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# The steady theft of our time

**O**ne of the worst things about today's ultramodern systems of communication is hiding in plain sight: They waste our time. Sure, gizmos like computers and cell phones and pagers can be real time-savers. But what's less obvious is the great extent to which high tech keeps us waiting.

Whether you're rich, poor or somewhere in between, time probably seems to be in short supply. And when intrusions keep draining away precious moments, you probably feel some combination of annoyance, frustration and anger.

The overwhelming nationwide response to the new do-not-call registry is a form of national rebellion against corporate time-stealers. "We need to appreciate the magnitude of what has happened," writes Fortune magazine senior editor Geoffrey Colvin.

"America's stampede to zap telemarketers is a true grassroots movement, and a huge one. It shows how extraordinarily deep and intense people's feelings are about this seemingly minor issue."

During a two-month period over the summer, upwards of 40 million people in the United States signed up to declare their home phone numbers off-limits to the marketing juggernaut. But the do-not-call list speaks to merely one manifestation of an ongoing assault on our time. While a current TV ad blitz by a credit-card company is warning against "identity theft," we have yet to see a national campaign against a much bigger problem — time theft.

In ways large and small, our time is being nicked and dined by corporate interests and government agencies that view it as worthless.

Consider how much time you've spent this year running gauntlets of phone carousels and waiting on hold while muzak and sales pitches fill your ear. It's remarkable how often there's "unusually heavy call volume" — a double-talk phrase that could be translated as "your time is far less important than our overhead."

And more companies are using voice-recognition software to force callers to talk to machines. Those firms aren't paying us, so our time isn't worth anything to them.

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Better we should wait longer.

Increasingly, while callers are compelled to hang on, recorded messages are pitching products and services at captive ears. By any other name, this is another form of telemarketing.

Meanwhile, more traditional advertising on radio and television continues to waste our time while media companies are selling our ear-and-eyeball time to advertisers.

The Internet experience is also, more and more, an assault on our time — and not only with the escalating barrages of spam from e-marketers. Just clicking through the pop-up ads on Web sites can be a real time drain.

The do-not-call upsurge is a barometer of how compacted our lives have become. The media environment, broadly defined, is constantly polluted with hollow claims on our time and attention.

Overall, the social fixations on commerce — the structural *raison d'être* of most media institutions — relentlessly nibble away at our time. To the extent that it doesn't seem to belong to us, time comes to seem more like the property of unaccountable institutions and their functionaries.

Today, the media establishment routinely fails to cover the siege against our time as a huge quality-of-life concern. These are important issues. For instance: How much of your time gets squandered in traffic for lack of adequate mass transit? How much time have you spent this year waiting in line at an understaffed post office (while the Pentagon budget continues to spike upward)? How many government agencies and corporate firms keep you waiting "due to unusually heavy call volume" that isn't unusual at all?

While people in various economic strata are apt to feel an acute shortage of time, those with money are able to buy some time in numerous contexts. The affluent, and even more so the rich, are able to "buy pass" major inconveniences, like waiting for buses or doing tedious errands and tasks that people of modest means do for themselves. As it happens, journalism is one of the many professions with often-unrelenting time pressures. That's true now more than ever — and even long ago, the news business was notably frenetic. Before he died in 1926, the American educator Charles W. Eliot told a newspaper reporter: "You are in the worst job in the world. You never have time." ■

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