Riding the Internet wave

Two thousand years ago, Socrates warned that technology would make human minds lazy. Is the Internet proving him right?

By Simon Chesterman

The Internet has had a greater impact on access to information than any development in human history, with the possible exception of the invention of writing. We are more connected and better informed than ever before. So why does it often feel like what takes place on the Internet is so dumb?

Two thousand years ago, Socrates expressed similar doubts about the written word itself. If humanity relied on technology instead of our minds, he warned, we would become lazy. No one would have to remember anything because it could all be written down:

“No true wisdom that you offer your disciples but only its semblance, for by telling them of many things without reaching them you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing.”

Of course, we have this story only because Plato wrote it down. Indeed, it is now freely and instantaneously accessible from half-a-dozen websites to almost anyone in the world.

Nevertheless, the promise of the Internet never seems to have been fulfilled. This failure is due in part to the nature of the medium itself and in part to our own nature.

The structure of the Internet is, in many ways, its greatest strength. The fact that it is decentralized, anonymous and user-driven protects freedom and encourages creativity.

The Internet’s decentralized architecture makes it robust and hard to shut down. Initially intended to withstand the devastation of a nuclear war, it now frustrates authoritarian rulers around the world. China now employs tens of thousands to police the Great Firewall of China, part of a Sisyphean attempt to block access to sites like Facebook — or at least that’s what my Facebook friends in China tell me.

The ability to remain anonymous on the Internet can protect people against reprisals for airing unpopular views. It can also enable the pursuit of a more interesting and fulfilling “virtual” life than one’s real world experience.

A 1953 vacation from the New Yorker summed it up, with one dog at a computer keyboard saying to another sitting on the floor: “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” Two decades later, the Internet played an important role in linking dissidents in the Arab Spring.

Third, the user-driven nature of the Internet has lowered the barriers to publication. There are, for example, hundreds of millions of blogs. Today, anyone who wishes to share their opinions with the world is able to do so, essentially for free.

Yet all these virtues — decentralization, anonymity, and being user-driven — are also its vices.

Decentralization undermines meaningful accountability. Web sites can skirt legal restrictions and make it almost impossible to remove falsehoods. Anonymity encourages both responsible and irresponsible free expression. A trawl through chat rooms and Facebook pages reveals much thought-provoking commentary and harmless banter, along with disturbing amounts of misogyny, bigotry and bullying.

The fact that the Internet is user-driven also leaves quality control to the audience rather than the authors. The barriers to publication in the pre-Internet era did not prevent aspiring writers from sharing their work: they protected the readers from an avalanche of rubbish. (Disclosure: as a teenager in the pre-Internet era I wrote two awful novels, both of which were mercilessly rejected by respected publishing houses and now exist only as single copies under lock and key.)

The Internet as a medium thus offers promise and pitfalls. And, like any tool, the manner in which we use it can reflect our true nature.

As an educator, I see the tremendous opportunities offered by the Internet. The rise of massive open online courses, for example, is creating the possibility of reaching far-reaching millions who might not otherwise go to university.

Yet I also worry about students in actual universities who do not appear to have developed the skill of reading closely and critically or indeed reading anything for any sustained period.

Such critical reading skills become all the more important when so much information is available at the touch of a button or the swipe of a screen. Wikipedia, for example, is a tremendous resource. But it should be treated as no more reliable than an opinion or half a dozen strangers you might come across on Twitter.

Politically, the Internet remains a work in progress. It played an important role during the Arab Spring. But many regimes have also used it for propaganda purposes or to identify and harass individual dissidents. In addition, its impact is often overstated or misunderstood.

Journalists breathlessly quote from English-language Twitter feeds with the hashtag #hashtags, for example, without asking why local activists would be writing in a language other than Arabic.

Outside of authoritarian regimes, one of the paradoxical implications of the Internet age is its ability to grant expression to like-minded individuals. As Cass Sunstein warned a decade ago in a 2001 book, a healthy democracy requires that a population have some shared experiences and knowledge.

The proliferation of information sources on the Internet, however, encourages fragmentation to ever smaller communities. This may be harmless, like the Ice Cream Bulletin Board (www.icecreebing.com), or more pernicious, as in the case of “self-radicalised” terrorists.

The rise of social media soars an illusion of activism among a generation growing up in a transformed political environment.

As Malcolm Gladwell has argued, if political activism is reduced to clicking “like” on a Facebook page or composing a snappy 140-character tweet, it will encourage political commitments that are very broad but also very shallow.

It’s analogous, one might say, to having a thousand “friends” on Facebook.

When Virginia Woolf presented her feminist manifesto, A Room of One’s Own, she argued that women needed literal and metaphorical space if they were to write fiction to rival men. Imagine if Shakespeare had a sister, she suggested, equally gifted in natural ability.

Yet that girl would have gone to school and would never have been independent. She would have been destined for marriage rather than a career.

The Internet today offers vast amounts of information to almost everyone, including the opportunity to participate in a truly global discourse. What do we do with that information and that opportunity will define 21st century culture and politics.

The answer, I fear, is not promising.

Last year, engineers from Google’s secretive X Laboratory announced preliminary results from their efforts to create an artificial brain.

Linking 6,000 computer processors, it built on the distributed architecture of the Internet and what we know of the human brain.

So what happens when you create a billion-connection neural network and give it unrestricted access to the Internet? Apparently, Google’s creation quickly “liked” what millions of people also appear to enjoy: watching videos of cats.

A serious question for the world’s policymakers and academicians is: How will we promote healthy human development in an age when the Internet is our most ubiquitous form of information and social media have become a central part of our daily life?