost anything we write. Yet at the same time, pressures to publish cause ontological insecurity among many scholars, particularly when there is little evidence that anyone is even reading what some of us write. It is not uncommon for our works to be cited by only a handful of people, often our students and friends (if not us, citing our own work). While we question the meaningfulness of some of our contributions, along with our own professional worth and value, we should be equally concerned about how excessive (and sometimes opportunistic) publication might complicate critical thinking for future generations. Might less sometimes be more?

My argument in this essay is for the virtue of slowing down scholarly production. First, I describe the problem of information overload, both in terms of our ability to discern the consequential from the superficial, and in terms of the troubling habits of inquiry to which it leads. Second, I discuss ethical tensions related to knowledge production in a neoliberal climate. I illustrate how neoliberal values, such as productivity, speed, and competition, can lead to unhealthy scholarly practices and identities; namely, an entrepreneurial mindset towards engaging people and their ideas. Third, I draw from slow movements (e.g., slow food, slow democracy) to argue for the value of slower scholarship as an ethical stance toward inquiry. I describe the possibilities that slowing down opens up not only for individual psychological health, but also for intellectual community and vitality. I conclude by suggesting that given the nature of our work, philosophers of education are natural allies of slow movements and in the call for slower scholarship. This is because a big part of what we do is to take a step back from taken-for-granted assumptions, look at issues from multiple angles and perspectives, reconsider and reflect, and ultimately, when we do our best work, engage deeply rather than superficially.

INFORMATION OVERLOAD

There is no doubt that modern technologies have made accessing information faster, easier, and more convenient than ever before. Research is now often synonymous with searching the Internet, and with the lightning speed of most Internet connections, this means we can have mountains of information at our fingertips instantaneously. Writing about living in an era of information overload, Kristin Luker asserts “that the extent of information available has begun to overwhelm the human capacity to process it.”¹ With the myriad choices available to read, listen to, or watch, it becomes hard to even know where to begin research. Is it any wonder that so many of us secretly read Wikipedia entries to beef up our understanding of something, if not learn it for the first time, even as we are embarrassed that we can’t already talk intelligently about poststructuralism, humanism, or the ideas of Foucault? A simple search of “slow movements” on Google yields over 92,000,000 results. How is anyone

supposed to reasonably sort through that morass?

Perhaps surprisingly, the sense that we are overloaded by information is not really a new phenomenon, despite scholarly approaches that presume information scarcity.² Writing in *The Atlantic* about how academics should spend their time in the aftermath of the Second World War (once they were not needed to apply scientific thinking directly to warfare), Vannevar Bush suggested that researchers should turn their attention to creating the technology to make more accessible “our bewildering store of knowledge.”³ While he no doubt would be pleased by our current capacity to digitize, catalog, and access information, prodigious rates of production are compromising our ability to understand, assess, and use all this new “knowledge.” Over seventy years ago, Bush worried that information glut was bogging down scholars, who in turn were “staggered by the findings and conclusions of thousands of other workers – conclusions which ... [they] cannot find time to grasp, much less remember, as they appear.”⁴ The even greater catastrophe, he lamented, was the fact that “truly significant attainments become lost in the mass of the inconsequential.”⁵ As any of us who do research in the current era know, weeding the meaningful and the compelling from the overwhelming volume of sources we might consult is no easy task.

One of the most significant problems connected to information overload is it leads to problematic habits of inquiry. I’m sure most of us are familiar with all-too-common random and haphazard research strategies: picking a few broad search terms; plugging them into Google; printing off a pile of articles that are freely available among the first few pages of hits; quickly skimming those articles (perhaps cherry-picking some quotes that sound smart, never worrying too much about the context around them); formulating one’s understanding largely based on reading only the abstract, introduction, and conclusion carefully; and then making claims, often surprisingly confidently. Troubling this trend, Andrea Schlesinger argues that the abundance offered by the Internet leads to superficial inquiry, and results in poor “habits of mind characterized by a dangerous lack of discernment.”⁶ In a culture of “information drive-by,” we lose a sense that research requires work: time to read, synthesize, analyze,

question, connect, deliberate, write, edit, solicit feedback, and collaborate. It also requires careful, responsible, ethical engagement with others and their ideas.

One of the antidotes to poor habits of inquiry is to teach students how to engage people and ideas with thoroughness and care, and hold scholars accountable to doing so as well. Indeed, this is our responsibility, since as David Levy suggests, universities are in many ways “our culture’s think tanks – the one place in the culture, supposedly, where deep study and reflection are not only sanctioned, but encouraged and taught.”⁷⁷ As we help students learn to slow down, carefully attend to ideas, and identify well-researched scholarship, we ought to at the same time reflect on our own scholarly habits. For many of us, we should also be slowing down our pace of scholarly production in service to more careful engagement with existing scholarship and more meaningful contributions. It is unethical to continue to add, indiscriminately, to information overload. Moreover, slowing down might also address some of the ontological insecurity many of us feel in the face of the culture of speed in the academy.

Ontological insecurity occurs when we lose sight of meaningfulness in our activities, and when the push for quantity trumps thoughtful consideration of quality. Stephen Ball writes that focusing on outcomes leads to uncertainty “about the reasons for actions.”⁷⁸ For example, do we publish “because it is important, because we believe in it, because it is worthwhile? Or is it being done ultimately because it will be measured or compared? It will make us look good!”⁷⁹ Thinking about ontological forms of professional insecurity, I am curious how many of us look at some of the things we have published over our careers and wonder if they really mattered; if we published them because we actually had something important to contribute, or, if we found something to say and somewhere to say it because we knew it was required. Why do so many of us think we could and should be publishing more, even as it often means we are reading less, working in isolation, and spending less time on other aspects of our work that may bring us more joy and sense of purpose, like teaching and service? Clearly some (if not many) of our choices are in reaction to systemic pressures. The growth of a neoliberal audit culture has meant quantity, which is easy to measure, often seems more important than quality. Indeed, quantity is typically

rewarded (in promotion decisions, merit pay, prestige), while we rarely ever talk about notions of sufficiency or even superfluosity. We almost never hear anyone encouraging us to aim for less, or to reach “for the minimum numbers necessary to achieve important benchmarks,” as part of focusing on quality and scholarly relationships.¹⁰ No doubt neoliberal values related to productivity, efficiency, and competition have not only fueled information overload, but also created complications, if not disincentives, for engaging in ethical scholarship.

ETHICS AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

How did we get to this place where many of us are writing furtively and (however consciously) trying to publish as much as we possibly can? A neoliberal approach to scholarship creates unethical practices in terms of knowledge production. Why work slowly and deliberately on one potentially valuable contribution to a scholarly field when it might look better if we whip off four articles on the same topic instead? I realize that in some contexts quality really does matter, and haste is discouraged, but I suspect they are becoming rarer than we realize. The ways in which institutions of higher education have increasingly adopted marketplace values and neoliberal logics are familiar.¹¹ Students are now clients, the humanities are on the decline, while technical majors that lead to specific jobs are growing, and the research that most occurs is that which is funded, often by private sources with a vested interest in the outcomes of that research. We now talk about the “knowledge economy,” as if the only purposes for engaging ideas are instrumental and the only way we can measure their value is quantitatively: research dollars generated, numbers of citations, publication impact factors. Rarely are larger purposes for education—the cultivation of habits of empathy, imagination, compassion, and democracy, for example—discussed. Magda Lewis paints a troubling picture of contemporary students who assess the worth of their education not in terms of their own development as thinkers and community members, but in light of whether their credentials can easily be parlayed into a high-paying job. She argues that “the language of the market place imagines not an intellectually informed and politically disquieted student ready to grapple with the challenges of the status quo,” but instead someone

who considers knowledge “as a commodity to be acquired, to be hoarded and ultimately to be bartered in the marketplace of salaries and prestige.”¹²

Just as students now tend to come to higher education dwelling on the instrumental usefulness of their degrees, a culture obsessed with performance narrowly defined leads to a similarly “unhealthy subjectivity among academics,” as we are implicitly (and sometimes overtly) pushed to refashion our “subjectivities in alignment with the values of individualism, entrepreneurialism and market competition.”¹³ Practically, this means we obsess about quantity; overstate and oversell the value of our work (especially when the carrot of merit pay, however meager, is dangled); tailor our research interests towards that which can get funded; consider research funding as an end in and of itself; see our colleagues as competitors (whose success threatens our own) rather than collaborators within a community of scholars; and ultimately learn that we can, and should “become more than we were and be better than others – we can be ‘outstanding,’ ‘successful,’ ‘above the average’.”¹⁴ Entrepreneurial scholars embrace values of competition, productivity, and performativity, which are certainly “very different from the older ethics of professional judgement and co-operation.”¹⁵

So what are the ethical challenges we face as scholars in a culture obsessed with easily measurable outputs, where “more is better” is rarely questioned? Epistemologically, it is hard to tell if we are deepening knowledge or contributing to confusion. Our relationships to others and their ideas shift when we focus on outputs. No longer do we have time to carefully and responsibly engage other scholars and their work, nor do we seek substantive feedback from others as we develop our ideas. Instead, too often we read quickly only sources that support what we already believe (we need to be expedient after all), pick out passages to cite that bolster our ideas without carefully attending to context, string together long lists of citations as part of illustrating our scholarly acumen (whether we have read them or not), write to increasingly narrow and specialized audiences, and submit ideas before trying them out with colleagues. In contrast to knowledge as a public good, it becomes a commodity shared by specialists who read, react to, and publish responses to each other’s work, often operating within relatively small circles of scholarly familiarity.

Pressures to produce also complicate our ability to develop healthy and ethical academic identities. Consider, for example, what we might *not* be doing when we are overly focused on producing: meeting with students and helping them to work through their ideas, updating our teaching materials so we stay current and relevant, taking service responsibilities seriously, sharing our research with broader publics, reading scholarship that is not directly related to our own, participating in social movements, and providing feedback on other's work. All of these activities help us to develop ethical relationships with others, that is, relationships where we treat people as if they and their thoughts matter, and we believe that it is important to engage them with care, respect, and attentiveness. Balance, responsiveness, and collegiality are at odds with a culture of speed. Alternatively, slowing down, as Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber argue in their popular manifesto *The Slow Professor*, "is about allowing room for others and otherness. And in that sense, slowing down is an ethical choice."¹⁶ Slowing down supports a vision of more genuine scholarly community, which involves working with others to make ideas matter, not competing with others for artificially limited rewards.

THE VIRTUES OF SLOW

The call for slow scholarship is part of a larger cluster of slow movements, the most well-known of these being slow food. The slow food movement began in response to the rapid growth of fast food as the increasing default by families feeling harried and over-extended, always rushing every aspect of their lives.¹⁷ Slowing down in this context means taking time to prepare food, using fresh and local ingredients whenever possible, unplugging during meals, conversing and connecting, and restoring pleasure to a necessary daily ritual. Other slow movements followed: slow cities, slow democracy, slow medicine, slow parenting. Importantly, movements towards slow are not necessarily about doing less, or about being lazy, or even about pace; rather, they are about occupying and controlling time differently. Carl Honoré describes slow as a philosophy and way of being. In contrast to fast life, characterized by words like "busy, controlling, aggressive, hurried, analytical, stressed, superficial, [and]

impatient,” slow reflects a different, more ethical orientation toward the world: “calm, careful, receptive, still, intuitive, unhurried, patient, reflective, quality-over-quantity. It is about making real and meaningful connections – with people, culture, work, food, everything.”¹⁸ Slowness involves living mindfully and being present with others; it entails using our time in ways that we deem worthwhile and meaningful, and not simply to respond to perceived external pressures.

A central idea shared by all slow movements is a desire to take more ownership over time. Too many of us live highly-stressful, anxiety-ridden, over-extended, and distracted lives, struggling to keep up with the myriad ways in which we are bombarded with information, stimulation, and expectation from every direction. In reflecting on his own Internet-addicted life in a recent *New York Magazine* article, Andrew Sullivan powerfully laments that he “used to be a human being,” yet his obsession to stay up with information, to respond to social media, to publish a daily blog, and to churn out his own thoughts, left him broken – isolated, in poor health, suffering, and feeling out of control.¹⁹ His story is familiar in academic circles. Under pressure to complete so many different personal and professional tasks in any given day, we do none of them well, self-medicating in all sorts of ways to keep up, becoming less human in the process. In moments of lucidity, we recognize the madness of always trying to do more to stay afloat, while hoping to get ahead, and face existential crises of worth. If nobody ever cites a paper I publish, what does that say about me? Honoré suggests that “inevitably, a life of hurry can become superficial. When we rush, we skim the surface, and fail to make real connections with the world or other people.”²⁰ Couple this with a neoliberal output culture, and we begin to value products over processes, publications over people, neglecting “all the things that bind us together and make life worth living – community, family, friendship.”²¹ We also compromise the quality and usefulness of the knowledge we produce.

Much of the writing about slowing down is about cultivating life balance and psychological health. It is about mindfulness, contemplation, relationships, and sanity. It is often coupled with discussions of self-care and intentional,

joyful living. While the individual benefits of slowing down are notable, I am particularly interested in the possibilities opened up when we seriously consider slowing down as scholars. In some ways doing so is a deliberate form of resistance to neoliberal values, and concurrently a way to imbue our scholarship with greater care, thoughtfulness, and purpose. Berg and Seeber write that “slowing down is about asserting the importance of contemplation, connectedness, fruition, and complexity ... It gives meaning to thinking about scholarship as a community, not a competition.”²² Focusing on quality rather than quantity is an ethical choice. Slowing down opens up spaces for scholars to spend more time working with colleagues, developing ideas, engaging broad publics, reading, listening, and providing feedback. Genuine inquiry should be time-consuming, and should involve experimentation, risk-taking, and creativity, all of which can be antithetical to an output mentality. Given that universities “ought to be ... institutions committed to the cultivation of the deepest forms of thinking of which human beings are capable,”²³ we should slow down enough to be as deliberate, reflective, and present as possible in our work and with others. Slowness is not “a good in itself,” as Rebecca Solnit suggests, but it is valuable “because of all that it makes room for, the things that don’t get measured and can’t be bought,”²⁴ including awe, mystery, subtlety, wonder, pleasure, and purpose. It makes space for academic community. Ultimately, slowing down is an ethical, ontological, and epistemological stance toward creating careful and purposeful scholarship at a time when we are swimming amid information overload and a rhetoric of more is always better.

FINAL THOUGHTS: SLOW PHILOSOPHY

One of my purposes in writing about the virtues of slowing down (the irony of publishing a piece that is at least, in part, about publishing less notwithstanding) is to be provocative. It is to encourage us to think about what we do, the academic realities that we help to make and remake through our performances, and what it means to be purposeful in our choices related to how we spend our time. Slowing down is both for our personal sanity and for the intellectual vitality of our fields. It serves none of us well when we value

quantity above quality; when we are careless about teaching, service, program development, and responsibilities to others; or when we think opportunistically about scholarship (though I do recognize graduate students and faculty on the tenure track face a unique set of pressures to publish and market themselves). In an era of information overload, we ought to be reflective about how, when, and where we add our voices and contributions, and in what forms. Slowing down, for example, might mean publishing less in scholarly journals and using the time this could free up to make our insights more accessible to wider audiences, “amplifying the potential impact of our scholarship rather than moving on to the next product that ‘counts’ to administrators.”²⁵ It might mean collaborating more, or spending more time mentoring students and junior colleagues. It might mean workshoping our ideas before sending them out for review, and committing to writing developmental reviews of others’ work. It certainly means greater potential for balance, sanity, meaningfulness, and purpose.

The call to slow down ought to resonate with philosophers. How often do we metaphorically encourage others to stop and think: to read attentively, ask deep questions, and explore deliberately and openly? Philosophy entails disrupting normal routines, looking at ideas from different perspectives, and engaging complexity. This careful and reflective thinking takes time, the very thing that so many of us feel eludes us, and does indeed elude us if we are seduced by the enticements of the fast world. In the end, slow, in the context I am calling for, is tantamount to careful, mindful, reflective, communal, and deliberate. Philosophical thinking requires us to slow down. Slowing down is good for us as individuals, colleagues, and knowledge producers. Slow does not mean idle; rather, it provides a space for meaningfulness and for genuine inquiry. This is precisely why Harvard Dean, Harry Lewis, admonishes new students to slow down and get more by doing less: “Empty time is not a vacuum to be filled: it is the thing that enables the other things on your mind to be creatively rearranged, like the empty square in the 4x4 puzzle which makes it possible to move the other 15 pieces around.”²⁶ Time is what makes meaningful knowledge production and responsible academic life possible. Slowing down so as to occupy academic time mindfully is thus an ethical choice.

1 Kristin Luker, *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences: Research in an Age of Info-Glut* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 9.

2 In describing the challenges of doing a literature review in our contemporary era, Luker (see note 1) contrasts the information scarcity of the past with information overload in the present.

3 Vannevar Bush, "As We May Think," *The Atlantic* (July, 1945), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1945/07/as-we-may-think/303881/>.

4 *Ibid.*, paragraph 5.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Andrea Batista Schlesinger, *The Death of Why: The Decline of Questioning and the Future of Democracy* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2009), 61.

7 David M. Levy, "No Time to Think: Reflections on Information Technology and Contemplative Scholarship," *Ethics and Information Technology* 9, no. 4 (2007): 237-249, 247.

8 Stephen J. Ball, "The Teacher's Soul and the Terrors of Performativity," *Journal of Educational Policy* 18, no. 2 (2003): 215-228, 220.

9 *Ibid.*, 220.

10 Aiming for less is what Alison Mountz, Anne Bonds, Becky Mansfield, Jenna Loyd, Jennifer Hyndman, Margaret Walton-Roberts, Ranu Basu, Risa Whitson, Roberta Hawkins, Trina Hamilton, and Winifred Curren, call for in "For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University," *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 14, no. 4 (2015): 1235-1259, 1253. Mountz et al. argue that we should challenge the culture of performativity and embrace saner, and slower, research norms, suggesting that we should think in terms of being good enough, not perfect.

11 See, for example, Henry A. Giroux, *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2014); Magda Lewis, "More Than Meets the Eye: The Under Side of the Corporate Culture in Higher Education and Possibilities for a New Feminist Critique," *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 21, no. 1 (2005), 7-25; and Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy*

- Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).
- 12 Lewis, "More than Meets the Eye," 17.
- 13 Jon P. Mitchell, "Let our Profs Be Profs," *ANUAC*, 5, no. 1 (2016): 87-90, 87.
- 14 Ball, "The Teacher's Soul," 219.
- 15 Ibid., 218.
- 16 Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 59.
- 17 Carl Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004).
- 18 Ibid., 14-15.
- 19 Andrew Sullivan, "I Used to Be a Human Being," *New York Magazine* (September 18, 2016), <http://nymag.com/selectall/2016/09/andrew-sullivan-technology-almost-killed-me.html>.
- 20 Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness*, 9.
- 21 Ibid., 9.
- 22 Berg & Seeber, *The Slow Professor*, 57.
- 23 Levy, "No Time to Think," 248.
- 24 Rebecca Solnit, "Finding Time," *Orion Magazine* (September/October 2007), <https://orionmagazine.org/article/a-fistful-of-time/>, paragraph 10.
- 25 Mountz, et al., "For Slow Scholarship," 1245.
- 26 Harry R. Lewis, "Slow Down: Getting More out of Harvard by Doing Less" (2004), <http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/harrylewis/files/slow-down2004.pdf>, 5.