

The Effects of Google on Our Minds

W2

English

Amanda Gabriel

Sophomore

agabriel2@washcoll.edu

Growing up in the “Electronic Age,” I have witnessed and experienced many of the vast developments and discoveries in the field of technology. With new computerized advancements being made each day, more traditional practices are being converted to online forms, such as printed literature to online literature; however, how is this new media affecting the way we process information? Sven Birkerts comments on this question in his novel *Gutenberg Elegies* when he writes,

Over the past few decades, in the blink of the eye of history, our culture has begun to go through a total metamorphosis. The influx of electronic communications and information processing technologies, abetted by the steady improvement of the microprocessor, has rapidly brought on a condition of critical mass. Suddenly it feels like everything is poised for change; the slower world that many of us grew up with dwindles in the rearview mirror. The stable hierarchies of the printed page...are being superseded by the rush of impulses through freshly minted circuits (Birkerts, 3).

Despite the fact that his perspectives are from the 1990s before the reign of Apple and Windows, his opinions have relevance to today’s world. The “change” which he explores in his work can be further investigated using evidence from the twenty-first century. Google, a search engine used by numerous people around the globe, is a cause for the shift from the “slower world” to a “rush of impulses”—“a total metamorphosis,” as Birkerts suggests. Google not only affects the way we interpret information by shortening our attention spans, but it also affects the level of depth with which we read. Yet this loss is perhaps just one of the consequences that comes along with any new invention.

Because people can Google facts in seconds, they no longer have the patience or focus to sit down and research information in encyclopedias and other print. As Nicholas Carr argues in his article “Is Google Making Us Stupid?”:

The Net’s influence doesn’t end at the edges of a computer screen. As people’s minds become attuned to the crazy quilt of Internet media, traditional media have to adapt to the audience’s new expectations. Television programs add text crawls and pop-up ads, and magazines and newspapers shorten their articles, introduce capsule summaries, and

crowd their pages with easy-to-browse info-snippets (Carr paragraph 22).

Audiences and readers alike desire quickness and efficiency in their daily lives because of the way in which the internet reroutes our brains' thinking processes. Why would anyone sit down and take the time to research facts in a library, when they can have an entire world of knowledge at their fingertips in seconds through Google? In order to compete with the fast pace of the internet, the world is altering itself to fit the needs of the consumer. As Marshall McLuhan suggests in *The Medium is the Massage*, "We become what we behold. We shape our tools and then our tools shape us" (McLuhan, 21). Since Google offers us solutions in seconds, people now want other aspects of their lives to be faster. We are becoming impatient; when problems take a long time to resolve, people become irritated and forget that the world has been much improved since the time of the horse and buggy. It seems that the faster a task is resolved, the happier we tend to be. The concern is no longer about the process, but instead about the product—the end result—and how fast we can get there.

Since some people have become accustomed to looking up fast resolutions in Google's search bar, their attention spans are negatively affected. Carr continues to describe his own experience involving a loss of interest, stating, "I get fidgety, lose the thread, and begin looking for something else to do" (5) when he reads more than a few pages in a novel. He furthers this idea by arguing, "...what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles" (Carr, 7). Personally, I have found myself in similar situations in high school. When I was assigned a reading from a novel in an English class, I would read the first few assigned chapters, but after a certain point my interest waned. Instead of finishing the assignment, I would start doing another activity. Looking back on my

experiences, I realize now that the reason for stopping was not necessarily because the book did not interest me, but because the language was too complicated and took too long to sift through. Instead of immersing myself in the “private experience” Birkerts passionately explains in *Gutenberg Elegies*, I Googled quick summaries and bullet points; that way I could be done and I could move on to something else. As a consequence, my brain was becoming accustomed to taking in information “in a swiftly moving stream of particles.”

As McLuhan argues, “All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered” (McLuhan, 26). Google is a type of medium that works us over completely. We may be unaware of the changes at first, but eventually these unintended consequences have noticeable effects on the social world, altering how we think.

Therefore, since my attention span was shortening and I was searching for other activities to do instead, I found myself at a loss of depth when I read. I attribute this consequence to Google, because I believe that is training us to place speed and convenience over depth and understanding. As a product of the Electronic Age, I find it easier to Google a summary of a novel on Spark notes than to sit down and immerse myself in the literature. According to Birkerts, this loss of depth is synonymous with the loss of wisdom. He argues,

We are experiencing in our times a loss of depth—a loss, that is, of the very paradigm of depth. A sense of deep and natural connectedness of things is a function of vertical consciousness. Its apotheosis is what was once called wisdom. Wisdom: the knowing not of facts but of truths about human nature and the process of life (Birkerts, 74).

With the loss of depth comes the loss of wisdom because wisdom is only achieved with a deep understanding of a subject. Reading is meant to challenge one’s views of the world by placing him or her in an alternate reality; however, one is only able to achieve this form of deep

contemplation through the development of a relationship with a text. What I mean by a “relationship with a text” is understanding a work on a deeper level than what appears on the surface. Google’s job is to provide facts quickly for people looking for an instant answer, not to have a person sit down for hours and read one long article and develop this type of relationship.

Carr writes, “Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski” (Carr, 7) to explain his relationship with a text after his experiences with Google. I support his idea because I used to surround myself with all genres of books when I was younger, just as a scuba diver surrounds herself with different species of marine life. However, as I grew older, I found myself being forced to read novels and dive into a “sea of words.” I previously attributed this shift in opinion to the fact that my definition of literacy changed from casual literacy to intellectual literacy, but what if there is a third definition that altered my viewpoint? Casual literacy (what I experienced as a child), is reading at leisure for recreation, whereas intellectual literacy (what I experienced in high school), involves analyzing the underlying meanings of a text. Now with the use of Google, I can experience a new type of literacy; I can “zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski” and experience what I refer to as surface literacy—only reading for quick factual pieces of information. As I became more accustomed to Googling answers to simple questions, I used Google for a great deal of information in my school projects. I had all the information I needed for assignments within minutes, so it’s only natural that I had no desire to sit down and annotate a 300 page novel when I could bypass hours of work. Each type of literacy that I define can also be considered a different type of relationship with a text, and I argue that one cannot solely rely on surface literacy, or the information provided by Google. Casual literacy allows for the exploration of the imagination while intellectual literacy involves a discovery of something in the universe; both

provide a sense of depth that the bullet point articles on Google are not able to provide.

Although I believe Google to be a cause of a loss of depth, some may argue that Google does indeed have depth because of its volume, which can also be considered a form of depth. I acknowledge the fact that there is such a vast amount of information available, and I agree with this argument to some extent. For example, Google is a great tool to use when doing research for papers, something I find myself doing quite often. Instead of spending hours in libraries searching for the right quote to incorporate into my paper, I can easily type a question into a search bar. Google has provided me with a broad range of facts that I have used to strengthen my papers. The pieces of information helped me to add volume to my paper in the sense that I had numerous sources to support my arguments. For this reason, my argument may be limited, and some may side with this idea completely. Yet I believe volume and depth to be two different things—volume provides quantity while depth provides quality. This is not to say that Google does not have quality information. I am arguing that there are so many websites and links available when you do a search that quality gets lost in the massive quantity. There is more quality behind the words in print form because in most cases authors spend a great deal of time crafting every piece of diction to add to the literary elements of a text. On the internet, there is a mixture: while some may take the time to craft their works the way print authors do, others can quickly post journal-like entries on blogs, Facebook pages, and other websites without much thought. Both of these authors will appear on a Google results page as long as they match the keywords in your search. As the world becomes more acclimated to think and desire information immediately, I believe some people, including myself, gravitate towards the shorter posts that did not take as much time and thought to create, and therefore, we lose a sense of depth by losing quality of thought.

In addition, others may argue that Google does not make us less intelligent, but instead makes us more intelligent because we are able to broaden our perspectives. Most printed literature deals with a limited amount of subjects and different books are needed to explore other topics. With Google, however, we can learn much more information about various fields of study in a single place. I agree that Google does allow one to explore more information on a wider range of subjects, but it is solely that—information. Printed literature not only provides a person with information, but it also bestows knowledge on him or her. The printed page opens up possibilities for thought and further explanation without the many distractions of the Internet. It provides us with a sense of discovery that is only possible through wisdom the way Birkerts defines the word. One does not get a sense of the universe or make groundbreaking discoveries through a Google search. Only through the classic study of printed literature does one achieve this form of intelligence and wisdom.

Whether you are convinced that Google is shortening our attention spans and leading to a loss of depth, or you are still skeptical of the negative effects, the bottom line is that Google does change us in some way. If people recognized the full effects technology has on our minds, there exists a new problem. What are we to do about it? Technology is a scientific advancement, and since the time of Socrates, scientists have been pursuing new discoveries. If an invention aids our population in some way, why would we go back to a time without it? Most people of my generation cannot imagine a world without iPhones. Certainly people who grew up in times when the sewing machine and typewriter were considered new inventions would not consider setting them aside and learning the ways of their ancestors because it “builds character.” Are we supposed to eliminate computers and other machinery from schools across the world, and solely focus our attentions on printed literature? Or are we to accept the changes and see what the

future has to offer and risk wiping out our academic and cultural identities with the click of a few buttons?

Perhaps the problem lies not in the Internet, but in the fact that some, like me, are unable to accept the changes brought on by it. McLuhan suggests, “The medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (McLuhan, 7). Google is part of a “new scale” that has been introduced to us. It is part of the evolution of literature, similar to the evolution of the movie. In the past, when the first movies were created, they were motion pictures; literally a series of pictures put together to look like they were moving. Over the years, movies became more advanced—the time between pictures became so minute that it is now unnoticeable. Special effects, sounds, colors, and animations have all been added, and the latest innovation is the 3D movie. Literature has evolved the same way. The alphabet and the printing press were created, allowing for not only the written word, but for it to be spread easily. The 3D element in literature is provided by the internet—people can physically see the words move across a screen, explore other possibilities through hypertexts, and even listen to sound effects. As McLuhan argues, “At the high speeds of electronic communication, purely visual means of apprehending the world are no longer possible; they are just too slow to be relevant or effective” (McLuhan, 63). Once people experience online literature that is faster and in most cases easier to focus on, why are they going to go back to endless pages of prose without fun pictures and links to keep their attention on the page? Media is constantly evolving, and personally, I believe that it hinders us by shortening our attention spans and causing a loss of depth in reading and in life. However, the internet is going to continue to evolve whether you believe it obstructs or helps us,

and sooner or later there will be a “bigger and better” craze to replace Google and all the heat surrounding the topic.

Works Cited

Birkerts, Sven. *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994. Print.

Carr, Nicholas. *Is Google Making Us Stupid?* Wreading Parlor. 2015. Web.

McLuhan, Marshall, Quentin Fiore, and Jerome Agel. *The Medium Is the Massage*. New York: Bantam, 1967. Print.