A fascinating collection of 19 essays, these articles provide a snapshot of opinions about the impact of the Internet, and especially the Web, on everyday lives. These stories were selected from diverse sources, ranging from the precious and precarious Onion to traditional sources such as the New York Times and Atlantic.

There is certainly an undercurrent of several themes in these essays, but the most significant seems to be about reading. How has access to terabytes of digital information altered the way we read? Nicholas Carr — in his essay “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” — argues ultimately that we are all becoming like HAL, feeling our minds going like the infamous computer in 2001. Carr solemnly ends his work by stating simply “our own intelligence flattens into artificial intelligence.” The Onion supports this notion in its absurdist way with the story of Philip Meyer, an “eccentric” who actually finishes an entire book (“Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird”) — not surprisingly, the Onion reports that psychologist Dr. Elizabeth Schulz calls Meyer “a classic case of deviant behavior.” Seriously, there are other examples of support for Carr in this collection, such as Dana Goodyear’s insightful description of keita shoeshu or cell-phone novels. Millions of these novels are literally changing Japanese publishing — and reading habits.

A second theme in this book might be simply called unsung heroes of the Internet, or defenders of the digital age. These individuals are certainly not supercharacters in the Hollywood sense, blessed with an abundance of special and unusual genetic mutations. Indeed, some might not call these heroes heroic, but rather those cursed with a certain kind of inflexibility. Julian Dibbell describes griefers in Second Life, those with a mission to derail the all-too-frequent deadly seriousness of some citizens in virtual worlds. Griefers might not be too heroic to many, but they certainly make it clear that reality is not a pixelated screen. A more geekish superhero might be Dan Kaminisky, described by Joshua Davis in his “Secret Geek A-Team Hacks Back, Defends Worldwide Web.” Kaminisky discovered vulnerabilities in DNS, leading to a massive effort to patch the problems with a “source port randomization solution.” danah boyd is certainly heroic in her essay in this work, calling on all of us to help at-risk young people online, the targets all too often of bullies and predators.

How can we make a difference, you ask? Well, it is a matter of “the will and the want” as boyd notes (p. 105). We have the tools. We certainly have the time. In the last essay in this collection, Clay Shirky calculates that this cognitive surplus could be spent instead on new digital tools, creating the equivalent of 2,000 hours a year in the United States are spent watching television. Shirky calculates that this cognitive surplus could be spent instead on new digital tools, creating the equivalent of 2,000 hours a year in the United States are spent watching television. This cognitive surplus could be spent instead on new digital tools, creating the equivalent of 2,000 hours a year in the United States are spent watching television. This cognitive surplus could be spent instead on new digital tools, creating the equivalent of 2,000 hours a year in the United States are spent watching television.
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edited by Steven Johnson. Johnson's selections gauge where we are today instead of predicting where we will
be tomorrow. "The most striking thing about the best technology writing of 2009 is how little of it
focuses on the future," editor Steven Johnson writes in his introduction.
The reason for this is obvious to anyone who has been cellphone
shopping lately. We've got all the future we can handle. Rather than make guesses, Johnson's selections serve the same function as
Sullivan's log/blog: to measure where we are today rather than predict where we'll be tomorrow. Of course, by today we mean a year ago,
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