



The Internet of Us: Knowing More and Understanding Less in the Age of Big Data

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We used to say "seeing is believing"; now googling is believing. With 24/7 access to nearly all of the world's information at our fingertips, we no longer trek to the library or the encyclopedia shelf in search of answers. We just open our browsers, type in a few keywords and wait for the information to come to us. Indeed, the Internet has revolutionized the way we learn and know, as well as how we interact with each other. And yet this explosion of technological innovation has also produced a curious paradox: even as we know more, we seem to understand less.

While a wealth of literature has been devoted to life with the Internet, the deep *philosophical* implications of this seismic shift have not been properly explored until now. Demonstrating that knowledge based on reason plays an essential role in society and that there is much more to "knowing" than just acquiring information, leading philosopher Michael Patrick Lynch shows how our digital way of life makes us overvalue some ways of processing information over others, and thus risks distorting what it means to be human.

With far-reaching implications, Lynch's argument charts a path from Plato's cave to Shannon's mathematical theory of information to Google Glass, illustrating that technology itself isn't the problem, nor is it the solution. Instead, it will be the way in which we adapt our minds to these new tools that will ultimately decide whether or not the "Internet of Things"—all those gadgets on our wrists, in our pockets and on our laps—will be a net gain for humanity. Along the way, Lynch uses a philosopher's lens to examine some of the most urgent issues facing digital life today, including how social media is revolutionizing the way we think about privacy; why a greater reliance on Wikipedia and Google doesn't necessarily make knowledge "more democratic"; and the perils of using "big data" alone to predict cultural trends.

Promising to modernize our understanding of what it means to be human in the digital age, *The Internet of Us* builds on previous works by Nicholas Carr, James Gleick and Jaron Lanier to give us a necessary guide on how to navigate the philosophical quagmire that is the Information Age.

The Internet of Us: Knowing More and Understanding Less in the Age of Big Data Details

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Jacob says

This is a lot like *Too Big to Know: Rethinking Knowledge Now That the Facts Aren't the Facts, Experts Are Everywhere, and the Smartest Person in the Room Is the Room* except from a much more philosophical point of view. In fact, I wouldn't recommend this for anyone who doesn't have at least a passing familiarity with philosophy. Mine is only as an amateur and I had to stretch to understand Lynch's references and some of the terminology and "idea shorthand".

Other than that, it's very similar to the other book I mentioned, arguing that in the era of the Internet, we know more facts but we understand relationships and how things work less than previous generations, particularly when it comes to real life experience. There is also discussion of privacy and autonomy that I could not get very excited about, although Lynch's points are worth pondering.

As with the other book, I don't find Lynch convincing either. I don't think it's true that we know more and understand less. Okay, yes, maybe the ratio of what we know to what we understand has shifted more in favor of knowing, but I would argue that what we understand has not shrunk in absolute terms. It's probably grown too, just not as much. And nowhere does Lynch compare the rate of growth in both ways. In any case, I find it strange to complain that we sacrifice understanding to knowing. For one thing, knowing facts is necessary to understanding, so there's a dependency there. And to use Lynch's example of how we just use massive amounts of data to recognize realities, maybe we "understand less" because we see that what we used to "understand" isn't actually as true as we thought it was?

The case I can think of where Lynch might be right in terms of how the Internet may cause us to know more and understand less is where we spend all our spare time experiencing the news, discussions, and cat videos that the Internet has to offer without taking time to think about what we've encountered. I've reached this point before, and maybe others keep going where I stopped regularly checking some of those sites that were eating my time (goodbye, cnn.com and howstuffworks.com). The funny thing is Lynch never uses that example. Also, it was certainly very possible before the Internet. I think this is the core complaint about television, and I have to be careful to take time to think about what I read instead of merely plowing through it. These book reviews are part of how I make sure to think about what I read.

As far as understanding less about the real world, I think Lynch has it wrong two ways: people don't understand less about the real world because of the Internet. People may be spending more time online and less doing other stuff, but they still have hobbies which don't directly involve the Internet. I think the existence of SO MANY specialized online communities for any kind of activity you can imagine (comics, windsurfing, the DIY movement, and home science experiments) and even more that you can't (bronies and we'll leave it at that) shows people are doing stuff and understanding plenty. The other way Lynch has it wrong is that he looks down on the Internet as a "fake world". And yet a LOT that goes on there IS just as real now. Keeping up with my cousins' posts on Facebook doesn't weaken my relationship with them, for example. I wouldn't have kept up with them any better otherwise, and knowing some of what they've been up to helps me start conversations with them when we do get together.

Lynch's last core argument (and almost everyone else's) about why the Internet is bad is because so many people don't listen to "reason" online, and they're able to form support groups of like-minded others. Although people's opinions may be becoming more extreme and entrenched because of the Internet, I think it was going on almost as much before. It just wasn't as visible, especially if you didn't get outside your own social groups once in a while. Lynch at least recognizes this could be the case. This particular complaint may

be disappointment that the Internet has not caused man to reach his potential for reason the way everyone hoped.

Tim says

This book raises an important topic, one that merits a lot of discussion, but as other reviewers mention, is overly simplistic, especially for someone in tech. It's worth reading to contemplate a personal response to information overload, but I won't be recommending it to any friends.

Lindy says

Other people have said everything in this book before and they have said it better. The analysis is incredibly shallow and the examples given are basic.

One gets the impression that this book was written to fill the last week of a freshmen-level course when students go, "So how does all this philosophy stuff actually have anything to do with my life anyway?"

Elsbeth Kwant says

Very insightful - especially on philosophical questions, such as the effect of the fact that online is a constructed world, not a material one. I like someone who says that property is a social construction par excellence (embodied for me in the concept of copyright extending after death). Also the complexity of the internet 'constructed by a gazillion hands, all using different plans'. Lynch speaks about neuromedia, extended minds - us looking out of the window of the Internet even as the Internet looks back in. Pools of data (attractive nuisances). And how not all ways of knowing are created equal. Highly recommended.

Vagabond of Letters says

***1/2

More about epistemology than technology per se. Rather politically correct, but par for the course for mainstream 'academic-lite' books. Some interesting remarks on epistemology, but if you're interested in that, better to pick up 'Epistemology: A Beginner's Guide' (which is much better than the Very Short Introduction entry of the same). For the technology, read 'Data and Goliath' by Schneier.

Antonio Gallo says

Il problema "sembra" essere tutto qui: "sembra" che sappiamo di più, ma "sembra" anche che conosciamo di meno. La differenza tra "sapere" e "conoscere" è filosofica o esistenziale? E' una illusione o una realtà? Io so di essere io, ma posso dire di conoscere veramente chi sono?

E se non so chi sono, come faccio a conoscere gli altri? Se le cose stanno così, allora "sembra" che la colpa sia tutta di Internet o del Web. Ma, come forse non tutti si rendono conto, Internet non è il Web, allo stesso modo di come "sapere" non è "conoscere".

Sarebbe ben contento di leggere quello che ho scritto un mio amico "poeta" che ha una lunga vita passata, ricca di vicissitudini esistenziali. Non conosce Internet, se non di nome, ma sa come imprecare contro di essa, specialmente quando vede continuamente la gente andare in giro con quella che lui chiama "la tavoletta", vale a dire il cellulare, l'iPad o pc che sia. Su di lui ho scritto qualche tempo fa anche un libro, una piccola antologia di quanto ha pensato, scritto e soprattutto fatto nella sua lunga esistenza. Gli auguro ancora tanti anni, lui che ormai si avvia quasi al traguardo del secolo.

Eppure continua a scrivere su tanti quadernoni che sistematicamente riempie di note, appunti, disegni, poesie, considerazioni e poi li consegna a suo figlio, "a futura memoria". Lui, di sicuro, non leggerà questo mio post. Lui non conosce la Rete, non ha mai navigato, a stento possiede un telefonino solo per parlare, sempre scarico per mancanza di fondi. Se mai leggerà quello che sto scrivendo, lo farà perchè questo post lo stamperò e glielo passerò io. Ma lui, testardo, continua a scrivere e dice che lo farà fino a quando resterà in vita. Dice che deve continuare a farlo perchè sa di avere da dire ancora tante cose, dopo tutte le cose che ha fatto. Si rende conto, però, che ne conosce sempre di meno.

Non importa se nessuno leggerà quei quadernoni, l'importante è che lui, quello che pensa, lo dica a se stesso ed anche all' "altro" che lo perseguita. E' un ritornello che non si stanca mai di ripetere. Anche molta altra gente, molto più acculturata di lui, si sente perseguitata non tanto dagli altri, quanto da se stessi. Quello che pensano e scrivono non va in Rete, non conoscono il piacere dell'interscambio, della condivisione, del "gossip" o della "chat" e del "download", come del "copia e incolla" e dell' "hashtag". Lui e gli altri non conoscono questi trucchi della comunicazione. Lui, poi, nel suo c.v. ha soltanto la quinta elementare. La laurea gliel'ha data l'università della vita.

Manovale, muratore, capo cantiere, progettista, architetto, imbianchino, pittore, acquerellista, disegnatore, poeta, scrittore, in italiano e in vernacolo. I mezzi, i modi e gli strumenti per comunicare li ha usati tutti, senza mai studiarli, li ha conosciuti tutti. Cose che ha saputo fare. Proprio come tutte le cose che puoi trovare in Rete, a tua disposizione, gratis, a portata di clic. Ma non troverai quello che pensa e scrive "masta 'a Gino" il "poeta" di Episcopio, alle falde del monte Sarò, nella Valle del Sarno su quei quadernoni. Lui resta tagliato fuori dalle grandi vie di comunicazioni, da quella che è stata definita la "autostrada dell'informazione" che dovrebbe avere come meta il "sapere", anche chiamato "conoscenza". Sapere per conoscere, conoscere per sapere.

Il fatto è che su questa "autostrada dell'informazione", il "grande emancipatore", colui o colei, come è stata definita Internet, che avrebbe dovuto creare una nuova e diversa cittadinanza su questo pianeta, dopo una ventina di anni dalla sua diffusione, continua a generare cinismo e paure. Non è vero forse che continuiamo a mettere in guardia i nostri figli dalle insidie che aumentano di giorno in giorno, in quel l'immenso calderone ribollente di tutto? Non è vero che c'è una lotta continua da quelle parti contro chi ci minaccia da molti punti di vista?

Forse per tutto questo non sappiamo più distinguere il bene dal male, o meglio, se sapere tutto così com'è messo a nostra disposizione, non sappiamo più la differenza tra sapere e conoscenza, a che serve l'una a che serve l'altra. Quello che scrive l'autore di questo recente libro, autorevole filosofo e studioso, sembra ricalcare quello che dice il mio amico. È chiaro che Internet ha segnato una svolta nella storia della conoscenza e del sapere degli uomini racchiuso nella espressione "Information technology".

È nata per l'occasione la frase "Internet of us", come "Cosa nostra". Qualcosa che ci appartiene ed alla quale tutti apparteniamo. Qualcosa che mentre allarga ed estende le nostre capacità di sapere, dall'altra ci frena illudendoci di sapere tutto. Una rete che mette in evidenza tutti quei problemi che hanno sempre occupato la

strada della conoscenza sui quali anche il mio amico "sembra" continuare a sbattere la testa: dove finisce il sapere e quando inizia la conoscenza. Lo aveva anticipato il grande T. S. Eliot:

Si leva a volo l'Aquila alla sommità del Cielo;
il Cacciatore coi cani segue il suo percorso.
O rivoluzione perpetua di stelle configurate,
o ricorrenza perpetua di stagioni determinate,
o mondo di primavera e d'autunno, di nascita e morte!
Il ciclo senza fine dell'idea e dell'azione,
L'invenzione infinita, l'esperimento infinito,
Portano conoscenza del moto, non dell'immobilità;
Conoscenza del linguaggio, ma non del silenzio;
Conoscenza delle parole, e ignoranza del Verbo.
Tutta la nostra conoscenza ci porta più vicini alla nostra ignoranza,
Tutta la nostra ignoranza ci porta vicino alla morte.
Ma più vicino alla morte non più vicini a Dio.
Dov'è la Vita che abbiamo perduto vivendo?
Dov'è la saggezza che abbiamo perduto sapendo?
Dov'è la sapienza che abbiamo perduto nell'informazione?
I cicli del Cielo in venti secoli
Ci portano più lontani da Dio e più vicini alla Polvere.

Thomas Stearns Eliot da Cori da "La Rocca",
(Milano, Biblioteca universale Rizzoli, 1994, p. 37)

Ecco, tra sapere e conoscenza, tra Internet e Web, il cerchio si chiude e arriveremo, forse, laddove abbiamo cominciato e ricominceremo di nuovo. Gino continua a pensare e scrivere, ma nessuno legge la sua scrittura a mano sui quaderni. Affida il suo sapere, la sua passata esperienza alla conoscenza di un futuro lettore che forse mai verrà. Se potesse mettere in rete quello che ha pensato, fatto e scritto in tutti i suoi anni, forse rimarrebbe qualcosa. Internet potrebbe essere "cosa nostra", di tutti gli umani, passati, presenti e futuri. Potrebbe significare un nuovo modo di intendere la nostra condizione di umani e digitali.

Si suole dire "vedere per credere". L'Apostolo volle anche "toccare" per credere. Google ci invita a credere ciò che ci offre addirittura "prima di chiedere". Il suo slogan è chiaro: "Risposte prima di chiedere" in ogni momento, su qualsiasi tipo di informazione, con pochi clic, e nessun sforzo mentale. Ma se questa esplosione di innovazione tecnologica ci mette in condizione di sapere di più, siamo sicuri di capire poi meglio? La conoscenza basata sulla ragione, quella umana, quella che ci offre Google, senza che noi nemmeno chiediamo, siamo sicuri essere quella migliore, quella definitiva?

Il problema non è la tecnologia che non sembra essere nemmeno la soluzione, anche se essa continua a trovarsi a suo agio adattandosi a noi (o siamo noi che ci adattiamo ad essa?) Aggeggi che sono vere e proprie estensioni del nostro essere. Ci porteranno verso destini di una nuova impreveduta evoluzione? Ritorneremo ai quaderni del mio amico poeta? Oppure essi andranno irrimediabilmente perduti? Sapremo leggerli dopo di avere cancellato la scrittura manuale tradizionale ed essere diventati digitali? Dopo il diluvio alfabetico, sarà il diluvio digitale la nostra fine, oppure la sospirata "vita nova"?

<https://goo.gl/eqe7DP>

knowledge by organizing information to explain what we "know" by making assumptions about what we already believe... and that this can be terrible for the search for honest-to-goodness TRUTH.

But, Dr. Lynch says, 'Fear not!' for there are ways to consider how this technology can be pedagogically useful so long as we understand the risks of use. He explains in simple terms how it provides a foundation to allow for changes to economic, political, and educational systems of information, be they progressive or regressive.

For my use, chapters 7 and 8 were particularly reassuring for my own work. (Perhaps this is my own social bubble getting in the way of epistemic truth, but regardless, it's nice to see someone thinking similarly as me on epistemology and knowledge on some level that isn't retired, dead, or academically estranged.)

...and so, with that, I'm back to editing my masters thesis...

Charles Moore says

I couldn't tell you how I found out about this book but I'm glad I did. I occasionally enjoy reading about the internet and knowledge and learning, from a little more philosophical point of view, without a lot of politics or self glorification. While Lynch once in a while gets his digs in about the government for the most part he is quite fair, I think, and points out a lot of potential problems with learning and understanding in our web-structured world. As a person who watches too many college kids only get a superficial education I worry a bit about where we as a country are going. Lynch is not negative, by the least bit, but is informative. He has plenty of sources all of which I know nothing about. (A Google-search problem.) I have bookmarked a couple of future readings for myself which is not something I have done in years.

"Why go to college when you have a library" where you can find all the knowledge you need to know. Why have a library when you have Google? You go to college "to find pilots who can guile us across the vast seas of knowledge. We need them to tell us what is already charged and what is left to chart still. Such guides shouldn't make us more receptive knowers; they should aim to make us more reflective, reasonable ones and, what's more, they should help us understand" (154).

Highly recommended particularly if you worry about the immense crush net companies of all stripes put on public education at all levels of government.

If you are one of those people who decry that students have it easy because of the internet, read this book! If you are educator-type whose education is very old school, like mine, Dr. Lynch should be able to calm your nerves about teaching in the internet era.

I like that he is very thorough in his thinking about why we are learning more and could easily, if not already, knowing more.

###

Peter Mcloughlin says

Networked computers aren't implanted in our brains yet but they might as well be. We have come to depend on them so much that we have offloaded many cognitive functions to computers. When we want to know something or argue a point we google it. Our computers have become our arbiters of fact. This could have

worrisome implications. Because control over our networked interfaces could become control of a lot more. This was true in the days of coups in the cold war the first thing to be seized was the broadcast station and the telephone network but now the levers of information reach much more deeply into our lives than almighty broadcast ever did. Ominous.

Amy McLay Paterson says

The treatment of the issues was a little more rudimentary than what I hoped (though the book is aimed at a general readership, rather than information professionals), but I appreciated the philosophical bent. There's a bit of the usual technological fearmongering, but not enough to make it tiresome or uninteresting.

Jeff Francis says

For those of us who didn't come of age with the Internet, there is a persistent, nagging question: Has the Internet truly *changed* us, as a people?... and if the answer is yes, is that change good, bad, or some combination of the two?

Because I consider these perhaps the most relevant questions of our time, I generally liked and admired Michael Patrick Lynch's "The Internet of Us: Knowing More and Understanding Less in the Age of Big Data"... even if it wasn't quite what I expected.

"The Internet of Us" is technically a philosophy book, i.e.: Lynch, a philosophy professor, posits a series of premises about the Internet and social media (some insightful, others fairly obvious) and then expands on those premises through verbose, ruminative treatises. In other words, Lynch makes an assertion about how the Internet has changed us, and then, in a philosophical sense, shows his work.

And that's the thing: despite peppering the narrative with some cool references—e.g., Philip K. Dick, "The Matrix," Borges's "The Library of Babel"—the reading can be a slog. Said narrative seems to presuppose the reader's knowledge of basic philosophy precepts (a proper assumption in some instances, I'd guess, but certainly not all).

So what's to redeem the book from its difficult prose? It's that even at its short length, Lynch still delivers enough passages that just. nail. it. Ones where he states so succinctly what many of us have used many more words to say vis-à-vis two-drinks-in rants... Take this one for instance:

"Interaction with the world brings with it an understanding of how and why things happen physically that no online experience can give. And it is why so many of us who use Facebook are still troubled by its siren song: it is a simulacrum of intimacy, a simulacrum mutual understanding, not the real thing" (p. 16)

If you're like me, and have watched Facebook essentially absorb the lives of so many friends and family, you'll agree that people should be *forced* to read those words.

Also, consider this one, where Lynch (again, a college professor), ponders why, exactly, he tells his students they can't use their phones during tests:

“That raises a question: if the Internet is available to you at the blink of an eye—and available in a way that seems like memory—then what *are* we testing for when giving exams? What, in general, is the point of higher education in the age of big data?” (p.149)

So, decide for yourself. “The Internet of Us” is a finely written book, and well-thought-out... it just falls a tad short of being the really definitive sociological study of the Internet that has yet to be written.

Amie Viller says

TBH a lot of this book can just be reasoned. Maybe I had a very thorough education on the a internet and I'm more curious as to why and how humans actually come to understand, learn and know, but this book was just a repeat of a lot my High School Classes. To others it might be pretty enlightening to know where the future of the Internet is going and so far how that has affected us. To me, I feel like I've read a lot of articles on what will be the future of the Internet and how millenials use and exploit the internet and how it justifies our "knowledge". TBH growing along with the Internet I feel like the knowledge is at our finger tips but it is a whole other deal what we do with it and how we use as the book entails.

Read it if it really does call your attention, but if you have read and know about epistemology and the future of the Internet... just skip it.

Atila Iamarino says

Uma boa reflexão sobre a era de informação que está se desenrolando. O que acontece quando a maior parte da informação que recebemos vem via internet.

Michael Lynch é um professor de filosofia da University of Connecticut, especializado em como formamos um conceito de verdade. Especialidade mais do que indicada para comentar o assunto. Comprei o livro por conta de uma opinião que ele publicou no blog do NY Times chamada "Googling is Believing", que recomendo demais. Lá ele expõe um dos conceitos mais importantes do livro: como podemos escolher o resultado do Google que mais ressoa com o que pensamos, podemos formar versões bem diferentes de verdades pessoais. Ao ponto que não discordamos mais sobre valores ou fatos, mais sim sobre as fontes que consultamos.

O livro começa com uma discussão sobre como estamos consumindo informação, uma linha melhor explicada em livros como Smarter Than You Think: How Technology is Changing Our Minds for the Better e The 4th Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality (este último citado como fonte). Aí caímos no que considero a parte mais nobre do livro, Google Knowing e como formamos uma versão da verdade pessoal baseada em uma leitura superficial da informação.

Ele faz o argumento massacrante (para mim) de que estamos formando versões fragmentadas e parciais da realidade, muito mais baseadas na emoção. Como sempre formamos, mas dessa vez muito mais nutrida de informação (parcialmente) falsa. E como o convencimento em tempos modernos depende muito mais de propaganda do que de fatos em si.

O livro tem muito mais, explica como entendemos, como a informação circula, como formamos uma realidade em nossa cabeça com base na nossa interpretação do mundo e como nossa informação pessoal está sendo compartilhada. Boas explicações, mas que já encontrei em outros livros. E termina com uma discussão sobre o futuro de como nos informamos.

Enfim, trechos parcialmente cobertos em outros livros, mas com um miolo sobre como entendemos e formamos opiniões que com certeza vou reler. Entre as discussões mais relevantes sobre a modernidade que encontrei.
