

NO TIME TO THINK

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- BILL MOYERS

The Menace of
Media Speed
and the 24-hour
News Cycle

HOWARD ROSENBERG & CHARLES S. FELDMAN

PULITZER PRIZE - WINNER

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HOWARD ROSENBERG
CHARLES S. FELDMAN



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Contents

Prologue ix

Acknowledgments xi

Chapter 1 “Why Is Speed So Bad?” 1

Chapter 2 Two Revolutions: French and Mexican 33

Chapter 3 All the News before It Happens 45

Chapter 4 Blog On! 67

Chapter 5 A New Protestant Reformation: Citizen Journalists to the Rescue 90

Chapter 6 “In-Depth Instant Results” 113

Chapter 7 Desperate Newspapers Play Catch-Up 133

Chapter 8 Mr. Inside and Mr. Outside: A Conversation 151

Chapter 9 What If? Scenarios, Dark and Darker 180

Chapter 10 Five Grams News, Ten Grams Speculation 189

Afterword 205

Bibliography 213

Index 215

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I'd like to dedicate this book to my mother, Martin Jay, and Erik
Carlson.

—**Charles S. Feldman**

For Carol, Kirsten, and the late great Margaret, Claire, and Getzel.

—**Howard Rosenberg**

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Prologue

A tale of two realities . . .

It is the best of times; it is the worst of times.

It is the age of media wisdom; it is the age of media foolishness.

It is the epoch of belief in technology; it is the epoch of incredulity in technology.

It is the season of light; it is the season of darkness, of 24-hour news and schmooze, of talk radio histrionics, of jerks and knee-jerks.

It is the spring of hope; it is the winter of despair, of newspapers collapsing like the U.S. dollar; of virtual unreality and YouTube, YouNews, and Facebook sprawl; of phone-photo and home-video hordes, of high-tech gizmos galore; of key-stroking masses and Internet cascades of citizen journalists ordained as democratizing saviors liberating society from the tyranny of competence and expertise.

We have before us, at our fingertips, all possibilities; we have before us bloggers whipping up hyperbole like meringue, and hyperventilating news anchors, ad-libbing reporters, instant nonexperts and hair-trigger pundits shooting from the hip with bombast blazing on the Fox News Channel, CNN and MSNBC.

We have before us stirring high-definition pictures of global human wreckage that stamp our brains with the bloodbaths of war and terrorism, as they should; we have before us the manipulative, pulsating theater of live TV, screaming headlines, gimmicky

instant polls, rumor, innuendo, opinion and speculation . . . along with Paris Hilton, Perez Hilton, and Britney Spears redux.

We have before us amazing news technology and fantastic speed; we have before us technology washing over us like a tsunami, velocity trumping veracity, frenzied pack reporting and fiery crashes waiting to happen as news zooms out of control around slippery hairpin curves on perilous fast tracks.

We have before us, warns veteran TV journalist Dave Marash, news and faux news traveling faster than “the speed of thought.”

We have before us potential disaster.

Acknowledgments

It began for us at bustling Art's Deli in Studio City, where we first hashed over the concept for *No Time to Think* (this was before it acquired a subtitle), and where we would return many times to incubate, discuss, and shape the book that was to occupy us for more than a year. If not our L.A. office, this was our unofficial home base. Thank you, Art's, for that, and for the potato latkes, too.

Like most books, this one was a collaborative effort, with many fingers in the pie.

A standing ovation is due the many souls who bravely submitted to our interviews, including those who did not share our hypothesis about the perils of media speed and Internet excess.

Locating some of our interviewees took a bit of effort. Assisting greatly in that endeavor were Jennifer Siebens, London bureau chief for CBS News; Taylor Ansen and Josh and Julie Dorkin, whose Web wisdom and research also proved enormously helpful. Greg Woolway gave us valuable Internet assistance, too. And Russ Poldrack of UCLA was generous with his advice.

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CHAPTER 1

“Why Is Speed So Bad?”

They stumble that run fast.

—William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

They wouldn't have *him* to kick around anymore.

Two weeks before leaving office in 2007, British Prime Minister Tony Blair aimed a withering attack at his nation's news media. Taking no prisoners, Blair charged that journalists had created a supercharged atmosphere driven by 24-hour news technology and an emphasis on “impact” and “heat.” He said they stressed “sensation above all else.”

He declared, “We are all being dragged down by the way media and public life interact.” He equated news media to a “feral beast, just tearing people and reputations to bits.”

Blair claimed that loss of audiences by traditional newspapers and evening news broadcasts to 24-hour cable news and the Internet created an environment that required media to increasingly compete for attention and forced politicians into a mode of perpetual reaction that served no good purpose.

He said that when he campaigned for election in 1997, “we took an issue a day.” But “in 2005, we had to have one for the morning, another for the afternoon, and by the evening the agenda had already moved on.”

The prime minister noted that nuances become casualties in news coverage that paints issues in black and white. In the shrill, hyperbolic vocabulary of “mediaspeak,” he added, a setback becomes “a policy in tatters,” mere criticism a “savage attack.”

The relationship between public life and the news media “is now damaged in a manner that requires repair,” he continued. “The damage saps . . . confidence and self-belief . . . it reduces our capacity to make the right decisions, in the right spirit, for our future.”

Blair did not come away unscathed from his assault on media; the counterattack was swift and understandably harsh. Skeptics dismissed his remarks as self-serving payback for aggressive media investigations of scandals in his government and their criticism of his unwavering support for President George W. Bush and the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Indeed, inescapable here was the irony of Blair, the ardent media spinner, now outraged by media spin; Blair, the maestro of manipulation, now complaining bitterly of being manipulated by media.

Yet Blair was on to something as he prepared to leave 10 Downing Street. His hypocrisy notwithstanding, the much-maligned 24-hour news cycle had already shrunk to something like 24 minutes by the time he delivered his blistering critique of UK media, and some of his remarks had bulls-eyed a deserving target. In his crosshairs—transcending nations’ borders, partisan rhetoric, and the usual back-and-forth between the outgoing Blair and his critics—was something that continues to beguile and bedevil U.S. media at least as much as it does their counterparts on the other side of the Atlantic.

That something is speed.

Reckless speed.

The speed of media pushing their pedals to the metal at any cost while racing blindly into today’s new-age data stream.

Blair’s farewell flip-off—regarding pressures on newsmakers to respond to the accelerated news cycle—was reinforced in the

United States five days before the 2008 Texas Primary and Caucuses. The occasion was Democratic presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton’s attention-grabbing “dangerous world” TV ad that aired in Texas at 7 A.M. It pictured kiddies slumbering peacefully as a dangerous crisis broke, and a voice declaring, “It’s 3 A.M. and your children are safe and asleep. Who do you want answering the phone?” Last scene: It’s Clinton who has answered—calm, confident, in command.

A guns-blazing assault on her Democratic foe Barack Obama’s slender foreign policy credentials, the Clinton spot immediately rocketed across the blogosphere, followed later that day by a superswift rebuttal from Obama’s campaign.

By noon Obama’s people had whipped up a 30-second response ad that was quickly sped to broadcast and cable networks and uploaded to YouTube—*before* that evening’s newscasts. This was significant, for as Brian Stelter wrote in the *New York Times*, “This may be the year politics finally moves at the speed of the Internet.”

He was right. Created to make news, Obama’s catch-up counterattack was a response not only to Clinton, but more essentially to the media’s own stunning pace that, in many ways, had already been shaping the 2007–2008 presidential election campaign.

Nor is obsession with speed exclusive to U.S. media. As Blair noted, Brits, too, are bonkers for it. In his book *Flat Earth News* prominent UK journalist Nick Davies describes the manic, high-speed “churnalism”—a hybrid of churn and journalism—that he says has overtaken news websites in his country, notably that of the BBC. The clash of traditional journalism and this new “churnalism” echoes loudly in the official BBC guide distributed to online staff, he writes. “On the one hand, it urges: ‘Your story MUST be accurate, impartial, balanced and uphold the values of BBC News. . . . NEVER publish anything that you do not understand, that is speculation or inadequately sourced.’ And then, as if there were no contradiction at all,” Davies adds, the guide continues: ‘Get the story up as fast as you can. . . . We encourage a sense of urgency—we want to be first.’”

The message? Like the all-powerful wiz pushing levers behind a curtain in *The Wizard of Oz*, speed is calling the shots.

Why should anyone bloody well care?

For one thing, “it is absolutely true, and anybody who says otherwise is slinging bullshit, that every mistake that’s made in the news business is made because of speed,” says Keith McAllister, former executive vice president and managing editor for CNN’s national newsgathering.

For another, the faster-and-faster crowd is gaining ever more stature with the public, with surveys showing that most Americans (especially those under 30) have lost faith in traditional media and prefer the Internet as a primary news source.

For another, media and inaccuracy, after a flirting through the ages, are now in a steamy lip lock. “Even when the first read (of a story) is not always true,” notes Washington, D.C.–based talk radio host Bill Press, “that doesn’t stop it from spreading like wildfire.”

Examples abound, as when a powerful politician was cut down prematurely by the Fox News Channel in runaway madcap overdrive. It began on the morning of March 10, 2008 after the *New York Times* website reported that New York Governor Eliot Spitzer—a former hooker-busting prosecutor—had been linked to a Washington, D.C.–based prostitution ring.

The 24-hour news channels immediately pounced and began speculating wildly about Spitzer and his future. But it was Fox and its anchor Shephard Smith who blew like Vesuvius. The sequence began with Smith quoting “sources” that Spitzer was expected to resign “just minutes from now.” Then came Smith’s announcement that Spitzer *had* resigned during a brief televised statement he’d made to the media. “He came in, he resigned and that was it,” said the ever-emphatic Smith, who then began speculating with his guests about what the administration of Spitzer’s successor, Lieutenant Governor David Patterson, would be like. Very relevant, very incisive—and above all, very fast.

Except that Spitzer had not resigned.

Minutes later Smith corrected himself, blaming the mistake on two sources, one a Fox executive. Some 45 minutes after that, a Fox headline reported, “*N.Y. Gov. Eliot Spitzer Expected to Resign Later Today.*” It was another misfire, as was Fox’s entire push-it-out-fast-and-faster approach to the story that morning

(actually, the governor would wait two days before announcing he would step down), which also included reporting that Spitzer had been “indicted.”

Also not true, Greta Van Susteren, the attorney who hosts Fox’s *On the Record* legal series, told Shephard later. After quickly thumbing through legal documents that had been released to the media minutes earlier, she warned, “I think we gotta really dial back on this, Shep.”

Dialing back is not in the electronic media’s DNA, especially when it comes to sex scandals that threaten the high and mighty. The speed of that coverage shoves offenders out the door—witness the instant vaporization of Spitzer’s political career because of that alleged tryst with a high-priced call girl. With little time to regroup, today’s scandalized politicians are usually gone like *that*, so fast does news travel in the Internet era. That speed “forces [them] to make decisions more quickly. You can’t sit back and reflect,” Harvard University lecturer Tom Fiedler told the *Washington Post*.

Nor is reflection usually a media priority when reporting celebrity news. Take the online hysteria and sheer pandemonium that greeted the death of young actor Heath Ledger on January 22, 2008, at once a minuscule footnote of history and microcosm of the challenges brought on by new media.

Stories of Ledger’s death that first raced across the Internet were riddled with confusion and errors, with the celebrity news website TMZ and even the *New York Times* City blog, for example, both posting the erroneous tidbit that he had died in the New York apartment of actress Mary-Kate Olsen. It turned out both had been misinformed by a spokesman for the New York Police Department, and they rushed to update the story after the spokesman corrected himself.

“But here’s the problem,” David Sarno wrote afterward in the *Los Angeles Times*, comparing media generations. “Stories have never arrived to the world fully formed or vetted. Journalists have generally had hours—not minutes or seconds—to craft a story from the blast wave of facts and factoids that come in the wake of a bombshell. What people are seeing now is an old-fashioned process—reporting—as it unfolds in real time.”

Did he say “minutes or seconds” to vet a story? Journalists might as well walk a slippery high wire in snowshoes.

Tech-minded new media do it all the time, their sped-up news cycle often granting urgency and credibility even to the silliest of rumors and half-truths. Take the Great Toilet Paper Flap that that centered on popular Grammy-winning singer/songwriter Sheryl Crow.

In the spring of 2007, the planet became intimately acquainted with Crow’s preference for sanitary cleanliness. At least, it thought it had when Crow, an outspoken environmentalist, was widely quoted as saying that, in the interest of conservation, people should use just one square sheet of toilet paper for each bathroom visit. From this spark, the Crow story ignited and spread across 24-hour news channels and the Internet faster than a wind-swept wildfire.

One very minor detail, hardly worth mentioning, really. It wasn’t true.

Not that Crow hadn’t made the remark; but she’d said it as a lark. As she told *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, “It was always a joke. It was part of a shtick. It was part of a comedy routine that Laurie (Laurie David) and I were doing on the ‘Stop Global Warming College Tour.’”

Nonetheless, as she was about to fly out of Washington, D.C., the next day, Crow said she saw the following headline on a CNN monitor in the airport: *Sheryl Crow has proposed that we legislate toilet paper to one square.*

A better idea: Flush impulsive media.

Contrary to Malcolm Gladwell’s best-selling *Blink* treatise on the validity of first glances and snap judgments, instant response is not necessarily wise response. Plus, the stakes become greater—quickness at times leading to quackery—in a higher- and higher-tech society that urges us to move faster. Not such a good idea.

“The collective pressures of technology and the marketplace have ratcheted up the expectations that we can think at the same pace we can press the send button,” writes syndicated columnist Ellen Goodman. “We are expected to make sense of information as fast as we can communicate it.”

But expectations and reality don’t necessarily coincide, especially when the issues before us contain subtleties or intricacies

easily missed at first glance. “Reality demands that you pay attention to both complexity and detail and nuance, and that takes the time in the telling,” says Dave Marash, formerly an anchor for the English-language Al Jazeera network in Washington, D.C. “Also, there has to be cognitive time for the viewer to absorb detailed, complex nuanced information,” adds Marash, whose pedigree also features years of reporting for *Nightline* on ABC. “So you have to pace stories so that they can be ingested efficiently. Understanding complex and rapidly changing events . . . cannot be done in an instant.”

Speed-caused missteps are not exclusive to journalism, of course. Was speed a culprit when the U.S. Supreme Court stiff-armed Democrat Al Gore and handed the 2000 presidential election to Republican George Bush? Jeffrey Toobin hints as much in *The Nine: Inside the Secret World of the Supreme Court*.

Toobin, an attorney and CNN regular, writes that historically the High Court nearly always denies litigants’ requests for speedy treatment. “But in the matter of the election of 2000, the justices departed from their usual roles. There was no order, no regularity, no procedure. The justices decided them on the fly.” Most of the justices were not even in the building on Wednesday, November 22, he adds, “so their clerks and the Court staff had to track them down to give them the Republicans’ briefs. Many of the law clerks had already left for the Thanksgiving holidays, so the decision on Bush’s cert petition [writ of certiorari, which asks the High Court to reverse a lower-court decision] went to the justices alone. And they did not wait to hear from the Democrats to issue their decision.”

You can just about pick your field, including government, where speed makes a difference, often for the worse. “I’ve never heard a decision made on the run or off the cuff or quick that’s better than one that’s thoughtful,” says Marlin Fitzwater, who ran press relations for presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. “I’ve never heard a first response better than a considered one.”

That also applies to the medical field, where mistakes potentially do the ultimate damage: they can kill. “The majority of errors (in medicine) are due to flaws in physician thinking, not technical mistakes,” oncologist Jerome Groopman writes in his collection of essays *How Doctors Think*.

“In order to think well, especially in hectic circumstances,” Groopman notes, “you need to slow things down to avoid making cognitive errors.” He cites “cognitive cherry-picking,” a shortcut in thinking by doctors who judge their current cases by past cases, latching on to a diagnosis by selecting only those symptoms that confirm their original hypothesis, while ignoring contradictory ones. This “skewed reading of the map,” Groopman says, “confirms your mistaken assumption that you have reached your destination.”

Edward H. Tenner, a Princeton University historian of technology, calls this “the bias of convenience,” which closely resembles the “law of least effort” theory set forth in 1935 by mathematical linguist George K. Sips, who believed that people tend to be satisfied by answers that are the easiest to obtain. So much so that they are unlikely to pursue other options.

And that’s especially the case, we can safely assume, if they are in a rush.

The parallels of this speed-driven “cognitive cherry-picking” with journalism are especially striking. “There’s a cynical expression—‘too good to check,’” says Ron Nessen, who was an NBC correspondent before becoming President Gerald Ford’s press secretary. “Some stories, you don’t want to spend too much time checking because you don’t want to find out you’re wrong.”

In one high-profile example of speed-driven perilous reporting, “the rush to air” without sufficient probing was behind a later-discredited *60 Minutes Wednesday* report on CBS in 2004, according to the findings of an independent panel. Relying on memos it said were authentic, the report claimed President George W. Bush had skirted some of his duties during his earlier National Guard service and that a commander felt pressured to sugarcoat Bush’s record.

“In retrospect, we shouldn’t have used the documents,” then CBS News president Andrew Heyward acknowledged at the time, “and we clearly should have spent more time and more effort to authenticate them.” The blunder forced Dan Rather, who fronted and initially defended the report, to relinquish his *CBS Evening News* anchor job earlier than he had planned.

More recently, ABC News legal reporter Jan Crawford Greenburg speculated in her blog that U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader

Ginsburg was ready for retirement after she was seen taking a long time rising from her seat after a hearing. That thesis hurtled through the blogosphere before *New York Times* Supreme Court reporter Linda Greenhouse put it to rest, reporting that Ginsburg had gotten up slowly because she couldn't find a shoe she had kicked under the table.

In a higher-profile case of blog bungling driven by extreme haste, reporter Ben Smith's 2007 story about the candidacy of John Edwards briefly flamed before crashing thunderously on Politico, a well-regarded Washington, D.C.-based website staffed largely by migrants from traditional news organizations. Smith, a former *New York Daily News* staffer, reported that presidential hopeful Edwards would announce at noon that day his plans to suspend campaigning for the Democratic nomination because his wife, Elizabeth, had suffered a recurrence of cancer. Preferring not to wait until the news actually broke, Politico posted it—“EDWARDS TO SUSPEND CAMPAIGN”—on its front page shortly after 11 A.M.—less than an hour before a scheduled press conference with the candidate and his wife.

Cyberspace linkage immediately toggled on, and within seconds Smith's blog was headlined on the widely monitored *Drudge Report* website, then picked up with varying qualifiers by CNN, the Fox News Channel, and MSNBC, which gave it a “breaking news” marquee. NBC News Anchor Brian Williams told viewers, “We will know more just a few moments from now when we hear it from the source, but reports have been circulating all morning long that Senator Edwards is, indeed, about to end or suspend his campaign for president.” Meanwhile, Smith was being interviewed about his “scoop” by three radio stations—and no wonder, for it was a big story, an important story.

And oh, yes—a wrong story.

Things were moving swiftly, for shortly after Politico posted Smith's story a disclaimer came in from the Edwards camp that the website added to the story but without changing the headline (something the *Drudge Report* site did do after learning of the error).

Smith acknowledged his mistake in another Politico piece posted later that evening. “I've done much of my reporting on blogs and have developed an instinct to let my readers know

whatever I know as soon as I know it,” wrote Smith, stating the high-risk, news-in-an-eye-blink mantra of bloggers everywhere. But his single “good” source had been wrong, he added.

Actually, Smith and his source, and everyone who followed Politico’s lead, turned out to be right. They were just 10 months early. Edwards did drop out—on January 30, 2008, when it was obvious he had no chance of getting the nomination.

Smith was apologetic when asked about this episode months later, acknowledging that he had blown it. Of course, all he had to do was wait an hour to hear what Edwards had to say, hear it from the candidate’s own lips instead of getting it wrong from an anonymous source. One lousy hour—why *not* wait? Even now, Smith doesn’t appear to quite get it.

His reply: “Why is speed so bad?”

It’s not necessarily bad, just dangerous when there’s no time or inclination to seek a second “good” source.

One can see how lethal to truth and accuracy the Tenner-titled “bias of convenience” can be when reporters do hurried research while gathering news on the run. Tenner sees the Internet as “flattering people into thinking they know something” and making it “easier to be satisfied with an incomplete or misleading answer (that) can convey a false sense of empowerment.” And, he wonders, “Are young journalists who are used to finding what they need on the Web going to be equally zealous in using other sources?”

In other words, it’s the old tree-falls-in-the-forest argument: if it isn’t instantly accessible online, it must not exist.

Another aspect of this—the echo chamber effect—demands scrutiny as well. As a research tool, the Internet’s possibilities are prodigious if not infinite. Tap, tap, click, and you’re there; it’s all before you, encyclopedic universes opening up like petals on a blossom. Or is it? Is it possible that, in its most prevalent use, the Internet is less a source of diverse and contradictory views than one echoing opinions that its users already hold?

The “overarching crisis of memory and knowledge” that Susan Jacoby describes in *The Age of American Unreason* refers to a general condition of unknowing in the United States. But her comments about famed 19th-century agnostic Robert Ingersoll, when interviewed by Bill Moyers on PBS, evoked a striking parallel with Internet usage.

Ingersoll often spoke to audiences who rejected his beliefs, “but they wanted to hear what he had to say,” Jacoby said. “And now what we have is a situation in which people go to hear people they already agree with. What’s going on is not so much education as reinforcement of the opinions you already have.”

Hence, the echo chamber—in a sense, speaking to oneself. *The Wizard of Id* cartoon strip nailed it years ago when it had Spook, a hairy character held interminably in a dungeon, spruce up for visitor’s day. In the next panel, he’s sitting, legs crossed, in front of a large mirror, asking, “So, how’s the family?”



You can blame Al Gore—sort of.

He didn’t invent the Internet, but he was an enabler. It was Gore, when he was a U.S. senator and not yet Bill Clinton’s vice president, who provided legislative support to help transform what was essentially a private plaything for the military and academia into a worldwide Web available to the masses.

As far back as 1988, Gore had helped introduce legislation to pump money into the National Science Foundation, which spearheaded software developments with the full backing of the U.S. military. “With greater access to supercomputers,” promised Gore at the time, “virtually every business in America could achieve tremendous gains.”

Nice thought, with some truths attached to it. But incomplete vision. What Gore and other early advocates of this technology hadn’t realized was this: The uncurbed rapidity of its flow of news and other kinds of information would have unexpected consequences that were beneficial only to the very few. One of them, for example, was that a teenager would be able to post for the planet to see, in an instant, a video of his chums and him guzzling beers in a contest to see who could upchuck in the shortest time.

Oh, *that*.

More recently, Gore wrote in *The Assault on Reason* that he puts his trust in the Internet to rescue us from television’s capacity to immobilize reason and stimulate a primitive “visceral vividness” not “modulated by logic, reason and reflective thought.”