Are We Outsourcing Our Brains to Google?

"The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works — no civil discourse, no cooperation, misinformation, mistruth…. I feel tremendous guilt."
— Charmath Palihapitiya, former vice president of Facebook user growth

This past March, I came across John Hawkins' online article at PJ Media, "[Fifteen Devastating Quotes That Show How Dangerous Social Media Has Become to Society](#)." In this compilation we hear from officers and employees of Google, university professors, writers, and commentators, all of whom decry the dangers of social media. Several fear that outfits as Apple, Facebook, and Google are "chipping away at our ability to control our own minds," endangering, among other things, democracy itself.

Others compare these platforms and their hold on users to addictive drugs. Still others point to the negative effects of social media on the development of children. "As a consequence," [says](#) Oxford Professor Susan Greenfield, "the mid-21st-century mind might almost be infantilized, characterized by short attention spans, sensationalism, inability to empathize and a shaky sense of identity."

I'll be the first to admit I am hooked to my electronic devices. I like — no, I love — having information at my fingertips. I love living in an age when to uncover some detail of history or literature I don't have to make a trip to the library. I have no desire to return to typewriters, slow mail, and phones hooked to a jack in the wall.

Yet the voices collected by Hawkins remind me that much as I

love my laptop and phone, I am also subject, like everyone else, to the negative effects of this technology. So many hours online has left its inevitable mark. I see the damage done by social media to our public discourse, the crudity and cruelty of some who attack people they will never meet. I have no doubt that my attention span is shorter than it once was, eroded by hopping from website to website. My ability to concentrate is surely diminished, and I know from experience my need for the drug of online stimulation. Take my computer away, and I would undoubtedly go through a few hard days of withdrawal.

And I am an old guy. What about our young people?

Hawkins includes several quotes about the negative influence of social media on young people, including one from Dr. Nassir Ghaemi, who postulates a strong connection between social media and depression among young people. But what about other effects? The ability to read deeply, to think and write coherently? The ability to exercise reason and restraint, to withhold judgment before ascertaining the facts, to sift out the truth from the falsehoods that appear daily online?

Right now, our technology is racing ahead of our ability to discern its import on us. For example, google "how the internet is changing our brain," and you will find a mixed bag of results. Some believe that we are outsourcing a part of our brain to… well, to Google.

Innovation often brings positive and negative effects. The automobile, for example, gave us the ability to move about with relative ease, to visit family members hundreds of miles away, and to live in the countryside while working in a city. On the other hand, our cars also transformed that countryside into suburbs, helped dismantle the extended family, and added millions of miles of asphalt roadways to the planet.

But there is one enormous difference between previous

technological advances — from the printing press to the development of atomic power — and those of our present age. Cars, light bulbs, telephones, and compact discs exist outside of us. When we engage with social media, however, when we take information from blogs and make it our own, we are merging our hearts and minds with a machine. Blithely, we continue apace in this transformation, most often unaware of the change we are undergoing.

Cars, light bulbs, telephones, and compact discs are objects we use and control.

Social media has the power to use and control us.

Former Google employee Tristan Harris has [this](#) to say: "A handful of people, working at a handful of technology companies, through their choices will steer what a billion people are thinking today. I don't know a more urgent problem than this. It's changing our democracy, and it's changing our ability to have the conversations and relationships that we want with each other."

Few people engaged with their electronic devices can see and understand this "urgent problem."

Which is too bad, because seeing and understanding may be the only solution.

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