

A spectre haunts the world's intellectual elites: information overload. Ordinary people have hijacked strategic resources and are clogging up once carefully policed media channels. Before the Internet, the mandarin classes were able to strictly separate 'idle talk' from 'knowledge'. With the rise of Internet search engines it is no longer possible to easily distinguish between patrician insights and plebeian gossip. The distinction between high and low, and the occasional mix during Carnival, are from all times and should not greatly worry us. What is causing alarm is another issue. Not only are popular noise levels up to unbearable levels, the chatter has entered the domain of science and philosophy itself-thanks to the indifferent Google. Search engines rank according to popularity, not Truth.

What today's administrators of noble simplicity and quiet grandeur can't express, we should say for them: there is a growing discontent in the search algorithms. The scientific establishment has lost control over one of its key research projects, computer science and the enlightened citizens and statesmen have so far not found a way to communicate their concerns to those in charge (read: the Google board). One possible way out could be to overcome to positively redefine Heidegger's 'Gerede' as 'being of everyday Dasein's understanding and interpreting'. Are Internet users cut off from a primary and primordial relationship with the world? Should we portray bloggers and the Web 2.0 cybermasses as 'uprooted' and cut off from the existential?

These questions, and more, came up while reading an of book of interviews with MIT professor Joseph Weizenbaum, known from the computer therapy program ELIZA and his 1976 book *Computer Power and Human Reason*. The publication is in German. A few years ago Weizenbaum (b. 1923) moved back to Berlin, the city where he grew up before he and his parents escaped from Nazis. The interviews were conducted by Munich-based journalist Gunna Wendt. A number of Amazon reviewers complained about Wendt's uncritical questions and the polite-superficial level of her contributions. No doubt interesting are Weizenbaum's stories about his youth in Berlin, the exile to the USA and the way he got involved in computing during the 1950s. The book indeed reads like a summary of Weizenbaum's critique of computer science. What interested me was the way in which Weizenbaum shapes his arguments as an informed and respected insider (the net criticism position, so to say). The title and subtitle sound intriguing. Translated it goes like this: "Where are they, the islands of reason in the cyber stream? Ways out of the programmed society."

Weizenbaum's Internet critique is general. He avoids becoming specific—and I appreciate that attitude. His Internet remarks are nothing new for those familiar with Weizenbaum's work: Internet is a great pile of junk, a mass medium that up to 95% consists of nonsense, much like the medium television, in which direction the Web is inevitably developing. The so-called information revolution has flipped into a flood of disinformation. The reason for this is the absence of an editor or editorial principle. Why this crucial media principle was not built-in by the first generations of computer programmers, of which Weizenbaum was a prominent member, the book fails to address.

On a number of occasions I have formulated a critique of such "media ecology," Hubert Dreyfus' *On the Internet* (2001) being one of them. I do not believe that it is up to any professor or editor to decide for us what is, and what is not nonsense. I would much rather like to further revolutionize search tools and increase the general level of media literacy. If we walk into a book store or library our culture has taught us how to browse through the thousands of titles. Instead of complaining to the librarian that they carry too many books, we call in assistance, or find the way ourselves.

Weizenbaum would like us to distrust what we see on our screens, be it television or Internet. Who is going to tell what to trust, what is the truth and what not, Weizenbaum doesn't mention.

Let's forget Weizenbaum's info anxiety. What makes this interview book an interesting read is his insistence on the art of asking the right question. Weizenbaum warns for an uncritical use of the word 'information'. "The signals inside the computer are not information. They are not more than signals. There is only one way to turn signals into information, through interpretation." For this we depend on the labour of the human brain. The problem of the Internet, so Weizenbaum, is that it invites us to see it as a Delphi oracle. To all our questions and problems, the Internet will provide you the answer. But the Internet is not a vending machine in which you throw a coin and then get what you want. First of all there are plenty of obstacles before one can even pose a question, like class, race and gender. Key is that you need to have a proper education in order to formulate the right query. It's all about how one gets to pose the right question. Weizenbaum: "It doesn't mean much that everyone can publish on the Net. Random publishing is as useless as random fishing." In this context Weizenbaum makes the comparison between Internet and now vanished CB radio. Communication alone will not lead to useful and sustainable knowledge.

Weizenbaum relates the uncontested belief in (search engine) queries to the rise of the 'problem' discourse. Computers were introduced as "general problem solvers" and a solution for everything. People were invited to delegate their lives to the computer. "We have a problem," so Weizenbaum, "and the problem requires an answer." But personal and social tensions cannot be resolved through by declaring them a problem. What we need instead of Google and Wikipedia, is the "capacity to scrutinize and think critically." Weizenbaum explains this with the difference between hearing and listening. For a critical understanding we first have to sit down and listen. Then we also need to read, not just decipher, and learn to interpret and understand.

As we're all aware, the so-called Web 3.0 is going to be the technocratic answer to Weizenbaum's criticism. Instead of Google's algorithms that are based on keywords and an output based on ranking, soon we will be able to ask questions to the next generation of 'natural language' search engines such as [Powerset](#). However, we can already guess that these computational linguists will not question the problem-answering approach and will be wary to act as professional expert who will decide what is and what's not crap on the Internet. The same counts for the semantic Web school and similar artificial intelligence technologies. Ever since the rise of search engines in the 1990s we seem to be stuck in the 'Society of the Query', which, as Weizenbaum indicates, isn't that much different from Debord's Society of the Spectacle. The complete reannotation of the world's information isn't going to solve the inevitable issue, also raised by Andrew Keen in his Cult of the Amateur, about the future status of the professional expert. For the time being we remain obsessed with the increase in quality of the answer to our queries—and not with the underlying problem, namely the poor quality of our education and the diminishing ability to think in a critical way. I am skeptical if next generations will discover Weizenbaum's 'islands of reasons'. The 'culture of time' is simply not there to stroll around, like a flaneur. Every information, any object or experience has to be at hand instantaneous. Serendipity requires a lot of time. If we can no longer stumble into islands of reason through our inquiries, we may as well have to build them. By definition these island will be artificial, and, most likely, digital in nature.

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Joseph Weizenbaum mit Gunna Wendt, Wo sind sie, die Inseln der Vernunft im Cyberstrom, Auswege aus der programmierten Gesellschaft, Herder

Verlag, Freiburg, 2006.

[Reviews \(in German\)](#)

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