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As a parent of two small children who takes seriously Richard Louv's concerns about "nature deficit disorder," I continually wonder how I can raise my children in this environment so that they are skilled with the technology but not drowning in it.[1] Practical issues regarding how much time my privileged children should spend in front of a screen, however, give way to broader concerns about the future of information processing. In this paper I will attempt to frame everyday issues regarding the role of information technology in our lives in terms of the "big picture" of where such incredibly powerful tools might lead us. Questions about our emerging digital world, I believe, speak to the very meaning of human life and the possibility of our extinction. Google cannot answer these questions, which makes them especially worrisome.

At root, my concerns stem from the popular sentiment that all knowledge is really just information. Biology, for instance, increasingly understands life as a matter of information processes that are not that different from the subject matter of computer science. The consequences of this paradigm may seem academic, but Leon Kass—former chair of President Bush's Council of Bioethics—captures the immense powers of the information age:

> All of the boundaries are up for grabs. All of the boundaries that have defined us as human beings, boundaries between a human being and an animal and between a human being and a super human being or a god. The boundaries of life, the boundaries of death…. We may be able to do new things, but it will no longer be clear who is the "we" doing them—whether enhancing athletes' bodies through steroids, changing who you are with euphoriants, moving the maximum life expectancy out so that one no longer lives with the vision of one's finitude as a guide to how one chooses to spend one's days, or blurring that ultimate line of what is a human being and what is an animal.

These questions are the questions of the 21st century and nothing is more important.[2]

From this perspective, the primary problem of too much information is not a matter of "information overload" for a busy population. The information technologies of our generation will, in all likelihood, shape humanity to an even greater extent than Gutenberg press or electricity. As we come to have instantaneous access to all digitized information, we become different creatures. We think differently and we socialize differently, and the changes are upon us before we have time to evaluate them. As an example of the speed of these changes, imagine the equivalent of the iPhone in 2030. It may well be a few millimeters in size and have powers that would seem even more magical to our 2010 minds than the 3GS would have seemed to me in 1990 when I was a first-year college student. For one example of the possible information technologies of the near future, consider the ambitions of Google cofounder Sergey Brin: "Certainly if you had all the world's information directly attached to your brain, or an artificial brain that was smarter than your brain, you'd be better off."[3] Your phone may soon be smarter than you.

More importantly, at some point it becomes difficult to distinguish you from your phone or your laptop. Surely we are smarter in some respects because we can recall limitless information via our machines, and I personally place considerable value in this. I could not be who I am without my laptop. But at some point it seems fair to ask: Is it the machines or the people that are becoming smarter? If my spell check automatically fixes mistakes, it seems questionable that I would receive credit for submitting an error-free paper. The machine did that bit of the work, just as a calculator does arithmetic for me. To use Bill McKibben's example, driving a marathon course in a car is very different from running it and our sense of achievement differs accordingly.[4] But what if Wikipedia does most of my research for me? Where should we draw the line be-

tween my contribution and the machine's? Can we still differentiate between the machines and the people? What criteria would we use to explain the boundaries between my efforts and the machine's? How will these lines blur further in 20 years? Will it become impossible to distinguish between the human and the inhuman as humans become more dependent upon and integrated with information technology? Where is all of this taking us? Who is in the driver's seat? Should we resist?

Now consider that these possibilities unfold very quickly during a period in which we seem to suffer from considerable confusion. It seems that every generation claims that its children are deteriorating—consider Socrates' "corruption" of the youth of Athens—but is this something different? Is information technology, in the words of T.W. Adorno, making us "stupider and worse" in that we seem to have a wealth of facts but a poverty of values?[5] Although we have access to seemingly limitless information, this sort of data tells us very little about why it has value. Empirical studies of various kinds have difficulty keeping up with the rapidly changing technologies, but the data increasingly suggest that we are indeed losing the ability to concentrate and think critically.[6] Google floods us with information before we know how to swim, and we seem forever floating on the surface of knowledge without knowing where we are headed. To paraphrase Thoreau, information gives us an improved means to an unimproved end. We are so drowning in information that we rarely have our heads above water to ask questions regarding ends—what we might consider the ultimate meaning and value of our lives. Information alone cannot make good decisions about justice, morality, and purpose. For that we need good judgment, which requires a rather different set of skills than Googling.

The confluence of these historical circumstances should worry us: we must determine the future and shape of humanity in the context of information technology yet our powers of evaluating questions of ultimate value seem rather weak for the task and increasingly dependent of that very information technology.

Even if we reached compelling reasons to slow the development of information technology, we might already be in too deep. Given competitive global markets, tremendous economic incentives propel the technologies forward. Few of us are likely to stop using the devices, in large part because it would place us at a considerable competitive disadvantage. Imagine, for instance, if a lone student today attempted to

complete her coursework without using a computer. Likewise, suppose that one community decides that it has "too much information" and somehow restricts access or slows the development of its information processors. Could it compete with those without such reservations and who seek to develop their information economy? If one culture thinks Google's artificial intelligence devices go too far, for instance, how will it fare against those who embrace the technology in matters of industry or warfare? This leaves us to wonder if we must adopt the technology or be left behind by those who use smarter machines. Such concerns should lead us to question the extent of our freedom to use such devices.

In this regard, computer scientist Bill Joy finds information technology similar to—and more threatening than—nuclear weaponry:

The nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) technologies used in 20th-century weapons of mass destruction were and are largely military, developed in government laboratories. In sharp contrast, the 21st-century [information] technologies have clear commercial uses and are being developed almost exclusively by corporate enterprises. In this age of triumphant commercialism, technology—with science as its handmaiden—is delivering a series of almost magical inventions that are the most phenomenally lucrative ever seen. We are aggressively pursuing the promises of these new technologies within the now-unchallenged system of global capitalism and its manifold financial incentives and competitive pressures.[7]

National and international bodies could aggressively prohibit and regulate nuclear technologies primarily because they existed within closely guarded military domains and such inventions had limited commercial application. Compare this to information technology. Each of us is already heavily invested in information technology and we carry its power in our pockets. We want more. Relinquishment—or even a momentary pause in the information arms race—seems unlikely. Barring global catastrophe that severely limits our energy supply, we are taking this train wherever it leads us.

So again, where is the information technology taking us? Robert Oppenheimer—often referred to as "The Father of the Atomic Bomb"—offered this defense of technology only months after the United

States obliterated Hiroshima and Nagasaki: "It is not possible to be a scientist unless you believe that the knowledge of the world, and the power which this gives, is a thing which is of intrinsic value to humanity, and that you are using it to help in the spread of knowledge and are willing to take the consequences."[8] Applying this anthem to emerging information technology raises grave questions. Is knowledge always intrinsically valuable, or must we put it to use toward human admirable human ends? Might information become a threat to humanity or even contrary to human survival? If information threatens humanity, which side should we be on: humanity or knowledge? Surely humans are not the conclusion of evolution, but should we resist if "smarter" things surpass us? If it is our intelligence that makes humans valuable, should information processing power determine a thing's rights and access to resources? By this standard, might a machine of the near future deserve energy more than I do? If processing power does not determine something's value and rights, what does? Can we preserve a privileged place for humanity without invoking our religious traditions? Compared to the information processors of the future, is there any reason to believe that we won't be "stupider and worse"?

References

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5. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1974), 25.

6. See Matt Richtel, "Hooked on Gadgets, and Paying a Mental Price," *The New York Times*, June 7, 2010. The article is available here: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/07/technology/07brain.html. Also consider the studies collected in Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?"

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8. Richard Mason, *Oppenheimer's Choice: Reflection from Moral Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 56.