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Not a Pundit

"I'm not a pundit, semicolon, I do research." So says freelance journalist and blogger Clive Thompson in a 2012 interview with the Science Journalism Fellowship of MIT (Inside The Story, Henry). Thompson may just be acting humble; he has worked with computers since he was a youth, graduated from U of Toronto after studying Political Science and English, worked for several magazines and writes freelance for publications including Wired (Nunes). Poly-Sci draws upon ideas of the fields of economics, law, sociology, history, philosophy, geography, psychology/psychiatry, and anthropology. Such subjects are important in his writing about ideas centered on humanity v. technology. His past has made him an effective source in many different aspects of human interaction as well as a possibly reliable source on technology in a growing digital age. However, Thompson is correct in his self-evaluation that he is not a pundit. He lacks formal education on many technological studies and thus he must rely on the side of his writing that relates to human nature and development more than on the technological side if he wants to remain in his zone of expertise. Fortunately, the other half of his statement is also correct: he does research.

Admitting that he is not an expert in everything he writes about actually allows him to strengthen his eventual overall arguments. Right off the bat he doesn't present self as expert in anything he isn't. In fact, in his essay from his book *Smarter Than You Think*, he supplies an anecdote about his own writing style that demonstrates his use of more advanced sources to strengthen his argument. He states that when he was working on the section in this particular essay from the book that had to do with chess strategy, he "often realized [he] couldn't quite remember a detail and discovered that [his] notes were incomplete" ("*Smarter Than You Think*," Thompson). So he'd "zip over to a search engine". There he was able to read long passages from chess experts and grandmasters and find information about chess and its interaction with technology in the form of centaur-play (that is, chess played by humans with the augmentation of a computer program). Obviously he is no grandmaster himself but he makes it a point to draw from primary sources to fill in the gaps on knowledge he himself is not already an expert source on.

Another interesting thing about Thompson as a source is his views on technology and its interaction with humanity. According to his writer bio on the *Smarter Than You Think* website, he started out pessimistic about technology. He worried "that society and civility would fall off a cliff" but over the years he realized "when everyday people were given remarkable powers of self-expression on a global scale, amazing things happened more often than not" ("*Bio*," Thompson). Any conflicts of interest Thompson might have are mostly alleviated here as he has had opinions on both sides of the argument. Now he may be more inclined to respond positively to ideas of technology but due to his past as more of a naysayer of such things, we can see that he

is most likely taking the facts on and benefits of technology into account more in order to form his opinions. Now, his ideal audience is wider as well.

As a freelance technology writer that works often with Wired, his central audience is no doubt those who are interested in learning about emerging technology and hearing his thoughts on said advancements. However, he also writes effectively for those who are concerned by such things as well. His blog on clivethompson.net, as well as his former blog “Collision Detection,” both mainly serve as updates on things he finds interesting in the digital age. His Wired articles are also generally updates on technological phenomenon and his thoughts on them. However, he also writes in order to assure his more pessimistic audience that technology is not a social cliff that we will eventually fall off of. The essay adapted from *Smarter Than You Think* that is found in *They Say, I Say* is a prime example. He chooses examples of scenarios that people are worried about (Q: will AI make things such as chess obsolete?) and postulates that such scenarios are examples of things society can use to improve, not examples of the end of the world as we know it (A: humans and computers collaborating are smarter than any single human or computer). He assures the worrisome audience that the future is in our hands and that technology is a springboard to the future, not the edge of a cliff that we’ll fall from before we reach the future. Because he appeals to both of these audiences, his opinion matters doubly in the field he opines on. He is a useful source for several walks of life that have questions about the future of the tech world.

Clive Thompson is somewhat of a Renaissance man. His experiences range wildly and his areas of expertise do so as well. He has college education in the fields of poetry and political science, yet he loves technology and is an expert journalist. When he's not working as a journalist, blogger and science/tech writer he writes poetry and lyrics and is a musician involved with two bands. His wide variation of interests thus enable him to look at many aspects of the world when he writes and does research. In his interview with Jacqueline Nunes of the Ryerson Review of journalism he sums up his ability to research like this:

“When the story came out,” says Thompson, “the FBI called and said, ‘You actually hunted down people that we weren’t able to contact’” (Nunes).

Thompson can be considered a reliable source in the fields of technology and its effect on humanity because of his years of experience in the technological spheres, his ability to research extremely efficiently and his tendency to address both sides of the technological debate. He is qualified to have an opinion on almost every facet of technology and his opinion matters because he is able to educate people in new, unique ways. His chess essay from *Smarter Than You Think* provides a positive outlook about humans and machines improving together that few naysayers (or even optimists) would have considered in the past. By being self-aware of his ability as an expert opinion or “pundit” he allows the audience to realize he can support his arguments with good data without overstepping his boundaries. Being that careful to ensure his opinions are based on solid evidence and expertise takes time though. As Thompson himself admits, “he drinks lots and lots of coffee” (Nunes).

Works Cited

“What Makes Clive Run.” Jacqueline Nunes, Ryerson Review of Journalism, <https://rrj.ca/what-makes-clive-run/>.

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