Book Cognitive Surplus

Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age

Clay Shirky
Penguin, 2010

Recommendation

This brainy book, with its fascinating historical and scientific references, illuminates a central aspect of 21st century life – what people are doing on the Internet actively and jointly with the thinking time they used to spend watching TV passively and alone – and enables readers to see this slice of human experience in a new way. New York University professor Clay Shirky intelligently and insightfully explains how putting the Internet and its online social media tools into the hands of nearly two billion people who have more than a trillion hours of free time is resulting in a new, optimistic and empowered world. He cites such unique, useful Web developments as Wikipedia, PickupPal.com, the Apache Project and countless other online wonders. If you don't yet fully understand the potential of social media, you will when you read this book. *BooksInShort* recommends this outstanding work to anyone who wants to know more about how and why the Internet and social media are dramatically changing the world.

Take-Aways

- For decades, most people used their free time passively to watch TV.
- Instead, now many spend their spare time online, actively connecting and collaborating.
- This results in a valuable "cognitive surplus," the useful, worldwide resource of informed people's free time as empowered by the Internet.
- Individuals can leverage cognitive surplus collaboratively to produce worthwhile results.
- Three factors, "means, motive and opportunity," help explain the "hows, whats and whys behind cognitive surplus."
- With free time and the right means, any group can achieve great things collaboratively.
- When people have strong motives and the right means, they will bring enthusiasm to carrying out any mission that drives them.
- The Internet gives individuals the opportunity to pool their mutual cognitive surplus to achieve major accomplishments at minimal cost.
- To integrate new technology into society, do not impose boundaries. Embrace chaos.
- Society will move toward more participatory technology as individuals find new ways to use Internet-enabled cognitive surplus.

Summary

What 21st-Century TV Watchers Have in Common with 18th-Century Drunks

During the 1720s, London was the sodden haven of drunks, specifically gin mill drunks who had recently migrated from the countryside to seek work in the sprawling capital. Gin was the perfect libation for these displaced, bewildered new urban citizens: It was cheap, easy to make and far more inebriating than beer. These former country folk used gin to anesthetize themselves against the pressures of life in a distressing, unfamiliar urban environment. Removed from their country kith and kin, these new Londoners lapped up gin to help them adapt to a strange, hostile metropolis and cope with the perplexing vagaries of city life. Gin consumption was a "reaction to the real problem – dramatic social change and the inability of older civic models to adapt."

> "The wiring of humanity lets us treat free time as a shared global resource, and lets us design new kinds of participation and sharing that take advantage of that resource."

Alarmed by the gin drinkers' public drunkenness, Londoners petitioned Parliament to fix the problem. It passed one law after another against gin "production,

consumption or sale." But the gin producers, merchants and drinkers found many clever ways around the new rules. The "cat-and-mouse game" of "Gin Craze" lawmaking continued for 30 years, and then quietly subsided, as if it had never occurred. London's new inhabitants just stopped drinking gin to excess. Why? The rural-born workers adapted to London, and it adapted to them. The new urbanites no longer found London bleak. Once it seemed like home, they didn't need to self-medicate with gin.

> "The world's people, and the connections among us, provide the material for cognitive surplus."

Why is this relevant now? In recent decades, the industrialized world has undergone a similarly radical transformation, as people have fled rural and urban areas alike to live in the suburbs, which – like old-time London – have distinct pressures. An increasing percentage of today's mobile labor force is made up of intellectual workers, in contrast to the past when workers tended toward factory or blue-collar jobs. Today's preferred form of self-medication, television, plays the role gin fulfilled in early industrial London. Workers have more free time now than ever before, and TV has been an ideal way for them to fill this extra time and forget life's pressures.

> "In the space of a generation, watching television became a part-time job for every citizen in the developed world."

For many in the workforce, watching TV is the main default activity if they aren't on the job or sleeping. The average time spent watching TV is more than "20 hours a week, worldwide." Many critics decry this attention to the "idiot box" as a colossal waste of time. Still, most individuals with extra leisure time have stayed virtually glued to their TVs until recently. Now many folks – teens and young adults in particular – spend a big chunk of their free time online instead. Watching TV is passive, but being online is active and offers many ways to interact, connect, collaborate and share with others.

> "The sitcom has been our gin, an infinitely expandable response to the crisis of social transformation."

Wikipedia, the comprehensive, multilingual online encyclopedia that unpaid contributors created and now embellish, is one positive result of such collaboration. It represents a valuable end product of all the "free time of the world's educated citizenry," or, as a collective, a "cognitive surplus." So instead of dully staring at canned TV shows for many hours each week, people can engage actively with each other online to have fun, share information, do good deeds and improve the world. Human beings accumulate "well over a trillion hours" of free time annually, and online social media enable them to work together in new ways that were not even possible until recently. The result was remarkable online developments, such as Wikipedia.

> "The Internet is the first public medium to have post-Gutenberg economics."

Police officers analyze three criteria before arresting a suspect: "means, motive and opportunity." These three factors also help to explain the "hows, whats and whys behind cognitive surplus":

1. Means: Where There's a Will, There's a Way

In 2003, when mad cow disease contaminated some US meat, South Korea closed its borders to American beef. Five years later, President Lee Myung-bak informed his citizens that South Korea would soon begin importing US beef again. Tens of thousands of citizens, primarily teenage girls, demonstrated against that decision in Seoul's Cheonggyecheon Park. These "candlelight girls" stayed in the park and slept there every night. This event became South Korea's biggest protest since 1987, when citizens took to the streets to demand a democracy.

> "Publishing used to be something we had to ask permission to do...not anymore."

So why were teenage girls the primary protestors? South Korea is "the most connected nation on earth," and its teenage girls love the boy band, Dong Bang Shin Ki (DBSK). The band has a website that provided a forum where girls could unite to talk about whatever was on their minds. Online conversations among girls who were passionately concerned about the risk of importing US beef led to the huge protests, which eventually resulted in President Myung-bak making his entire cabinet step down and apologizing to his citizens for not soliciting their opinions about US beef imports. The lesson: Give any group the means (in this case, DBSK's website), and they can accomplish big things working together in their free time – even if they are teenage girls.

2. Motive: An Ax to Grind

In 1998, *People* magazine's website asked visitors to rank attractive celebrities for its annual "50 Most Beautiful People" list. The editors presumed that readers would just sort out the magazine's list of 50 well-known personalities, including movie stars Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet. Big mistake. Online voters were not happy that *People* assumed their endorsement of its list of names; the public does not like to be manipulated or taken for granted. However, *People* also permitted a write-in vote. In defiance of the magazine's designated list, Kevin Renzulli, who runs the "King of All Media" (KOAM) website that honors radio shock jock Howard Stern, began an online, beautiful-people write-in campaign for Hank, the Angry Drunken Dwarf (the on-air title of Henry Joseph Nasiff Jr., a sometime guest on Stern's raucous show).

> "We are increasingly becoming one another's infrastructure."

Hank had created an online persona as an unattractive, boorish, drunken loudmouth – the total antithesis of *People*'s glamorous stars. Stern promoted Renzulli's write-in idea on his show, and the notion spread rapidly to numerous "discussion boards and mailing lists." The Angry Drunken Dwarf won the "50 Most Beautiful People" contest by a landslide. Hank (who died in 2001) received almost 250,000 votes. Though *People* had put DiCaprio at the top of its suggested list, he received only 14,000 votes. When individuals have a strong motive (asserting their independence, as they did here by opposing *People* magazine) and the right means (online write-in voting), they will charge ahead with enthusiasm. Indeed, time and again, online citizens "act on their desire for autonomy and competence or generosity and sharing."

3. Opportunity: When It Knocks Online

The Internet is an "opportunity machine"; it enables user groups, big or small, to develop novel opportunities, at minimal cost and aggravation, for the like-minded to seize and act upon online. Operating in large numbers, with aggregated enthusiasm and passion, these users can accomplish incredible things. Consider Apache, the

popular server that offers trillions of Web pages each year. Apache's owners make their program available online at no cost so users can download it and improve it. Thousands of programmers worldwide have tinkered with it, making millions of small improvements to improve its functionality. This global effort to improve Apache taps into a new reality: Volunteers can pool their mutual cognitive surplus to do great things at scant cost.

Culture Enables Coordination

In 1645, a group of educated Londoners formed the "Invisible College." Its guiding principle was that participants – including architect Christopher Wren and scientist Robert Hooke – would "refuse to believe things that weren't demonstrably true." Their motto was *Nullis in Verba* or "Believe nothing from mere words." They corresponded about their experiments so they could replicate each other's research and verify each other's findings. The Invisible College developed a distinct culture of sharing and openness in stark contrast to medieval alchemists, its "intellectual forebears," who worked alone and hoarded their knowledge. The Invisible College was able to transform alchemy into chemistry because its culture promoted a "collaborative circle" to advance knowledge. The Web globally enables such collaborations. It is "an Invisible University," a virtual collection of Invisible Colleges that build "civic sharing" and develop public value.

The Payoff

So how can you use your "social software" to leverage cognitive surplus in the most opportunistic and productive way? The following suggestions, derived from ideas that worked for various successful online social services, may help:

- **"Start small"** – PickupPal.com, an online ride-sharing website, launched its services only in Ontario at first to show that its model worked, then grew outward from there.
- **"Ask 'why'?"** – Determine what factors would motivate someone to use your service.
- **"Behavior follows opportunity"** – Give users an opportunity that matches their motives. Social media designer Joshua Porter explains, "The behavior you're seeing is the behavior you've designed for."
- **"Default to social"** – Online, social value is never optional. This is why Delicious.com worked, but Backflip.com did not. Sharing bookmarks is the default setting on Delicious; Backflip, which offered the same basic service, made it an option.
- **"A hundred users are harder than a dozen and harder than a thousand"** – One hundred users are too many for a unitary group to interconnect, but are also too few people to sustain a social function effectively, particularly if they are not diversified.
- **"People differ. More people differ more"** – Broadcast media can make valid assumptions about large, passive audiences. However, online, where participation is the point, expect users to display an amazingly diverse range of behavior.
- **"Intimacy doesn't scale"** – Use the Facebook approach to dodge this barrier: Enable your users to cluster in special interest groups.
- **"Support a supportive culture"** – Many US Amtrak trains have a "quiet car" where people can't play intrusive music, speak loudly or use cellphones. Passengers self-police violators. Ideally, your online users will adopt this attitude about your social service.
- **"The faster you learn, the sooner you'll be able to adapt"** – Meetup.com, which helps individuals organize local groups, gauges how its site is working by watching users in action instead of by conducting focus groups.
- **"Success causes more problems than failure"** – You learn best from your mistakes.
- **"Clarity is violence"** – Spelling everything out for Web users is counterproductive. Users will develop their own rules and protocols as your service matures.
- **"Try anything. Try everything"** – The book *Elements of Style* provides definitive rules for English composition, but it also tells readers, "The best writers sometimes disregard the rules." This is also true of online activity – it's all about experimentation.

Integration

Developers of new technology, like interactive social media, can integrate it three ways:

1. **People leave old technology and adapt new technology as they choose** – Avoiding boundaries is the best option, so software developers should build in "as much chaos" as they can tolerate. The initiators of a new technology can't possibly develop "more change" than society can handle. Such change has its own pace.
2. **The old technology's bosses control how people use the new technology** – The path of "traditionalist approval" is not a good option. The owners of an old technology do not want newer programs to replace it and would use any veto power to kill them.
3. **The old technology's bosses bargain with new technology's developers and users** – This "negotiated transition" option is also a problem. Neither the proponents of new technology nor the owners of traditional technology can negotiate the use of the new version since no one knows how users actually will adapt it in the future.

    "Here's something four-year-olds know: A screen without a mouse is missing something."

Society will continue to move away from canned media experiences (old technology) to participatory ones (new technology) that involve not only consuming information in every conceivable format, but also independently producing and sharing information. At the same time, individuals will continue to find new, ingenious ways to use the Internet, to leverage discrete segments of the cognitive surplus, and to make positive things happen around the world.

About the Author

Clay Shirky is an assistant arts professor and writer in residence at New York University. He is the author of *Here Comes Everybody*.