

THEME 03

Disappearing rhythms

MODERN
TECHNOLOGY

MODERNITY

SOCIO-CULTURAL
DYNAMICS

Modern technology has a liberating effect in that it enables us to gain more control over our daily lives and frees us from the structures of traditional societies and nature. However, this also entails a radical break with the patterns and rhythms to which man is – biologically and culturally – attuned. Consequently, something might be lost with the increasing technologization and digitization of our living worlds and daily lives.

Our observations

- We have previously written about [sleep hacking](#), or how we can get the same quality of sleep within a shorter time frame by applying techniques to improve our sleeping cycle, using, for example, transcranial direct-current stimulation neurotechnology or [electroencephalography wearables](#).
- Although it is a cultural pattern rather than a biological necessity, most of the world's population consumes [three meals](#) per day (breakfast, lunch, dinner), except in regions with food shortages. However, food technology has made rapid advancements in the past decades, and it is now possible to maintain a healthy food consumption pattern consisting only of [pills and powder](#). Furthermore, the traditional food pattern is changing as most people are skipping large meals and substituting them with continuous consumption of [smaller snacks](#), a process called “perpetual grazing”.
- Digital technology has made it much easier to move and to work from a distance. As a result, an increasing number of people do some or all their [work at home](#) (up to a quarter in the U.S.). A survey among global business leaders showed that they expect that more than a third of their workforce will [work remotely](#) by 2020. Furthermore, digital technology [enables](#) a new kind of employability, e.g. self-employed entrepreneurs who can run their business only with a laptop and smartphone, and the labor-on-demand in the [gig economy](#). The [average job tenure](#) has declined in recent decades, according to U.S. Census data. Furthermore, members of younger generations, such as millennials, [switch jobs](#) more often than previous generations.
- Current younger generations have significantly [higher migration rates](#) than other younger generations historically. That might have to do with different [socio-cultural characteristics](#) (millennials marry and have children at a later age) or economic reasons (most millennials cannot afford to buy their own [homes](#) and are forced into the more volatile but less binding [renting market](#)). But it is also because modern ICT and smartphones have reduced the barriers to move to different places by making it possible to obtain information about different places and to stay in touch with others at home. Likewise, ICT makes travelling more accessible to all (e.g. one may not know how to speak a foreign language or navigate unknown places but one needs to have Google Translate and Maps). As a result, international travel taken an enormous flight, both [globally](#) and among tech-savvy [younger generations](#).
- Digital technology allows us to communicate anywhere, anytime. As a result, there are almost no populated places left without any [internet connection](#). The same goes for shopping, and the global [user penetration rate of e-commerce](#) is expected to grow from a third to almost half of the global population in five years.
- Thoman Mann's novel “The Magic Mountain” features many discussion between the allegorical characters of Hans Castorp, mister Settembrini and Naphta, who embody different ideas and ideologies with respect to modern societies: a seeking man that is lost in the (post)modern world, a liberal humanist and a social conservative respectively.



Connecting the dots

Modern technological innovations are considered signs of progress: they help man liberate himself from the shackles of nature and break open the small world of traditional societies to the global village: it becomes easier to move to new places (e.g. taking a car or plane instead of walking), acquire food (e.g. from a ready-to-take supermarket instead of hunting), or make new friends according to one's preferences in digital worlds. However, by doing so, traditional patterns and structures that have long functioned as anchor points are disappearing.

Natural and traditional rhythms guide our daily lives, like our food patterns (when we eat), sleeping cycle (when we sleep and wake), or division of the week into "week to work" and "week-end to rest" (and contemplate, in religious contexts). They also organize a large part of our whole walk of life, such as our working career and places where we live, or our place, duties and rights in society. These rhythms serve a practical purpose. For example, obeying our [sleeping rhythm](#) (circadian rhythm) is healthy, as is [eating](#) our three meals of the day regularly. Furthermore, a daily life that has specific rhythms (working days and hours, specific times where to meet and talk to people) help many people in structuring their lives. By breaking these patterns, a paradoxical situation emerges: modern technology both liberates us from traditional patterns and rhythms but creates new problems and dependencies at the same time. For example, although it has become easier to live and hop jobs from place to place, [loneliness](#) and [stress and burnout](#) are on the rise. And while it has become very easy

to communicate, social media doesn't seem to make us any [happier about our social lives](#). Although technology has always had this paradoxical character – providing liberation and new dependencies at the same time – digital technologies accelerate this trend, causing the traditional rhythms that once governed our lives to become less important and guiding. There are three general reactions to loss of our traditional rhythms. The first is to embrace them or even magnify these the liberating aspect of (digital) technology, because there are still too many constrictive structures by which human life is bounded. Digital technology allows us to break free from repressive structures that once dominated humans' lives, thus unleashing profound social and political changes to realize man's full potential. This stance brings together strange bedfellows, such as [Neo-Marxism](#), ultra-right-wing capitalism and [accelerationism](#). A second reaction is a rejection or a return to traditional or even pre-modern lives. According to this (Romantic) stance, man should subjugate himself to his natural, traditional and religious rhythms, as modernity and modern technology corrupt the good life. This position is unpopular in most advanced and most Western countries, but a much more widely supported stance in countries that are in the process of [modernization](#). A last stance is to embrace the technological and digital modern world while acknowledging the importance of traditional and biological rhythms in our daily lives. In this way, modern technology is actively embedded in traditional structures and ways of life.

Implications

- Activities that are tightly connected to natural rhythms, like dancing or holidays into nature, will gain in popularity in highly advanced, technological societies. These activities stress the importance of non-digital consciousness, such as "digital detox", yoga and sports.
- As digital technology has an accelerating effect on breaking with our traditional rhythms, it might lead to increased generational differences with those generations that are not as digital-savvy as younger generations. Furthermore, it might even increase the mental distance between the connected and the unconnected, a kind of psycho-digital divide.