

Curiosity leads to knowledge

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"Imperfection inspires invention, imagination, creativity. It stimulates. The more I feel imperfect, the more I feel alive." - Jhumpa Lahiri



The predominance of technology and smartphones in particular has led to many suggestions that imagination and creativity are being killed by our reliance on these tools. This however is not a new thought – people were suggesting that technology was extinguishing creative impulses long ago. When I was a child, it was the transistor radio and the gramophone record that were to bring the downfall of imagination and creativity everywhere.

For example, how often have we made this simple statement? I'm going to guess quite frequently. How often have we heard it from others? I am reasonably certain that it was many times more. We also know that when an interesting question is asked, "I wonder" seems to naturally appear in our psyches. It's only two words, yet those two words are far more powerful than we may realise.

What then makes wonder such a powerful force? It is the wellspring from which engaged and expansive thinking emerges. Curiosity, an essential source of intellectual inquiry, is stirred. Our mental gears start turning, and we begin to feel excitement and an urge to know more. Curiosity propels us to seek out an answer.

In the process, we examine different facets of the question and explore its depths. If we are in a group, we may argue, disagree, and, in the end, find consensus or clash vehemently, all of which catalyses new iterations of the question and new roads to explore as you further ponder the question. We think creatively and innovatively. In the end we may have an insight and maybe even an epiphany. Towards a conclusion to this intellectual and intuitive journey, we make a discovery that may be new only to us or may change the world. In either case, it is as if a seed that was planted by "I wonder" grows and blossoms into the most beautiful flower you have ever seen. Knowledge.

Unfortunately, in more recent times imagination and creativity have been on a downward spiral in many segments of society as a result of profound information overload. We can call up information on almost any topic with a few clicks of the keyboard. As a result, we've gained massive amounts of awareness into the way our world works and into things and people and places of which we would previously have never been exposed.

Yet it would seem that we have lost something in the process. We have lost a sense of real knowledge. We have lost the ability to create meaning and substance out of the power of not-knowing.

Not long ago, there existed a phenomenon called 'not-knowing.' Pre-internet, there were times when "I don't know" was not just an acceptable answer to a question — it was the only answer. Pre-internet, people would say, "I don't know," and move on with their lives, rather than immediately 'googling' the answer to whatever question was being asked.

One of Britain's leading inventors, Trevor Baylis, has warned that a 'Google generation' who rely on the internet for everything are in danger of becoming 'brain-dead'. He believes that children are losing creativity and practical skills because they spend too much time in front of screens. He also fears that the next generation of inventors is being lost, with young people often unable to make anything with their hands.

With more access to more information than at any point in human history, society has become incurious and wilfully ignorant about things that we should never have allowed to slip aside. Most damaging of all, an incurious culture is the fastest, most effective way to destroy creativity and imagination.

In a time when people didn't immediately know everything, society fostered curiosity, exploration, and discovery. The thrill of the new was sparked by dissatisfaction with a lack of knowledge or understanding. The creative process began, and still begins, from a place of curiosity and not-knowing. Sometimes, creativity leads to merely an iterative development of an existing idea. Other times, it leads to truly new, innovative thinking and the creation of a new thing entirely.

In the same way that a lack of knowledge can spark creativity, so can an abundance of knowledge, if it is framed by the proper mindset. It is the curious mindset that sparks creativity in humanity. And it is the incurious, knowledge-saturated mindset that we experience in today's society that many see as signalling the end of creativity and imagination as human aspiration.

Creativity and imagination are fundamental ingredients that make us human, and as such they are incapable of being bred or beaten out of us. However, they can be buried and rendered devoid of meaning. That's what I think has happened in the world today. Creative thinking, the ability to create mentally and physically new things in the world, has undergone a shift that only a few people today recognise.

However, none of this will happen if someone blurts out the ultimate intellectual and creative executioner - "Let's google it!" In a millisecond, the answer to the question appears, and any further conversation ceases immediately. We may get the answer to the question, but at what cost? The question, and any conversation or subsequent mental gymnastics that it might have generated, dies an immediate and unfortunate death. At the very moment that "Let's google it!" is uttered, the life of the seed that may have bloomed into a stimulating discussion withers away.

A society that consumes more than it creates is in danger, and the developed world is at the tipping point of that dangerous place. We are on the verge of outpacing the creative process through consumption, whether in terms of physical resources or information overload. Paradoxically, the only way to avert the actual death of creative thought is to get creative with how we manage humanity's consumption of products, information, things, and resources.

Creativity flourishes at the intersections of traditional disciplines and thrives in an environment where individuals have the freedom to devote time and effort to ideas and projects that may not have an immediate payoff. In fact, the internet has done a great deal to kill people's creativity. For example, by using an emoji in lieu of words and the proliferation of predetermined responses (liking, sharing, and, in some cases, disliking) we have become uncreative. These new universals of human interaction promote efficient – but lazy – behaviours so that we can devote more time to consuming more internet content.

Although user-generated content has been growing exponentially in the past decade, much of it is noise and the result is that valuable and trustworthy information is now harder to find. In an age of overabundance and exuberance where everything is freely available but knowledge is hard to cultivate, this paradox highlights the importance of the less is more philosophy of life.

In the age when the answer to almost any question is just a Google-search away, have we lost the ability to wonder? Have

we given up our creative need to connect facts with stories in exchange for never having to say “I don’t know”?

As much as we may concede that it is possible that learning the answer from an internet search might actually inspire further thinking and discussions, we need to admit it does not really happen.

The internet has brought us a universe of information when we want it with minimal effort. Indeed it is a blessing. We can learn about anything just by turning to our smartphones, tablets, or computers. There’s no doubt that there is practical utility in having this wealth of information at our fingertips such as looking up directions, finding a recipe, or planning a route for a vacation.

‘Googling’ can also be a path of least resistance. It’s just too easy; it’s intellectually lazy. When it comes to ideas, it neither inspires nor challenges us. Information can be useful, but it can also put our thinking in a box.

Sure, we have more information, but information alone has limited value, and even less so when it isn’t allowed to grow into knowledge, insight, and wisdom. And this evolution can only occur if we are given the time, space, and uncertainty to allow a question or idea to grow and flourish in our minds or within a group. The effortless availability of information becomes akin to fast food for the mind - readily obtained, immediately gratifying, but ultimately unnourishing.

What then are the consequences of ideas never seeing the light of day? What happens when ideas are stifled by too much information? How many important ideas would be lost before they even have time to take root? What impact will the immediacy of information have on future creativity, innovation, and progress?

The next time a really intriguing question comes up that causes you to say “I wonder” and someone responds with an enthusiastic “Let’s google it!”, tell them, “No, thanks. I would rather just wonder.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor Dhiru Soni is the Director for Research and Innovation at Regent Business School and writes in his personal capacity.

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