



Internet Crunch

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*Just a few years ago these questions were resolved very differently:
When does the bus leave? What is that telephone number? – One knew
to take a look at the bus schedule or the telephone book and remember
the information. Today, nothing functions without the Internet, quick
information for a flat rate. Nobody, especially not the user, checks
the quality or the validity of this information. It may be right, or, then
again, not.*

Technology has changed people.

Long ago there was only the spoken word: Stories and reports were spread by word of mouth. Knowledge was imparted by speech. Information was inextricably linked to social events and activities, embedded in human interaction and encounter. Think only of the creation and dissemination of our cultural and spiritual knowledge in the form of myths, epics, legends, fairytales, and religious revelations or cultic practices. They went from mouth to ear. Their authenticity was directly experienced by the listener, through their perception of the speaker.

Then came the written word, and with it the first diminishment of human beings' capacity for memory. Plato proffered this notion already in his "Phaedrus Dialogue": The invention of letters will infuse the mind of the learner with forgetfulness. But through the new technologies for gathering and documenting knowledge and information, unheard of horizons have been opened to us. Modern scientific understanding was born with the printing press. To this day, a printed book represents the validity and reliability of the knowledge and conclusions it contains, regardless of any claims to the contrary. For good reasons the "copy and paste" submissions of students from elementary school to University are not recognized as independent work—if they are noticed. Not simple reproductions, but original and individualized contributions are demanded.

Gerd Gigerenzer, director of The Center of Adaptive Behavior and Cognition at the Max Planck Institute for Education Research in Berlin, asserts that using the Internet changes our thinking because it shifts the search for information from inside our head toward something external. Instead of exerting our long-term memory, we comfortably carry out this search by way of a search engine. That is why many people, especially children, find it difficult to remember fairytales, poems, or songs. Gigerenzer points out another serious difference: In order to glean information from the Net, social skills are no longer required. His conjectures appear to be confirmed by Gary Small, professor of psychiatry at the University of California in Los Angeles. Neuropsychology has established that our thinking has changed as a result of the Internet, smart phones, and the like. Constant access to multimedia changes not only the activity patterns in our brain, but also our learning and social behavior. Thus, Internet use influences and structures areas of the brain that are responsible for how we solve problems, recognize and control emotions, concentrate, and our ability to postpone immediate desires for the sake of long-term goals. A study conducted with eight-to twenty-three-year-olds showed that they misinterpret emotional signals, and that face to face communication is difficult for them. The biological memory becomes weaker if we no longer memorize things, but instead only learn where we can find the information the quickest.

Definitions strain the memory
The vividly artistic cultivate the memory
Efforts of will fortify the memory.
– Rudolf Steiner

In the *Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung* (newspaper), the neuroscientist and learning researcher, Manfred Spitzer formulated it briefly and drastically: The constant use of media makes us not only dense but also dull. Content and substance are absolutely no longer mentally processed, and when violent acts occur, instead of stepping in to help, out comes the mobile phone, and the video is uploaded on the Internet.

There are many kinds of memory.

Katherine Nelson, a developmental psychologist in New York, describes the memory as a bio-socio-cultural system.

The following distinct memory forms are direct catalysts to a person's sense of identity:

- ☉ There is the *social memory* that is strongly permeated with familial ties. Just how strongly can be seen by the example of the honor killing of Hatun Sueruecue in Berlin, the purpose of which was to restore the identity of a social cohesion – the family honor.
- ☉ There is the *cultural memory*, into which everything flows that embeds us within a national or ethnic context. Without a valid passport at every border crossing, one is virtually without identity. In his novel *Stiller*, Max Frisch plausibly depicts the problems that can occur if this classification system does not function.
- ☉ Finally, there is *communicative memory* that is applied especially through language. Harald Welzer, director of the Kulturwissenschaftlichen Institut (Cultural Science Institute) in Essen, and psychologist Hans-Joachim Markowitsch in Bielefeld, assert that increased language competency and memory development virtually form a single unit, and that not only the content, but also the structure of memory is formed through spoken communication.

According to Colin Trevarthen, human infancy researcher at the University of Edinburgh, up to age two the memory is working almost completely as “body-implicit.” Thus, small children do not yet have an autobiographical memory. The child first differentiates and integrates the various levels of memory with the ability to speak.

One thing is clear: Facilitating good speech and differentiated verbal expression practiced through compassionate, empathic, and emotion-supported dialogues—so-called memory talks—leads to firm support for the memory. This socio-cultural aspect is in turn tied in with certain phases of brain development that are completed only after puberty.

The anthroposophical view on memory

In his book *The Study of Man*, Rudolf Steiner went much further than a bio-socio-cultural frame of reference. For him, memory was not to be found in the head. He compared remembering with awaking, and forgetfulness with a process of going to sleep. When we remember something, we do not call forth warehoused notions from some area of the brain; we newly perceive what has been literally embodied in us as a memory. The storage facility for these images was described by Steiner as the etheric body, the carrier of all life and formative processes in our body. What is remembered is not the substance of perceptions or ideas but the mental, pictorial experiences associated with them: feeling

impulses, tensions, or moods that have been written into this “body.” And there is more: Polar to the process of remembering, the experience impresses its form even into our physical organs and shapes our way of remembering.

Ernst-Michael Kranich, anthropologist and Waldorf educator, elaborated on the importance of the connection between activities and development of the capacity for remembering. In this respect it is obvious that one speaks of a physically connected memory that is supported by the whole body. The contents of this memory are brought forth again by way of feelings and the will, not by way of the intellect through the use of memory exercises.

Steiner formulated his teaching on memory like this: “Definitions strain the memory. The vividly artistic cultivates the memory. Efforts of will—activities of will—fortify the memory.” Looked at in this way, the Internet represents an assault on the autonomous life of our feeling and willing natures because they unfold in time and space. The Internet user is relieved of any effort: He wants and gets the result immediately.

The abolishment of memory and its consequences

According to Aleida Assmann, literature scientist at the University of Konstanz, the increasing transference of knowledge onto the Internet represents a massive process of dematerialization. But our memory requires the material, or human, preservation of knowledge because the Internet, in its basic structure, is not very reliable or stable, and is, basically, a memory without support, that networks, extracts, and assesses. Cultural and social memories and the individual memories associated with them (autobiographical memory) are altered depending upon which medium is used to convey knowledge and information. This applies especially when the remembering itself (Facebook, Youtube, etc. are examples) becomes a media event of self-production. Goetz Grossklaus, a media historian in Karlsruhe, emphasized how the flood of images in the form of photos, videos, films, and computer animations represents an important creative component of the Internet – more than the mediums of speech and writing – that stands in close proximity to our internal images that are connected to our remembering and our imagination.

The craving of images is something that is inborn in human beings. It is the yearning of the soul for inner movement. We live in a time when the creation of an internal treasury of images is made more difficult because we receive images only from the outside. The more the internal world of images is impoverished, the more hunger there is for external images. External images only appear to feed the soul. Externalization empties the soul more and more. They distort and falsify the image we have of ourselves and others. World-image and self-image are composed of countless splinters of images that do not follow any internal connection. In their omnipresence they threaten to cover up the internal world of

images and the “true” self. Even today, Native Americans shy away from being photographed because they believe the photos “catch” their soul. Photographs highlight a fleeting present moment in the totality that knows no past and no future. When looking at a photograph, who has not said: “That’s not me, is it?” The human ego, or “I,” checks to see if the souvenir picture is identical to the actual event, or perceived object or self image, or if it is just an illusion. It looks past the picture to what is remembered.

Roy Baumeister, social psychologist at Florida State University, speaks of “ego exhaustion”: The human will is paralyzed when, through a flood of information and images, it must permanently decide what is important or not. The energy to concentrate and actively limit can no longer be summoned.

All of the memory content is externalized. The person appears as a being who is devoid of memory and whose mind is increasingly “removed.” And the question arises as to whether a person without memory, without a history of their internal world, even loses their “I”? This scenario became famous through the Stanley Kubrick film based on the science fiction novel *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess. In one scene, Alex, the main character, has his eyelids held open and is forced to view violent images over and over. What was thought to be re-socialization therapy is actually the same as tortuous brainwashing. The protagonist becomes an egoless, hollow form, with catastrophic results.

The Italian sociologist Elena Esposito would probably agree with Plato’s fear quoted at the beginning of this article because, for her, modern communication media are “tools of forgetfulness.” Otherwise the overabundance of information simply could not be dealt with. Thus, storing information is not remembering information, and most certainly not communicative usage. Esposito even proclaimed the “telematic revolution” whereby the technology user, sucked into electronic mediums, virtually melts into them and is carried along on the never dwindling stream of data. Subject and object become one. Whether the evidence she offers of stronger interest in religious and esoteric subjects is actually heralding a countermovement, and giving back some orientation to the “digital natives,” is questionable. A one-dimensional world is always a pitfall for the “I.”