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# Is Smart Technology Making Us Dumb? Take Our Poll.

**A panel of experts debates the question and the audience votes**

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I attended a recent Intelligence Squared debate at the Kaufman Center in New York City on this question: Does smart technology make us dumb?

Two sets of panelists argued pro and con in front of a sold-out crowd. The audience was an integral part of the evening because it voted on who won the debate. After listening to both sides, how would you vote? Take our poll at the end of this story to tell us.

## **Pro: Smart Technology Steals Our Ability to Think Deeply**

Launching the pro side was Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*. “We’re here tonight to talk about our intelligence and about whether our smartphones, apps and social media accounts are expanding it or eroding it,” he said.

“How is the technology influencing the way our minds work?” Carr asked. “I think all of us know pretty well how we use our gadgets. We use them compulsively. The research bears this out. The average person with a [smartphone](#) will pull out the phone and look at it about 150 times a day.”

All those messages, alerts and Google searches create an environment of distraction and almost perpetual interruption, which disturbs the process of memory consolidation, he said. The key to building knowledge is being able to move incoming information from your conscious mind into your long-term memory. Through this consolidation, we create connections and associations between what we’re learning now and what we already know. That is the foundation for conceptual, critical and creative thinking. The problem today is that we’re constantly overloading that small store of our working memory.

Being peppered with messages and bits of information frustrates our mind’s ability to think deeply. “We’re losing that contemplative, focused, attentive state of mind that is crucial to the creation of knowledge and deep thinking in general,” Carr said.

Andrew Keen, executive director of the Silicon Valley Salon FutureCast and author of the book, *The Internet is Not the Answer*, added that technology “simply confirms our misplaced ideal that the world revolves around us. Everyone is saying everything at the same time and no one listening to anyone else.

“We all have our publishing platforms. We can all tell the world what we’re thinking, what we’re doing, where we’re going, what we’re wearing,” he said. “This is a selfie culture.”

And it’s an echo chamber culture, he said, where we look for confirmation of our preexisting views vs. seeking out different perspectives.

### **Against: This Is the Smartest Age We’ve Ever Had**

Speaking against the motion, David Weinberger, author of *Rethinking Knowledge Now That the Facts Aren’t the Facts*, said: “This is the greatest time in human history to be somebody who cares about knowledge.”

Weinberger praised Wikipedia, noting that the ability to link to ever more information is a plus. He contrasted it to old reference books, using the Encyclopedia Britannica’s entry about playwright Oliver Goldsmith as an example. In 1911, Goldsmith’s life merited 6,000 words. But with each new edition, his biography shrank as new entries crowded it out. By 1994, it was down to 1,500 words — a 75 percent reduction in information.

Today, information is vast and access to it has never been this free, Weinberger said. “We can take a course at a major university for free, and read open access journals, where most of the best physics and best math in the world is being done,” he noted.

Weinberger did not deny the facts the other side presented about how the brain works. But he asserted it’s crazy not to think technology is making us smarter. “If ‘smart’ means [we are] better at our work, then I absolutely — and you absolutely — want your doctor, your auto mechanic and your airplane pilot to have the smartest technology that there is.”

Also on the opposing side was Genevieve Bell, vice president of corporate strategy at Intel, who maintained that smart technology has made us more responsive and engaged. In Africa and India, government agencies send out health warnings by texting people’s mobile phones. In Australia, indigenous people have embraced new technologies for old things like storytelling and new things like researching climate change and how to regain their land.

Citing student protests and the videophone recording of a policeman shooting a suspect in South Carolina, Bell asked: “Would the students who were protesting say that smart technology was making them dumb? I don’t think so.” She also referenced the revelations of Edward Snowden and Sony leaks.

### **Rebuttals**

John Donvan, moderator of the event, then opened the floor to rebuttals.

Carr argued that science was against Weinberger's argument that pilots should have the smartest technology possible: "Actually, if you look at airline safety research, and if you look at the recent proclamations from the FAA, they're saying that over-automation is actually making pilots less capable."

According to a study done in the Netherlands in which people were given increasingly smart software to do difficult tasks, Carr continued, researchers found that as the software got smarter, the people got lazier. "They began to become reliant on the software itself. They weren't practicing their own talents."

Keen disputed Weinberger's praise of Wikipedia: "But all the research on Wikipedia indicates that the content there isn't very reliable. When it comes to the medical information on Wikipedia, a board of doctors who researched this found that nine out of 10 articles on Wikipedia about medicine were inaccurate."

Carr cited a Stanford study comparing people who spend a lot of time online and multitasking with a group that didn't. "They gave them six basic, fundamental tests of cognitive function. The heavy multitaskers did worse on all six tests."

Keen added that he was suspicious of Bell's argument that new technologies would empower aboriginal people, solve poverty or overthrow repressive political regimes.

During her rebuttal, Bell challenged the very premise of the debate on smart vs. dumb, asking what we really meant by the pejorative word.

"Does it mean that every single one of us who uses GPS because we're directionally challenged is an idiot? Does it mean the fact that I like Microsoft to spell-check me make me dumb? I don't think so. So there's sort of something in there about what is the judgment lurking beneath 'dumb' that requires just a little bit of scrutiny," said Bell.

She also raised a point about human anxiety over technology, saying we've seen it before over the last 200 years. "What is the anxiety that is appealed to when you applaud the notion that this technology is making us dumb?" she asked the audience. "Because at beginning of this debate, most of you raised your hands that you had smart technology in your lives. My suspicion is that threading through all of that is a very human set of preoccupations and anxieties, an anxiety about what technology means for us, what it means for our humanity, our bodies, our competency, what it means to have new technologies in some ways threaten some of those things."

Weinberger spoke to the impact the Internet in particular has had. "If we look into the [sciences](#), we see that smart technology has enabled a rapid advance of those sciences. What we're doing now would be absolutely impossible without the Internet. And not simply because of the rapid communication," he said.

The other key, Weinberger said, is the sophisticated collaboration that the Internet makes possible, including management of enormous multinational projects. "It's enabled a type of iterative knowledge as well, in which ideas are put forward, and then iterated on in public," he said. "And this is actually a pretty new form of knowledge. It can be done at scale. The Internet is enabling open access, which is the

movement that — the idea that — scientific research and research in the humanities, academic research should be available for free to anybody online.”

Just before the debate ended, moderator Donovan asked the audience: “As this debate has proceeded before you, has anybody been multitasking in any form?”

He waited a beat. “Some hands have gone up,” he noted.

Then he said: “You missed an amazing debate.”