



Automation Addiction

Every summer my family and I go to a small and serene lake in northeastern Washington to spend a week in a little cabin that my wife’s grandparents built nearly 50 years ago. It is rustic, but even my 16- and 17-year-olds love it. And it is not so rustic that it does not have certain 21st-century amenities, such as quads—also called ATVs, four-wheelers, or (my favorite) noise makers.

Before our kids even unpack or jump in the lake, they are off on the quads, returning with exciting stories of moose sightings and other wildlife encounters (and news from the less exciting flat rock, where they have enough cell phone reception to text their information-hungry friends at home).

Occasionally, my wife Kristen and I join our kids on their quad trips, and on one of those rides this summer I realized something that felt really profound at the time.

Kristen has never had a good sense of direction. It was good enough to get by before we got married, but after our marriage she essentially gave up on it. You see, I have a good sense of direction, and when we are together she does not even need to try to maintain her orientation. She just leaves it up to me.

During one of our trail rides this summer, I suddenly realized that I had no idea where I was. I was completely lost. Why? Because Hannes, my 17-year-old, has an excellent sense of direction. Much better than mine. I have recently discovered that, so I subconsciously turned off my own otherwise ever-present ability and left it up to him to find our way back home.

The good news is that he had no problems navigating back to our

cabin. The bad news is that this is an apt illustration of a constant danger when it comes to the way we use technology.

A number of recent reports have addressed the decline in Chinese youngsters’ ability to write out the 10,000 or so characters that a well-educated Chinese needs to know. The reason: texting and computer usage. To counter this, the Chinese Ministry of Education just announced that elementary school students “in grades three to six will have one hour of calligraphy class every week, and senior high schools should set up calligraphy as an optional course.”¹

This over-reliance on technology is not just a danger for today’s kids. Another example was issued in a recent warning from the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration claiming that the airline industry is suffering from “automation addiction.” According to the sobering report, pilots are spending so much time programming navigation directions into computers that they are forgetting how to use their hands on the controls to fly the plane.²

Isn’t the same true for so many other things where technology is ostensibly “helping”?

Think of the technology that we use as translators, such as spell-checking and auto-correct. We do not work on any text nowadays without these features in place. Does it improve our spelling? Maybe in the texts we produce, but not for our overall ability to write properly.

What about the quality assurance features that most translation environment tools offer, such as the ones that look for “mechanical” mistakes like incorrect numbers, punctuation, and tags? Are we becoming less careful because we know that we can rely on the technology? I believe we are.

What about translation memory matches or—gasp—machine translation proposals that need to be corrected? Do we also tend to rely too much on the computer’s ability to “translate” in those cases? We know that computers cannot translate, right?

I can think of a good number of other examples where we risk losing essential skills and abilities to technology. Do not get me wrong: it is not all catastrophic. Most high school kids today do not know how to read the time on a traditional clock—that is what their cell phones are for, they will tell you. Is that terrible? Well, it is a little sad but not earth-shattering. But if we surrender to technology some of the other critical skills and abilities that make us who we are, that would be a tragedy.

Notes

1. “China Enhances Calligraphy Education as Penmanship Gets Sloppy.” *People’s China Daily Online*, <http://bit.ly/r6cNlz>.
2. “Automation Dulling Pilot Skills.” *News24 Online*, <http://n24.cm/qgtTWM>.

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