

Radlett & District U3A Philosophy Group

Report of meeting on 19th September 2013

The subject for discussion was “I Fear the day that technology will surpass our human interaction. The world will have a generation of idiots.” Is Einstein right?

As a group we were all unsure about what “surpass human interaction” means and what it means to be an idiot. It was a contentious subject. We agreed that the way we learn is changing. Styles of learning have changed with technology, so we are not idiots but learn differently.

We looked at the subject from many angles, often focusing on the effects on children of spending too much time with technology and too little with nature. We also looked at the decreasing use of speech in communications and the way this restricts the nuances and shared pleasure possible in verbal communication. We feared that people may lose some of the simple enjoyment of the natural world and the pleasure of making things. However we valued the improvements to the quality of life and education that technology has made possible as well as the way it has enabled those with disabilities to take a full part in society.

Overall we felt that Einstein got it wrong. Technology is controlled by humans and enriches our lives, if we remember to stop, enjoy and value other people and nature.

The following are some of the comments and questions raised organised into subject headings: -

Einstein’s world

The technology at the time of the quote was not computers and mobile phones

Einstein lived at the time of the first atomic bomb

In his era Charlie Chaplin’s film Modern Times covered this subject with the machines taking over the pride and skill of craftsmen.

Idiocy

When we label someone else an idiot, we must look at our own understanding of their world and experience.

In the early 1900s a classification of mental age classed idiots as the lowest, followed by imbeciles and morons.

People control technology

We can’t have improvements in technology without clever people

We have a broader, better educated society

Human ingenuity can get over the fragility of the www.

Effects of technology on children

Other problems may arise. Children stay indoors and don’t interact

If children don’t play together outside, they have lost an enjoyable aspect of life

Teenagers entering the job market are inept at communication and can’t interact

It is a generational thing. The young are losing skills, how will they enrich their lives?

Some young people are reluctant to read

The young in their turn will be left behind

The internet allows grooming by paedophiles and uncontrolled pornography

Internet safeguards do exist.

There have always been dangers, such as latch key kids.

Effects of technology on adults

Train commuters using technology are more effective and efficient.

They don't take time out to reason, to stop and stare.

They are not mutually exclusive.

We are moving away from nature. Instead of focusing on natural things, we spend too much time in a manmade world.

Are we creating a minority of technocrats who will rule the world and everyone else will be classified as idiots?

Our minds are already controlled or influenced.

Most of us only use 1% of our brains. Einstein may have used 2%

In 10 years time the inability to use a computer will equate to illiteracy.

Social media

Some people have replaced talking

iPads and social media stop people communicating directly

Communication has changed its format with Twitter and social networking

Desperately sad that people tweet what they had for breakfast

Facebook can be a way of keeping track of family

The potential for eavesdropping is a downside, with lack of privacy and poor security systems.

It can be used for good.

If you tweet a valid complaint you get a response in minutes rather than weeks for letters.

Tweeting is much more effective than emails.

Companies do business on Facebook.

Technological advances

Technology enables some people to communicate and take part in society, Stephen Hawking being an example.

Some people with autism have found technology allows them to communicate when they cannot use verbal communication. This allows us into their world.

Technology allows operations to be done remotely but this distances the medic from the patient.

One block of technology may react with another block of technology bypassing humans

We have trouble recording and retaining information. Machines can record and store information easily.

Technology is an aid to improving the quality of our lives. Washing machines, typewriters and computers have made huge changes to our daily lives

Technology can even improve the quality and speed of communications

It appears that no-one controls the world wide web. It is beyond human ken.

It is potentially fragile, but other parts have the ability to take over from any failing part.

There is a risk of power outages. We are very reliant on electricity.

Human versus machine

Technology can't have emotions and rejoice at births and mourn deaths.

We still have the choice to interact. Some still prefer to speak on the phone than text or email

Verbal communication is a way of learning

Generational differences

Each generation has fears. It was feared we would stop reading and theatres would close.

We are on the cusp, having experienced horses and carts, we can still just about cope with the modern technology.

Philosophers on the subject

The philosopher Martin Heidegger said about technology “such an orientation to the world will blind humanity to the ways in which the world reveals itself. In spite of (in fact, because of) the entire set of scientific apparatuses and theories which are meant to guarantee our precise knowledge of our world, we will miss the truth of what the world is.”

Authors predicting similar events

Dystopian novels such as Brave New World and the works of Arthur C. Clarke predict our minds being diminished.