

In an online poll, *The Economist* asked readers if the world is...

Wising Up



There is an ancient proverb that goes like this: "Parents just don't understand."

Well, it's actually less of a proverb, and more of a Will Smith and Jazzy Jeff lyric, but the meaning remains just as profound as any of Confucius's most tantalizing ideals. Beneath the sassy tone that the Fresh Prince is known for lays an astute commentary on the role of the generation gap in relation to intellectual assumption. In short, we're not as dumb as we sometimes look.

Ignore the Internet abbreviations that have now become the linguistic commonplace. Forget the deteriorating attention span of a generation founded on high-speed access and endless availability. The argument of declining intelligence as a whole lacks any actual weight, if only because the methods of measurement are becoming more obsolete as we continue to evolve.

We are not a generation that is getting dumber, but one that is simply finding new ways of being smart.

The methods that were once used to assess the possibility of our waning intelligence have now become as old and tired as the very people who condemn us. We are the result of the 1990s, an era that followed the "greed is good" motto into bloodthirsty relevance. We no longer simply seek answers, but hunt for the most efficient way to find them.

Competition drives us, and our intelligence is only as good as our ability to improve on all that came before us. Our smarts are no longer assessed by how much we know, but rather how quickly we can find the information needed with the least amount of effort. Lazier? Perhaps. But dumber? Not by a long shot.

As information becomes more readily accessible, there is no denying that the drive to be adequately familiar with that knowledge is becoming less crucial. But our desire to find new ways to access this plethora of information makes for a new breed of intellectuals altogether, one that uses competition as its driving force. We have smartened up to new ways of subvert-

ing regulation and bypassing traditional procedures. The existence of Wikipedia doesn't hint at the possibility of intellectual demise, only new forms of mental rejuvenation. Easy accessibility is far too often mistaken for overwhelming apathy.

But our quest for new forms of intellectual stimulation seeps into every aspect of our lives, far beyond the given classroom or test results. The art medium as a whole has found itself inherently forced to up the ante for a generation that now craves intelligence even in its entertainment.

Gone are the days of the traditional sitcom, and in are the sweeping narrative arcs of television shows that ask viewers to follow storylines that won't be wrapped up in a matter of minutes — I've been watching "Lost" for a good five years now and I still don't know what's going on. Our films sprinkle bits of allegory into even the most traditional summer fare. "WALL-E" took an environmentally conscious look at an apathetic species' relationship with its creations. Even "The Dark Knight" managed to tap into the moral boundary within the issue of wire-tapping.

These aren't merely films, these are records — artifacts that will last far beyond us and will manage to speak volumes about what moved us, what connected us, and most of all, what defined us. We are creators who now strive to say something significant with all that we do. We are viewers that now crave intelligence with even our most mind-numbing of pastimes. We are a generation that has grown smart enough to know that intellectual analysis is never constant, but always an objective assessment of the ins and outs of a given era. It's the new millennial equivalent of "what to get the man who has everything." It's an existential question that both drives us and defines us: how do you teach a generation that has every lesson available at their fingertips? You don't. Instead, you teach the methods to find the answers.

We are a generation that has given a new meaning to intelligence; as times change and technology evolves, the skill set to which our generation has become accustomed has redefined what it means to become smarter. To assess a new breed of intellectuals through methods created by generations past is both illogical and inaccurate. We have come to depend on a type of wit that everyone from our forefathers to our grandfathers will have a hard time understanding. But while we continue to evolve, a parent's inability to understand may just have to be something that stays eternal.



Our world, which we have fought so hard for, which we have expended blood, sweat and tears to improve, is getting dumber.

That's not to say that science has halted, or to deny our ballooning lifespans. No, people are smarter, but they are far less wise.

The human race has shown tremendous potential to fight for what it believes in.

But our generation has forgotten how to think.

We have forgotten the wisdom to reject apathy, entangled in a political and social mutation of the bystander effect. We demand change — there is no doubt about that, but we perpetually pass the buck to

the next man: be it a government, a nonprofit, or other, more altruistic versions of ourselves. We elected Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States on a platform of "change we can believe in," but short of electing a new president and *hoping* he follows through, we the people squander every other opportunity at our disposal to make change.

"The Man" is made responsible for just about everything. Businesses are blamed for causing poverty or television for the mind-destroying content it generates.

But try as they might, average consumers have more influence than they know with the power of their vote, their voice and their dollars.

Though it has many problems, the free market gives us the ability to vote with our wallets. If you don't like a show on television, don't watch it. Television companies make money on advertising based on how many people watch, and if viewership falls below a certain point, the show will be canceled.

We dictate how our world looks, but

people these days are too afraid to push for what they want in a way that will help them achieve it.

The developed world saw huge improvements in living conditions, wages, work safety, health science and corporate accountability in the 1800s, when our modern economic system began to form. These were not changes made by "the Man" — they were pushed by market forces, controlled by average consumers who just wouldn't take it anymore. The human race has shown remarkable potential for change.

Until now.

As the world has grown smaller, people have been less and less in touch with their own political representatives. Gone are the days of town hall meetings, the plebiscite, and making one's opinion known in an effort to seek change.

Instead, we use the fantastic technology at our fingertips as more efficient means of complaining, somehow sending people's unedited, unrated opinion out to everyone but dodging any potential for public discourse.

People in this age have forgotten: how to think, how to act, how to change the world.

But that's only part of it; it would be easy to talk about war, famine, genocide, and the widening wealth inequality in our own country, but the fact that I don't have to says enough.

The people are outraged! They say so in their blogs and express their disgust in instant messages. Everything has become abbreviated, staccato statements that do nothing to encourage actual, pragmatic action.

Conservatives have become neo-cons; 24 hours of news has been reduced to five-second sound bites; a topic such as the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, with a history dating back to Genesis, gets boiled down to bumper-sticker politics.

There is nothing wrong with activism; but protest through education, not for the sake of protest.

It's time to take off those blinders, step off of the soapbox, and listen. Educate, articulate, and make your message known.

The human race has shown amazing potential for making the world better.

Inform your audience, but don't forget to take the time to wise up a little bit yourself.

Dumbing Down