

Derek Abbott ([00:00:00](#)):

Can everybody hear me? All right. Oh yes. I can hear myself. So it must be greetings everyone. Welcome to this session of the Adelaide festival of ideas. My name is Derek Abbott and the director of the center for biomedical engineering at Adelaide university. And I'm here to chair this session on speed with Robin Williams who I think needs very little introduction or you probably wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Robin Williams, but I'll just say that he's probably undisputedly Australia's leading television and radio science broadcaster. Did I forget to say anything else about you and he's going to talk to us about the problems of speed. Now, you're probably wondering what that means. Is he going to be talking about crazy drivers or is he going to talk about LSD, but he tells me he's going to be talking.

Derek Abbott ([00:01:00](#)):

No, not about those two things. He's going to be talking about the problems of the speed or pace of life with the modern way we live in modern technology and do these things indeed save us time or not. I think he's going to take the position that they're not really saving us time. So I think just to give a bit of spice, I'll disagree with him and tell him that he's not going to take my microwave up and away from me too attached to it. So without further ado, can we greet Robyn in the usual way?

Derek Abbott ([00:01:34](#)):

Thank you. [inaudible]

Robyn Williams ([00:01:43](#)):

Certainly flattered the tool here because I'd have been across listening to Naomi Klein startling intellect, and I've been really admiring her work with which I have a certain parallel theme, funnily enough. And I'm most impressed in fact that we can look at the festival of ideas as being the great example of the way in which we can take time to say the ideas and the intellectual wealth of this state and this nation. Now you'll be aware that the word intellectual can be taken awry, especially in English speaking countries. And this was demonstrated very nicely by the great poet W H Auden, who said in a rhyme to the man in the street, who I'm sorry to say is a keen observer of life. The word intellectual suggests straight away a man who's untrue to his wife.

Robyn Williams ([00:02:52](#)):

Well, woman was never untrue to his wife for all sorts of reasons. And so you need to take it as a sexist remark on his, but it's the sort of thing that I really find very interesting amongst people like say, Phillip Adams, who's here this week and friends of mine in Britain. I remember going to a dinner put on by Jonathan pirate is a really lovely man, a green person. He advises prince Charles on green affairs and he wants to put on a dinner attended by Douglas Adams. And the intellect was really scintillating in the room. And yet when I said you are clearly intellectuals, they all backed away and shriveled and denied it instantly. And I said, well, what's wrong with saying you're intellectuals and you deal in ideas. That is the currency of the intellectual, but it seemed to be a very British thing to say. And in some ways, and an Australian thing to say in Britain, you are clever, not intellectual

Robyn Williams ([00:03:51](#)):

Here,

Robyn Williams ([00:03:52](#)):

Unless you're an Adelaide during this week, you are now you pretend to be something else. And I asked a great shame because I think in Australia, you've got some of the most scintillating ideas in the world, which is why I live here. However, it is that denial of the worth of bright ideas and the time in which to save them, which is my theme. You're quite right. I am concerned about the pace of life. I am very bothered that I have noticed myself react to the changes over the last 30 years, by actually having a change of personality at the moment I'm being relaxed, pleasant, and in my soul, my own sort of self image of God-like serene person. I even took time off to be kind at least once this afternoon, without shouting at people this morning. However, when I went to the ABC, when somebody showed me the fifth routine of security that was imposed using the new technology and the new systems, I said, but I've been coming here for 30 years. I showed them my ABC pass and they said, that is not good enough. So I found myself doing what basil faulty does when the rat escapes from the kitchen. And someone says, you have to not mention the war and you get out of control and you start being frantic and frothing at the mouth. And I frost at the mouth this morning, as I often do during the day. And I said something about the parentage of Jonathan Shire, which I'm, I'm sure it actually turned out to be quite accurate.

Robyn Williams ([00:05:34](#)):

However,

Robyn Williams ([00:05:36](#)):

As I was preparing this a while ago, little did I imagine that last night on tele at eight 30 would be a kind of executive summary in fi bridal ways broadcast in aftershock about this subject there at all. Was anyone here? See it? Yeah, it doesn't get very much of an audience. Does it? However, after shock did it and its theme was speed. And it was trying to understand the paradox of here we are with all this technology being convenient, like Derek's microwave. And the problem is as Margaret Wertheim is sometimes able to say she quotes someone who says looking at the microwave. I want you to hate my lasagna. I don't want to play chess with you. In other words, in many ways, technology has got out of its box. And that is what I'm concerned about. To start with a number of quotations to illustrate my theme.

Robyn Williams ([00:06:42](#)):

This is from Jeremy Rifkin, who of course, there's a well-known American critic of modern technology and science. He says a new term, 24 stroke, seven around the clock activity. 24 hours a day is something that's catching up with us seven days a week quickly coming to define the parameters of the new temporal frontier, our fax machines, email, voicemail, PCs, and mobile phones. Our 24 hour trading markets, instant cash point machines and online banking services all night e-commerce and research services. 24 hour TV news and entertainment. 24 hour food services all vying for attention. And while we have created every kind of labor and time-saving device and activity to service, one another's needs and desires, we're beginning to feel. We have less time available to us than any other humans in history. Email is a great convenience until we find ourselves spending much of the day, frantically keeping up with it.

Robyn Williams ([00:07:45](#)):

The mobile phone is a great time-saver except that now we're always potentially in reach of someone else who wants our attention. One way that they've put it another way is something that Salomon rashy talked about. Selman rusty was writing about communications, which I'll come to in a minute. He says, he's the poet of course, and novelists. The speed of life is now so great that we can't concentrate on anything for long. We need caps your meanings to be attached to news events, instantly explaining and

pigeonholing their significance so that we can move on secure in the illusion of having understood something. And he goes on to say in the real world, the present is always imperfect. And the future is almost always a region of hope. The problem lies in the way we all now insist on reacting to the news. Is it a good thing? Is it a bad thing? What's in it for us? What does it tell us about ourselves or about other guys? Where's the angle who's to blame? Give me the zapper let's surf. You can't simply take a piece of news as the information it represents.

Robyn Williams ([00:08:56](#)):

So here we are in a [inaudible] situation, which is very peculiar. It is trying to make our lives faster, but it's changing us in ways that are really unprecedented, as you heard in the beginning from Riskin. And if you look back to what is really hype up in James Gleick's book faster, if you don't have Jean James Blake who wrote the biography of Dick Fineman and also a book on chaos, his latest book is called faster, and you can recognize it because he's removed the vowels so that you can read it more quickly. At least the title and in his book, he actually mentions what I think is absolutely fascinating as a concept. He says the word boredom really existed a century ago to bore mentored first, something another person could do to you specifically by speaking too long, too rudely, or too irrelevantly maybe boredom. He says in its modern sense is a backwash within another mental state.

Robyn Williams ([00:10:07](#)):

The one called mania. As I mentioned as a faulty defined by psychology psychologists as an abnormal state of excitement, encompassing exhilaration, elation, euphoria, a sense of the mind racing boredom in this definition is the symptom of withdrawal from hi boredom is new mark Halperin. He quotes as well as saying your life is lived with the kind of excitement that your forebears knew only in battle. And you lead that life through the benefits of modern technology every day. There is the problem. There is the thing I'm trying to tease out. I'm trying to understand. And it seems to me, we have in modern society, three extraordinary manifestations of this obsession with speed ways in which if you contrast that, which takes time like scholarship and especially science, science takes a huge amount of time to deliver information. It needs to be tested. And if you have a product, it takes what 3, 4, 5 years to get.

Robyn Williams ([00:11:17](#)):

Even to stage one. I know myself that when I actually broadcast something about a breakthrough is it's sometimes called off wrongly about medical research. And then I interviewed the professor who says very happily when we expect to have the results available for treatment in seven years time. Now that's almost embarrassing, but that is the way it works. If you look at the scholarship, that's needed to get an understanding of some phenomenon, something to do with culture or even some do in scientific area, you will take a long time, which is why I, in my job, going to universities, doing work in progress am not embarrassed to find the professor or whoever it is working on something that has inched forward over two or three years. That is what their life is like. And in a funny way, it's what your life is like yet. When you compare our modern society, gambling, shopping, and business activity, I think are manifestations of the obsession with speed gambling.

Robyn Williams ([00:12:24](#)):

Think if you like, if the amount of money spent last year is in the paper yesterday by the federal government on research in the nation's laboratories, it was \$4.05 billion. Guess if you can, the turnover, the amount spent by Australians on gambling. One is 4.05 and the other is, well, work it out. I'll just review some of the older news about gambling as warnings of a worldwide economic slowdown

percolate through our daily lives. There there's evidence that today for the first time, Australian losses at poker machines have exceeded national savings. Telephone betting, and internet gambling have grown by 30% in this last year. That was at a time just over a year ago when one gambling machine, one poker machine in every 10 in the world was in new south Wales, wanting 10 in the world was in new south Wales. Time magazine says this during the 1990s household spending on gambling has grown by 50% for decades.

Robyn Williams ([00:13:36](#)):

Australian spent no more than 2% of disposable income on gambling. Now they spend 3% social workers and groups lament the deepening woes of probably problem gamblers, families, the fraying of the social fabric and damage to small business. I actually read a wonderful article in the economist four years ago, sorry, three years ago, where they analyzed, whether you actually got some sort of economic advantage by having casinos and other outlets of the gambling industry, because at one stage, the crown casino in Melbourne was the biggest single employer in the state. Would you believe if you counted all the adjuncts? Now what the economists said about the overall effects of building casinos and other gambling institutions. They said many pet places fail to understand the casinos more than any other forms of gambling, such as lotteries, cause what economists call negative externalities. There is a price to pay in the rising cost of such things as law enforcement street cleaning the extra social services needed when gambling leads to break up families.

Robyn Williams ([00:14:47](#)):

And when these additional costs are taken into account, it is far from clear that gambling benefits anyone except the casino operators. In other words, it actually costs society overall in a considerable amount, which brings me to that overall figure to compare to four point whatever it was that we spend on research. This was published in the Sydney morning Herald last month, Australians passions for gambling, especially pokies cost them 13.3 billion last financial year as the machine swallowed ever more cash. In fact, in the state treasuries losses from gambling in 99 to 2000 jumped 900 million on the previous year, continuing a growing trend. Most of that extra money was left behind in gaming machines. This kept 7.6 billion or 800 million more than the year before. And so on the figures go. The overall figure. However, is the one that really interests me. It is \$113.8 billion. Now, if somebody tells me that they have problems spending money on scientific research

Robyn Williams ([00:16:00](#)):

Or anything on the

Robyn Williams ([00:16:04](#)):

Science center here in Adelaide, if you are worried about the old hundred thousand yeah, hundred and 13.8 billion in P N is the amount that's spent by Australians on gambling last year and it's going up. So I think there is something pathological about a kind of society that has such expenditure just proportionally to other sorts of expenditure. And I think it's something that really needs attention and, and dramatic attention, which brings me to shopping. I think it's very interesting how shopping has effected life. I lost most of the audience for the science show. In fact, it was a huge audience in about the mid seventies when it started. And that was when shopping finished at 12 o'clock on Saturday, since then, of course shopping has become around the clock activity. And instead of coming home at a particular time, compulsorily mid day on Saturday and turning on the radio, as many people said they

did, they find that they can't actually go to a place where they can listen to the radio that they have to be in a car or not at all.

Robyn Williams ([00:17:19](#)):

Now I've got somewhere on my person around there, some, some headphones, which are unbelievably cheap and simple devices, I get them. You can get them from Dick Smith. I get them from the states where they, the headphones I, where we talk, where I can listen to the radio, any sort of radio cost me \$14. And you can wear this sort of equipment for cleaning out the shed for going for walks sitting in Texas, where people tried to talk to you too much. And it's a wonderful device. However, people these days tell me they can only listen to the radio in a \$30,000 motor car. I find that amazing, however, shopping it's called retail. Yeah. Therapy these days in Britain. And this is according to some research, 2.5 million people suffer from this syndrome that was work done by Dr. Helga Ditmar university of Sussex. They shop to change mood, lift depression, adjust self image.

Robyn Williams ([00:18:14](#)):

It's a quick habit forming an endlessly repeatable activity, two and a half million people in Britain. And here's a quotation from Tara Palmer. Tomkinson who is a socialite who was severely effected by this syndrome. She said, I ended up owing thousands of pounds and have decided to attend a program to help me kick the habit. I am not alone an estimated and she got the figure wrong. 700,000 people in this country are addicted to shopping in America. Numbers may be as high as 15 million. She said, shopping, dominated my waking hours and sleep as well, rather than worry about bills. I'd sometimes lay awake at night terrified. I would terrified that I wouldn't get a particular item that I wanted. If what I wanted wasn't in stock, I was eating them to ring the store manager 20 times a day until I was or spend hours calling other branches around the world.

Robyn Williams ([00:19:08](#)):

I felt sick until I bought it. Germane Greer also has a theory. She said, and I quote this from the newspaper when England based Australian intellectual Jermaine Greer stops, casting pills will all be the poorer here's her latest bond mode being trotted out around the world's cable services, six being largely unattainable to many women and available sex. So unsatisfactory shopping is the substitute. The displacement activity. The shopping experience is as close to an orgasm. As many, if not most women are likely to get well. I always bow to her greater wisdom there shopping. And what about business? I've been rather puzzled on various boards that I seem to be serving on not least when we were on the commission for the future, Phillip Adams and I, but also when we're looking at the way science long term planning can be discussed by corporations in their boardrooms who want some sort of sense of future.

Robyn Williams ([00:20:20](#)):

And I would have thought that that would be a natural thing to do. If you're looking at a corporation, you are not wanting to invest too much in a single thing like maybe fossil fuels. So instead you would not want to see how you can proliferate to hedge your bets. In other words, understand how society is going, see how the new technology could foster activities that you're getting through biotechnology obviously is something which offers all sorts of promises and FH folding in this state, I think has done a remarkable job over the years in turning from a grocer's outfit into one, the decide typically based, which is why we gave at the Australian museum. Foldings one of the first ever Eureka prizes for industry. So how much is Australian business actually looking to the future? And the answer is practically not at

all. There was a conference in Canberra a few months ago called science in the boardroom and in Dunlop, who was then the head of the Institute of company directors explained to me that they are so much consumed by money, questions and legal questions that the luxury of looking forward of trying to plan the future means something that they actually get to at the very last, if at all, and usually not at all.

Robyn Williams ([00:21:39](#)):

And so here you are in business trying to do what gamblers do, hedging your bets, turning around money, shifting pieces of paper, instead of being involved in what is a planning activity as if you have long-term in my own field in broadcasting, the experience has also been quite strange. I've mentioned already what Sellman rashy says about it, that you can't just have a news item that something has happened. What you've got to do is have the angle upon it. You've got to have the interpretation built in so that you've got a bite bite sized factoid so that this thing can be made relevant to you almost like an advertising slogan. It's got to be, in other words, a bite, a sound bite, something that sparks something that contains the politics of the day. Instead of asking you something that might tax you in an intellectual sense, it's put as texting you in another way, except the texts is now a dirty work.

Robyn Williams ([00:22:41](#)):

So what's happened in broadcasting. I think it's very interesting. The way that gleek analyze is that in his book faster, because he says what happened about 2025 years ago is actually based on the new technology. The first thing that happened is to save you that extraordinary amount of physical effort to get out of your chair and change temp channel, they invented the zapper. And so you could sit there and go from channel two to three to four, whatever. And they hadn't actually thought that this is the most incredible editing device so that you can immediately, and you do this all the time, zoom through channels. If what's going on, doesn't suit you immediately for that minute. So building up something that has got to take time to establish itself like an old fashioned play in God, God knows 10 minutes or five minutes, or maybe more, you are instantly trying to get a feeling for what is being broadcast.

Robyn Williams ([00:23:40](#)):

And I know when I interviewed a hundred young people at Macquarie university, they were from all over Australia. And I asked them how many actually listened to ABC radio? None of them had ever turned it off because they didn't know that AAM existed. When it came to ABC television, I asked them whether it was true that the minute they came into the room, they could feel that ABC television was polluting their space. And they said, yes, because they immediately exactly it off. It's too slow for them. And when I asked them what they would like me to broadcast, what would be their preference, if they had control, they, it had to have something to do with their lives. And I said, look, one of my problems is that I'm supposed to be a journalist. I'm supposed to be finding stuff out in the world that may not be directly to do with your life or even to your liking.

Robyn Williams ([00:24:34](#)):

For example, you're probably the last generation who will be here on earth while the great apes and other large creatures are roaming free. You are the last ones who will co-exist with these wild animals. I may bring you that story, but you might not like it. How will you react to that? And they said, well, they weren't sure. And I said, well, in fact, and this was, I think in March, I said, there's been a three-part series on the ABC actually produced by the BBC about the world's state of the planet. Did anyone watch it? One person did? And I said, how did you react? He said, well, but the man had a boring voice. So I turned it off. And I said, so you don't like Edinburgh. And he said, I've never heard of it.

Robyn Williams ([00:25:18](#)):

What happens with the Zappa is that you are then dealing with a state of production of programs, where the people making those programs are actually thinking completely differently. Gleek again, quotes from various sources. He says, no matter how fast the movie goes these days, or a situation comedy, a newscast, a music video, or a TV commercial, it is not fast enough vehicles, race, plunge, and fly faster cameras, pan and shake faster. And scenes cut faster from one shot to the next. Some people don't like this content, maybe no more than people talking yet. No shot seems to last more than a second. If it did, if the camera actually settled on one person's face for the time it takes to speak a full sentence, would you change channel? The program is think so, Annette in-store from Columbia university says there's a kind of mindlessness. The viewer is invited to absorb images without digesting them.

Robyn Williams ([00:26:25](#)):

And in terms of the ways in which material is broad Timothy Garton Ash from Oxford, who's a writer and journalist as well as an academic. He says the world historical reflections of a Nobel prize winner prove more ephemeral than the hurried new story of a 19 year old reporter. So the stuff is zapping through. So that's the first invention. The second invention, funnily enough, I think it's very funny was MTV because here you had at about the same time as the zapper came along, this challenge, when we used to have programs with pop music called countdown and top of the pops or whatever, they were, you had a number of set pieces and you had two, three or four young people going Punka Blanca Blanca, and you know, seeing their stuff and you have the cameras zooming in and faces that way. Facials that way, closeups on the pig.

Robyn Williams ([00:27:24](#)):

It's a limited amount of thing you can do. So imagine when they had a channel that had nothing, but these pop clips, so what they needed to do was speed it up. And so you would have an intercutting of images faster than anything that ever happened before on this influenced most of TV production and even film production. So it went to influence practically all of the production houses we've had. I find that very interesting because it means that you then have, as gleek points out a kind of situation on the commercials where you cannot see the difference between the end of a program and the beginning of the commercials. And you have production values of the commercials, which are sometimes 10 times as expensive as in fact you have for the programs themselves. I wants to do a series of quantum interviews. The first series, I did cost \$13,000 of seven programs, including taxi vouchers and instant coffee.

Robyn Williams ([00:28:31](#)):

At that time, the cost of the 32nd high value commercial was \$350,000, 13,000 versus 350,000. The average high production value commercial, you see lasting 30 seconds. These days cost half a million bucks. At least at least those are the ones who are spending the money. It's quite extraordinary speed problems with speed. Where are they going to go next as a paradox. I also find that this problem with speed affect institutions, and this is a different sort of example. I work in an organization, which is like many, which people have the misfortune to belong to, which is beginning to have no sense of its own history. What you have is a policy of executive cleansing,

Robyn Williams ([00:29:29](#)):

Where you remove entire

Robyn Williams ([00:29:32](#)):

Layers of senior management and then middle management, and then you go around the village and wipe out a great number of the other people have other ranks. And this has been going on in a progressive way for quite quite some time. It's not just the latest regime we have in the ABC. And I think it's an unfortunate, because an intellectual in Britain who I think wouldn't mind calling himself an intellectual, he and I who are not necessarily on the same side of politics, although I worked for the ABC, therefore I have no politics. Now, Roger Scruton has often felt he's a philosopher on the conservative side. He's, he's written books about Fox hunting. And so on Fox hunting is interesting because he's talking about a system of behavior, which involves tradition, the slow evolution of habits and ways in which you connect at various levels with the people irrespective of hierarchy in the village.

Robyn Williams ([00:30:36](#)):

The hunt for him is an emblem of the way in which life goes on. And it seems to me that what he's saying about the revolutionary aspect of things like executive cleansing and down sizing of institutions and removing people, having them on short short-term contracts is the very thing that eliminates the memory of an organization it's morale and therefore its effectiveness. I'll give you an example of something that really with me going way back now, in the old days, when I first joined the ABC, we had heads of the organization who stayed there for decades. I think when I joined, we'd only had something like maybe two or three general managers of what was then called the commission and myself and a couple of other friends were rather naughty. And so told that duck mentor who was then head of the ABC was a bit pompous. And, you know, he was very clever, very thoughtful and believed in great standards. It was rather old fashioned and out of touch. And so we, we felt that his time had come and we were part of the rather vigorous opposition that led to the changes at the top and also the conversion of the commission into a corporation and something fairly substantial. So we would have been the last persons who would be expected to look around at the new building and Ultimo say, where's towel.

Robyn Williams ([00:32:09](#)):

We haven't seen him here.

Robyn Williams ([00:32:11](#)):

Whatever happened to him, maybe we should find out and find out. And some of my colleagues like Tim Boden, who thought tells a Drago pipe, smoking fin pleasant, but nonetheless pumper stronger really shouldn't. We should be left, left to fade away into the darkness, the shadows of history, but he went along with what I did next, which was to write to tell and say, would you like to come back to the ABC? We haven't seen you here. You might like to come for either a Royal tour or a clandestine cuppa, whatever you fancy that you were afterall head of the place for 18

Robyn Williams ([00:32:55](#)):

Years.

Robyn Williams ([00:32:57](#)):

And we would like to know what your thoughts are. This is the letter I got in exchange. Thank you very much, indeed, for your courteous and friendly letter. What I must make clear is that now I have no wish whatsoever to pay a visit to the ABC, either formally or informally. It is too late for that. And the reason

is quite simple in the years that have passed since I chose to retire and during which I have declined or requests to comment publicly on broadcasting matters, no senior ABC executive or board member has sought to contact me nor have I been invited to any ABC function. I have not even received a copy of the corporation's annual report. In fact, the only correspondence I've had from an ABC source since 1983, apart from your letter has been brief notes to cover the dispatch of copies of the bitchery notices published in the British press when former BBC and ITV friends have died and which in the absence of other contacts, give me, cause to think that apart from anything else, I am being suckling reminded of the brevity of life. There is only one conclusion to draw from all this than I have drawn it. What I remember referring to somewhat facetiously as the obscurity of retirement several years ago has been redefined for me tell died six months after that letter was written, he never did

Robyn Williams ([00:34:31](#)):

Actually step into the building again. Now

Robyn Williams ([00:34:35](#)):

I think there is a tradition may be that the new corporate approaches are drawing on. And it's what I call the barrier tradition barrier was the person who helped Joe Stalin run his personnel affairs. He ran them by eliminating people and also their images from photographs. And I do not think it is an effective way to get morale burgeoned nor do I think it is a way to have people interact in a confident and effective way. I do believe that we have misconstrued the way human beings behave. And I think funnily enough, the answers are quite presented in the art, the culture, and even the television broadcasting that we enjoy so much. If you look at some of the most popular broadcasts in the world, even today, there is the soap opera, the old fashioned soul, like neighbors popular around the world, which doesn't have cataclysms, which doesn't have murders, which has ever so slowly developing relationships, just like in a real street.

Robyn Williams ([00:35:47](#)):

You've even got that present nonsense like survivor and big brother where you actually watch people sitting in a room for hours on end bizarre isn't it. And you've also got the way that we, when we go back to our normal homes are when we want to relaxing having conversations about other neighbors in indulging in gossip and doing things on a slower sort of scale, a smaller gentler canvas. And if you look at some of the arts that we enjoy so much, if you look at some of the most prized paintings of all time, you have van golf's chair, a straw chair, or a bunch of sunflowers now worth millions and millions, millions of dollars that small glimpse of life is in fact, the scale on which we would mostly prefer to have our lives continue. And if you look at the way in which Saul bellow, for example, is trying to understand our view of the importance and the significance of characters.

Robyn Williams ([00:37:00](#)):

If you notice how everyone, all your heroes systematically are getting trashed, it's not simply a tall poppy. It's almost an obliteration policy where everyone is somehow exposed as being, as having feet of clay or having some sort of suss past what bellow says. It's obvious to everyone that the statute of characters in say modern novels is smaller than it once was. And this diminution powerfully concerns. Those who value existence. I do not believe he says that the human capacity to feel or do can really have dwindled or that the quality of humanity has degenerated. I rather think that people appear smaller because society has become so immense and I would add so fast. So bellow incidentally is impressive. In other ways, he's in his eighties and he's just become a father again. And when they asked him what his

secret was now he's got a young wife and there is in his mid eighties, mid-eighties become a father. He said, practice, practice, okay.

Robyn Williams ([00:38:10](#)):

Which I found almost a role model. I wish. So there we are. There is a paradox. The question is what to do about it. It seems to me that your microwave is, is certainly the most welcome thing. There are ways in which you can get through this present manifestation of technology, which is as Marvin Minsky at MIT would say, it's stupid phase where in fact, most of the things that we're looking at on our new technology are to sell things. 90% of what is on the internet and the messages that I received in my office on emails and in messages and faxes are to promote stuff, to sell stuff there, product placement. If you have a new sort of technology, which can be selective, which is programmed to keep away from those things, which you have told it, you don't like and don't need, then I think we can then develop the kind of space in which to appreciate the new world of effective speed rather than hyper speed.

Robyn Williams ([00:39:20](#)):

And I think we can get to a point where maybe in a half a generation's time, because if it's a generation, I won't be there. We can actually have a sort of serene village that will make all this make sense. I've got a political point and a satirical point to finish with the political point. I know his name is John. I can't remember his son. And just for the moment the professor of European thought at the LSE is trying to explain the way in which as Naomi Klein is across another hall, that globalization has become a problem in his book, false dawn. He is tried to describe the ways in which conservative politics seems not to have come to grips with the genie. It is unleashed because conservative politics when asked how it will like to see the future fumbles around, because it doesn't know how properly to address the question.

Robyn Williams ([00:40:19](#)):

It simply says, oh, we believe in the family. We like the village. We like the institutions, you know, Scruton likes fox hunting. But the interesting thing that is suggested in fall store is that for the first time in history, we have two extraordinary forces unleashed. One of them being the new technology and the other being the unfettered free market, put them together. And they are a juggernaut whose effect is above all to change every aspect of that treasured day of all this, this conservative dream of how you live, it's changing your job. It's changing your village, it's changing your surroundings and it's changing your technology. So the paradox X of the uninsured, the lectural conservative bit in politics or otherwise is that he or she has not considered that. The very things that they're trying to promote are those which are destroying their treasured world.

Robyn Williams ([00:41:22](#)):

Hence the paradox of modern politics. Finally, I started talking about aftershock and what I saw on last night. Now, most of my activities in satire, I tend to put on programs every now and then where I give somewhat free range to my imagination. And two years ago, I presented a gentleman called Wayne King, the new head of the ABC radio to the world. And I interviewed him about changes, which are going to happen to my programs cause she had assigned chair. He said, I would have to be joined by a 20 year old young woman who was pierced from triple J, who was there to rebrand my program and to attract a younger generation. She knew absolutely nothing about science, but would ask those questions that were on everyone's mind rather than the kind of poncy things that I would ask. And we would actually have to have between every two or three sentences. Rap music played very loudly just in case your attention wandered. Now I broadcast that with rap music. I wrote the script and Felix Williamson, David

Williamson son played Wayne King and lots of people believed it. Last week. Last week I sent the tape to our new head of radio national parliamentary news network. Who's called mark Kalia, who used to be with Phillip Adams on to UAE. And I said, I'd like to rebroadcast this program. I've yet to hear his answer. Thank you very

Robyn Williams ([00:42:54](#)):

Much. [inaudible]

Derek Abbott ([00:43:22](#)):

Well, Robyn, thank you for a very stimulating talk. Robyn said that boredom was the absence of hype. If I remember you didn't bore me. So I wonder what that means perhaps is a bit self-defeating there. Anyway, we're going to now throw it open for questions. We have a little time for questions. So if anyone wants to ask a question there's a microphone there.

Robyn Williams/ Derek Abbott ([00:43:47](#)):

Or you can shout, oh, you can shout. Yes.

Robyn Williams ([00:43:50](#)):

But if you'd like to come up to the microphone, we might be able to hear you. Okay. This question

Audience member ([00:43:57](#)):

Robyn, you started off by saying how long technology is influencing you as a person, perhaps change how you react to the situations. Given that a lot about characteristics are sort of set by the time we have to 10, whatever it is with children growing up today with new technology foster MTV generation, et cetera, is there an influence that's affecting them in their personal development in a fundamental way. A colleague of mine who works in cognition, science was making that contrast in his experiences with that of his young son, with respect to playing more than the computer games, where the process of thinking through what would be the likely consequences of an action. Isn't in fact, the way to win the game is to try something, see how it reacts and then try something else. If that didn't work, are we setting ourselves up there for a generation that isn't able to contemplate, but he's going to work in a reactive fashion.

Robyn Williams ([00:45:03](#)):

I think you're quite right. Setting ourselves up in the short term, unless we plan something different. I know that my own children who are in their mid twenties have decided to live in the country and become artists. And both of them do things which are very slow creative. And both of them read books for hours. And I'm quite surprised by this. I know that many people who work as teachers say that their concern is with a new technology. They find that young people are not encouraged in analysis. As you say, you Zack through the possible answers to questions and you don't necessarily construct any kind of thesis and the sort of exercise that we've done. We had say the university of technology in Sydney and elsewhere on the university of the future is to say, okay, what we want the technology to do. And I know that in my own state in university, it was 90, 92, 90 3% boredom.

Robyn Williams ([00:46:08](#)):

We just slushing around the place wondering when people would get on with it and give us something stimulating to absorb. Now, if those sorts of things which were boring, could be put into the new technology whereby you could learn at your own place at your own pace, do the grunt work. And then funnily enough, come back to a university where like this we're being Socratic. So a university place or school is where you actually engage, do the analysis, do the discussion, and then write the words because we find that if in fact you train people to think you get 10% more efficiency, not just in the single subject, which may be science, but overall, so training to think use the new technology and to discuss ideas is the way forward. So it's not an inevitable and competent, but it's something that we need to think about. Next question

Audience member ([00:47:04](#)):

Surprisingly appreciative of Roger prescribed 900 to follow up on the British government. Cut back on the university expense. You wrote an article in the London times and I off the top of my head, I wish I had the IPO wouldn't, but I might send it to you ended up in saying in short, higher education must be pointless and irrelevant. Otherwise it's got no value. Now the other question was, have you answered the question when you get repeats on the commercial TV and so on? I think StepStone son, the writings are much higher than it was on the ABC. Now why is this because of people like the ads or what, and the third quick comment on it, right? John Maynard Keynes predicted in 1930, that because of the in a hundred years time, because the rapid advancement of science and technology, the economic problem will be solved and people will need only to work 15 hours per week to produce all the goods and services that a society needs. So if we can get refute the economic arc, rational arguments, the theories, we hopefully can only work 15 hours per week and all the rest of the leisure.

Robyn Williams ([00:48:07](#)):

Well, on two of your points, one of them why they get higher ratings on commercials while the commercials are there on television to get a bigger audience, that is their job. What we suppose to do in public broadcasting is that which doesn't necessarily get a large audience, although we don't mind one.

Robyn Williams ([00:48:34](#)):

And when you look at our programs, we've got a new program, son of quantum or daughter of quantum coming up on August the ninth, which we fought for very hard. It's an eight 30 on Thursday for half an hour. Whereas commercials are doing something, especially on radio, for example, where it's kind of the same all the way through so that young people are trained to pick a network or a set of networks seeking us out for an hour is something which is pretty well counter productive. However, the way we're using the new technology is quite sneaky. What we're doing is for instance, with a science show, and we did this with planning before any new regime came on, talking about digital is saying that if we could actually have this sort of programming, not for say, as it used to be 20 to one on a Saturday, I mean, who can remember that ridiculous time? No one under 35 would dream of remembering that. But instead, if you could find a science program and have it at the push of a button wherever you were, and we can do that, now we can do it not as effectively as we might, but you can stream it or listen to the sideshow in Paris in my nephew's apartment, he just pressed the button and there, it was two hours after it was broadcast in Australia. So we can begin to transcend the difficulty. What was your other question?

Audience member ([00:50:07](#)):

It gets me, sorry. The universities are not fighting modern economics theory. This is what makes me so angry. You know, economics department. So you, I criticized and they say, oh, you must have criticized it your own. I'm trying

Robyn Williams ([00:50:21](#)):

To help them fight. And a couple of us from the national council on education went in to see one of the chancellors here this morning and talked about ways in which science is relevant to all professions, environmental research. Is it, is it relevant to all professions? You can't think of any to which it's irrelevant. And we need to have summits on these campuses here in north terrorists, very soon under the auspices of a council that I chair on environmental education so that we can prove that these things are relevant throughout the Australian life. That way you will have a most amazing bit of ginger bring up of campuses. But let me just address very quickly. What you said about may not canes. The reason I mentioned gambling is it seems to me intrinsically, even if you enjoy it unproductive. So Keynes was in some ways, right? That you can produce the things you need, the shelter, the food, and all the intellectual stimulation. But what we've got in a modern society is some sort of pathology where things are being sold and produced in ways that don't necessarily support what people would choose to have as their normal life. So you're making stuff, which is essentially junk, especially my gambling example. So Keynes I thought was to some extent onto under the right thing, there was someone down here who wanted to say, you can stand up and shout

Audience member ([00:51:51](#)):

In order to deal with the boredom I followed my passion in different directions, and different activities, but in doing so I realised life is going by so quickly, how do you slow life down?

Robyn Williams ([00:52:16](#)):

Take out a BIS form, probably get to angry.

Robyn Williams ([00:52:27](#)):

People say that life slows down. When they begin to go to a different place. When they travel, you find that the single days of what you call a holiday in another place and exploring tend to stretch. I know when I am somewhere else outside, the normal routine because the routine takes you through things in a way that lurches you forward. Whereas if you are in a different place for the different experience, you are yourself able to slow down and savor the moment. And someone described in terms of physics, actually ways in which you can seem to have eternal life by having a consciousness that is able, there's a quotation, which I can never quite remember properly all life in a grain of sand. We know William Blake, the contemplation of the small flower and the grain of sand where you can practice that sort of thing. And it seems to me that being out of the rat race is the way in which that can be done. But you, you then go in back into the rat race to get the contrast, which is quite nice. So

Audience member ([00:53:39](#)):

I guess my question is on the same note, it said looking for antidotes to speed. Silicon valley, we think obviously Apogee is speed place where they say that a year takes one 10th of the time. If that's anywhere else, I'm interested to see that a group of software specialists from Silicon valley have a designer thing or design a thing called the millennium clock, which is just to be tardy at a traditional materials. And which was based around a Tom Scott of a thousand rather than a hundred. And the idea behind this is to make people think of their lives environment, different trainers, et cetera, over a longer

period of time. My question is, do you know about the stock and what do you think of that as a way of getting people to think it,

Robyn Williams ([00:54:28](#)):

I think that's quite useful, but they're also more prosaic things to do with personal habits. And I can describe it. I read about 32 journals a week and that isn't as mad as it sounds, because it includes things like the new scientists, scientific American nature, journal science, Australasian science, magazine, Newton, and so on. And what I do is I read them in a postmodern way because in many ways they're written in a postmodern way. They're full of bite-size things. And I found that as weeks passed, my attention was becoming more and more fickle. It wasn't bad as the attention of a journalist, but as a human being, it was bad. So I decided that the Christmas novel I was given of 600 pages come hell or high water. I would start to read it, even though it seemed almost impossible as a project like climbing Mount Everest. As I began now, it just slowed my life down wonderfully. I'm reading a novel, just like that interaction I described, which represents the soap opera, the real rhythm of life. I don't know whether a different sort of clock would do it, but I think a different kind of regime might help. And how we build that as another question.

Audience member ([00:55:53](#)):

Yes. [Question inaudible] .

Robyn Williams ([00:56:25](#)):

Okay. The spiritual values. Yes. Well,

Robyn Williams ([00:56:31](#)):

I not necessarily the right person to ask about this. I'm just a hack and the personality. Yes. I think my personality changes and I know there's other personnel who see this present situation of answering questions in a, in a crowded hall. Worries me, not at all. What does worry me is if I walk to the office and you've got three machines blinking, wanting immediate attention because they are going to continue ruthlessly. And I know that people, when they're flustered, when they're out of control, behave completely differently. Some of the most serene people I know are millionaires. However, it just so happens that our happiness study was done in Oxford by the ex professor of psychology. And he found that the three ingredients that were most important to happiness turned out to be one family, terribly important spiritual value, which needn't necessarily be religious. They could be, I'm not a religious person, but I have lots of, if you like general spiritual values that the atheist here Philip Adams would approve of and they're to do with the, the love of nature, the love of beauty appreciation of music and the kind of emotional reaction you have to them.

Robyn Williams ([00:57:57](#)):

If given time the money aspect was the only thing that turned out to be complete paradox, because there was no relationship beyond poverty, which of course is a different question. There was no direct relationship between more money and more happiness. It turned out that on most of the studies done, especially the Oxford one, there was an inverse relationship because what you're dealing with is amounts of power and control in terms of finance that had no direct bearing on your everyday life. Except, I mean, it's a bit like having why'd you need five cars. If you've already got four, it's absurd. And if you've got any sense, you're ashamed of it because it's environmentally disastrous as well.

Audience member ([00:58:44](#)):

My question is about children and the phenomenon we call ADHD and what your thoughts are about the connection of that occurrence in children with speed and the counterculture that we're placing

Robyn Williams ([00:58:59](#)):

When I started the sign show, funnily enough, one of our very first stories in 1975, '76 was with Dr. Finegold from California who had found that the additives in common foods colorings and so on, based on a certain group of chemicals seem to foster what was then called hyperactive behavior. Now it's called ADHD. And so on attention deficit disorder I've heard a number of theories to do with aspects of this syndrome. In recent times, I think last week it was shown that Ritalin and other similar drugs, stimulants that seem to be favored as treatments are not giving the effect that they're expected to have. In fact, a counterproductive. And someone else said that a sort of apnea, which is in, in fact stopping breathing, which I thought affected only middle-aged snorers. Mainly men turns out to affect 10% of children. And there is an association between hyperactivity to use the old fashioned term and that sort of sleep disorder.

Robyn Williams ([01:00:10](#)):

So in answer, it's a very complicated syndrome. And I do believe that you shouldn't underestimate the drama of having a kid that's really out of control. I would not dream of prenups. Just, just, just handing down information about how it should be dealt with. But I do know that in many instances, the diagnosis is simply wrong. And the kid being told that it's whatever hyperactive and the family, assuming it accordingly is missing out the life story that may involve everything from its diet through to its sleep. So I do believe that whatever happens when you look at the diagnosis in some parts of America, where 50% of kids in the classroom is supposed to be high, it's just mad. It can't possibly be right. Just one final thing.

Audience member ([01:01:06](#)):

We're looking, we're looking to achieve a knowledge society. There seems to be a jump discontinuity between this and wisdom.

Robyn Williams ([01:01:18](#)):

Yes. the factoid society. In other words, well, you have to start with something. And I do know that there's been a sort of complacency in places like America, Britain, the English speaking world and Australia, because they assume having invented cleverness. They say through their science, through their skepticism, through their empirical tradition, that therefore they are still way ahead of other countries who may have an Asian tradition of Confucianism. And the old man knows best. Funnily enough, there was some something in, in Canberra when we were discussing this called the vomit, do you know about the vomits, very old men in ties. And they were, they were supposed to be the people who in other traditions said the right things about how life was going on and how science and the world operated, which is why you had so very few Japanese Nobel prize winners, apart from those who had wisely gone to America and done their work.

Robyn Williams ([01:02:37](#)):

However, now, if you look at some of the best practice in the classroom, in the university, you will find, it happens in places like Taiwan. You will find that lots of other places are pioneering ways in which you

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can educate young people to think to problem solve using all manner of disciplines. And they are being more skeptical than we are. And I'm afraid in many instances, we're falling behind when it comes to using our wisdom. And we're being trapped by the sort of factoid syndrome that made my son in his third year at the university of Sydney, studying philosophy in a tutorial room with 65 young people say, this is ridiculous. He left the country and went to Mexico and he took money that he learned in the [inaudible] district, in Japan, in a nightclub called one eyed jacks, where you could actually save a thousand American dollars a week. And he took it to Mexico, signed in at the university of Quanta Quato, the town of the frogs, and out of his own pocket did studies in Latin American studies. And so on, which in fact gave him wisdom because it seems to me that unless we get that disjunction between knowledge and wisdom worked out the various gesturing in Canberra on both sides of politics, won't meet very much at all. So you're quite right. Thank you.

Robyn Williams ([01:04:25](#)):

[Inaudible].