Part one of this column in the March/April issue summarized the arguments of researchers Nicholas Carr and Andrew Keen, who recently appeared on Intelligence Squared, the renowned online debating forum, to make the case that “Smart technology is making us dumber.”

These two experts maintained that the internet has had a negative effect on the way we think by creating an “environment of perpetual distraction,” in which deep thinking and concentrated thought is becoming next to impossible.

Here in part two, I represent the positions of debate opponents David Weinberger and Genevieve Bell, who beg to differ.

Weinberger conceded that the internet has changed the way we think — but for the better. That’s because smart technology has enhanced our ability to understand the world to a degree unimaginable a few decades ago. The idea that we think “in our heads,” as epitomized by Rodin’s famous statue, The Thinker, has never, he believes, been true. Mankind always has thought with the tools we have had, and the internet has given us powerful, new tools with which to think more deeply about anything we choose.

And we don’t have to go it alone. The internet helps us interact with others all over the globe as we consider questions The Thinker once pondered in solitude. “The ability to participate in the creation of knowledge” with the benefit of information heretofore unavailable to the layman has made us smarter.

The unprecedented accessibility of information on the internet, Weinberger asserts, has led to a “democratization of knowledge.” We used to have gatekeepers because the old medium, the technology of paper, was so narrow that the flow of information could be controlled and even sold at a price. Today, thanks to the internet, “the gates are down.” The democratization of information has made more people smarter because more people today can find whatever information they need; knowledge is no longer proprietary.

Weinberger believes that our love affair with books is based on simple nostalgia, hearkening back to the time when paper was the conduit of knowledge. Books, however, do not help us learn more because the format of paper is too limited: Only so much can be crammed between the covers of a book.

As an illustration of the confining aspect of the old technology, he points to the 1911 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica and its 6,000 words on playwright Oliver Goldsmith. The editors of each successive edition had to cut the text of this particular article (and presumably most others) to pack new information into the volume. Today, only 1,500 words have survived.

Compare this, he suggests, to the information about Goldsmith on Wikipedia, which offers links that lead to a hundred scholarly resources. “Links are like the new punctuation,” he enthused. “Instead of being stopped by a period, we are given a connection which leads to evermore sources of knowledge.”

Genevieve Bell, who is an anthropologist, made the case that smart technology also is making our communities smarter and safer globally. Thanks to the internet, people have been able to connect and share vital information in the aftermath of typhoons, tsunamis, Ebola outbreaks, etc.

So… which side won? Is smart technology making us dumber or smarter?

After the votes of the audience were tallied, this spirited debate ended — for the very first time in the history of Intelligence Squared — in a tie.

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