

Just How Dumb Can We Get?

Artificial Intelligence is almost a reality. Are we ready for it? Do we need it? Can we cope with its consequences? This article explores these questions for you to consider. Find the home site of author Bill Allin at [http: billallin.com](http://billallin.com)

Ours is the age that is proud of machines that think and suspicious of men who try to.
- H. Mumford Jones, US critic & educator (1892 - 1980)

Not just your age Mumford, the present one as well.

Many people have an odd fascination with machines with Artificial Intelligence (AI). Two generations ago the most popular Christmas gifts for girls were talking dolls. A generation ago people flocked to the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* to hear the computer Hal conduct conversations with the spacecraft's crew members. The *Star Wars* franchise brought R2D2 and C3PO (a near-android) and audiences loved them.

Today people scoop up for gifts anything automated, including video games and toys with robotic capabilities. A programmable cordless vacuum cleaner that looks like a shortened curling stone and gathers floor litter without human hands operating it is another immensely popular gift. Sony's walking robot remains an expensive dream for most kids.

So popular are automated things, especially those that use computers or computerized chips are their hearts that Microsoft is about to launch a new all-encompassing operating system that will tie together the computerized systems in many different household appliances, some of which have not yet been released to the marketplace.

We look forward to the day when our computers and computerized robots do some of our thinking for us. Are we not afraid that they will eventually replace us and become effectively the heads of our households? Though we should, apparently we do not have such a fear.

We believe that technology will not only make our lives easier, but it will also prevent itself from taking control of our lives. Arthur C. Clarke, the British science fiction writer and co-author of *2001* (with director Stanley Kubrick), warned us with Hal, but the lesson didn't stick. If anything, Hal (a metal box with an actor's voice-over) prompted even more research into AI and its uses to assist humans in their daily chores.

The modern world population, those who have easy and constant access to the Information Highway which gives us more information that we can absorb, has become essentially a race of stupid animals. As writer Stephen Vizinczey said, "We now have a whole culture based on the assumption that people know nothing and so anything can be said to them." Yet that culture wants machines that can think. think for them, we must assume.

Are we really stupid? The so-called post-modern world requires expertise in many fields, which in turn requires our best educated people to specialize in one field of study so intensively that they know less about most subjects than a high school dropout. We don't repair anything broken any more, we buy a new one. We don't fix broken equipment in our homes because we don't know how. We toss it and buy new.

We hope for casual conversations with colleagues because strangers might want to talk on subjects we know nothing about. Small talk about nothing of significance has risen to an art form.

We pollute our air with half a million chemicals, warming it unnecessarily with coal-fired electricity generating stations, drive huge SUVs that emit many times as much CO₂ as smaller cars, and we drive as much as we can our vehicles that use fossil fuels rather than putting pressure on science to deliver alternative energy sources. And we know we are doing it. That's stupid.

But, as H. Mumford Jones said, we are suspicious of those who think, speak or write along any train of thought that differs from what our politicians, our industries and our pop scientists tell us is the right way to think. In fact, we often socially ostracize such people, cause them to lose their jobs or find ways to imprison them or otherwise silence them.

Perhaps we need Artificial Intelligence to compensate for the lack of intelligence we exhibit ourselves, in our

personal and our public lives. Though our public lives are getting smaller as we turn our civic responsibilities over to politicians and their agencies, even to the extent of staying away from the polls on voting days.

Before you go thinking that I believe we are bound for hell in a handbasket or are dumbing ourselves down to the intelligence level of dirt, remember, we will soon be able to have transplants of brain tissue, whole brains or artificial brains.

We'll know it has already begun when we find a revival of the name Hal for newly born babies. Or C3PO.

Bill Allin

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