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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Outsourced Brain

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The gurus seek bliss amidst mountaintop solitude and serenity in the meditative trance, but I, grasshopper, have achieved the oneness with the universe that is known as pure externalization.

I have melded my mind with the heavens, communed with the universal consciousness, and experienced the inner calm that externalization brings, and it all started because I bought a car with a G.P.S.

Like many men, I quickly established a romantic attachment to my G.P.S. I found comfort in her tranquil and slightly Anglophilic voice. I felt warm and safe following her thin blue line. More than once I experienced her mercy, for each of my transgressions would be greeted by nothing worse than a gentle, “Make a U-turn if possible.”

After a few weeks, it occurred to me that I could no longer get anywhere without her. Any trip slightly out of the ordinary had me typing the address into her system and then blissfully following her satellite-fed commands. I found that I was quickly shedding all vestiges of geographic knowledge.

It was unnerving at first, but then a relief. Since the dawn of humanity, people have had to worry about how to get from here to there. Precious brainpower has been used storing directions, and memorizing turns. I myself have been trapped at dinner parties at which conversation was devoted exclusively to the topic of commuter routes.

My G.P.S. goddess liberated me from this drudgery. She enabled me to externalize geographic information from my own brain to a satellite brain, and you know how it felt? It felt like nirvana.

Through that experience I discovered the Sacred Order of the External Mind. I realized I could outsource those mental tasks I didn't want to perform. Life is a math problem, and I had a calculator.

Until that moment, I had thought that the magic of the information age was that it allowed us to know more, but then I realized the magic of the information age is that it allows us to know less. It provides us with external cognitive servants — silicon memory systems, collaborative online filters, consumer preference algorithms and networked knowledge. We can burden these servants and liberate ourselves.

Musical taste? I have externalized it. Now I just log on to iTunes and it tells me what I like.

I click on its recommendations, sample 30 seconds of each song, and download the ones that appeal. I look on my iPod playlist and realize I've never heard of most of the artists I listen to. I was once one of those people with developed opinions about the Ramones, but now I've shed all that knowledge and blindly submit to a mishmash of anonymous groups like the Reindeer Section — a disturbing number of which seem to have had their music featured on the soundtrack of “The O.C.”

Memory? I've externalized it. I am one of those baby boomers who are making this the "It's on the Tip of My Tongue Decade." But now I no longer need to have a memory, for I have Google, Yahoo and Wikipedia. Now if I need to know some fact about the world, I tap a few keys and reap the blessings of the external mind.

Personal information? I've externalized it. I'm no longer clear on where I end and my BlackBerry begins. When I want to look up my passwords or contact my friends I just hit a name on my directory. I read in a piece by Clive Thompson in Wired that a third of the people under 30 can't remember their own phone number. Their smartphones are smart, so they don't need to be. Today's young people are forgoing memory before they even have a chance to lose it.

Now, you may wonder if in the process of outsourcing my thinking I am losing my individuality. Not so. My preferences are more narrow and individualistic than ever. It's merely my autonomy that I'm losing.

I have relinquished control over my decisions to the universal mind. I have fused with the knowledge of the cybersphere, and entered the bliss of a higher metaphysic. As John Steinbeck nearly wrote, a fella ain't got a mind of his own, just a little piece of the big mind — one mind that belongs to everybody. Then it don't matter, Ma. I'll be everywhere, around in the dark. Wherever there is a network, I'll be there. Wherever there's a TiVo machine making a sitcom recommendation based on past preferences, I'll be there. Wherever there's a Times reader selecting articles based on the most e-mailed list, I'll be there. I'll be in the way Amazon links purchasing Dostoyevsky to purchasing garden furniture. And when memes are spreading, and humiliation videos are shared on Facebook — I'll be there, too.

I am one with the external mind. Om.

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