Should everybody write?
the destabilizing technologies
of communication
dennis baron
No, at least according to some critics.

Henry David Thoreau made pencils for a living and sought endorsements for his writing instruments from the likes of Emerson. But Thoreau’s comment in *Walden* suggests that not everyone should write, because not everyone has something to say:

“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.”

Pencils from the John Thoreau pencil factory in Concord.
At first, when writing was the stuff of bean counters, not everybody wrote --

The Susa clay tokens, found in the Mediterranean basin ca. 6000-5000 BCE, were used by merchants not to transcribe speech but to track inventory.
As each new writing technology becomes user-friendly and affordable, more and more people learn not just to write, but to become writers.

Extra credit question: Did the students at Hogwarts use SparkNotes?
Writing education has typically involved copying, not creating, text, as we know from Gilbert and Sullivan’s Lord Admiral, who was taught “to copy all the letters in a big round hand.”

Handwriting expert George Bickham illustrates English Round-Hand, perfect for copying all the letters.

*The Universal Penman, 1743.*

Bickham writes, “As a legible and free Running hand is indispensibly Necessary in all Manner of Business, I thought proper to introduce these Examples for the practise of Youth and their more speedy Improvement. September 4th, 1737. G.B.”
The telephone turned everyone into a talker –

Illustration of the telephone, from Alexander Graham Bell’s notebook.
Should everybody talk?

The telephone was criticized early on for allowing people who would not be admitted were they to knock at the front door to gain access to one’s house unannounced simply by putting a nickel in a pay phone.

Payphone made in 1910 by Elisha Gray. Gray invented the telephone at around the same time as Bell, but Bell filed his patent application hours earlier, and after a series of bitter lawsuits, was credited with the invention.
But that wasn’t always such a good idea –

Ray Milland calls home in Alfred Hitchcock’s 1954 classic, “Dial ‘M’ for Murder.” If the movie were remade today, would it be called “Text ‘M’”? 
Now, with cell phones, everybody talks, texts, and lights up concerts . . .
There’s always someone who objects to a new technology roll out. Critics of the first wheel probably argued that round technologies sped up the pace of life too much and longed for the good old days of feet planted firmly on the ground –
Some people actually thought writing was a bad thing. Socrates worried that writing would make us forget –

The Death of Socrates, by Jacques-Louis David, 1787, shows that the great philosopher used a post-it to remind him what to buy when he went to the agora.
We remember this because Plato wrote it down –
Even after writing had established itself, most people didn’t write.

None of the “signatories” of this 11th century English charter, including King William Rufus, Sir Ilbert de Lacy, and his wife Hawise, actually signed the document, because they didn’t know how to write –
Even though the age of print opened up publication opportunities for writers, the printing press is a copying technology, not a creating technology.

Book of Genesis, from a Bible printed by Johannes Gutenberg, ca. 1450. The text was printed, but the illustrations were added by hand.
In 1520 Martin Luther warned of the danger of too many books – in his view, you just need one good book, not a lot of bad ones.

The 18th–century English poet Alexander Pope may have warned that “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing,” but some 19th-century educators feared that too much education gave people ideas beyond their station and was a recipe for social unrest.

Making literacy widely available meant that Karl Marx could read, think, and write revolutionary essays like Das Kapital in the public reading room at the British Museum.
Of course the printing press also enabled the development of new genres like the novel and paper money.

Initially, in the U.S., anyone with a press could print money. Because of this, we didn’t trust paper money much until the government began to regulate it in the 1860s –
With the typewriter, as with the press and the big round hand, everyone’s a copyist: This 1875 ad in *The Nation* for the Remington “Type-Writer” reads,

“a machine now superseding the pen. . . . anyone who can spell can begin to write with it. . . . It is worked without effort, and is not liable to get out of order. . . . Young persons acquire its use with wonderful ease and interest. . . .

The benevolent can, by the gift of a “Type-Writer” to a poor, deserving young woman, put her at once in the way of earning a good living as a copyist. . . . “

The alternative would be unthinkable.
Everyone’s a copier: the Comptometer – an early brand of adding machine – joined the typewriter to replace the “big round hand” in the 20th-century office –
But typewriters were also being used by creators of text as well as copiers; in the 1930s, researchers showed that children who typed learned more than children who didn’t –
Mark Twain praised the typewriter:

“I will now claim – until dispossessed – that I was the first person in the world to apply the typewriter to literature. . . . The early machine was full of caprices, full of defects – devilish ones. It had as many immoralities as the machine of today has virtues. After a year or two I found that it was degrading my character, so I thought I would give it to [William Dean] Howells. . . . He took it home to Boston, and my morals began to improve, but his have never recovered.”

from Twain’s “The First Writing-Machines.” Twain actually dictated to a typist rather than composing at the keyboard.
The first photographs were conceived of as a kind of writing – Henry Fox-Talbot called his 1844 book of photographs “The Pencil of Nature,” and he described photography as copying nature by tracing its patterns of light and dark.

It was too dark for indoor photography, so Fox-Talbot shot this picture, “In the library,” by taking the books and bookcase outdoors and photographing them in full sunlight.
In the 1860s, the photographer Alexander Gardner made several portraits of Abraham Lincoln, and Howard Frank took this photo of Marilyn Monroe in “The Seven Year Itch” (1955).
MIT’s William Mitchell commissioned this mashup, which appeared on the cover of Scientific American in 1994, to demonstrate how photos could be manipulated just like documents.

And the digital camera/camera phone has turned everyone into a “copier” of nature:
Should everybody write on a computer? According to Theodore Roszak, a child with a pencil in hand is ready to write, a child with a crayon in hand is ready to draw – but the pencil didn’t turn us all into writers . . .
... and despite ads like this, it didn’t make everyone an artist.
The computer was initially touted as a “work processor,” not a word processor –
But not all new technologies catch on –

In 1956, Chrysler and CBS offered an in-dash record player. Playing at 16 2/3 rpm, each record could hold about an hour’s music. Although it lasted several years, combination of proprietary technology and bumps in the road doomed the innovation to failure.
Some complaints against new technologies still come from Luddites – but we’re starting to see critiques from computer gurus as well –

Stephen Colbert (left) and Jonathan Zittrain, author of *The Future of the Internet and How to Stop It*.

FBI sketch of the Unabomber
But even with complaints, the computer soon was turning everyone into a writer.
Anyone with a laptop, a Wi-Fi card, and a place to sit at Starbucks, can be an author.

But the danger of letting everyone write is that some people will write things that ought to be suppressed.

It’s one thing to email, IM, text, or blog, but what about all the fraud, pornography, and hate? or the endless junk?
Not to mention the invasion of privacy.

Recent inventions and business methods call attention to the next step which must be taken for the protection of the person, and for securing to the individual what Judge Cooley calls the right "to be let alone." Instantaneous photographs and newspaper enterprise have invaded the sacred precincts of private and domestic life; and numerous mechanical devices threaten to make good the prediction that "what is whispered in the closet shall be proclaimed from the house-tops."

We thought the internet was the place to go to be anonymous –

"On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog."
But if Mark Zuckerberg is right, privacy is dead . . .
And it’s not only privacy that’s disappearing: writing online has a way of disappearing all of a sudden.

Server not found
Firefox can't find the server at www.meaningoflife.com

- Check the address for typing errors such as www.example.com instead of www.example.com
- If you are unable to load any pages, check your computer's network connection.
- If your computer or network is protected by a firewall or proxy, make sure that Firefox is permitted to access the Web.

Try Again
So, should everybody write?
Nunberg asks,

What is an author, after all, if the new media no longer support the legal status or institutional privileges that have traditionally defined that role?

A signal virtue of electronic technologies is to remove the capital and institutional impediments to the production and circulation of documents. As we’re often reminded, “anyone” can produce a document and make it accessible to thousands or millions of readers.”

What real increase is there in the ability of the average citizen to affect public opinion if anyone who wants to gain the attention of a mass audience has to compete for attention with millions of other "authors"?

Nunberg spends a lot of time discussing the changing notion of information.
While the absolute number of writers and documents has been steadily growing, the proportion of writers to readers has remained relatively constant or may even have declined over the centuries, along with the circulation of the average published document.

Until now . . .

There has always been too much to read.

Electronic discourse promises to disrupt this process. In the first place it sharply increases the proportion of writers to readers

Anyone can set up as an expert; expertise is no longer required for comment.
the remarks of Aldous Huxley in 1934:

...[T]he proportion of trash in the total artistic output is greater now than at any other period. That it must be so is a matter of simple arithmetic. Process reproduction and the rotary press have made possible the indefinite multiplication of writing and pictures. Universal education and relatively high wages have created an enormous public who know how to read and can afford to buy reading and pictorial matter. A great industry has been called into existence in order to supply these commodities. ... The population of Western Europe has little more than doubled during the last century. But the amount of reading—and seeing—matter has increased, I should imagine, at least twenty and possibly fifty or even a hundred times.
The ephemera of earlier ages tend to be forgotten, so that the overall quality of contemporary writing always seems infinitely more mediocre when it is compared to the works that are still available from earlier periods. Historically, as we have seen, the impression of proportionally increased participation is probably unjustified, but it could in fact be a cause of some change in the overall quality of public writing as we move from print to electronic communication.

Nunberg concludes,

I think we should look to electronic discourse to provide a counter and complement to the informational forms of print — a domain that privileges the personal, the private, and the subjective against the impersonal, the public, and the objective.