**How the Internet Is Ruining Everything**

Name:

Period:

On this side, write a summary for each paragraph.

Article of the week #2

Highlight Unfamiliar words.

Circle or highlight key words and phrases

**By**[**QUENTIN HARDY**](http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/author/quentin-hardy/)

On this side, write questions or comments you have about the article.

 DECEMBER 3, 2011 9:53 AMDecember 5, 2011 12:29 pm 72 Comments

The ongoing argument about whether the Internet is a boon or a bust to civilization usually centers on the Web’s abundance. With so much data and so many voices, we each have knowledge formerly hard-won by decades of specialization. With some new fact or temptation perpetually beckoning, we may be the superficial avatars of an A.D.D. culture.

David Weinberger, one of the earliest and most perceptive analysts of the Internet, thinks we are looking at the wrong thing. It is not the content itself, but the structure of the Internet, that is the important thing. At least, as far as the destruction of a millennia-long human project is concerned.

Mr. Weinberger, a co-director of the Harvard Library Innovation Lab and a researcher at Harvard’s[Berkman Center](http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mediaberkman/category/david-weinberger/) for the Internet and Society, is one of the authors of “[The Cluetrain Manifesto](http://www.cluetrain.com/cluetrain.pdf),” a blog started in 1999 that became a bestselling book in 2000. The book still enjoys a huge following, particularly with cutting-edge business thinkers. It opened with the statement that “markets are getting smarter,” a questionable observation in light of such follies as the Internet stock bubble, subprime mortgages, and European debt issuance. Many other observations about the impact of global conversations, Wikileaks-style flow of information, and subverted corporate hierarchies, however, now seem both prophetic and prescriptive.

Mr. Weinberger’s new book, called “[Too Big to Know](http://www.amazon.com/Too-Big-Know-Rethinking-Everywhere/dp/0465021425),” will be published in January. He gave a lecture with the same name last Wednesday at the University of California at [Berkeley’s School of Information](http://www.ischool.berkeley.edu/), touching on the book’s main themes. Chief among them was the destruction of our institutions of knowledge and culture.

“Newspapers, encyclopedias, they are just gone, at the touch of a hyperlink,” Mr. Weinberger said. The institutions of “education and politics – they’ll just shatter. How did they get to be so fragile?” With the pained glee of a scientist discovering very bad news, he added, “knowledge for my generation was at the center of the human quest. It is going the way of the recording industry. It is a term that won’t survive the generation.”

The abundance problem of the Web, Mr. Weinberger said, is really an old one. The Roman philosopher Seneca talked about “too many books” (echoing [Ecclesiastes 12:12](http://bible.cc/ecclesiastes/12-12.htm), “of making many books there is no end.”) The issue nowadays is to some extent the need for good filters, pushing away information after centuries of seeking it.

But more important where the destruction of the institutions that supposedly steward the development of knowledge is concerned, he said, is the Web’s ever-changing structure of links, which undermines hierarchical analysis by allowing everyone to see and contribute different points of view. “In a highly-connected medium we would expect knowledge to change. And it does,” he said, “the knowledge lives in webs and networks as it has in books.”

While that can lead to speedy analysis, Mr. Weinberger said, it also means we live in a world of continual change and situational thinking. Every understanding is open to change, a kind of point of view that can be undermined by a non-expert with a persuasive argument. Even top researchers now acknowledge this, he noted: Recent claims that neutrinos travel faster than light are both posted and debated in places like [arXiv.org](http://arxiv.org/), without the traditional process of peer-review. “It did not respect professional credentials,” the Harvard researcher said.

This, along with the advent of seemingly leaderless, non-hierarchical movements from the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street, does give some evidence to the idea that our systems of knowledge organization “were based on brave falsehoods,” as Mr. Weinberger put it. Since Aristotle, there has been at least lip service to the idea of teleology, a process of discovery that leads to greater and greater understanding. We have invested much of our society in making such a process better.

Now, he said, the model of a protean, ever-linked and ever-changing world is killing that. “The dream of the West has been that we will live together in knowledge, that there is One Knowledge. The Web is saying ‘Nice try,’” Mr. Weinberger said. By its very success we know that “the Internet as a medium is far more like the world we live in” and “the Web is closer to the phenomenological truth of our lives,” he said.

There is a lot of truth to this, so to speak. Mr. Weinberger’s book will likely make a splash and be widely discussed, as it deserves to be. He did not offer any ideas about what lasting institutions could be developed as the old ones are undone. He did say that business, which responds to the market, would probably steward the change better than government, which has fixed commitments.

Instead of giving us a new and better way of seeing the world, the Internet is a tool that embodies how we have wanted to see the world for some time. We have built it according to our new ideas about the world, and it gained a power that is destroying pre-existing structures.

There is some precedent for this; the logical methods of observation and refinement at the dawn of the Scientific Revolution enabled the creation and improvement of the microscope and the telescope. In turn, these tools both grew and shrank our sense of the world, enhancing the idea of hierarchies. Much social and scientific organization followed that path and destroyed its predecessors. We build the tool to change things, and then the tool changes us.

I put this to Mr. Weinberger. “Did we invent something to fulfill all the philosophies, or were they right?” he said. “I don’t know. And in a way, it doesn’t matter.” That is probably the right answer, when you believe in a world of ever-changing situations. It does not matter if the discovery precedes its invention; we only deal with the thing that seems most true for now, having abandoned the idea of Truth.

Though of course, when a Harvard researcher values something because it affords a more accurate picture of reality, the end of hierarchy and a quest for ultimate understanding seems a long way off.

On a separate sheet of paper. Answer this question.

Do you agree with the author when he says “the internet is ruining everything”?

If you agree with him, give examples from this article that help prove he is right. Explain why.

If you disagree, give an example of something he said that you don’t think is true. Explain why.

Your response should be close to a page in length. Staple it to this article when done. It is due Friday.