

Three Tweets for the Web

Welcome the new world with open arms—and browsers.

BY TYLER COWEN

THE PRINTED WORD IS NOT DEAD. WE ARE NOT about to see the demise of the novel or the shuttering of all the bookstores, and we won't all end up on Twitter. But we are clearly in the midst of a cultural transformation. For today's younger people, Google is more likely to provide a formative cultural experience than *The Catcher in the Rye* or *Catch-22* or even the Harry Potter novels. There is no question that books are becoming less central to our cultural life.

The relative decline of the book is part of a broader shift toward short and to the point. Small cultural bits—written words, music, video—have never been easier to record, store, organize, and search, and thus they are a growing part of our enjoyment and education. The classic 1960s rock album has given way to the iTunes single. On YouTube, the most popular videos are usually just a few minutes long, and even then viewers may not watch them through to the end. At the extreme, there are Web sites offering five-word movie and song reviews, six-word memoirs (“Not Quite What I Was Planning”), seven-word wine

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reviews, and 50-word minisagas.*

The new brevity has many virtues. One appeal of following blogs is the expectation of receiving a new reward (and finishing off that reward) every day. Blogs feature everything from expert commentary on politics or graphic design to reviews of new Cuban music CDs to casual ruminations on feeding one's cat. Whatever the subject, the content is replenished on a periodic basis, much as 19th-century novels were often delivered in installments, but at a faster pace and with far more authors and topics to choose from. In the realm of culture, a lot of our enjoyment has always come from the opening and unwrapping of each gift. Thanks to today's hypercurrent online environment, this is a pleasure we can experience nearly constantly.

It may seem as if we have entered a nightmarish attention-deficit culture, but the situation is not nearly as gloomy as you have been told. Our culture of the short bit

*Not everything is shorter and more to the point. The same modern wealth that encourages a proliferation of choices also enables very long performances and spectacles. In the German town of Halberstadt, a specially built organ is playing the world's longest concert ever, designed to clock in at 639 years. This is also the age of complete boxed sets, DVD collector's editions, extended “director's cut” versions of movies, and the eight- or sometimes even 10-year Ph.D. But while there is an increasing diversity of length, shorter is the trend. How many of us have an interest in hearing more than a brief excerpt from the world's longest concert?

is making human minds more rather than less powerful.

The arrival of virtually every new cultural medium has been greeted with the charge that it truncates attention spans and represents the beginning of cultural collapse—the novel (in the 18th century), the comic book, rock ‘n’ roll, television, and now the Web. In fact, there has never been a golden age of all-wise, all-attentive readers. But that’s not to say that nothing has changed. The mass migration of intellectual activity from print to the Web has brought one important development: We have begun paying more attention to information. Overall, that’s a big plus for the new world order.

It is easy to dismiss this cornucopia as information overload. We’ve all seen people scrolling with one hand through a BlackBerry while pecking out instant messages (IMs) on a laptop with the other and eyeing a television (I won’t say “watching”). But even though it is easy to see signs of overload in our busy lives, the reality is that most of us carefully regulate this massive inflow of information to create something uniquely suited to our particular interests and needs—a rich and highly personalized blend of cultural gleanings.

The word for this process is *multi-tasking*, but that makes it sound as if we’re all over the place. There is a deep coherence to how each of us pulls out a steady stream of information from disparate sources to feed our long-term interests. No matter how varied your topics of interest may appear to an outside observer, you’ll tailor an information stream related to the continuing “stories” you want in your life—say, Sichuan cooking, health care reform, Michael Jackson, and the stock market. With the help of the Web, you build broader intellectual narra-



Twitter allows the author to instantly “tweet” some 2,000 “followers.”

tives about the world. The apparent disorder of the information stream reflects not your incoherence but rather your depth and originality as an individual.

My own daily cultural harvest usually involves listening to music and reading—novels, nonfiction, and Web essays—with periodic glances at the *New York Times* Web site and an e-mail check every five minutes or so. Often I actively don’t want to pull apart these distinct activities and focus on them one at a time for extended periods. I like the

blend I assemble for myself, and I like what I learn from it. To me (and probably no one else, but that is the point), the blend offers the ultimate in interest and suspense. Call me an addict, but if I am torn away from these stories for even a day, I am very keen to get back for the next “episode.”

Many critics charge that multitasking makes us less efficient. Researchers say that periodically checking your e-mail lowers your cognitive performance level to that of a drunk. If such claims were broadly correct, multitasking would pretty

TECHNOLOGY IS HONING our ability to do many more things at once and to do them faster. Multitasking may even be making us smarter.

rapidly disappear simply because people would find that it didn't make sense to do it. Multitasking is flourishing, and so are we. There are plenty of lab experiments that show that distracting people reduces the capacity of their working memory and thus impairs their decision making. It's much harder to show that multitasking, when it results from the choices and control of an individual, does anyone cognitive harm. Multitasking is not a distraction from our main activity, it *is* our main activity.

Consider the fact that IQ scores have been rising for decades, a phenomenon known as the Flynn effect. I won't argue that multitasking is driving this improvement, but the Flynn effect does belie the common impression that people are getting dumber or less attentive. A harried multitasking society seems perfectly compatible with lots of innovation, lots of high achievers, and lots of high IQ scores.

With the help of technology, we are honing our ability to do many more things at once and do them faster. We access and absorb information more quickly than before, and, as a result, we often seem more impatient.

If you use Google to look something up in 10 seconds rather than spend five minutes searching through an encyclopedia, that doesn't mean you are less patient. It means you are creating more time to focus on other matters. In fact, we're devoting more effort than ever before to big-picture questions, from the nature of God to the best age for marrying and the future of the U.S. economy.

Our focus on cultural bits doesn't mean we are neglecting the larger picture. Rather, those bits are building-blocks for seeing and understanding larger trends and narratives. The typical Web user doesn't visit a gardening blog one day and a Manolo Blahnik shoes blog the next day, and never return to either. Most activity online, or at least the kind that persists, involves continuing investments in particular long-running narratives—about gardening, art, shoes, or whatever else engages us. There's an alluring sus-

pense to it. *What's next?* That is why the Internet captures so much of our attention.

Indeed, far from shortening our attention spans, the Web *lengthens* them by allowing us to follow the same story over many years' time. If I want to know what's new with the NBA free-agent market, the debate surrounding global warming, or the publication plans of Thomas Pynchon, Google quickly gets me to the most current information. Formerly I needed personal contacts—people who were directly involved in the action—to follow a story for years, but now I can do it quite easily.

Sometimes it does appear I am impatient. I'll discard a half-read book that 20 years ago I might have finished. But once I put down the book, I will likely turn my attention to one of the long-running stories I follow online. I've been listening to the music of Paul McCartney for more than 30 years, for example, and if there is some new piece of music or development in his career, I see it first on the Internet. If our Web surfing is sometimes frantic or pulled in many directions, that is because we care so much about so many long-running stories. It could be said, a bit paradoxically, that we are impatient

to return to our chosen programs of patience.

Another way the Web has affected the human attention span is by allowing greater specialization of knowledge. It has never been easier to wrap yourself up in a long-term intellectual project without at the same time losing touch with the world around you. Some critics don't see this possibility, charging that the Web is destroying a shared cultural experience by enabling us to follow only the specialized stories that pique our individual interests. But there are also those who argue that the Web is doing just the opposite—that we dabble in an endless variety of topics but never commit to a deeper pursuit of a specific interest. These two criticisms contradict each other. The reality is that the Internet both aids in knowledge specialization and helps specialists keep in touch with general trends.

The key to developing your personal blend of all the “stuff” that's out there is to use the right tools. The quantity of information coming our way has exploded, but so has the quality of our filters, including Google, blogs, and Twitter. As Internet analyst Clay Shirky points out, there is no information overload, only filter failure. If you wish, you can keep all the information almost entirely at bay and use Google or text a friend only when you need to know

something. That's not usually how it works. Many of us are cramming ourselves with Web experiences—videos, online chats, magazines—and also fielding a steady stream of incoming e-mails, text messages, and IMs. The resulting sense of time pressure is not a pathology; it is a reflection of the appeal and intensity of what we are doing. The Web allows you to enhance the meaning and importance of the cultural bits at your disposal; thus you want to grab more of them, and organize more of them, and you are willing to work hard at that task, even if it means you sometimes feel harried.

It's true that many people on the Web are not looking for a cerebral experience, and younger people espe-

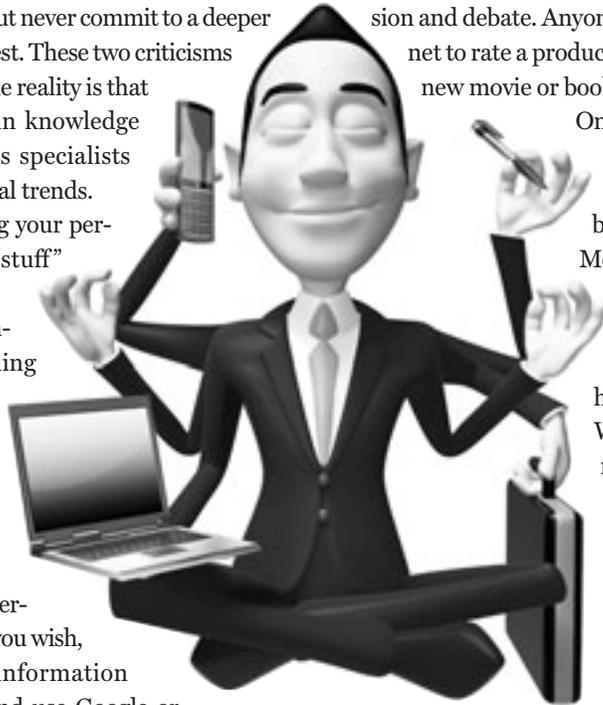
cially may lack the intellectual framework needed to integrate all the incoming bits into a meaningful whole. A lot of people are on the Web just to have fun or to achieve some pretty straightforward personal goals—they may want to know what happened to their former high school classmates or the history of the dachshund. “It's still better than watching TV” is certainly a sufficient defense of these practices, but there is a deeper point: The Internet is supplementing and intensifying real life. The Web's heralded interactivity not only furthers that process but opens up new possibilities for more discussion and debate. Anyone can find space on the Internet to rate a product, criticize an idea, or review a new movie or book.

One way to understand the emotional and intellectual satisfactions of the new world is by way of contrast. Consider Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*.

The music and libretto express a gamut of human emotions, from terror to humor to love to the sublime. With its ability to combine so much in a single work of art, the opera represents a great achievement of the Western canon. But, for all *Don Giovanni's* virtues, it takes well over three hours to hear it in its entirety, perhaps four with an intermission. Plus, the libretto is in Italian. And if

you want to see the performance live, a good seat can cost hundreds of dollars.

Instead of experiencing the emotional range of *Don Giovanni* in one long, expensive sitting, on the Web we pick the moods we want from disparate sources and assemble them ourselves. We take a joke from YouTube, a terrifying scene from a Japanese slasher movie, a melody from iTunes, and some images—perhaps our own digital photos—capturing the sublime beauty of the Grand Canyon. Even if no single bit looks very impressive to an outsider, to the creator of this assemblage it is a rich and varied inner experience. The new wonders we create are simply harder for outsiders to see than, say, the



Multitasking is bliss.

fantastic cathedrals of Old Europe.

The measure of cultural literacy today is not whether you can “read” all the symbols in a Rubens painting but whether you can operate an iPhone and other Web-related technologies. One thing you can do with such devices is visit any number of Web sites where you can see Rubens’s pictures and learn plenty about them. It’s not so much about having information as it is about knowing how to get it. Viewed in this light, today’s young people are very culturally literate indeed—in fact, they are very often cultural leaders and creators.

To better understand contemporary culture, consider an analogy to romance. Although many long-distance relationships survive, they are difficult to sustain. When you have to travel far to meet your beloved, you want to make every trip a grand and glorious occasion. Usually you don’t fly from one coast to another just to hang out and share downtime and small talk. You go out to eat and to the theater, you make passionate love, and you have intense conversations. You have a lot of thrills, but it’s hard to make it work because in the long run it’s casually spending time together and the routines of daily life that bind two people to each other. And of course, in a long-distance relationship, a lot of the time you’re not together at all. If you really love the other person you’re not consistently happy, even though your peak experiences may be amazing.

A long-distance relationship is, in emotional terms, a bit like culture in the time of Cervantes or Mozart. The costs of travel and access were high, at least compared to modern times. When you did arrive, the performance was often very exciting and indeed monumental. Sadly, the rest of the time you didn’t have that much culture at all. Even books were expensive and hard to get. Compared to what is possible in modern life, you couldn’t be as happy overall but your peak experiences could be extremely memorable, just as in the long-distance relationship.

Now let’s consider how living together and marriage differ from a long-distance relationship. When you share a home, the costs of seeing each other are very low. Your partner is usually right there. Most days include no grand events, but you have lots of regular and pre-

dictable interactions, along with a kind of grittiness or even ugliness rarely seen in a long-distance relationship. There are dirty dishes in the sink, hedges to be trimmed, maybe diapers to be changed.

If you are happily married, or even somewhat happily married, your internal life will be very rich. You will take all those small events and, in your mind and in the mind of your spouse, weave them together in the form of a deeply satisfying narrative, dirty diapers and all. It won’t always look glorious on the outside, but the internal experience of such a marriage is better than what’s normally possible in a long-distance relationship.

The same logic applies to culture. The Internet and other technologies mean that our favorite creators, or at least their creations, are literally part of our daily lives. It is no longer a long-distance relationship. It is no longer hard to get books and other written material. Pictures, music, and video appear on command. Culture is there all the time, and you can receive more of it, pretty much whenever you want.

In short, our relationship to culture has become more like marriage in the sense that it now enters our lives in an established flow, creating a better and more regular daily state of mind. True, culture has in some ways become uglier, or at least it would appear so to the outside observer. But when it comes to how we actually live and feel, contemporary culture is more satisfying and contributes to the happiness of far more people. That is why the public devours new technologies that offer extreme and immediate access to information.

Many critics of contemporary life want our culture to remain like a long-distance relationship at a time when most of us are growing into something more mature. We assemble culture for ourselves, creating and committing ourselves to a fascinating brocade. Very often the paper-and-ink book is less central to this new endeavor; it’s just another cultural bit we consume along with many others. But we are better off for this change, a change that is filling our daily lives with beauty, suspense, and learning.

Or if you’d like the shorter version to post to your Twitter account (140 characters or less): “Smart people are doing wonderful things.” ■