

The times, they are a-changin'

 By [Matthew Stone](#)

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When I was a kid, I remembered my friends' phone numbers by heart. I had a little phonebook for those I didn't use frequently, but I could recite several numbers on the spot. This was back when cell phones were still status symbols. They were bulbous things with aerials and monophonic ring-tones. Once I got one, I stored my numbers digitally. I never again learnt a number by heart, aside from my own.

I never again had a girl write her number in pen on my hand, because I could just type it into my phone. Now when I meet someone, I don't even need their number. I just need their name. With that I can find them on Facebook. It is far less intrusive than a phone-call anyway, even less intrusive than an SMS.

I can get it for free if I want

I used to use encyclopedias for school projects. First physical encyclopedias and then Encarta. Now I use a combination of Wikipedia and Google. I use Google instead of a dictionary. Even more startling, perhaps, I haven't handwritten anything longer than a sentence since I left university... and I am an English major. I have stopped watching television, I've stopped listening to the radio. Any series, movies and music I want is all more easily accessible on the Internet, if you know how to find it. And I can get it for free if I want. In fact it's my choice.

The legality of it all has almost become a moot point when you consider that almost any individual my age has enough pirated software that they could be fined more than they would probably ever make in their lifetime. Every iPod is filled with illegal music. So, for all intents and purposes, it is my choice whether I want to pay or not. And you can get it online legally if you want anyway. Hell, if I'm at a restaurant and I hear a song playing that I like, I pull out my phone, Google any sentence from the lyrics and I can find it then and there.

I watch a debate form around every story

I seldom watch the news anymore. With a combination of Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and a Google Reader filled with my favourite RSS feeds I get all the news that interests me, all linked from different sources. Not only that, but I read what others have to say about it. I watch a debate form around every story. I watch as both sides try to make their point as best they can.

I used to use a mapbook. I remember looking in the back for the street name, and then finding the appropriate cell reference. Now I have Google Maps... on my phone. All I need is to type in the address and I can view it from street level. That's without using GPS.

This has all happened since I was in high school, and I'm 23 now. I can understand how my parents and those their age can't keep up with what's going on with regards to technology and especially the web. IT changes at a breakneck speed and it is difficult to grasp without being raised with it.

But it isn't just them. Even people my age feel out of touch and intimidated by it all, especially in South Africa. At the same time that the new generation is steaming ahead into the future, the same generation is already getting frustrated with it. The digital divide is not exclusively linked to the generation gap or even a financial gap. It's also between those who choose to partake in it and those who choose not to.

Life, more complicated, frivolous

Although technology is supposed to make our life simpler, people continuously find that it makes it more complicated and frivolous. From devices with more functionality than you could possibly want, to a web that is fraught with entities devoted to exploiting it, to the constant creation of devices to fulfil needs that were barely there in the first place.

While some, the technophiles, revel in the unnecessary gimmickry of it all... others find it deeply infuriating. Not only are these developing technologies often complicated to use, but also expensive. Despite prices quickly falling for new technologies, the overall expense of IT and telecommunication for an average family is rising. High-speed Internet is becoming considered a necessity, along with a smart phone, iPod and some sort of mobile Internet solution. In business you are now expected to be online from wherever you are, because you can. You are expected to have an online social presence. And if you're not on Facebook or Twitter, be prepared to lose out on plenty of invites.

Of course, some tech does its best to remedy this. As the rise of Apple suggests, user friendliness and simplicity is taking the front seat from processing power. What once belonged to nerds is now designed to be used by any man on the street. Many sites now have made having your own web space as simple as it could possibly be, something that only relatively tech-savvy users would do in the past.

And even with all the gimmicks attached there's a deep value even in what seems like extravagant technology. Having full web and email capability from a relatively cheap phone means that even those who live in areas without wired connectivity can participate online. Tablets are paving the way for an entire new possibility of reading, an interactive experience where the meanings of words can be discovered with only a click and the pictures are akin to those in Harry Potter. The move of our social lives onto the web allows us a golden opportunity in research, in both academic and advertising spheres. The amount of exposure that the Internet can generate to amateur content creators is unlike anything ever seen before.

So where does this leave us?

Well there's something to be learned from both sides. There will always be a backlash against new technology. Whether its stubbornness, fear, or even a healthy understanding of what is 'really important', many will refuse to be caught up in the digital tidal wave. They are partially right, something will be lost in advancement. Kids will play outside less, because they're jacked in. Certain news authorities will lose ground to crowd-sourced amateur micro-blogging. Social interaction will change as a result of digital interaction.

At the same time, we will gain so much in return. We have adapted so quickly that we often forget the perks. We take for granted that we can have a video call for near no cost with different people across the world. We are now used to having spell check built into our writing. We are accustomed to being able to find out anything at any time; be it the capital of Ukraine, the lyrics to a song you like or even the name of that person who works at the coffee shop. We forget that we have access to more information than any human before us.

I am usually hesitant to throw in a quotation from a famous figure, but I'm going to borrow one's authority for a moment. Mark Twain famously said: "A man who does not read good books has no advantage over a man who can't read them." The crux of the message is that squandered abilities offer no advantage over lack of ability. In Twain's context this refers to the ability to read and having access to good books. I contend that, despite its flaws, the Internet is a remarkable tool... the

likes of which have never been seen before. Having access to that technology and the ability to use it, is akin to what in Twain's day would be the ability to read at a high level.

There is nothing more relevant, and nothing more powerful. You do not need to embrace it like I have; you do not need to move your life online. You should, however, make use of it. It's not going to stop growing and it's only going to get more pervasive. Rather make it a friend than an enemy.

ABOUT MATTHEW STONE

Matthew Stone works in research and copywriting at The Rubiks Room Digital (www.trrdigital.com, @trrdigital), a technology company specialising in better digital solutions for business. Matt is a psychology and English literature graduate, a writer with a passion for music and an ardent commentator on Internet culture, social media, technology and politics. Email him at matt@rubiksroom.com

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