Google and the End of Wisdom

BY BOB BATCHELOR

Remembering that search engines provide data, not answers, may be the beginning.

DRIVING MY FOUR-YEAR OLD daughter to a park in our rural Florida town, a sign in large, black letters outside a church caught my eye: "THERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS THAT CAN'T BE ANSWERED BY GOOGLE." For the next hour, I pondered that sign and decided to try several "big-picture" queries just to test the assertion.

Is there a God? (78.4 million results)
Will my daughter be happy? (39.2 million results)
When will I die? (1.06 billion results)

Exploring a couple dozen hits returned some interesting information and a broad swath of early 21st century Americana, such as the woman who wrote to *Yahoo! Answers* several months ago wondering why her new baby girl "will not smile or laugh in my presence." I also visited The Death Clock, a website that professes to predict the exact date an individual will die (In my case, a rather depressing Tuesday, June 10, 2042—I mean, who wants to die on a Tuesday at 74 years old?)

Upon further reflection, it dawned on me: Google cannot answer any questions, because Google is not creating the content for its search results. The "answers" are obtained from the approximately 30.3 billion Web pages indexed by the major search engines. This content is the lifeblood of the Internet.

When people "Google" something they essentially are asking the search engine to rank pages based on an intricate algorithm, basically using software to search, read, and index Web content. Therefore, Google answers almost nothing. Perhaps that church sign should read "There are some answers a person can't find by googling."

While it might be eye-opening to find out one's (presumed) death date or reassuring to ask questions of and find answers from an online community, more important are the long-term cultural implications of the meaning behind that sign. These are important issues as the Web becomes more ubiquitous and we progress further into the digital age.

As a college teacher I am confronted every day with the role Google and the Internet play in the learning process. The current situation would startle most people, even in light of the cottage industry that has sprouted up labeling the millennial generation in the U.S. dim-witted, such as Nicholas Carr's article "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" in *The Atlantic* (July/August 2008) that argues Google is essentially rewiring our brains away from deep thinking.

The challenge educators face is simple on the surface, but complex in its repercussions. Returning to the message on the church sign, I think one would be hard pressed to find a mainstream American under the age of 30 who does not feel that all questions can be answered by Google. Today's students, from first graders to those in graduate school, have been taught to find specific, correct answers. Google does this quickly and efficiently. For them, Google is a godsend. Or, perhaps, as *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman once asked, "Is Google God?"

For example, I hear more and more frequently about graduate students citing Wikipedia in research papers and middle school students who cannot conduct the most basic library research and, as a result, turn in papers cribbed from the first five Google results, whether those hits consist of BillyBob's Shakespeare blog and the like or a reputable academic or government site. What today's students do not realize is that Google sometimes provides fact, and often opinion—but never answers.

In the last year, I have taught approximately 850 students in a large lecture class at the University of South Florida in Tampa. Because the class focuses on the development of mass communications historically and culturally, we spend a great deal of time discussing the Internet and social media.

From class discussions and the online journaling the students complete throughout the course, I see two profound consequences arising from the pervasive use of Google and other forms of Internet-based technology:

- Most troubling is that few will read anything assigned in hard copy, because they no longer have the ability to concentrate long enough to read, particularly from books.
- In general, students are willing to forfeit advanced thinking (critical thinking, in-depth research, and healthy skepticism) for the speed and quickness of Google search results. They are so programmed by standardized testing in K-12 education that finding "facts" online is deemed sufficient to meet college-level expectations.

Unfortunately, this kind of knowledge acquisition represents the lowest type of critical thinking. As a result, America is producing many college students and later graduates who can manage only the most basic thinking skills, such as recall and memorization. That may get them through college, but

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it will not prepare them for the rigors necessary to succeed as engineers, lawyers, political analysts, artists of caliber, or other creative professionals.

Poor critical thinking in college leads to substandard thinking as adults, not the kind of skills necessary in confronting global challenges. Thus, the reliance on Google and Wikipedia for quick answers in completing a college-level paper has ramifications. We are producing a generation of lazy thinkers who gleefully use the information easily accessible via technology as an excuse for shoddy cognitive abilities.

Most students are not fond of the alternative. The antithesis of simple thinking is hard work based on reading, discussion, reflection, and creating new knowledge based on the accumulation of facts, and basically critiquing one's own thinking. Instead of putting forth such effort, which is certainly difficult, today's students use technology as a way of outsourcing their thinking—no questions asked.

The long-term consequence of ignoring critical thinking skills is that people rely less on the power of their own minds and more on the "facts" discovered online—and equate that unquestioned information they may have retained for a while with actual knowledge. The status quo is no longer questioned.

Wisdom develops over time as a person stacks up experiences and finds measures to constantly reengage with the changing nature of the world at large. Relying on answers from a search engine, even if it produces thousands of results faster than the blink of an eye, cannot compare to the simple, beautiful act of sitting quietly for 15 minutes, disconnected from the computer—and thinking.

We who understand this (perhaps, in part, by having lived without the Internet) have the responsibility to foster critical thinking skills in newly graduated engineers and other professionals as part of this upcoming generation's professional training.

So is Google God? Do questions exist that the search engine cannot answer? These are challenging issues. The transformation that must occur is moving from using Google and the Web as a means of searching for facts to using it as a tool for exploring, interrogating, and questioning the larger world.

By the way, typing "Is Google God" into the search engine produced 82.6 million hits. MSC