

How the Internet Changes Our Perceptions of Relationships and Connections of Ideas

I recently read an article on how the Internet is changing our brains. It was noted in the article that Dr. Gary Small, a UCLA neurologist, made some startling discoveries while researching the effects of the Internet usage on subjects. Small found that repeated actions such as web research and browsing changed the way in which our brains operate. It seems that searching the web causes a change in brain function and enhances decision making and complex reasoning in some subjects. Also observed were increased levels of anxiety, depression, memory loss and attention deficit disorder in those who practiced what Small calls “excessive computer use.” His research shows “that just one hour of Internet use can measurably boost brain function.” Small is quoted as saying “As our brain is plastic and remolds itself in accordance to our daily activities, prolonged computer use can have a profound effect on the way we think, feel and behave.” A Stanford Study has found that for every hour spent on computers, traditional face-to-face skills drop. With this loss of face-to-face skills, human relationships suffer and we may begin to misinterpret others. Small notes that “Qualitatively, high-speed decisions are not the same as the type of decision that you slowly contemplate and make over time.” He further notes that benefiting from computers is all about balance. Small notes that “You should aim to balance Internet time with real social time as much as you can. If you work all day with computers, make sure you mix with real people in the evening. If you never use computers, then start!”

What does all this mean for libraries and librarians? For one it might mean computer usage will cause an improvement in our directional skills, while at the same time impacting how we interact with face-to-face people. While speedy efficiency is great I think we all need to remember the need for the human touch in all that we do. I recall recently an e-mail question from an alumnus who recalled fondly the apple pie served at a certain university cafeteria. Did we have the recipe by any chance? The quick answer is to switch the person off to the cookbook section in the stacks. But wait, maybe there was something different about the local recipe that made the pie different. A quick e-mail to the cafeteria staff resulted in an apple pie recipe for forty pies, which delighted the alumnus who now had to figure out how to reduce it to one pie. This type of high speed switching is also evident with students who want to pay their overdue tuition bills, being referred by telephone operators to Special Collections in the library (get it - special COLLECTIONS). When we get to a traffic light if it is green we continue on, but if it is red we have to think about stopping. Maybe we need to think some more and not just become switching librarians? Meeting people face to face can help us maintain a human perspective. What better place to meet other librarians than the North Carolina Library Association?

Letters to the editor should be addressed to the editor and sent to Joyner Library, East Fifth Street, Greenville, NC 27858, or by electronic mail (scottr@ecu.edu). We reserve the right to edit all submissions. If you are interested in writing for *North Carolina Libraries* or would like consideration for news and product information, please send brief information to the editor at the above address.

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