



Samedi 7 Avril 2018

EPREUVE : ANGLAIS DE CULTURE
GENERALE

MP / PC / PSI / PT / TSI

Durée : 2 Heures 30 Minutes

Condition(s) particulière(s)

Calculatrice interdite

Remettre le sujet contenant le QCM avec vos copies d'examen

Warning. In order to ensure that your handwriting is as legible as possible, paper is provided for a rough draft (*brouillon*). Use the *livret* for your final version.

Instructions

This exam is composed of 10 multiple choice questions and two documents. The latter show the information and opinions related to the use of algorithms in the areas of culture, media and taste over the past 10 years.

Part 1 – Multiple Choice test (10 pts) based on Document 2 **only** (“Digital Maoism”)

Part 2 – Writing Task One – summary

Sum up as objectively as possible **Document One**. (“Slave to the algorithm?”)

Word limit: 200 words with a margin of 5 %. All words count, including any references to the article.

Indiquer le nombre de mots que vous utilisés.

Part 3 – Writing Task Two – essay

Choose one theme or aspect of online collectivism as exposed in the two documents and discuss how you think this relates to the preferences and taste of Internet users. Be specific about this aspect or theme.

Your text will be judged on the clarity and rigor with which you express this view, as well as on the quality of your arguments used to support it.

Word limit: 300 words, give or take 5%.

Indiquer le nombre de mots que vous utilisés.

Origin of documents

1. “Slave to the algorithm? How music fans can reclaim their playlists from Spotify”, article by Ben Ratliff, in *The Guardian*, 19 February 2016.
2. “Digital Maoism: The Hazards of the New Online Collectivism”, article by Jaron Lanier, in *Edge*, 29 May 2006.

Part 1. MCQ on Document 2:
“Digital Maoism: The Hazards of the New Online Collectivism”

Circle the correct answer. Only one answer is correct.

1. The author’s criticism of the Wikipedia is based on
 - a. How much importance people give to it.
 - b. Its impact on people, who tend to see it as an all-knowing entity.
 - c. How fast it gained popularity.
 - d. All of the above.

2. According to the author, why were the items selected for the comparison of Encyclopedia Britannica to the Wikipedia favorable for the Wikipedia?
 - a. Because the items were scientific.
 - b. Because the Wikipedia items were written by the same authors that wrote the Encyclopedia Britannica items.
 - c. The specificity of the topics meant implicitly that there would be little risk of the collective finding errors in the Wikipedia item.
 - d. Encyclopedia Britannica tends to avoid science topics for fear of controversy.

3. In paragraph 4, Lanier reminds the reader that
 - a. Although accuracy is necessary in a text, it is not a value.
 - b. A desirable text is accurate and expresses personality.
 - c. Although personality in a text is important, it is not desirable.
 - d. If a text is accurate, it will be desirable.

4. The process of **aggregating** (paragraph 9) means
 - a. Arguing strongly for something you want.
 - b. having the same opinion as somebody else.
 - c. spending a long time worrying about a difficult situation.
 - d. combining different items into a single group or total.

5. As mentioned in paragraphs 7 and 12, **authorship** is
 - a. The fact of writing a book.
 - b. The identity of the person who wrote something.
 - c. A qualification.
 - d. All of the above.

6. In paragraph 12, Lanier writes that one layer of page ranking is
 - a. A real threat to authorship.
 - b. A hard threat to reliability.
 - c. Not a great threat to authorship.
 - d. None of the above.
7. In paragraph 17, why does the author mention the world record in ice-cream eating?
 - a. To illustrate how news of no importance dominates popurls.
 - b. To show that he feels that such news is just as important as news about diabetes and deserves the same coverage in the media.
 - c. To show how comprehensive popurls' coverage is.
 - d. All of the above.
8. In paragraph 19, the author is not so much critical of AI itself, but rather of
 - a. The attempts to eliminate personality from the Internet.
 - b. People's tendency to presume that AI is closely related to human intelligence.
 - c. People's willingness to lower their intelligence to make AI appear smart.
 - d. All of the above.
9. What can be understood by Lanier's criticism of the TV show "American Idol"?
 - a. He thinks that the singers competing on the show have no talent.
 - b. He doubts the validity of such a big, collective vote.
 - c. He uses examples of famous influential singers whose talent would not have been appreciated by the collective.
 - d. Both B and C.
10. In paragraph 35, it should be understood that
 - a. Linux programmers have no interest in personal glory.
 - b. The Wikipedia has excellent design quality.
 - c. Open source software lacks esthetic design quality.
 - d. None of the above.

Document 1

Slave to the algorithm? How music fans can reclaim their playlists from Spotify

The big news in music over the past 10 years or so may not be Kanye or Adele or Taylor but you, the listener. Access is power, and a great deal of the history of western music, and much else besides, is now in your phones or on your desks, via YouTube or a streaming service – Spotify, Pandora, Apple_Music, Tidal, whatever – for free, or for a modest price. I know you know that, but mark the moment. Spotify (which turns 10 this year) and its equivalent forces have altered your relationship with music. You’ve got unprecedented riches on your hands.

What are you going to do with these? Let them sit there? No, you’re going to listen to them. And doing so might help shape the way you walk and talk: your thoughts, taste and identity. Listening to anything, especially when you haven’t heard it before, is a highly creative act; but a little less so, I think, when you let the computers do the choosing for you, when you listen through if-you-like-x-you’ll-like-y recommendation engines, based on your perceived listening patterns, and whatever else your streaming service may know about you.

The algorithmic music recommendation business suggests an opposite scenario to the music-appreciation movement of the first half of the 20th century. Books such as Aaron Copland’s *What to Listen for in Music* (1939) sought to increase accessibility by democratizing a prescribed kind of “good taste”: they wanted the average person to be a reasonably educated listener, which at the time meant knowing roughly what the composers intended in the most famous works of European classical music, from, say, Bach to Brahms. The listener’s range of access was assumed to be limited. Composers, publishers and record companies held the power.

Now the listener’s range of access is vast, and you, the listener, hold the power. But only if you listen better than you are being listened to.

I am a music critic at the New York Times. Sometimes, listeners will suddenly open their windows to music they hadn’t previously known, creating their own framework for understanding it. Sometimes I play a part in this process. You have no idea how much that pleases me, especially when their reasons for responding to it are difficult to recognize. A little while ago I became interested both in the idealistic, blinkered spirit of the music-appreciation movement of the past, and in the great, boundless tumble of listening’s present, and decided to write a book about possible ways to listen now.

Because I have lived half my life without the internet, I often think of my phone as a bricks-and-mortar record store or library, to which I have 24-hour access. But that’s not quite right. In stores and libraries you can see the stock in context; you can move through stacks and sections without exactly knowing where you’re going; learn enormous amounts by accident because of alphabetical proximity, the range of the eye, the lighting of the space. Through a complex reading of signs and symbols, you discern the politics and history of the place you’re in and the artefact you’re holding. You might ask questions as needed, depending on your level of interest. Sometimes you need to go back and find something again; sometimes it’s not there, and the wanting of that thing can make a passion grow.

My sense is that this interactive dumb-luck process can have a great effect on your life. By contrast, online listening, great as it is, hides the metadata from you. The tiny amount of information you are given is rendered uniformly in the streaming service’s typesetting and format. You can’t see anything except what the service wants you to see, and so you have no awareness of what’s in the back of the store, or even that there is a back of the store. What’s demanded of you in the moment of encounter is basically a noncognitive passivity.

Spotify's Discover Weekly playlist, which is provided automatically if you have a subscription to the service, is the most sophisticated recommendation engine involving algorithms that I've come across. It connects your taste to that of other users it has judged as akin to yours. It seeks to know not only what you like but what you appear to be looking for. It recognises if you are a casual listener and, if so, it appeals to your comfort; or an obscurant, in which case it appeals to particular aspects of your snobbery. (It moved me deeply a couple of times over the past few weeks with songs I hadn't known before: Life Without Buildings' "The Leanover" and Kadhja Bonet's "Remember the Rain".)

But listening is creative and personal, and with Discover Weekly I am aware of being profiled by forces I do not know and cannot see. I am being given an ongoing accessory for someone of my type. Often I hate the results, even if I like half the songs: I feel intensely frustrated by what it has reduced me to. I want not to be pandered to by genre, or era, or a reduced, sellable version of a mood.

Simon Critchley, the English philosopher who lives in New York, recently told me how much he liked Discover Weekly. It played him Swedish electro-pop he didn't know, and things he'd known and liked in the distant past – DAF, Van der Graaf Generator. But then he made a face. "It's wallpaper, though," he said. "They're making it wallpaper."

I figure that the old way of music appreciation, which usually begins with composing experiences – understanding the function of harmony and melody and rhythm, and then on to sonata form and so forth – can be augmented by a new mode, which sorts out the current abundance into different kinds of listening experiences. I don't want to tell you how to access music – most likely it will take some searching and noticing on your part, and taking suggestions from people you know or trust; I only want to suggest ways of unlocking this great abundance that don't align with a marketing one-sheet of who you are. [...]

By Ben Ratliff from the Guardian, 19 February, 2016

Document 2

DIGITAL MAOISM: The Hazards of the New Online Collectivism

Vocabulary from the text

Intelligent design - the theory that the universe and living things were designed and created by the purposeful action of an intelligent agent.

Hive - a shelter constructed for housing a colony of honeybees; beehive.

Bottleneck - a narrow entrance or passageway; a place or stage in a process at which progress is impeded.

A toss up - the tossing of a coin to decide something by its fall; figuratively, term used to describe a competition in which there is no clear winner.

Jellybean – dragée

1. The problem I am concerned with here is not the Wikipedia in itself. It's been criticized quite a lot, especially in the last year, but the Wikipedia is just one experiment that still has room to change and grow. At the very least it's a success at revealing what the online people with the most determination and time on their hands are thinking, and that's actually interesting information.
2. No, the problem is in the way the Wikipedia has come to be regarded and used; how it's been elevated to such importance so quickly. And that is part of the larger pattern of the appeal of a new online collectivism that is nothing less than a resurgence of the idea that the collective is all-wise, that it is desirable to have influence concentrated in a bottleneck that can channel the collective with the most verity and force. This is different from representative democracy, or meritocracy. This idea has had dreadful consequences when thrust upon us from the extreme Right or the extreme Left in various historical periods. The fact that it's now being re-introduced today by prominent technologists and futurists, people who in many cases I know and like, doesn't make it any less dangerous.
3. There was a well-publicized study in Nature last year comparing the accuracy of the Wikipedia to Encyclopedia Britannica. The results were a toss up. While there is a lingering debate about the validity of the study, the items selected for the comparison were just the sort that Wikipedia would do well on: Science topics that the collective at large doesn't care much about. "Kinetic isotope effect" or "Vesalius, Andreas" are examples of topics that make the Britannica hard to maintain, because it takes work to find the right authors to research and review a multitude of diverse topics. But they are perfect for the Wikipedia. There is little controversy around these items, plus the Net provides ready access to a reasonably small number of competent specialist graduate student types possessing the manic motivation of youth.
4. A core belief of the wiki world is that whatever problems exist in the wiki will be incrementally corrected as the process unfolds. This is analogous to the claims of Hyper-Libertarians who put infinite faith in a free market, or the Hyper-Lefties who are somehow able to sit through consensus decision-making processes. In all these cases, it seems to me that empirical evidence has yielded mixed results. Sometimes loosely structured collective activities yield continuous improvements and sometimes they don't. Often we don't live long enough to find out. Later in this essay I'll point out what constraints make a collective smart. But first, it's important to not lose sight of values just because the question of whether a collective can be smart is so fascinating. Accuracy in a text is not enough. A desirable text is more than a collection of accurate references. It is also an expression of personality.
5. For instance, most of the technical or scientific information that is in the Wikipedia was already on the Web before the Wikipedia was started. You could always use Google or other search services to find information about items that are now wikified. In some cases I have noticed specific texts get cloned from original sites at universities or labs onto wiki pages. And when that happens, each text loses part of its value. Since search engines are now more likely to point you to the wikified versions, the Web has lost some of its flavor in casual use.
6. When you see the context in which something was written and you know who the author was beyond just a name, you learn so much more than when you find the same text placed in the anonymous, faux-authoritative, anti-contextual brew of the Wikipedia. The question isn't just one of authentication and accountability, though those are important, but something more subtle. A voice should be sensed as a whole. You have to have a chance to sense personality in order for language to have its full meaning. Personal Web pages do that, as do journals and books. Even Britannica has an editorial voice, which some people have criticized as being vaguely too "Dead White Men."

[...]

7. Myspace is another recent experiment that has become even more influential than the Wikipedia. Like the Wikipedia, it adds just a little to the powers already present on the Web in order to inspire a dramatic shift in use. Myspace is all about **authorship**, but it doesn't pretend to be all-wise. You can always tell at least a little about the character of the person who made a Myspace page. But it is very rare indeed that a Myspace page inspires even the slightest confidence that the author is a trustworthy authority. Hurray for Myspace on that count!

8. Myspace is a richer, multi-layered, source of information than the Wikipedia, although the topics the two services cover barely overlap. If you want to research a TV show in terms of what people think of it, Myspace will reveal more to you than the analogous and enormous entries in the Wikipedia.

9. The Wikipedia is far from being the only online fetish site for foolish collectivism. There's a frantic race taking place online to become the most "Meta" site, to be the highest level aggregator, subsuming the identity of all other sites.
10. The race began innocently enough with the notion of creating directories of online destinations, such as the early incarnations of Yahoo. Then came AltaVista, where one could search using an inverted database of the content of the whole Web. Then came Google, which added page rank algorithms. Then came the blogs, which varied greatly in terms of quality and importance. This led to Meta-blogs such as Boing Boing, run by identified humans, which served to aggregate blogs. In all of these formulations, real people were still in charge. An individual or individuals were presenting a personality and taking responsibility.
11. These Web-based designs assumed that value would flow from people. It was still clear, in all such designs, that the Web was made of people, and that ultimately value always came from connecting with real humans.
12. Even Google by itself (as it stands today) isn't Meta enough to be a problem. One layer of page ranking is hardly a threat to **authorship**, but an accumulation of many layers can create a meaningless murk, and that is another matter.
13. In the last year or two the trend has been to remove the scent of people, so as to come as close as possible to simulating the appearance of content emerging out of the Web as if it were speaking to us as a supernatural oracle. This is where the use of the Internet crosses the line into delusion.
14. Kevin Kelly, the former editor of *Whole Earth Review* and the founding Executive Editor of *Wired*, is a friend and someone who has been thinking about what he and others call the "Hive Mind." He runs a Website called Cool Tools that's a cross between a blog and the old *Whole Earth Catalog*. On Cool Tools, the contributors, including me, are not a hive because we are identified.
15. In March, Kelly reviewed a variety of "Consensus Web filters" such as "Digg" and "Reddit" that assemble material every day from all the myriad of other aggregating sites. Such sites intend to be more Meta than the sites they aggregate. There is no person taking responsibility for what appears on them, only an algorithm. The hope seems to be that the most Meta site will become the mother of all bottlenecks and receive infinite funding.
16. That new magnitude of Meta-ness lasted only a month. In April, Kelly reviewed a site called "popurls" that aggregates consensus Web filtering sites...and there was a new "most Meta". We now are reading what a collectivity algorithm derives from what other collectivity algorithms derived from what collectives chose from what a population of mostly amateur writers wrote anonymously.
17. Is "popurls" any good? I am writing this on May 27, 2006. In the last few days an experimental approach to diabetes management has been announced that might prevent nerve damage. That's huge news for tens of millions of Americans. It is not mentioned on popurls. Popurls does clue us in to this news: "Student sets simultaneous world ice cream-eating record, worst ever ice cream headache." Mainstream news sources all lead today with a serious earthquake in Java. Popurls includes a few mentions of the event, but they are buried within the aggregation of aggregate news sites like Google News. The reason the quake appears on popurls at all can be discovered only if you dig through all the aggregating layers to find the original sources, which are those rare entries actually created by professional writers and editors who sign their names. But at the layer of popurls, the ice cream story and the Javanese earthquake are at best equals, without context or authorship.
18. Kevin Kelly says of the "popurls" site, "There's no better way to watch the hive mind." But the hive mind is for the most part stupid and boring. Why pay attention to it?

19. Readers of my previous rants will notice a parallel between my discomfort with so-called "Artificial Intelligence" and the race to erase personality and be most Meta. In each case, there's a presumption that something like a distinct kin to individual human intelligence is either about to appear any minute, or has already appeared. The problem with that presumption is that people are all too willing to lower standards in order to make the purported newcomer appear smart. Just as people are willing to bend over backwards and make themselves stupid in order to make an AI interface appear smart (as happens when someone can interact with the notorious Microsoft paper clip,) so are they willing to become uncritical and dim in order to make Meta-aggregator sites appear to be coherent.
20. There is a pedagogical connection between the culture of Artificial Intelligence and the strange allure of anonymous collectivism online. Google's vast servers and the Wikipedia are both mentioned frequently as being the startup memory for Artificial Intelligences to come. Larry Page is quoted via a link presented to me by popurls this morning (who knows if it's accurate) as speculating that an AI might appear within Google within a few years. George Dyson has wondered if such an entity already exists on the Net, perhaps perched within Google. My point here is not to argue about the existence of Metaphysical entities, but just to emphasize how premature and dangerous it is to lower the expectations we hold for individual human intellects.
21. The beauty of the Internet is that it connects people. The value is in the other people. If we start to believe the Internet itself is an entity that has something to say, we're devaluing those people and making ourselves into idiots.

[...]

22. The collective rises around us in multifarious ways. What afflicts big institutions also afflicts pop culture. For instance, it has become notoriously difficult to introduce a new pop star in the music business. Even the most successful entrants have hardly ever made it past the first album in the last decade or so. The exception is American Idol. (Editor's note: This is like "Nouvelle Star" or "The Voice", on French TV.) As with the Wikipedia, there's nothing wrong with it. The problem is its centrality.
23. More people appear to vote in this pop competition than in presidential elections, and one reason why is the instant convenience of information technology. The collective can vote by phone or by texting, and some vote more than once. The collective is flattered and it responds. The winners are likable, almost by definition.
24. But John Lennon wouldn't have won. He wouldn't have made it to the finals. Or if he had, he would have ended up a different sort of person and artist. The same could be said about Jimi Hendrix, Elvis, Joni Mitchell, Duke Ellington, David Byrne, Grandmaster Flash, Bob Dylan (please!), and almost anyone else who has been vastly influential in creating pop music.
25. As below, so above. The New York Times, of all places, has recently published op-ed pieces supporting the pseudo-idea of intelligent design. This is astonishing. The Times has become the paper of averaging opinions. Something is lost when American Idol becomes a leader instead of a follower of pop music. But when intelligent design shares the stage with real science in the paper of record, everything is lost.
26. How could the Times have fallen so far? I don't know, but I would imagine the process was similar to what I've seen in the consulting world of late. It's safer to be the aggregator of the collective. You get to include all sorts of material without committing to anything. You can be superficially interesting without having to worry about the possibility of being wrong.
27. Except when intelligent thought really matters. In that case the average idea can be quite wrong, and only the best ideas have lasting value. Science is like that.

28. The collective isn't always stupid. In some special cases the collective can be brilliant. For instance, there's a demonstrative ritual often presented to incoming students at business schools. In one version of the ritual, a large jar of jellybeans is placed in the front of a classroom. Each student guesses how many beans there are. While the guesses vary widely, the average is usually accurate to an uncanny degree.
29. This is an example of the special kind of intelligence offered by a collective. It is that peculiar trait that has been celebrated as the "Wisdom of Crowds," though I think the word "wisdom" is misleading. It is part of what makes Adam Smith's Invisible Hand clever, and is connected to the reasons Google's page rank algorithms work. It was long ago adapted to futurism, where it was known as the Delphi technique¹. The phenomenon is real, and immensely useful.
30. But it is not infinitely useful. The collective can be stupid, too. Witness tulip crazes and stock bubbles. Hysteria over fictitious satanic cult child abductions. Y2K mania.
31. The reason the collective can be valuable is precisely that its peaks of intelligence and stupidity are not the same as the ones usually displayed by individuals. Both kinds of intelligence are essential.
32. What makes a market work, for instance, is the marriage of collective and individual intelligence. A marketplace can't exist only on the basis of having prices determined by competition. It also needs entrepreneurs to come up with the products that are competing in the first place.
33. In other words, clever individuals, the heroes of the marketplace, ask the questions which are answered by collective behavior. They put the jellybeans in the jar.
34. There are certain types of answers that ought not be provided by an individual. When a government bureaucrat sets a price, for instance, the result is often inferior to the answer that would come from a reasonably informed collective that is reasonably free of manipulation or runaway internal resonances. But when a collective designs a product, you get design by committee, which is a derogatory expression for a reason.
35. Here I must take a moment to comment on Linux and similar efforts. The various formulations of "open" or "free" software are different from the Wikipedia and the race to be most Meta in important ways. Linux programmers are not anonymous and in fact personal glory is part of the motivational engine that keeps such enterprises in motion. But there are similarities, and the lack of a coherent voice or design sensibility in an esthetic sense is one negative quality of both open source software and the Wikipedia.
36. These movements are at their most efficient while building hidden information plumbing layers, such as Web servers. They are hopeless when it comes to producing fine user interfaces or user experiences. If the code that ran the Wikipedia user interface were as open as the contents of the entries, it would churn itself into impenetrable muck almost immediately. The collective is good at solving problems which demand results that can be evaluated by uncontroversial performance parameters, but bad when taste and judgment matter. [...]

By Jaron Lanier 29 May, 2006 (extracts)

¹ – The technique is designed as a group communication process which aims to achieve a convergence of opinion on a specific real-world issue. The Delphi process has been used in various fields of study such as program planning, needs assessment, policy determination, and resource utilization to develop a full range of alternatives, explore or expose underlying assumptions, as well as correlate judgments on a topic spanning a wide range of disciplines. The Delphi technique is well suited as a method for consensus-building by using a series of questionnaires delivered using multiple iterations to collect data from a panel of selected subjects.

From The Delphi Technique: Making Sense Of Consensus by Chia-Chien Hsu, The Ohio State University & Brian A. Sandford, Oklahoma State University. Vol 12, No. 10, Aug 2007.