

'net savvy' than in those who are 'net naive.'

These findings cannot answer the question of whether such changes are good or bad. Conclusions are coloured by the authors' values. Bilton treats the adaption of the 'net savvy' as positive: "the brains were learning, benefiting from practice and experience". Carr comes to the opposite conclusion: "When it comes to the firing of our neurons, it's a mistake to assume that more is better."

Part of the problem is the paucity of scientific studies on the effects of modern technologies on the brain. It is a testament to both authors' skills that they were able to produce entire books on works so sparse. Unfortunately, to fill the pages, they lump information into categories that are too diverse to be useful. For example, both treat the use of all Internet technology — web browsing, web searching, texting, tweeting, video games and so on — as a single activity, despite the fact that such variety is unlikely to have one distinct effect. As with food, the effects of technology will depend on what type of technology is consumed, how much and for how long.

History suggests that technology does not change the brain's fundamental abilities. The general principles of brain organization have not changed for thousands of years — probably since the rise of language. Major technological advances do not create *de novo* brain structures. They do, however, take advantage of the cognitive flexibility of the human mind.

With each new technological development, we see a shift in the cognitive abilities and brain functions that society values most. The advent of writing systems, so celebrated by Carr, devalued the role of oral memorization through storytelling as cherished by the Greeks. Great orators such as Socrates would have lamented that Carr has lost the memory skills necessary for passing on knowledge through stories to future generations. Yet he has gained other skills by entraining alternate brain networks for reading and text analysis.

Just as it was difficult to say at the time whether the advent of writing was good or bad, a value judgement of the effect of the Internet is impossible. But it is a tribute to neural plasticity that, with each new technological development, our brains adapt — for better or for worse. ■

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ART

Abstract relativity

A Paris exhibition contrasts 1920s depictions of the fourth dimension, find **Stefan Michalowski** and **Georgia Smith**.

The birth of modern physics a century ago fired artistic as well as scientific imaginations. This can be seen in the Pompidou Centre's current exhibition of abstract art, covering Dutch painter Piet Mondrian and the De Stijl group, led by another Dutchman, Theo van Doesburg.

A series of canvasses illustrates the evolution of abstract techniques, from the soft contours of impressionism to the spare geometry of cubism. "We arrive at a portrayal of other things, such as the laws governing matter," Mondrian wrote. Cubist techniques were inspired, in part, by the multi-dimensional mathematics of Henri Poincaré and his contemporaries.

Most of the exhibition is rightly devoted to Mondrian and the development of his recognizable mature style. From a minimal toolbox of visual elements — white canvas, black lines and simple blocks of red, yellow or blue — emerge geometric compositions of startling intensity and elegance.

Mondrian was deeply influenced by theosophy, a spiritual movement grounded in ancient texts that was bent on uncovering universal truths in art, religion and science. He penned reams of theory as to why his abstract style was the appropriate expression of these "great generalities" for modern times.

A quiet introvert from a Calvinist family, Mondrian became a mentor to van Doesburg, by contrast a flamboyant young painter who had three wives and many artistic cliques in his short life (he died aged 47). When van Doesburg moved to Paris in 1923, the two men worked closely: their canvasses form a dialogue as each sparked fresh innovations from the other. But their intense relationship exploded a year later — and one of the flash-points was the theory of relativity.

The public learned about Albert Einstein's discoveries after the First World War, when the solar eclipse of 1919 confirmed general relativity by showing that gravity can bend light. In Paris, space-time became a catchword in avant-garde circles. Artists from futurists to Dadaists latched on to the new ideas. Van Doesburg had already flirted with spatial geometry in

Mondrian/De Stijl
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four dimensions: the exhibition includes some of his tesseract, projections on paper of four-dimensional cubes. Then, in the 1920s, he began trying to evoke time and change — four-dimensional space-time — in his paintings.

Mondrian rejected van Doesburg's attempt, and the two split over it. Symbolic of their rift was van Doesburg's use of dynamic diagonal lines, which contrasted with Mondrian's strict vertical and horizontal grids. But the quarrel went deeper than diagonals: Mondrian's doggedly developed style had become too much of a constraint for his former coterie.

The De Stijl artists wanted to remake the human environment by designing furniture, buildings and cities based on their primary-coloured, idealized structures. Van Doesburg experimented with architectural designs and films incorporating the fourth dimension. Some of these products are displayed in the exhibition, but the role of the fourth dimension is not clearly shown or explained. The artists themselves do not always seem to have grasped the



Theo van Doesburg's use of diagonals is symbolic of his quarrel with Piet Mondrian.

difference between a fourth dimension in space versus one in time.

As the artists tried to incorporate the new-found laws of physics in their expressions of absolute truth about the Universe, history ambushed them. Their comrades in abstraction were soon brutally dismissed by the Soviet and Nazi authorities. Einstein helped to pull the rug out from under their depictions of the 'absolute' by dissolving special relativity's neat geometries into quantum theory's fuzzy clouds of probability. But Mondrian's precise vision, with its subsumed scientific borrowings, continues to intrigue and delight. ■

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