

Poor memory? Blame Google

Research finds people are adapting ability to remember because of power of search engines to remember for them

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Research has shown that search engines such as Google have prompted people to adapt their ability to remember things. Photograph: Paul Sakuma/AP

First it was a search engine. Then it became almost synonymous with the internet. Now Google is a replacement for the ancient human faculty of memory.

Research by scientists at Columbia University has found that people are adapting their ability to remember because of the formidable power of search engines such as Google to remember things for them. In short, people no longer always need to know stuff; they just need to know where it can be found.

The research, published in Science magazine, involved a series of experiments. In one, participants were given pieces of information to type into a computer. Half were told the computer would retain the information and the other half were told it would be erased.

Participants "did not make the effort to remember when they thought they could later look up the trivia statements they had read," the researchers reported. In another experiment, when participants were given information and folder names in which they were stored, they were better at recalling the folder names than the information.

"The results ... suggest 'where' was prioritised in memory, with the advantage going to 'where' when 'what' was forgotten," the researchers said.

Betsy Sparrow, a psychologist who was one of the principal researchers, said that when faced with difficult questions, people are "primed to think about computers".

As a result, we have lower rates of recall of the information itself, and enhanced recall of where and how to access it.

Sparrow concludes that the internet has become "an external memory source that we can access at any time" – an arena where information is stored collectively outside ourselves.

"These studies suggest that people share information easily because they rapidly think of computers when they find they need knowledge," Sparrow said.

"Just as we learn through transactive memory who knows what in our families and offices, we are learning what the computer 'knows' and when we should attend to where we have stored information in our computer-based memories. We are becoming symbiotic with our computer tools."

Sparrow said people were becoming dependent on their gadgets in the same way that they were dependent on friends and colleagues for shared memory.

"The experience of losing our internet connection becomes more and more like losing a friend. We must remain plugged in to know what Google knows."

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