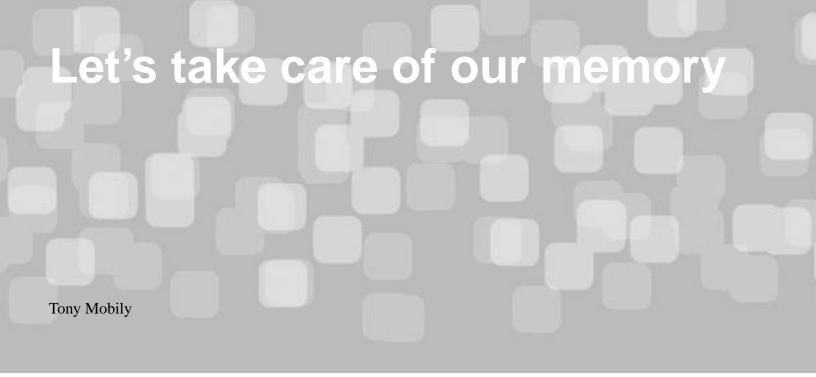This is a **low resolution**, **black and white** version of the article you downloaded. To download the whole of Free Software Magazine in *high* resolution and color, please subscribe!

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Let's take care of our memory

Tony Mobily

I t was late at night in Sydney. I was at John Paul's house—the man behind MySource (`http://mysource.squiz.net/`). We hadn't seen each other for years, and we had spent the whole day helping his parents move house, so we did what old friends do: we talked about anything and everything. The conversation somehow turned to neural damage and freak accidents (our backs must have hurt).

I remembered something someone (Dave Guard?) told me years earlier, and decided to contribute to the never-ending spread of useless information (typical of the human race): "Well, I heard about this guy who got a chunk of wood shot through his skull, and he was sort-of fine afterwards. The chunk of wood went right through his brain, and was stuck in his head... Can you imagine the doctors in the ER?".

We laughed. Then, he asked "I've heard that story too! Didn't it happen to someone from England?"

In the pre-internet world, the conversation would have ended there, in uncertainty and doubt. If we really wanted to know, we could have called up some neurosurgeons in the morning and asked them to give us some medical references, but I don't think we would have bothered.

However in the post-internet world, we looked at each other in silence for a couple of seconds thinking of how we could find out more, and we both came up with one meaningful word: "Google".

Finding information on Linux in Google is quite simple. Finding out about people who have had chunks of wood lodged in their heads, however, is tricky to say the least. In the end, we managed to find a few "reliable" bits of info (and discovered that we had both been wrong), but it was a big struggle.

This episode raised a question in my mind: has the web effectively become the world's memory? And has Google become the way of fetching anything from this memory?

If the answer to these questions is "yes", then there are some issues that should be considered.

The first one is: what about things that happened before the web existed? In general, particularly after blogging began, current affairs events are thoroughly talked about and discussed. But anything that happened in prehistory (in this case, anything that occurred before 1999) is published

on the web as reported, second hand information. If the web is the new memory of the world, it is a very selective memory and only recent events are remembered vividly. The rest is old news and isn't easily accessible. The web can also be poisoned (contents-wise) quite easily. Anyone can go about publishing anything on web, and then give it relevance artificially by using various tricks.

Blatantly false information is mixed with more accurate facts and no one can decide what's accurate and what's not. Ironically, human brains create "false memories" as well (ask Google if you don't believe me!).

What about the information that very few, perhaps disadvantaged, people care about? This is a more stringent issue. While looking for information about Linux is quite easy, if you look for the best coffee shop in Nicaragua, you might be out of luck. You don't have to be that obscure to find holes in the web-memory. I have tried searching on animal health, for example, and it was more tedious than you can imagine...

These are quite common questions and I could have raised even more intriguing questions. The internet (as well as search engines), however, somehow seems to be evolving quite well in order to deal with all of those problems. The one problem that I consider "scary" is: what if the interface to this enormous wealth of information, Google, disappeared? Or what if it became a "pay-per-use" service? Or what if it became less "ethical" and more selective about the results it gives?

In this case, this enormous wealth of information, the web, the world's memory, could become inaccessible, and therefore completely useless. Though just now, this outcome seems very unlikely. However, companies do change their policies—especially when they are short of cash...

They sometimes collapse, or are bought by another company. If Google's stock price became \$1 tomorrow, the obvious alternative to it might be... Microsoft's MSN. How encouraging.

If it's true that the web is becoming the world's memory, regardless of its problems, then I feel that we, the creators and owners of this immense wealth of information, ought to have a free (free as in freedom) way of accessing it. A way that doesn't depend on the health or ethical decisions of a particular company (Google, Microsoft, or whatever). A way that doesn't require a rack of 400 servers (and growing) or immense amounts of bandwidth in order to index what's there and process it.

Unfortunately, nobody has come up with a solution yet. However, any ideas are most definitely welcome.

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Tony Mobily is the Editor In Chief of Free Software Magazine.