

# Are people getting dumber?

## **Thinking in More Sophisticated Ways**

*James R. Flynn, an emeritus professor of politics at the University of Otago in New Zealand, is the author of "What Is Intelligence?: Beyond the Flynn Effect" and "Are We Getting Smarter? Rising IQ and the Twenty-First Century," forthcoming in August from Cambridge University Press.*

On an IQ test, the average person today would be 30 points above his or her grandparents, so we are not getting any dumber. But are we smarter? That's a more complicated idea. In fact, it's the subject of my next book: "Are We Getting Smarter? Rising IQ and the Twenty-First Century."

*I would prefer to say that our minds are 'more modern' than those of our ancestors.*

If the question is "Do we have better brain potential at conception," or "Were our ancestors too stupid to deal with the concrete world of everyday life," the answer is no. If the question is "Do we live in a time that poses a wider range of cognitive problems than our ancestors encountered, and have we developed new cognitive skills and the kind of brain that can deal with them," the answer is yes.

I would prefer to say that our minds are "more modern" than those of our ancestors. Our ancestors lived in a world that was concrete and utilitarian. In 1900, schoolchildren were asked, "What are the capitals of the 46 states?" Today they are asked, "If rural representatives dominated a state legislature, where would they put the capital?" (The answer is that, because they hate big cities, they would put the state capital in Albany rather than New York City.) In other words, we take applying logic to hypothetical situations seriously, plus of course playing video games that take us into hypothetical and symbolic worlds.

As a result, we are better prepared to learn about science, which is all about the hypothetical and abstractions, and even to reason better about ethics. If you asked my father, "What if you woke up one day and were black," he would say that is ridiculous. But a modern racist would have to take the question seriously. He would have to say that black people are worthy of discrimination not simply because they are black, but because of some genetic taint. Immediately, evidence enters the debate and takes it to a higher level.

## **Stupidity Is Funny, but It's No Joke**

*Erin Jackson is a stand-up comedian. She is on Twitter.*

Are people getting dumber? Without a doubt.

Does it bother me? Yes and no.

I am a professional stand-up comedian, so dumb people are good for business. Without dumb people doing and saying dumb things, I wouldn't have anything to blog, or tweet, or riff about on stage. No joke about the CVS cashier who couldn't figure out how to give me 15 cents in change because "we ain't got no dimes," or the acquaintance who can't double a cookie recipe without using an iPhone app.

*Somewhere in between all the LOL's and J/K's, we've lost our sense of humor.*

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But in the part of my life that exists outside comedy clubs and social-networking sites (all 30 minutes of it), I've become increasingly frustrated with the dumbing down of society and our too-easy acceptance of it.

Even the institutions whose job it is to help us become smarter are dumbing it down. Case in point: the "earn your college degree in your pajamas" commercials I'm forced to sit through during nearly every television show. Remember when online education first became popular? The sales pitch was all about making college accessible, helping people fit it into their busy schedules. But over the years it's somehow been boiled down to "Hey, you wanna get a master's degree without leaving your master bedroom?" Look, I'm all for people earning their degrees in whichever way is most convenient and affordable for them, but if your school's target student population includes people for whom getting dressed was previously a deal breaker, you may want to rethink your mission.

Our dependence upon technology has played a huge part in our "endumbing." We don't memorize phone numbers anymore. We've forgotten how to use maps and compute basic math problems. But beyond that, I believe it's also resulted in a collective inability to discern nuance, interpret social cues, take a joke. Somewhere in between all the LOL's and J/K's, we've lost our sense of humor.

And that is undoubtedly bad for my business.

## **To See Humans' Progress, Zoom Out**

*Steven Pinker is Johnstone Professor of Psychology at Harvard University and the author of "The Better Angels of Our Nature."*

James Flynn's [eponymous effect](#) — a worldwide rise in IQ scores — shows that in one important sense, people have been getting smarter, not dumber, over time. The increase is not in raw brainpower, nor in crystallized skills like arithmetic or vocabulary, but in abstract reasoning: the ability to ignore appearances and reckon in formal categories. Flynn attributes the effect to the spread of education and the trickling down of scientific and analytical concepts into everyday discourse.

In a culture that seems to be getting dumb and dumber, this claim needs a sanity check. Can we see the fruits of superior reasoning in the world around us? The answer is yes.

*We are living in a period of extraordinary intellectual accomplishment.*

In recent decades the sciences have made vertiginous leaps in understanding, while technology has given us secular miracles like smartphones, genome scans and stunning photographs of outer planets and distant galaxies. No historian with a long view could miss the fact that we are living in a period of extraordinary intellectual accomplishment.

Nor is our newfound sophistication confined to science. It's easy to focus on the idiocies of the present and forget those of the past. But a century ago our greatest writers extolled the beauty and holiness of war. Heroes like Theodore Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Woodrow Wilson avowed racist beliefs that today would make people's flesh crawl. Women were barred from juries in rape trials because supposedly they would be embarrassed by the testimony. Homosexuality was a felony. At various times, contraception, anesthesia, vaccination, life insurance and blood transfusion were considered immoral.

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Ideals that today's educated people take for granted — equal rights, free speech, and the primacy of human life over tradition, tribal loyalty and intuitions about purity — are radical breaks with the sensibilities of the past. These too are gifts of a widening application of reason.

## **The World Grows More Complex**

*Linda S. Gottfredson, who studies the sociology of intelligence, is a professor in the School of Education at the University of Delaware.*

Many of us feel stupider by the year, if not the week. Age and ill health take their toll, but Mother Nature isn't the culprit. It's those clever people busily complicating our lives, innovation by innovation, upgrade upon upgrade. They don't lower our native intelligence, but relentlessly burden it.

Just ask a humorist. One "Frank and Ernest" comic strip shows a caveman pointing to an engraved stone tablet and saying: "Look! I just invented writing!" His companion says: "Thanks a lot! You just made everybody else in the world illiterate!" Scott Adams's "Dilbert principle" explains how a few thousand amazingly smart deviants turned the other six billion people into ninnyes by designing a civilization too complex for everyone else.

*Modern innovations make us feel dumber, because they add to the work our minds must do.*

Smart deviants scoff at the "mindless" simplicity of everyday tasks, but Adams was right. A 1993 literacy survey revealed the level of difficulty at which tasks stump American adults:

- 21 percent could perform most Level 1 tasks like locating one piece of information in a sports article, but they couldn't complete tasks on the next tier.
- 27 percent could do most Level 2 tasks like locating two pieces of information in a sports article, but were stymied by Level 3.
- 32 percent could handle tasks like entering information given into an automobile maintenance record form, but failed at tasks more complicated.
- 17 percent could do Level 4 tasks like using a bus schedule to determine the appropriate bus for a given set of conditions, but could not clear the next hurdles.
- 3 percent could answer the most complex questions, like determining the total cost of carpet to cover a room (using a calculator).

More than missed buses is at stake. Health is one example: Modern lifestyles predispose us to chronic diseases like diabetes. New technologies help patients keep blood glucose within safe limits to avoid life-threatening complications but are too complex for many patients. Just substitute the words "nutrition label" for sports article; "daily blood glucose readings" for automobile maintenance; "insulin dose" for

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bus schedule; and, for calculating required carpet, “healthy meal plans with enough but not too many grams of carbohydrates at each meal and snack.”

## **Smart Moments Don't Go Viral**

*Ritch Duncan is a staff writer for [Dumb as a Blog](#) on truTV.com.*

I was putting the finishing touches on a post about a naked man who was arrested on burglary charges while covered in chocolate and peanut butter — it turns out there is a wrong way to eat a Reese's — when I was asked: “Are people getting dumber?”

Based on the number of times I've written about criminals getting caught because they posted pictures of their stolen loot on Facebook, anecdotal evidence would indicate: Yes. People are getting dumber.

*Online, the really dumb things that people do — even people of average intelligence — get amplified almost instantaneously.*

But that's not really fair. Honestly, if people were getting dumber, my job would be a lot easier.

Because of the Internet, the really dumb things that people do — even people of average intelligence — get amplified almost instantaneously. You can get a perfect score on your SATs and it will barely register in a world of 200 million tweets a day. But give just one stupid answer in a beauty pageant, and you'll be the laughingstock of the world before you have time to clear your name on the next morning's “Today” show.

And while watching something smart takes time, you can see something stupid in a flash. Today at work, when I had a spare moment, I didn't try to learn a new language. I watched a video of a guy getting a tattoo removed with an air-blast sander. And now I know that's not a very good idea.

If anything, people are getting more sophisticated in using our insatiable desire for stupidity to their advantage. There were a lot of performers onstage with Madonna at half-time of the Super Bowl, but the only one I can name today is the rapper M.I.A.: overnight she had become the talk of the Internet because she flipped the bird to 111 million people. Some folks called her dumb, but I'm sure her publicist feels the notoriety she received was well worth the ridicule.

It is possible that our society has gotten more shameless, but I don't have time to get into that. I'm on deadline for a post about a guy who left his marijuana in a courthouse security tray, and it isn't going to write itself.

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	Summary (At Least 2 Points)	Personal Reaction
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