

Are Smartphones Making Us Stupid?

Sixty-four percent of Americans own smartphones, according to a recent survey. Among young people, the number is even higher: 85 percent. We carry them everywhere and use them for everything from getting directions to watching videos. But some believe that constant connectivity and easy access to dizzying amounts of information is not without drawbacks. Two technology experts face off on the effect these ubiquitous devices are having on our brains.

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YES The idea that smartphones are making us stupid might, at first, sound a little absurd. After all, that iPhone or Samsung Galaxy in your pocket is actually an incredibly sophisticated networked computer and camera with the power to immediately connect with anyone around the world. You could write a novel, edit a movie, or solve a complex math problem on this magical device.

But, of course, you *aren't* writing novels, editing movies, or solving complex math problems with your smartphone. Instead, you're using your incredibly sophisticated pocket computer to Tweet the details of what you just ate, check updates on Facebook, and post your disappearing Snapchat photos from last night's school dance. Then there's all those WhatsApp instant messages you so need to send each hour to your girlfriend or boyfriend and all those selfies—a collective 93 million a day in 2014—that you post daily on Instagram.

Our smartphones are making us more and more wrapped up in ourselves.

So rather than transforming us into Albert Einstein, Steven Spielberg, or Toni Morrison, our smartphones are actually making us more wrapped up in ourselves. In the end, all we are left with is more and more intimacy with our own lives and less and less knowledge of the wider world around us.

And that, I'm afraid, is why smartphones are making us stupid.

You see, technology doesn't exist in a vacuum, independently of the world; technology is only as good as how we use it. Smartphones could, of course, make us smarter if we use them *smartly*.

But most of us don't, because we are locked in the trivia of our own lives. Our culture lends itself to instant gratification, the trivialization of serious subjects, and, above all, what psychologists call "narcissism"—unhealthily excessive interest in oneself. Smartphones are both a cause and a consequence of our selfie-obsessed culture. Unfortunately, they are, indeed, making us dumber and dumber. •

—ANDREW KEEN

Author, *The Internet Is Not the Answer*



Smartphones BY THE NUMBERS

**1.9
billion**

Estimated number of smartphone users worldwide, almost double the number in 2012.

46%

Percentage of American smartphone users who say they can't live without their phones.

93%

Percentage of young smartphone users in the U.S. who use their phones to prevent boredom.

SOURCES: STATISTA;
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

NO Twenty-five years ago, before the Internet was known to everyone, if someone had advertised a "universal answers machine" that fits in your pocket, it would have been hailed as a miracle. If that machine also let you discover music, navigate any city or town, keep up with the news, read books, and become a virtual reality headset—check out Google Cardboard—it would have been called "a pocket university" that's ushering in a new age of intelligence.

Now, of course, we take all that—and more—for granted. But we shouldn't.

The fact that we can ask a question and get an answer, wherever we are, means that our discussions can get past disputes over facts so that we can talk about the real issues: what we make of the facts.

Because these devices are always with us, we can keep up with real-time events. We can follow news as it's unfolding. It also means that if we want to explore an idea, we can always find the right pages or podcasts.

Since our smartphones have GPS built into them, the knowledge they give us can be specific to our location.

Getting answers immediately means our discussions can get past disputes over facts.

This is convenient if we're looking for a restaurant or an ATM, but it also means our phones can point us to places to explore we otherwise would have missed, such as a little-known nearby museum or historical site.

Want to bring 20 books with you on a trip? Go ahead; they won't add an ounce to your bags or your phone. Even if you're not sure you're going to like a book, you might as well bring it along and give it a try. Being able to browse easily gives us more opportunities to become smarter.

And while many of us use our phones primarily to keep in touch with our friends, even that can nourish our brains: Social networking is often how people share the links and ideas that matter to them. When we read the articles and watch the videos our friends post, we learn more about the world.

More access to more information, ideas, and discussions? Sounds like an opportunity for smartness—but only if we choose to take it.

—DAVID WEINBERGER
Berkman Center for Internet & Society, Harvard University