

GIBBS & SOELL

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The Assault on Creativity: Part One

Surely nobody meant to erode the creative thinking of business communicators. We meant to ensure quality and legal compliance with more forms, templates, better checklists, longer loops for routings. We meant to enable faster communication and provide nearly unlimited access to information using digital technology. We set out to gain efficiencies with new systems and processes, to be more accountable through better measurement and reporting. We challenged ourselves to do more with less.

And we have done all of these positive things, aided by ever-more-powerful computers, the Internet, email, mobile devices and thousands of brilliant applications. The technology is dazzling – unimaginable a generation ago.

But what risks or harmful side-effects might there be to this magic? Neuroscientists are increasingly finding evidence that some vital qualities for communicators – creativity and the ability to synthesize disparate pieces of information and points of view – could be suffering.

Your Brain on the Internet

Marshall McLuhan famously wrote, in 1964: “The medium is the message.” He argued that the structural effects of media on our lives extend far beyond the content delivered. McLuhan also predicted that “electric media” would change the world, creating a “global village” through more rapid and widespread dissemination of information.

His words perhaps have never rung more true than in the digital age – just ask any Middle Eastern dictator. In 1993, the year of its founding, *Wired* magazine declared McLuhan its patron saint. More recently, in 2010, he appeared prominently in a troubling book, “The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains,” by Nicholas Carr.

Carr focuses on how digital media can change the way we think. He cites the relatively new finding in neuroscience that the human brain, previously thought to settle into a rigid structure by early adult-

hood, actually remains highly malleable throughout our lives. Different patterns of thinking – which use different circuits of neurons and synapses – are like different muscles of the body in that repetitive use strengthens them while a lack of use weakens them. The brain can even create brand-new circuits.

What happens when this “neuroplasticity” runs into the ever-present teasers, tangential hyperlinks, important news, irresistible junk, flashing pop-ups, beckoning videos, and genuine wealth of information on the Internet? Well, good and bad things. We can research McLuhan, check in with friends and colleagues, or find out who played the sax solo on “Can’t You Hear Me Knockin’” in seconds, almost anywhere.

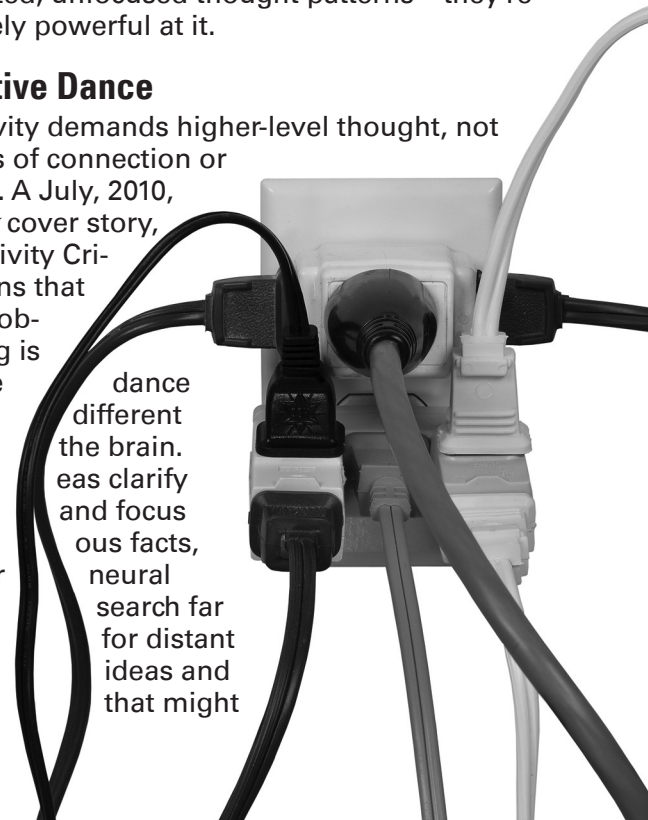
But, Carr writes, the Internet “also turns us into lab rats constantly pressing levers to get tiny pellets of social or intellectual nourishment.” As we do, our brains become wired for it, at the expense of higher-level thought. Digital media aren’t unique in reinforcing distracted, unfocused thought patterns – they’re just uniquely powerful at it.

The Creative Dance

And creativity demands higher-level thought, not just flashes of connection or inspiration. A July, 2010, *Newsweek* cover story, “The Creativity Crisis,” explains that creative problem-solving is an intricate

dance between parts of the brain. Some areas clarify and focus on obvious facts, while other networks search far and wide for distant ideas and memories

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apply. They work together to scan, identify and then capture relevant thoughts.

The authors write that highly creative people have become skilled at “bilateral thinking,” shifting back and forth between divergent thought and convergent, focused thought. They have strengthened the circuits for creativity and learned to tune out distractions. In a study of Dartmouth College students, music majors improvising on a keyboard were able to deactivate the right temporoparietal junction (r-TPJ) of their brains, which scans incoming stimuli. Non-musicians could not.

Another key to creativity is allowing the unconscious to work on problems or challenges. It’s common for creative people, when they hit a roadblock, to set aside the task and take a break or work on something else. Couldn’t mindless web surfing serve this purpose?

Not effectively, Carr writes: “The Net seizes our attention only to scatter it... [Its] cacophony of stimuli short-circuits both conscious and unconscious thought, preventing our minds from thinking either deeply or creatively.”

Multitask – and Fast!

Other computer-enabled trends are also attacking attention, concentration and creativity.

Multitasking, like surfing the web, engages broad areas of the brain but impairs memory and learning that take place when we focus on one task at a time. University of Michigan neuroscientist David Meyer acknowledges in “The Shallows” that it may be possible with practice to improve our brains’ ability to switch rapidly from one task to another. But, he adds, “you can train until you’re blue in the face and you’d never be as good as if you just focused on one thing

at a time.” He sees multitasking as “learning to be skillful at a superficial level.”

One reason business people multitask – laptops open at meetings, phones on mute during conference calls – is the culture of immediacy that’s been fostered by digital media. And no question, speed is one of the great advantages of digital communication. But when hundreds of emails arrive each day, and an urgent message from a boss or important client could come in at any time, the inbox can take on an exaggerated sense of importance. Pressure builds for quick actions, responses and decisions, even when there’s time to gather more information and think a problem through.


“We’re being trained to prefer an immediate decision even if it’s bad to a later decision that’s better,” says psychologist Clifford Nass of Stanford University in another *Newsweek* article, “I Can’t Think!” February, 2011.

More Isn’t Better

The same article presents research showing that “trying to drink from a fire hose of information has harmful cognitive effects. And nowhere are those effects clearer, and more worrying, than in our ability to make smart, creative, successful decisions.”

A research study on decision-making, by Angelika Dimoka at Temple University, showed that the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, part of the brain responsible for decision-making and controlling emotions, became more and more active as subjects were provided with increasing amounts of information. But eventually it overloaded and its activity crashed, leaving the subjects to make decisions with poor cognitive activity and emotions running wild. Needless to say, their decision-making suffered.

Neuroscientists note that humans almost automatically seek more information and more complexity, and also overweight recency in decision-making. So digital media’s speed can work against good decisions by leading us to overlook more important considerations in favor of the most recent information.

Would we be better off putting the digital genie back in the bottle? Nobody, except perhaps those Middle Eastern dictators, thinks so. See next month’s *Insight*, however, for ideas on how to prevent potential negative effects and enhance clear thinking and creativity. 

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