

Is the Internet Really Making Me Stupid, Psychotic, and Constantly Distracted?

Thorin Klosowski 7/20/12

Dear Lifehacker,

It seems like once every couple of years I hear about how the internet (or Google, or Farmville, or whatever else) is messing up my head in one way or another. Is it really possible the internet is making me stupid, psychotic, and constantly distracted?

*Sincerely,
Bozo Dotnet*

Dear BD,

When you keep up with the media it's easy to get paranoid about pretty much everything. We talked a bit about this sensationalism [earlier this week](#), but the internet is its own beast. Research on the internet's effects on us is still young, but we do know a few things. With that in mind, let's break down each of the three problems you raise, one by one.

The Internet Makes You Stupid

In 2010, tech columnist Nick Carr posed the question, [Is Google Making Us Stupid?](#) in the Atlantic (he also expanded on the idea in his book, [The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains](#)), and since then it has been cause for debate.

Carr's essential argument is that the internet rewires our brains to think differently. Of course, *everything* we do rewires our brains and while Google—and the internet as a whole—might be rewiring how we do things, that's not necessarily a horrible thing. One major point made by tech alarmists is that the internet has changed how our memory works. Jonah Lehrer [talked about this for Wired](#):

One of the virtues of transactive memory is that it acts like a fact-check, helping ensure we don't all descend into selfish solipsism. By sharing and comparing our memories, we can ensure that we still have some facts in common, that we all haven't disappeared down the private rabbit hole of our own reconsolidations. In this sense, instinctually wanting to Google information—to not entrust trivia to the fallible brain—is a perfectly healthy impulse. (I've used Google to correct my errant memories thousands of times.) I don't think it's a sign that technology is rotting our cortex—I think it shows that we're wise enough to outsource a skill we're not very good at.

Lehrer's point has been [echoed](#) by a [lot](#) of [people](#). Sure, maybe the internet makes it so we don't remember a lot of trivia. It rewires the way we recall memory (we know [how to search for it, but not what it is](#)). That's not necessarily a sign of intelligence though. Intelligence is usually defined by the ability to acquire and apply knowledge. Just because you can't remember facts doesn't mean you're stupid—especially if you can search for them quickly.

The Internet Makes You Psychotic

Newsweek recently asked the question [Is the web driving us mad?](#) After citing a few different studies, Newsweek suggests the internet is well on its way to making us psychotic:

The current incarnation of the Internet—portable, social, accelerated, and all-pervasive—may be making us not just dumber or lonelier but more depressed and anxious, prone to obsessive-compulsive and attention-deficit disorders, even outright psychotic.

The problem, as both [Mind Hacks](#) and [Time](#) point out, is that Newsweek's choice of studies is far from stellar. Some are older (like 1998 old) and a lot of the wording is overtly fear-inducing.

Psychosis, after all, is a serious mental condition. Mind Hacks explains:

We have studied the environmental risk factors for psychosis for [decades](#) and nothing has suggested that the internet or anything like it would raise the risk of psychosis. This must be amazing new scientific evidence.

Time, in a similar fashion, breaks down the Newsweek article by pointing out the research data currently available doesn't support the claims that the internet makes us psychotic. Time sums up their argument pretty bluntly:

The truth is, we really don't know much about how our online lives are affecting us. It's quite possible that Internet use has the deleterious effects critics suggest—certainly some people do have difficulty controlling the amount of time they spend online. But is it the addictive effect of the Internet that keeps us checking our work emails on vacation or during evenings and weekends—or is it the fact that we fear we may lose our jobs if we don't?

So, can the internet really make you psychotic? No, probably not—at least not on its own. We don't know the longstanding effects of constant internet use, but chances are that if the internet is anything, it's merely an enabler for craziness.

The Internet Makes You Constantly Distracted

The internet is interesting because, unlike a service like cable, you can always find *something* awesome online. The internet is also connected in a way that a simple search for “movies with Audrey Hepburn” can somehow lead to six hours of “research” into the films of Stanley Kubrick. The interconnectedness of what makes the internet great is also what makes it easy to fall into rabbit holes of distraction.

Social networking sites don't help either. Since web sites like Twitter and Facebook are essentially a constant water cooler discussion waiting to happen, it's easy to get distracted by them.

So, does the internet actually erode our focus and cause us to get distracted? It doesn't, it's just readily available. The [Harvard Business Review explains how distraction works](#):

[A]ctivities such as watching TV or playing video games activate the basal ganglia of the brain, which releases dopamine. When dopamine levels increase, you're inclined to do whatever it takes to maintain the "high" they generate, but when the levels decrease, you start to look for something new or a "distraction" to replace that hit.

The point is that distraction can come from anywhere. The internet is just the easiest place to lose yourself. It's not [always a bad thing](#), but if you need to, [cutting off distractions](#) and [learning how to focus](#) aren't hard to do.