

New Directions – Redefining the Human Intellect in View of Technological Progress*

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Clive Thompson:

Smarter Than You Think – How Technology is Changing Our Minds for the Better
Penguin Books, 2013, p. 352

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Many people believe that technology and technological progress are inherently bad, destroying the intellectual capabilities and social skills of humanity, dulling our minds and, due to our excessive dependence on them, making us vulnerable. As far as the first criticism is concerned, let us not forget the successes of technological innovation that enabled the creation of a safer and more liveable world (e.g. medical innovation), and the achievements that have long excited human imagination (e.g. space exploration, landing on the moon). It is indisputable that technology has always had a transforming effect in the history of humanity, it has always pushed us to take a new perspective. One only has to think of the discovery of writing or how our ancestors realised the benefits of using fire.

Clive Thompson discusses the relationship of humans and machines from this positive-utopian perspective. The book's "protagonists" are people who utilise the available technology to the fullest, and fundamentally change the way we think about the world. This process is often unconscious, the individual is simply caught up in a situation, which acts as a catalyst, eventually affecting a surprisingly large number of people. Others experiment with their digital devices using them for their own purposes and discover advantages that are worth sharing with a wider audience. Thompson asserts that the artificial intelligence of machines in and of itself is far from being as superior as we might think. In the examples of human-machine collaboration presented in the book, much more effective and innovative methods are employed than by machines alone. The author also points out how much the close cooperation with machines (almost a symbiosis) improves the human intellect by fostering creativity and problem-solving skills. Moreover, as a result, we can see the world from an entirely new perspective.

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official view of the Magyar Nemzeti Bank.

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The combination of biological and non-biological intelligence previously only present in science fiction has become a reality. One of the characters in the book has owned the forerunner of the famous Google Glass for 20 years. Its inception was motivated by the simple fact that its owner had trouble following the lectures at university and taking notes at the same time. We could also mention the person who wears a so-called SenseCam system, equipped with special heat and light sensors, around his neck. This enables him to make an audio and visual recording of his days. His whole life is digitally preserved on a hardware where he can search for people and the recorded memories associated with them whenever he wants.

A less well-documented positive consequence of the phenomenon that the internet, blogs and social media platforms have gained ground is the improvement of writing skills. Writing to an audience prompts writers to properly convince the readers of their views, that is, to clearly structure their arguments. Listing pros and cons in the right proportion and in a straightforward fashion, correct spelling, the appropriate use of stylistic elements are all key to writing a good post. Furthermore, the knowledge that others might read what they are writing increases writers' performance pressure, which results in a post that is of much higher literary value.

Using the data from his extensive research, Thompson identifies correlations and innovations in the blessed-damned relationship between humans and technology. These represent a greater intellectual ability both at the level of individuals and that of society. They also have a previously unseen potential for organising and forming communities. Is it possible that an even tighter bond between humans and machines will be the next step in evolution and in the development of civilisation? The author tentatively suggests this prospect, and alludes to the torrent of technological innovations that have launched a noticeable process, which will definitely affect us.