



Event

Does technology make us stupid?

Miranda Anderson is an Anniversary Fellow in Philosophy at the University of Stirling, UK. On Aug 8, 2019, Anderson gave a talk as part of the Cabaret of Dangerous Ideas (CODI), a series of events in which academics from the four universities in Edinburgh speak about their research. Anderson's talk was entitled "Has your phone replaced your brain?". The so-called dangerous idea at the heart of Anderson's talk was that the mind or cognition are not limited to the brain, but in fact extend across the brain, body, and the world, leading to the concept behind the extended mind hypothesis, championed by philosophers including Andy Clark and David Chalmers.

In the context of the extended mind hypothesis, Anderson explained why the advent of smartphones was not the first example of social cognition, using illustrations from history and her training in literature and classics. She pointed to classical Rome, where slaves were trained to remember information for their master, from financial accounts and the names of guests for symposia, through to entire literary epics that they could recite to entertain their master and his guests. In a modern context she highlighted what would happen if someone stopped us in the street and asked if we knew what time it was; we would automatically answer, "yes"—but would then need to check our watch or mobile phone. We don't know what time it is within our brain, but

we treat having the time on our watch or our phone as being part of our consciousness. The same is true of performing basic calculations, such as splitting a bill after a meal; we may not automatically know the answer off the top of our heads, but we would use the calculator function on our phone to work out the solution.

Smartphones are not the first pieces of technology to face a backlash, despite headlines screaming that "technology makes us stupid". Anderson highlighted the story handed down from Plato of Thoth, the inventor of writing, visiting Thamos, the King of Egypt, to demonstrate his hieroglyphics, only for the ruler to dismiss the idea because it would make Egyptians lazy. Anderson concluded with two other examples from history that could be interpreted as fitting with the extended mind hypothesis. The first came from the renaissance and concerned the concept of three souls: the rational soul, which was considered unique to humans; the emotional or sentimental soul, shared by humans and animals; and the vegetative soul, which was shared by plants, animals, and humans. Her second example came from the prologue of *Henry V*, a play by William Shakespeare, in which he implores the audience to use their imaginations to smooth out the flaws in the story: "Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts".

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