To Google, or Not to Google: Is it Really a Question?

Looking back at my high school career, I can remember a time when researching meant going to the library, pester ing the librarian to find books, and reading pages upon pages of text just to reach a single paragraph of applicable information. From there, taking notes and creating bibliographies came quite easily, with, of course, none of them containing long lines of “http://.” Each source was methodically selected, had a reliable author and a title that thoroughly reflected the research subject. Most University students will have no recollection of these “good old days” because research now involves a quick typed-search of Google that will, undoubtedly, turn up more useful (but not, perhaps, more accurate) information than one could find in a week of searching the stacks of local libraries.

For those who assume that this internet technology will be the downfall of our society, consider past development, side-by-side, of technology and the human brain. Tool development has always helped us progress as a species. For example, without advancement in the use of metals, say, for copper wire, we never would have been able to generate electricity. Further down the line, this dependence on electricity facilitated our move to autonomy in production, allowing us to concentrate less on manufacturing, and more on the intricacies of the medical field. Stanley H. Ambrose, a professor of anthropology at the University of Illinois, further illustrates this idea. He points out that since the advent of stone tools as a technology (and it was just that, at over 2 million years ago), humans began to see anatomical changes in the size of their brains (1749). These tools gave prehistoric human the ability
to access greater food sources, simultaneously fueling the growth and capacity of their brains. This enabled the development of speech, and the creation of cultural communication and habits. Each of these, in turn, led to the further development of the human brain, mainly the frontal lobe, where non-repetitive motor skills and complex planning are controlled (1751).

It is an inarguable fact that technology has helped develop Humans as a species. What, then, are the effects of internet technology on research habits, and how might it affect the brain? Unquestionably, both positive and negative consequences arise from using the internet to fuel our knowledge base. A way to control these effects, however, lies in the manner in which we make use of this abundance (or overabundance, in many cases) of information. If used correctly, internet technology can make research habits more efficient while providing new, fresh ways of thinking. However, thinking back to the way it used to be, using our brains to do the thinking for us, we find certain efficiencies in this “old-school” process of researching. Today, many let Google do the thinking for them, while half of the information a student finds (and, unfortunately, uses) on the internet tends to be either inaccurate or very one-sided. This inability to weed through one’s findings is an unfortunate side effect in this age of overused technology.

With so many sources and references to scan through and, usually, a cruelly-immediate deadline, how can one take the time to analyze each and every source one finds on the internet? The answer is, of course, that we cannot. We must develop a new process of mental evaluation. Nicholas Carr, a Pulitzer Prize-nominated author and New York Times best-selling author, cites a scholarly research poll undertaken by the University College London. This research concludes that we are in the midst of a sea of mental change. UCL’s study of online research habits found that students have discovered a technique that includes simply scanning through documents, rarely reading more than a page or two, before jumping on to the next document. This process is simply referred to as “skimming” (Carr 58). Using this process, students are finding information in short snippets, recording it, and
moving on to find more valuable information, raising the question: When scanning just a few pages of a
document, realistically, can one thoroughly evaluate the true goal of the author? I certainly can admit
that, while researching for this paper, I used this process of skimming many times. Even while reading
Carr’s article, at first, I found myself not making it to the final pages. When I did, I found that a lot of
valuable points had been overlooked. In fact, this process, as efficient as it may seem, can easily
backfire without the proper implementation.

The development of new mental capabilities is almost certainly a necessity while using the
internet to research any topic. In Technology and the Way We Think, Mia Krstic explores how this
process of evaluating the huge amounts of information on the internet contributes to developing the
underused portions of our brains. She points out that research carried out by the University of
California, Los Angeles finds that web searches can greatly benefit one’s mental development. Areas in
the human brain that deal with controlled decision-making and complex reasoning skills are activated
more prevalently when using the internet to research. Due to the need to process which sources are
useful and which are not, these areas of the brain are developed more thoroughly, and, with practice,
can provide a whole new process of thought (Krstic 40).

Armed with these new thought processes and research techniques, are we becoming more
efficient beings? Through such abundant information and appropriate use thereof, we have become, in
many ways, a more advanced and knowledgeable society. Some, however, would strongly disagree with
this conclusion, and with good reason. Steven Cohen, in his article Don’t Just Google It, describes a
society that has become less and less thorough due to a lack of attention span and honest, hard work.
He describes scholarly research as being the “victim” of the internet and its swaths of information.
Armed with information from Google, Cohen believes, students are fooling themselves into believing
that their research is sufficient while, in fact, it is nowhere near. This is effectively rendering their
education useless. This “research” lacks use of any brain power of their own, and thus he finds students don’t actually learn anything from what little information they have discovered (Cohen 29).

Is there a way around this problem? Many find themselves, as a matter of course, wanting to use Google in every scenario. From football facts, to recipes, to simply finding the fastest route to wherever we might be driving (or even walking, for that matter), there always seems to be an application for the internet. However, we must curb this automatic urge to rely completely on the internet. This point is hit home by Cohen, explaining how often his urge to use Google not just for simple, obvious information, but also for more in-depth problems needs to be curbed. He points out that, when researching more difficult subjects with a plethora of particulars and complicated details, he must resist this urge and, as he so simply describes, not take the easy way out (29).

Indeed, our brains do need to be exercised more than simply using Google and the internet to fill our information-hungry minds. I am living proof of this. Even while researching for this paper, I found it quite difficult to concentrate through more than three or four pages of each article. With lengthy descriptions and quotes, I often found myself skimming over the large majority of the paragraphs, only stopping to read when a key word caught my attention. This, in fact, was a sharp contrast to my middle- and high-school days. I used to love the thrill of a wordy, detailed novel, or the excitement of a movie that stretched over three hours in length. Enjoyable as they were, I now find myself turning to short stories, truncated TV shows, and not-quite-full-length feature films far more often than any epic trilogies such as Lord of the Rings (the books, of course), Star Wars, or Indiana Jones. Honestly, when I do go back and attempt another viewing of these intrinsically beautiful compositions, I find myself getting lost in my own head, losing concentration after a mere twenty minutes or so.

So what has changed in our brains? It is hard to believe that Google and the internet are fully to blame for this lack of concentration, this downfall towards which many have yet to put up a significant fight. However, some would certainly say that this, invariably, is the case. According to an article
published in *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, up to 13% of undergraduates polled are addicted to the internet. This, in turn, has thoroughly impaired their interaction with family and friends, as well as the students’ individual mental well-being. Also affected is their academic performance. According to this research, a disorder with prevalent connections to internet addiction is that of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The most common symptom of ADHD in undergraduates who displayed signs of internet addiction is a serious and debilitating lack of attention span (Yen 187). Does this explain why attention levels have taken such a severe plunge in the last decade? The evidence certainly suggests that this is the case. It is worth noting that, while this research may have unveiled those who are displaying serious and sometimes unmanageable symptoms of ADHD, the majority of us may very well have a lesser form of this problem, amplified by overuse of the internet’s limitless bounds.

Even well-seasoned researchers admit to using technologies such as Google and other search engines as their primary sources of information. In Nicholas Carr’s article “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” published in *Atlantic Monthly*, he openly admits that Google has become a major source of his information. Carr goes so far as to call it “a godsend to [him] as a writer.” He explains that information that used to take days to retrieve in libraries is now accomplished in mere minutes using Google as a primary search tool (57).

All information considered, what can we do to effectively make use of the technologies provided to us through Google, and, more generally, the internet? First of all, finding an efficient way to combine the use of online search engines such as Google with that of hard-copy researching in a library will significantly expand the horizons of any research. This unification of meticulously-written books, peer-reviewed articles, and experience-driven blogs and research articles on the internet will significantly increase the knowledge base of any research project.

Circumstantial evaluation is also a great way to effectively weed out any incorrect or biased information found on the internet, always making sure there is a well-respected author for any
information found that is not peer-reviewed. For every article discovered, we need to check sources that were cited within for authenticity and unbiased opinions. This process, of course, can also be applied to sources found anywhere, including the internet and libraries. Performing these checks will almost always keep one’s research and information in check, providing a broad, thorough base on which to discover one’s own ideas and opinions.

At this point, it is almost a necessity to point out the irony, if not hypocrisy, that this paper has become. Guilt drives me to admit that I, as a researcher, would not have made it this far in any research-based article, not even my own! I know that the generations following mine, or at the very least my peers at the University, are most likely far worse than I in terms of attention span. Although I grew up in an environment where researching in a library was necessary, many University students did not. In essence, my faith in humanity drives me to hope for the majority of readers to, at the very least, observe the last few paragraphs of each source depended upon, as I mentioned (and admitted to) earlier.

Now, of course, it is time to draw up a conclusion. The original question: How is the use of internet technology affecting our research skills, and what effect is it having on our brains? To the first portion of the question, the following can be presented: With intelligent, well-appropriated use of internet sources and technologies, our research habits can, unequivocally, be made significantly stronger and more thorough than any other time in history. These multitudes of information on the internet are there not for us to abuse, but for us to efficiently analyze in the most competent manner possible. As long as we pay close attention to the origins of each source, these online droves of information can improve the efficiency of any researcher, including professionals, and result in a presentation far beyond anything possible in the past.

The second portion of the question seems to depend on the following: Can we learn to use this information appropriately? Using our brain’s ability to adapt and evolve, we can develop techniques
that will help narrow and critique any information we find through these internet sources. Using internet technology is a great way to learn, although we have to be discriminate towards the information provided. With practice, we can develop the technique of skimming, along with analytical abilities, to find the most appropriate and scholarly information in a quick, efficient manner.

Technology has always paralleled human evolution, and it continues to do so today. As in the past, it is all about how we use such tools to help us. This includes, of course, not relying on any one thing too greatly (which we all, in many cases, are guilty of in one way or another). Results will vary on an individual basis, but there is plenty of good, both for our brains and our research habits, in using the internet and its vast sources to assist in our learning experience.

So I will leave it at this: can and will we learn to use the internet to benefit ourselves and those around us? Or will we flounder in the deep informational sea that has become the world of Google?
Works Cited


