

Explore

1. One of Carr's central points in his essay relates to the process of adapting to new intellectual technologies. In the changing metaphors we use to explain ourselves to ourselves: "Free write about the metaphors that you use to describe yourself and your thinking processes. Have these changed over time? How may these metaphors relate to the technologies you use or may once have used?"
2. In her essay "How We Read: Close, Hyper, Machine," the academic N. Katherine Hayles critiques Carr's essay and explains the ways in which various types of reading can all exist at the same time. Look up a copy of Hayles's essay either in your college library or on the Web. Read the essay, making note of the many places where her essay is in dialogue with Carr's essay. Then, in a short essay, which you will present to your classmates, explain what Hayles's essay is about and how it can be compared and contrasted with Carr's essay.
3. In response to Carr's argument and the claims he uses to support his argument, write a three- to five-page essay in which you explain, based on your own experiences of using Google and other Web technologies in your writing and research processes, why you agree or disagree with Carr's argument and the claims he uses to support his argument. In your essay, make sure to cite and comment on textual evidence from Carr's essay.

Clay Shirky

"Does the Internet Make You Smarter?"

Clay Shirky is an American writer, educator, and consultant who has been writing and thinking about the Internet since the mid-1990s. An Associate Professor at New York University (NYU) in Journalism and New Media Studies, Shirky's writings are currently focused on the Internet's effect in shifting media landscapes, the Internet economy and its effects on national culture, and open source software in post-PC network ecologies. His articles and essays have been published in a range of business and technology magazines and newspapers, and he is the author of several books, most

recently *Cognitive Surplus: How Technology Makes Consumers Into Collaborators* (2011) and *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (2009). In this essay, Shirky argues that the Internet, contrary to widely held perceptions, does not make us dumber or more distracted but may actually be an engine behind a potential cognitive surplus.

Does using the Internet make you feel more or less intelligent? Why?

Digital media have made creating and disseminating text, sound, and images cheap, easy and global. The bulk of publicly available media is now created by people who understand little of the professional standards and practices for media.

Instead, these amateurs produce endless streams of mediocrity, eroding cultural norms about quality and acceptability, and leading to increasingly alarmed predictions of incipient chaos and intellectual collapse.

But of course, that's what always happens. Every increase in freedom to create or consume media, from paperback books to YouTube, alarms people accustomed to the restrictions of the old system, convincing them that the new media will make young people stupid. This fear dates back to at least the invention of movable type.

As Gutenberg's press spread through Europe, the Bible was translated into local languages, enabling direct encounters with the text; this was accompanied by a flood of contemporary literature, most of it mediocre. Vulgar versions of the Bible and distracting secular writings fueled religious unrest and civic confusion, leading to claims that the printing press, if not controlled, would lead to chaos and the dismemberment of European intellectual life.

These claims were, of course, correct. Print fueled the Protestant Reformation, which did indeed destroy the Church's pan-European hold on intellectual life. What the 16th-century foes of print didn't imagine—couldn't imagine—was what followed: We built new norms around newly abundant and contemporary literature. Novels, newspapers, scientific journals, the separation of fiction and non-fiction, all of these innovations were created during the collapse of the scribal system, and all had the effect of increasing, rather than decreasing, the intellectual range and output of society.

To take a famous example, the essential insight of the scientific revolution was peer review, the idea that science was a collaborative effort that

included the feedback and participation of others. Peer review was a cultural institution that took the printing press for granted as a means of distributing research quickly and widely, but added the kind of cultural constraints that made it valuable.

We are living through a similar explosion of publishing capability today, where digital media link over a billion people into the same network. This linking together in turn lets us tap our cognitive surplus, the trillion hours a year of free time the educated population of the planet has to spend doing things they care about. In the 20th century, the bulk of that time was spent watching television, but our cognitive surplus is so enormous that diverting even a tiny fraction of time from consumption to participation can create enormous positive effects.

Wikipedia took the idea of peer review and applied it to volunteers on a global scale, becoming the most important English reference work in less than 10 years. Yet the cumulative time devoted to creating Wikipedia, something like 100 million hours of human thought, is expended by Americans every weekend, just watching ads. It only takes a fractional shift in the direction of participation to create remarkable new educational resources.

Similarly, open source software, created without managerial control of the workers or ownership of the product, has been critical to the spread of the Web. Searches for everything from supernovae to prime numbers now happen as giant, distributed efforts. Ushahidi, the Kenyan crisis mapping tool invented in 2008, now aggregates citizen reports about crises the world over. PatientsLikeMe, a website designed to accelerate medical research by getting patients to publicly share their health information, has assembled a larger group of sufferers of Lou Gehrig's disease than any pharmaceutical agency in history, by appealing to the shared sense of seeking medical progress.

Of course, not everything people care about is a high-minded project. Whenever media become more abundant, average quality falls quickly, while new institutional models for quality arise slowly. Today we have The World's Funniest Home Videos running 24/7 on YouTube, while the potentially world-changing uses of cognitive surplus are still early and special cases.

That always happens too. In the history of print, we got erotic novels 100 years before we got scientific journals, and complaints about distraction have been rampant; no less a beneficiary of the printing press than

Martin Luther complained, "The multitude of books is a great evil. There is no measure of limit to this fever for writing." Edgar Allan Poe, writing during another surge in publishing, concluded, "The enormous multiplication of books in every branch of knowledge is one of the greatest evils of this age; since it presents one of the most serious obstacles to the acquisition of correct information."

The response to distraction, then as now, was social structure. Reading is an unnatural act; we are no more evolved to read books than we are to use computers. Literate societies become literate by investing extraordinary resources, every year, training children to read. Now it's our turn to figure out what response we need to shape our use of digital tools.

Does the Internet Make You Dumber?

The case for digitally-driven stupidity assumes we'll fail to integrate digital freedoms into society as well as we integrated literacy. This assumption in turn rests on three beliefs: that the recent past was a glorious and irreplaceable high-water mark of intellectual attainment; that the present is only characterized by the silly stuff and not by the noble experiments; and that this generation of young people will fail to invent cultural norms that do for the Internet's abundance what the intellectuals of the 17th century did for print culture. There are likewise three reasons to think that the Internet will fuel the intellectual achievements of 21st-century society.

First, the rosy past of the pessimists was not, on closer examination, so rosy. The decade the pessimists want to return us to is the 1980s, the last period before society had any significant digital freedoms. Despite frequent genuflection to European novels, we actually spent a lot more time watching "Diff'rent Strokes" than reading Proust, prior to the Internet's spread. The Net, in fact, restores reading and writing as central activities in our culture.

The present is, as noted, characterized by lots of throwaway cultural artifacts, but the nice thing about throwaway material is that it gets thrown away. This issue isn't whether there's lots of dumb stuff online—there is, just as there is lots of dumb stuff in bookstores. The issue is whether there are any ideas so good today that they will survive into the future. Several early uses of our cognitive surplus, like open source software, look like they will pass that test.

The past was not as golden, nor is the present as fawdy, as the pessimists suggest, but the only thing really worth arguing about is the future. It is our misfortune, as a historical generation, to live through the largest expansion in expressive capability in human history; a misfortune because abundance breaks more things than scarcity. We are now witnessing the rapid stress of older institutions accompanied by the slow and fitful development of cultural alternatives. Just as required education was a response to print, using the Internet well will require new cultural institutions as well, not just new technologies.

It is tempting to want *Patients Like Me* without the dumb videos, just as we might want scientific journals without the erotic novels, but that's not how media works. Increased freedom to create means increased freedom to create throwaway material, as well as freedom to indulge in the experimentation that eventually makes the good new stuff possible. There is no easy way to get through a media revolution of this magnitude: the task before us now is to experiment with new ways of using a medium that is social, ubiquitous and cheap, a medium that changes the landscape by distributing freedom of the press and freedom of assembly as widely as freedom of speech.

Analyze

1. According to Shirky, what was the "essential insight of the scientific revolution"? What were the effects of this insight?
2. Shirky compares Wikipedia with the scientific peer review process initiated with the invention of the printing press. Explain why this comparison is important to his argument.
3. How does Shirky define "cognitive surplus"? Why is this term central to his argument?
4. What are the three beliefs that Shirky cites as being behind the "digitally driven stupidity" case?

Explore

1. Central to Shirky's essay is the analogy he makes between the printing press and the Internet. Make two lists: one of the changes that Shirky mentions in relation to the printing press and one of the changes he mentions in relation to the Internet. Write a short essay assessing the strength of this analogy based on the evidence presented by Shirky.

2. Much of Shirky's argument regarding the potential for the collective cognitive surplus relates to his belief that the Internet is fundamentally different from television. Write a short essay comparing and contrasting how your use of Internet and Web technologies is similar or different to how you watch TV.
3. If, as many critics claim, the Web is a "meta-medium" that incorporates all of the media that came before it, how might this perspective affect Shirky's argument? In a three- to five-page essay, describe the many different media that are brought together by the Web and assess the extent to which Shirky acknowledges this perspective in his essay and the strength of Shirky's argument in the context of this perspective.

Sam Leith

"What Does It All Meme?"

2011

Sam Leith is a British author and journalist. A frequent contributor to *The Spectator*, *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, and *The Guardian*, he has a regular column in the *Monday Evening Standard*. Leith has published several works of nonfiction: *Dead Pets*, *Sod's Law*, *You Talkin' to Me?*, and, most recently, *Words Like Loaded Pistols: Rhetoric From Aristotle to Obama* (2012). *The Coincidence Engine*, his first novel, was published in April 2011. In this essay, Leith reviews the origin and meanings of the term *meme* and considers the possible effects and consequences of instant media events for culture and society.

What is currently your favorite meme? Why?

process - just improve?

He lives in Japan. He's a straight-haired Scottish Fold, four years old, slightly rotund (his name means "round" in Japanese). Otherwise? Well, there's this thing he does where he jumps into an empty cardboard box. He jumps into all sorts of cardboard boxes. And out. Sometimes he climbs in a bin. Just for fun!