授课文本

Bleat For Yourself

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The instant availability of an ocean of information has been an epoch-making boon to humanity. But has the resulting information overload also deeply changed how we think? Has it changed the nature of the self? Has it even as some have suggested radically altered the relationship of the individual and society? These are important philosophical questions, but vague and slippery, and I hope to clarify them.

The Internet is changing how we think, it is suggested. But how is it, precisely? One central feature of the “new mind” is that it is spread too thin. But what does that mean?

In functional terms, being spread too thin means we have too many Websites to visit, we get too many messages, and too much is “happening” online and in other media that we feel compelled take on board. Many of us lack effective strategies for organizing our time in the face of this onslaught. This makes us constantly distracted and unfocused, and less able to perform heavy intellectual tasks. Among other things, or so some have confessed, we cannot focus long enough to read whole books. We feel unmoored and we flow along helplessly wherever the fast-moving digital flood carries us.

We do? Well some of us do, evidently.

Some observers speak of “where we are going,” or of how “our minds” are being changed by information overload, apparently despite ourselves. Their discussions make erstwhile free agents mere subjects of powerful new forces, and the only question is where those forces are taking us. I don't share the assumption here. When I read the title of Nick Carr's essay, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” I immediately thought, “Speak for yourself.” It seems to me that in discussions like Carr's, it is assumed that intellectual control has already been ceded but that strikes me as being a cause, not a symptom, of the problem Carr bemoans. After all, the exercise of freedom requires focus and attention, and the ur-event of the will is precisely focus itself. Carr unwittingly confessed for too many of us a moral failing, a vice; the old name for it is intemperance. (In the older, broader sense, contrasted

with sophrosyne, moderation or self-control.) And, as with so much of vice, we want to blame it on anything but ourselves.

Is it really true that we no longer have any choice but to be intemperate in how we spend our time, in the face of the temptations and shrill demands of networked digital media? New media are not that powerful. We still retain free will, which is the ability to focus, deliberate, and act on the results of our own deliberations. If we want to spend hours reading books, we still possess that freedom. Only philosophical argument could establish that information overload has deprived us of our agency. The claim at root is philosophical, not empirical.

My interlocutors might cleverly reply that we now, in the age of Facebook and Wikipedia, do still deliberate, but collectively. In other words, for example, we vote stuff up or down on Digg, del.icio.us, and Slashdot, and then we might feel ourselves obligated if we're participating as true believers to pay special attention to the top-voted items. Similarly, we attempt to reach "consensus" on Wikipedia, and again, if participating as true believers endorse the end result as credible. To the extent that our time is thus directed by social networks, engaged in collective deliberation, then we are subjugated to a "collective will," something like Rousseau's notion of a general will. To the extent that we plug in, we become merely another part of the network. That, anyway, is how I would reconstruct the collectivist-determinist position that is opposed to my own individualist-libertarian one.

But we obviously have the freedom not to participate in such networks. And we have the freedom to consume the output of such networks selectively, and holding our noses to participate, we needn't be true believers. So it is very hard for me to take the "woe is us, we're growing stupid and collectivized like sheep" narrative seriously. If you feel yourself growing ovine, bleat for yourself.

I get the sense that many writers on these issues aren't much bothered by the un-focusing, de-liberating effects of joining the Hive Mind. Don Tapscott has suggested that the instant availability of information means we don't have to "memorize" anything anymore just consult Google and Wikipedia, the brains of the Hive Mind. Clay Shirky seems to believe that in the future we will be enculturated not by reading dusty old books but in something like online fora, plugged into the ephemera of a group mind, as it were. But surely, if we were to act as either of these college teachers recommend, we'd become a bunch of ignoramuses. Indeed, perhaps that's what social networks are turning too many kids into, as Mark Bauerlein argues cogently in The Dumbest Generation. (For the record, I've started homeschooling my own little boy.)

The issues here are much older than the Internet. They echo the debate between progressivism and traditionalism found in philosophy of education: should children be educated primarily so as fit in well in society, or should the focus be on training minds for critical thinking and filling them with knowledge? For many decades before the advent of the Internet, educational progressivists have insisted that, in our rapidly changing world,

knowing mere facts is not what is important, because knowledge quickly becomes outdated; rather, being able to collaborate and solve problems together is what is important. Social networks have reinforced this ideology, by seeming to make knowledge and judgment collective functions. But the progressivist position on the importance of learning facts and training individual judgment withers under scrutiny, and, pace Tapscott and Shirky, events of the last decade have not made it more durable.

In sum, there are two basic issues here. Do we have any choice about ceding control of the self to an increasingly compelling "Hive Mind"? Yes. And should we cede such control, or instead strive, temperately, to develop our own minds very well and direct our own attention carefully? The answer, I think, is obvious.