

This Week's Citation Classic

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Toffler A. *Future shock*. New York: Random House, 1970. 505 p.

Future Shock argues that people overwhelmed by change suffer not only concrete biochemical consequences, but also marked psychological distress—disorientation, confusion, occasionally lapsing into violence or apathy. It analyzes the social, psychological, and political implications of accelerating change and recommends changes in education, control of technology, and a new form of political process termed anticipatory democracy. [The *Science Citation Index*® (SCI)® and the *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicate that this book has been cited in over 1,195 publications since 1970.]

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"*Future Shock*¹ is a book of social analysis and criticism. Its subject is change, the acceleration of change, and our attempts to cope with it. Rapid technological and social change translates into more transience, novelty, and diversity in the environment. In turn, this places heavy pressure on people to adapt.

"Yet, there are, at any time, certain biological and cultural limits to the speed and complexity of our adaptive decision-making. When accelerating technological, social, and cultural changes demand too many (or too complex) adaptive decisions in too short a time, our decision-making competence deteriorates. We may become 'irrational.'

"In writing not merely on the effects of social and technological change on individuals and organizations, but more specifically on the effects of the acceleration of change, *Future Shock* approached the question of human adaptation in a novel way.

"The problems of maladaptation to rapid change first came to my notice in the late-1950s when I was a political correspondent in Washington. It became clear to me that the government lacked adequate sensing mechanisms with which to monitor and cope with rapid change.

"In 1965, I was invited by *Horizon* magazine to write an article about our unread-

ness for the future. In preparation, I began reading about 'culture shock'—the dislocation travelers experience when suddenly plunged into an alien culture. An analogy occurred to me: if people could be, so to speak, dislocated in space, why not in time? If accelerating techno-social change was creating an alien society in our very midst, perhaps much of the widespread disorientation, alienation, psychological stress, and even breakdown we see is the result of adaptational failure. Perhaps people could suffer from 'the premature arrival of the future' and go into 'future shock.'

"This analogy started me and my wife (who is also my colleague, editor, and intellectual companion) on five years of research.

"*Future Shock* first appeared in July 1970 and clearly struck a very raw nerve. Since then, some 7,000,000 copies have been sold in more than 50 countries, and it has been translated into two score languages from Arabic and Hebrew to Greek, Chinese, Polish, Rumanian, Finnish, as well as, of course, French, Spanish, Japanese, and German. It is now used in hundreds of university courses in many different disciplines from sociology to biology, religion, jurisprudence, philosophy, and experimental psychology. Numerous experiments have been triggered by it. It has been quoted by presidents and prime ministers, as well as scientists. Many periodicals have commented on it, from scientific journals in the US to *Pravda* in Moscow and *Le Monde* in Paris. The term 'future shock' has also made its appearance in various recent dictionaries, and the book has won the Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger as well as the McKinsey Foundation Book Award for its 'distinguished contribution to management literature.'

"I suspect there are several reasons why *Future Shock* has been so widely cited in the scientific literature. First, it is interdisciplinary. Second, the issues it deals with are inherently international. Third, it looks at the problems of change and adaptation in a novel way—cutting across conventional lines of analysis. And finally, the basic phenomenon—accelerative change—is felt strongly in science itself, so that many scientists have a personal experience of the very process described."

1. Toffler A. *Future shock*. New York: Bantam Books, 1981. 517 p.