

Is our skill in rapidly locating information from multiple disparate sources destroying our ability to think?

Many lawyers in practice today learned their trade in traditional libraries, and most, as children and young adults, were actively immersed in books of all types.

Are We Googling Ourselves Stupid?

BY RONALD F. POL

At university, lengthy articles, complex judgments, and textbooks were commonplace, with computers used mostly for word processing; synthesizing extensive research with our own interpretation and extension—sometimes resulting in new treatises themselves finding space on library shelves.

Recent graduates, however, are used to a different paradigm—one that is rapidly transforming the practice and business of law for all lawyers. Computers are now extensively used for communicating, and locating the information comprising their content.

Author Nicholas Carr suspects that “the high speed cacophony of the internet” is destroying his ability to concentrate on ideas.¹ Although it had been easy to become immersed in the long stretches of prose and turns of argument in a book, Carr remarks that this is now rarely the case; his concentration drifts after a few pages. Research that once required days in libraries now needs “a few Google searches, some clicks on hyperlinks, and I’ve got the telltale fact or pithy quote I was after.”

The internet is a hugely valuable resource hardly contemplated a few decades ago, yet the delivery of knowl-

edge may not be entirely passive. As we seek information in new ways, we might also be altering the very way that we think—with our thoughts taking on a “staccato quality, reflecting the way [we] quickly scan short passages of text from many sources online.”

Researchers have begun to investigate the impact of these changes, yet it will take years for the results of long-term experiments to identify whether and the extent to which our cognitive abilities have been altered by new communication and search methodologies.

In terms of lawyers’ work, for example, has our improved ability to rapidly locate information to address immediate concerns affected our capacity for the sustained concentration required to solve the biggest strategic issues facing our organizational clients?

Yet even if we believe the internet has altered how we think, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Carr notes that earlier changes also attracted critics bemoaning the loss of traditional thinking.

Socrates lamented the development of writing. As people began to rely on the written word, he feared that they might cease to exercise memory as their repository of knowledge, and was concerned that with the ability “to receive a quantity of information” people might “be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant;” and “filled with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom.”

Gutenberg’s printing press generated similar concerns; that the easy availability of books would lead to intellectual laziness and spread sedition and debauchery.

While the complaints about these new developments were often proved right, the written word and its widespread printed distribution have also

generated many countervailing benefits.

Yet the internet not only broadens our access to information; it might also alter the very way that we process the information in our minds. “In the quiet spaces opened up by sustained, undistracted reading of a book, or any other act of contemplation...we make our own associations, draw our own inferences and analogies, foster our own ideas... If we lose those quiet spaces...we will sacrifice something important,” says Carr.

It is too early to know the extent to which the legal profession is affected by these changes, but when I ask lawyers when they last read a book, most reply with a nostalgic air, or look forward to an opportunity to squeeze in a book or two on their next vacation.

Until the research delivers answers, and perhaps in any event, the impact is nonetheless uniquely individual. If our own cognitive abilities have changed, we can therefore develop personal strategies to retain our capabilities for the types of thinking most appropriate for our work and aspirations—such as reserving time for uninterrupted reflection and contemplation.

For many lawyers, the outcome of a conscious process involving recognition of the issue and strategies for addressing it might ultimately result in a strong compromise solution. This may combine a finely honed capacity for scanning, sorting, and rapidly analyzing information from multiple sources, with the retention of traditional capabilities for sustained concentration, contemplation, and assimilation of ideas—the best of both worlds. 

NOTES

1. “Is Google Making Us Stupid?,” *The Atlantic*, July/August 2008.

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