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Mastering the Digital Age: How the Liberal Arts Can Turn Technology into Progress

Written by Caleb Hamman

Sitting in Clowes Hall for freshman orientation, I found the devotion of an entire segment to the dangers of Facebook a little weird. Two years ago, social media had yet to fully reveal themselves, at least to me. Obviously some suspected their shortcomings, such as the presenters in Clowes that day. But I doubt even the prescient could have predicted all of the perils and pitfalls that would accompany the opportunities of the so-called digital age.

While one might dispute its ramifications, the emergence of an electronic order is not up for discussion. In 2009, the average American consumed 34 gigabytes of information per day, with more than 91 percent of it radiating from electronic sources. As newspapers are bankrupted and books become digitized, the likes of Twitter multiply, and the ascendancy of the blogosphere appears ever more permanent. Facebook now has 350 million active users who on average spend nearly an hour per day surfing the site.

A digital age indeed.

But what of the liberal arts? If we can assume for a moment the risks of digitization, can we say a liberal education offers any prescription? Have I, a student of politics and philosophy, been better prepared for hardwired complexity? And what about students of the natural sciences, of the fine arts, of gender studies, of mathematics? In short, can we, for our efforts, hope to navigate the wilds of the digital labyrinth?

I sure hope so.

While I sincerely believe us to hold the tools for the task, I must confess to doubts about our prospects. The hazards of the digital age are not of a sort to be trifled with, and if we fail to give them due attention, I fear even the liberal arts may prove of no avail.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

It seems to me we must bring our attention back to the maze-back to the "wilds of the digital labyrinth"-for if we are to plot an escape through the liberal arts, we must first trace the impediments of digitization.

To frame the inquiry, I would suggest beginning in 1964, in the year Herbert Marcuse published *One-Dimensional Man*, a scathing critique of "advanced industrial society." While the era was far from a digital age, it was nevertheless a time in which technology was rapidly reconstructing human interactions. And then, like now, the process was not purely benign.

For Marcuse, the benefits of industrialization were accompanied by the systematic promotion of "one-dimensional thought." It was a condition that stifled liberal values like criticality and civic participation, for it made citizens complacent with their society and fused individual self-interest to the preservation of the status quo. As technologies like the radio and the television disseminated manufactured needs, so mass production delivered pacifying goods on an unprecedented scale. Thus came the intrusion of "industrial rationality" into the sanctuaries of language and cognition, and as one-dimensional thought hijacked reason itself, it fashioned it in a mold cast by technological imperatives.

Needless to say, this is less than a comforting vision.

I would apologize for the exposition, but it seems to me the parallels are too stark to ignore, the links between industrialization and digitization too profound to omit. The symptoms of one-dimensional thought, particularly the loss of criticality and reason—these seem to me the very dangers of the digital age, the wilds of its concomitant labyrinth.

Unfortunately, the connection is not as incredible as one might imagine.

Nicholas Carr, in his seminal piece, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?," cites a panoply of scholars—psychologists, media theorists, neuroscientists—in arguing that the digital realm, more than a simple portal, is threatening to change the way we think. Technology, it turns out, may be shaping "the neural circuits inside our brains." This would seem to be cause for concern.

Of course the real question is not the rewiring itself, but rather the effects of the transformation. Anthropology and sociology have revealed the malleability of the mind, and digitization wields a hefty hammer. Thus the unknown is not so much the craft itself as it is what comes off the anvil. But here I've already staked my claim.

It seems to me reason and critical thinking are endangered species in an electronic order. When information is immediate, there arises a temptation to search rather than struggle with complexity. When knowledge appears to spring from all corners, every problem surely has an answer. One need only consult the mysteries of the omniscient Google. The question itself is damned, written off as a mere annoyance, and the digitized is severed from the edification of agnosticism. Entertainment, disinformation, and half-truths converge, blending insidiously to create epistemological chaos. And while intricacies are flattened with irons, so simplicities become obscured. In a land of limitless perspectives, all opinions appear equal, and certainty is made to seem mirage. The realm of answers renders reason to antiquity, criticality becomes a false concept, and one-dimensional thought is given renaissance in a digital age.

Obviously it does not need to be this way. Technology is an instrument, not an agent—its properties are a function of our own. Yet it seems apparent, at least to me, that reason and

criticality are being compromised. It may be a contingent truth, but the effect is unchanged. 34 gigabytes is just too much. Impossible to process, it must merely be skimmed, mostly dumped, a few bits stored.

So what of our question? What of the liberal arts?

It seems to me I have already given an answer. If you don't think so, maybe try Google, but I wouldn't recommend it. To conclude I will merely observe that the targets of digitization seem to be the very values nurtured by the liberal arts. Thus I say meeting the digital age is not a question of means but a question of wills. If we can find our resolve, then, perhaps we can do more than just sanitize our advancements. Maybe we can actually harness them to better the human condition.

References

- 1) Information consumption (34 gigabytes) from UC San Diego:
http://hmi.ucsd.edu/howmuchinfo_research_report_consum.php
- 2) Facebook statistics: <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>
- 3) Carr: <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200807/google>