

The last word

Good ol' daze

IF YOU THINK TECHNOLOGY WILL RUIN THE DAY, OR SAVE IT, THINK AGAIN – OR CHECK ON WIKIPEDIA OR SOMETHING.

AS **STEVE HOLDEN** REPORTS, WE'VE ALWAYS WORRIED ABOUT PERNICIOUS NEW TECHNOLOGIES, AND THE BRAVE NEW WORLD AND THE GOOD OL' DAYS HAVE NEVER REALLY BEEN FAR APART.

Google is making us stupid; tweet readers on Twitter are turning into, um, twits; Facebook and MySpace and suchlike social networking sites are trivialising our social relationships; our attention span is shrinking as the size of our screens grows; txting is turning us into phone-thumbing zombies and destroying the English language as we know it, yadda yadda yadda.

If you've already read all this sort of stuff, with googled assistance, probably, and online almost certainly, you'll know that the next step in the diatribe is to be told that we all ought to switch off, grab a good ol' fashioned book, maybe even shell out for one of those olde-worlde fountain pen thingys and possibly get ourselves one of those single horsepower, um, horses to get around on.

It's time to step back from the future, you see, as technology continues its das-

tardly work of transforming our lives *for the worse*.

Yet wait, says Dennis Baron, a professor of English and linguistics at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, which, according to Wikipedia, is in Illinois, the fifth most populous state in the United States, with an estimated population of 12,901,563, did you know?

Baron, author of *A Better Pencil*, says the digital communications revolution, like most technological revolutions, improves our lives. Equally, he points out, most new technologies, like the invention of the printing press or the clay tablet or, yikes, writing itself were, in their day, greeted with fear and loathing, and a desire to get back to the good ol' days before the young folks took to this newfangled printing or clay tablet carving or writing.

In an interview with *Salon's* Vincent Rossmeier – available at www.salon.com

on the, gasp, worldwide web, if you're still connected – Baron singles out a few of the usual suspects in a line-up of the fearers and loathers: Plato, who thought writing, the shadow of the real thing, would rot our memories; Henry David Thoreau, with his observation that 'We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas, but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate;' or the inventor of the telegraph, Samuel Morse, in turn sending out an SOS about a pernicious new telephone technology.

The knockout punch in any fight between the new and the good ol' days, though, is the too-much-information charge that, with 955,454,536,342,364,788,009,876 web pages, and counting, according to WikiAnswers, there's simply too much information. That's a fair charge, Baron concedes, but adds, 'There's always been too much to read. Nobody read all the books at the Great Library of Alexandria' – which, incidentally, was partially or completely destroyed by Julius Caesar's fire in either the Alexandrian War, in BC 48, the attack of Aurelian in the third century AD, the decree of Theophilus in AD 391 or the Muslim conquest in or after AD 642, according to Wikipedia. **T**

REFERENCES

Baron, D. (2009). *A Better Pencil: Readers, writers and the digital revolution*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Rossmeier, V. (2009). *Is the internet melting our brains?* *Salon*. Available at www.salon.com/books/int/2009/09/19/better_pencil/index.html Retrieved 25 September, 2009.

This month's Last Word was written in between time-consuming tweets, googles, deletions of RSS feeds and visits to Facebook by Steve Holden, Editor of Teacher, and the 2008 highly commended winner in the Best Columnist category of the Melbourne Press Club Quill Awards for the Last Word.