

# Is technology making us smarter?

ADVANCES IN computing technology and the internet are making us smarter, some folks say. Others argue that having so much information at our fingertips can encourage mental laziness and fill us with false or misleading information.

What do you think?

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On the internet, search:

- Technology is making us stupid.
- The dumbest generation? No, Twitter is making kids smarter.
- Do smartphones make smarter students? Some educators think so.
- Is technology making us stupid (and smarter)?



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For some, yes; for others it may make them appear smarter because they just have to click on the appropriate application and voilà.

—John Thompson

Technology simply allows us to (erroneously) believe that everyone can have an opinion, and that opinion—no matter how factually wrong—is valid. Technology isn't making us smarter; it's enabling us to be stupid.

—Cara Katterhagen

As much as the internet has become a useful tool, it has also created a situation where we tend to let it do for us rather than do for ourselves and learn in the process.

—David Stratton

Life experience and self-learning are the best teaching tools. I look at technology as a supplemental aid.

—Michael Foster

Just like everything in life it is not a "one size fits all." Technology, in and of itself, does not make anyone smarter. One must be open to learning and applying new information to become smarter, and technology can certainly facilitate that.

—Truth Renaissance

In some ways yes and in others no. I remember I used to know everyone in my life's phone number by heart. Now, thanks to smartphones, my own husband doesn't even know my number.

—Andrea Humphrey

Having information is one thing and experiencing something is another. Unless information is obtained by experience or by putting in some effort, it can never be converted into knowledge. That is what the gap is today.

—Sandeep Garg

STEVEN LAIT

## YES FROM EXPERTS IN THE FIELD



**Stephen Downes** (downes.ca) is an Ottawa-based researcher specializing in teaching and learning with digital media and technology at the National Research Council of Canada.

TO UNDERSTAND the ways digital technology, such as smartphones, is making us smarter, let's examine how it is making us less intelligent.

- A study from Dartmouth College says, "Using digital platforms such as tablets and laptops for reading may make you more inclined to focus on concrete details rather than interpreting information more abstractly."

This is because when we use digital technology to communicate with people around the world, we realize that few generalizations are actually true, and we're less inclined to leap to them.

- The journal *ACM Transactions on the web* reports that we tend to scan digital media rather than read articles from beginning to end.

This means we are reading more efficiently. Instead of simply consuming content, we are making judgments as we read. Because reading takes so much less effort, we can look at many things and focus on the ones we want.

- Digital media encourages multitasking; a UCLA study tells us multitasking makes it more difficult to learn and remember.

Becoming better at multitasking makes us better able to adapt and thrive in a complex environment. Learning isn't simply about consuming content and remembering it; it's about developing the skill to keep one's eyes and ears open and to recognize and react instantly, even if we're doing something else.

- Our use of technology is changing our brains so that we become less deep and contemplative when we use digital media, says journalist Nicholas Carr, who has written a book on the subject.

This is called "plasticity" and is one of the key advantages humans have over animals, which must rely on instinct. Instead of simply learning by remembering, we learn to learn quickly and efficiently.

Yes, we think and learn differently when we use digital technology. But we become less set in our ways, able to adapt to changing information and better able to make judgments. These are all ways of being smarter, not less able. **C**

## NO FROM EXPERTS IN THE FIELD



**Nathaniel Barr** is a professor of creativity and creative thinking at Sheridan College in the Toronto area and a co-author of the paper *The Brain in Your Pocket*.

MY COLLEAGUES and I conducted research to see what sorts of thinkers are most prone to rely on the internet as an extended mind. We found that people who are lazier in their thinking and are lower in cognitive ability use search engines more often than their more analytic and intelligent counterparts.

Such a habit might seem to result in smarter people—those less able to reason effectively are offloading their thinking to the internet rather than relying on their brains for incorrect answers. Decades of reasoning research show that although some people are lazier thinkers than others, we all tend to be lazy in our thinking to save time and energy. So is it the case that we all can be smarter by relying on the internet more?

The problem with this logic is that online content is often inaccurate. Fake news, clickbait and other false information abound on the internet, and the sheer volume of content can make it hard to separate fact from fiction.

Given that the people who more frequently rely on the internet as an extended mind are less reflective and less intelligent, those who are least capable of assessing whether information is valid are being exposed most often to incorrect information. And although some are more susceptible than others, our collective disposition to limit effortful thought means that none of us are immune to the perils of misinformation online.

Furthermore, it is still unclear whether increasingly using technology to do our thinking dulls our own ability to remember, reason and pay attention.

To reap the benefits of technology, we cannot mindlessly rely on the internet for information; we must think hard about the content we consume and share. At the very least we can ask ourselves: Who posted this? What qualifies them to know what they are talking about? And we should then take a little time to get different views, both online and from people in the real world. Although the internet isn't making us smarter, it has the potential to, if we use it more intelligently. **C**

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