A Memory Revolution

1   A high school senior logs on to a computer at the library to double-check the application due date listed on a college admissions website. Nearby, a librarian helps a group of biology students use a database to search for recent studies about mammals. In the past few decades, the Internet has become an integral component of daily life for many people. The seemingly limitless power of search engines made the Internet search extremely common, and today people increasingly rely on the Internet's vast accumulation of sources to access all types of information. Scientists are beginning to examine how this reliance is modifying the strategies people use to store and prioritize information in their mind.

A Dependable and Valuable Asset

2   Psychologist Benjamin Storm from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and researchers Sean Stone and Aaron Benjamin devised an experiment to study students' tendency to depend on the Internet for facts. To begin, the scientists divided sixty participants into multiple groups, including an "Internet" group and a "memory" group, and placed them in front of computers. The Internet group was required to use the search engine Google to answer eight challenging trivia questions. In contrast, participants in the memory group were permitted to use only their personal knowledge to answer the questions. In the second round, the researchers administered notably easier questions. This time, they allowed each group the option of using Google as they answered. Their results showed that 83 percent of the Internet group continued to consult Google in the second round, while only 63 percent of the memory group chose to do so.

3   People's growing inclination to rely on the Internet in order to retrieve information, particularly facts and figures, is called cognitive offloading. Canadian researcher Evan F. Risko and British researcher Sam Gilbert, who have written extensively about the topic, say a similar process has been taking place for centuries. In the past, people used resources like encyclopedias to assist their memories; however, today the Internet, serving as a vast extended memory, allows people to digitally access and retrieve much larger volumes of information. Consequently, people's minds are free for other cognitive feats, such as connecting data, learning new information, or solving problems.

Filing Information Away

4   The use of the Internet also appears to be modifying the strategies people use to store information in their mind. Researchers Betsy Sparrow from Columbia University, Jenny Liu from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Daniel Wegner from Harvard University conducted several studies to discover how people efficiently manage their information intake.

5   To begin, the researchers examined how people evaluate which information deserves their effort to remember. For this experiment, participants read forty trivia facts, such as "An ostrich's eye is bigger than its brain," and typed the statements into a computer file. Half the participants had been previously told the file would be saved, while half believed it would be erased. Next, the participants wrote down every fact they could recall. Those who believed the information would be erased and no longer available could recall 40 percent more facts than those who thought the information would be saved.

6   In another experiment, the same researchers tested the ability of study participants to remember where to access information. For this trial, participants read and typed trivia statements, which they

saved in folders with generic names such as "Facts" and "Items." After spending ten minutes writing down all the facts they could recall from memory, participants were asked which folder contained a particular fact based on a keyword. For example, "Which folder has the fact about ostriches?" Overall, participants recalled the information's location more often than the content itself, correctly identifying 49 percent of the folders for specific facts while remembering only 23 percent of the actual trivia. The researchers concluded that our memory is adapting to the Internet age by prioritizing where to locate information even when the specific details are forgotten. According to Sparrow, the Internet has become an important form of transactive memory, an external source of the recollections and associative networks that constitute memory.

7   As the Internet's resources continue to expand our "external" memory, some question whether the process may cause people to depend too heavily on technology. However, Steven Pinker, a professor of psychology at Harvard University, says, "Knowledge is increasing exponentially; human brainpower and waking hours are not. Fortunately, the Internet and information technologies are helping us manage, search and retrieve our collective intellectual output at different scales, from Twitter and previews to e-books and online encyclopedias. Far from making us stupid, these technologies are the only things that will keep us smart."

HOW MEMORY WORKS

Information is
maintained through
repetition.

Rehearsal

| New Information → | Sensory Memory | → Attention → | Short-Term Memory | → Storage → | Long-Term Memory |

Retrieval

Unrehearsed
information is
forgotten.

Some information
may be forgotten
over time.