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An Analysis of the Argument Presented Within “Gin, Television, and Cognitive Surplus”

In his article “Gin, Television, and Cognitive Surplus” Clay Shirky presents an argument that the western world has a massive amount of untapped brain power which has been hidden for the last half century by television and is just now beginning to be utilized as a result of interactive media. Although the argument is overall sound and is decently backed up, it does have numerous unaddressed holes, which stem in large part from what appears to be narrow-mindedness on Shirky’s part.

Shirky begins his argument in a worrying fashion; he attempts to draw a parallel to the industrial revolution, which he claims survived on Gin, and the second half of the 20th century, which he claims survived on TV. He claims that there are all of these wonderful examples as to how Gin was necessary to the industrial revolution. He then produces only one weak example, “there were gin pushcarts working their way through the streets of London” (211). This lack of evidence to support his first claim starts Shirky’s argument off on rough footing. He then goes on to continue his history lesson by talking about how once society stopped using gin to cope with the changes of the industrial revolution, it developed all of these wonderful modern conveniences such as libraries, education systems, more pure democracies, etc... (211) for this claim Shirky provides not one shred of evidence.

Shirky then moves on to one of his most basic premises, that after World War II western society suddenly had a massive amount of free time on its hands, something which it had never

experienced before (212). And although it is undeniable that society as a whole did gain more free time after WWII, something which Shirky backs up enough to be taken as true. His claim that free time had never existed for Americans before weakens his arguments. He fails to address the fact that society spent plenty of free time prior to WWII doing all sorts of things, such as: sports, listening to radio, reading, going to parties and clubs, etc... Essentially Shirky fails to make a solid argument that free time was a new phenomenon for society and that it had no means of absorbing it. This is a clear example of how Shirky takes what could be a very strong argument and then weakens it by being too single focused. He then goes on to talk about how this new and unusual free time which he claims to exist gets gobbled up by watching television (212), and he gives some good examples as to some shows that received heavy viewership during the second half of the 20th century, and later in his argument he gives some impressive statistics as to the amount of man hours spent watching TV in the United States. He does however fail to address the other uses of free time which come into existence post WWII, in addition to the things mentioned above, there were a number of massive social movements (civil rights, antiwar, free society, etc...) and the reactions to those social movements which took a significant amount of time, long distance travel became viable and took a lot of time out of society, etc... and although Shirky is probably right, TV did take a lot of time out of society, his refusal to acknowledge other sources of time loss make him again look narrow minded.

Shirky then goes on to provide some truly impressive numbers as to how much time is spent watching TV and compares that to an easily tangible entity, the Wikipedia project. Unfortunately the nature of the article does not allow Shirky to present his calculations for time spent on TV versus the Wikipedia project, but nonetheless his use of a numerical comparison

does a lot to improve the credibility of his argument as a whole, moving it from purely anecdotal to having some solid evidence, this also does a lot to set up the next part of his argument.

Now, Shirky finishes his ground laying by talking about how the significance of this cognitive surplus is that no one has any idea how to use the time which they have found on their hands, and that that is why they waste it on TV (214). This is something that Shirky has reiterated throughout his argument in different ways, and although he may be completely correct that TV is just an activity which acts as a black hole for free time, he fails to address any other possibilities, for example: TV is our means of social education or TV is the way in which we relieve our stress from our fast passed lives. It isn't necessarily that Shirky is incorrect, but simply that he does nothing to prove that he is correct or that other possibilities are incorrect, which weakens his argument, and is again another example of his narrow mindedness.

Shirky then finally moves into his primary argument, that this excess of time, and as a result brainpower, which society currently puts towards watching TV is going to begin to be used for more productive interactive tasks (214) . The example which he chooses to use is one of an unproven small scale crime mapping project in Brazil. There is no logical reason why this should be an example used anywhere in the paper. There are so many wonderful examples to illustrate the point he is trying to make, the Linux projects, Wikipedia, the massive number of projects available on SourceForge.net (a hub for thousands of open sourced community software projects), etc... Shirky choosing an unproven, unknown, small community project as his first example to support his primary argument rather than a large scale, well known project makes it seem as if he has not done sufficient research.

At this point Shirky finally makes a good counterargument, and then he forgets to refute it. He talks about the fact that all of the modern interactive media outlets that he says are modern

society's opening to become more productive didn't exist until recently, that until recently the only thing that anybody could do was to watch TV (215). If this was the case, as he asserts that it was, then the issue was not as he says that society was in shock with the time that it had found, but rather that technology had not provided the meaningful outlets for thought that society demanded, or some combination of the two.

Shirky then makes what is very close to an indisputable claim; "It's better to do something than to do nothing" (216), if a reader is taking the time to read an article discussing the state of society's cognitive value then odds are you actually agree with this assertion. But Shirky decides to back it up with some anecdotal evidence anyway. He goes on to say that this is a new thing, that in the world of TV there was no participation, just passive watching (216). This is probably a generally true statement, not requiring too much supporting evidence. However, it is interesting that he didn't use this place in his argument to talk about the massive popularity of those Television shows which promote some amount of participation, namely American Idol and its clones. It would seem that he could have greatly strengthened his argument by referencing those shows and showing how they gained popularity so much quicker than standard TV shows.

Shirky then explores another counterargument, which is that people enjoying interactive media is a fad and that sooner or later society will be back to only watching TV (217). This time Shirky refutes the counterargument very effectively, he relies on a bit of anecdotal evidence that everyone in the western world can easily recreate. He talks about how he watched a little girl look for a computer I/O device on her TV, expecting to be able to make it do whatever she wanted. Shirky argues that it is clear that the new generation of westerners expects nothing less than fully interactive media, in which they can mold the world around them and in the process, add to the value of our world (217). And the example of the little girl easily backs this up.

So while Shirky, throughout his argument, fails to use sufficient evidence to back up the premises upon which he is working or his primary argument itself, he does at the very end rescue at least part of his case and convincingly shows that future generations will move away from simply watching TV and instead expect to be able to interact with their media and the world as a whole.

Work Cited

Shirky, Clay. "Gin, Television, and Cognitive Surplus." *The Best Technology Writing 2009*. Ed.

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