

Technology's Stranglehold

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Description

We are all familiar with the minor perils that the rapid rise of technology has caused- buying clothes on the internet without trying them on, buying electronics and appliances online without seeing them, personal relating through impersonal social media, and so on. But what we rarely think of is how technology has distorted the pursuit of knowledge.

The area where this affects most of us is journalism the newspapers, magazines, and books that we read that disseminate knowledge. We now read them on the internet rather than in paper print. The internet makes it so easy for both readers and writers to retrieve facts through reports and studies (something we used to go to the library for) and everything is available because almost all publications are on the internet. An increasing number of print publications now have internet editions that are equal to or bigger than their print editions. So, knowledge has become easily accessible. However, as Ezra Klein suggests in a column by Ross Douthat in the New York Times, (The Old Journalism and the New) "there is something being lost in the transition from policy magazine s to policy websites."

Speaking about the recent intended controversial switch from print to internet by The New Republic, Douthat goes on to say that the print edition "never left its readers with the delusion that literary style or intellectual ambition were of secondary importance." Such literary style is no longer admired or even condoned by online magazines that urge writers to use a conversational tone in their submission guidelines. But as Neil Postman so persuasively argues in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, conversation is not writing and, "The written word endures, the spoken word disappears; and that is why writing is closer to the truth than speaking."

Intellectual ambition is also sacrificed online as articles seem to focus on more trivial pursuits and most are not terribly high-minded or deeply into their subject. They choose a narrow sphere of content coverage that is data-driven- i.e., that lends itself to charts, reports, and other discreet and abstract analytical sources. In a sense, they dissect a subject into parts and miss a sense of coherence and wholeness. The titles of online articles are catchy, jazzy and intended to attract readers who are assumed to need such flags and have short spans of attention. A serious title is a no-no and short pieces are preferred. Pieces are valued by the number of 'hits' or clicks they get so that the editorial choice of online articles is surely influenced by the potential for these hits. Again, following Postman, "the form in which ideas are expressed affects what those ideas will be."

An even clearer example of technology's impact on knowledge is in the university where the pursuit of knowledge is one of its two main purposes (the other being teaching). In fact, the digital revolution may have started in the universities about thirty or more years ago in the form of the huge 'mainstream' computer before the personal computer became ubiquitous. Research used to be mostly qualitative- knowledge gained through intuition, personal interview, and experience. But when statistical analysis became the handmaiden of research, it used huge numbers of observations and complex means of making sense of them. Computers then became the way to retrieve this data and to analyze it. Soon quantitative or digital methodology became the sole way of

acquiring knowledge and continues to this day. Papers submitted to professional journals that do not contain computer-generated tables are not published. Dissertation proposals for qualitative research are not accepted.

This imbalance creates serious problems. For one, the digital method can only deal with phenomena that lend themselves to quantification and computer manipulation. So, as in journalism, only certain research questions are asked. And even in these questions, important variables, those not amenable to this method, are left out of the equation.

Another distortion is in the area of understanding. Although technology is able to determine the magnitude, frequency, and relative importance of events, it is not able to relate the variables to each other - so as to form a new pattern and a new understanding of a coherent whole. The connection between points is missing so that the findings cannot be related to a broader context to answer the question of meaning.

The problem is that technology dictates the kind of questions to be asked (only those that can be answered with this limited method); the variables to be chosen (only those that can be analyzed quantitatively); and the answers to look for (only those that require no synthesis or broader interpretation). If the intuitive, integrative, and creative are left out, and the question of meaning becomes meaningless - then we are left with a grave distortion- technology not for the sake of knowledge, but for its own sake. Technology has, by now, become ideology, and the search for knowledge - merely a technological exercise.

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