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The Distractions of Documentation

In an article in the London *Sunday Times* for 20 July 2008, the usually perceptive commentator Bryan Appleyard wrote a article under the presumably intentionally provocative headline 'STOOPID: why the Google generation isn't as smart as it thinks'. Nothing particularly new there: a number of similar articles have appeared recently, reacting against the assumption that the rising generation, however techno-aware it may be, is necessarily brighter and more capable of coping well in the digital world than that world's more long-standing inhabitants. Appleyard's article has rather more substance than most, however, as shown by its sub-title: 'The digital age is destroying us by ruining our ability to concentrate'. He presents a variety of evidence, and quotes a variety of other commentators, to support this view, which goes well beyond journalistic hyperbole, and which may make worrying reading for anyone concerned about the value and use of recorded information.

In essence, Appleyard's article suggests, the problem is multi-tasking, something which we are all supposed to do nowadays, and at which the Google generation – switching happily between television, social networking sites, sms messages, and whatever else is to hand – are supposed to excel. The problem is simply that multitasking doesn't happen, since the same areas and functions of the brain are required to deal with the various tasks, and this is not possible. What truly happens, and what multitasking actually 'is' in reality, is a constant and rapid switching of attention between information sources – a permanent condition of distraction.

This is not just a matter of inefficiency, though Appleyard quotes a study suggesting that the average worker 'loses' over two hours of productive time through a typical day, due to the need to switch between competing distractions. Rather ,there is a suggestion that a generally distracted life style makes it initially difficult, and finally impossible, to engage in the kind of concentrated intellectual activities which were regarded as the norm for an educated person: concentrating on a lengthy article, finishing a whole book, learning a poem by heart, comprehending a mathematical proof, and so on. Scanning and skimming, says Nicholas Carr, another commentator quoted by Appleyard, have replaced thinking and absorbing. And the new generation, raised on the continual distraction of multimedia and on the continual quick fix of information-by-Google, will not even realise what it has lost. They will not seek for the internal 'connections of understanding' which can only be gained by time-consuming reflection on knowledge and experience, but will rather automatically seek the instant gratification of an external connection from the internet. So seriously is this regarded by some commentators, that the seriously speak of the result as a new 'Dark Age'.

Associated with this is a concern with the shallow 'friendships' of social network, made easily in large numbers, and just as easily broken on a whim, and lacking entirely the concept of maintaining a long-term relationship with a genuinely known person, and persisting through difficult times. If this essence

of what has been understood a a 'friendship' for most of human history is lost, then what becomes of human relationships.

Finally, Appleyard quotes evidence to the effect that the most often quoted positive factor of the situation, the greater familiarity of the new generation with technology, is largely a myth. Older users are generally more adept in putting computers to serious use, since have the better skills in making judgements, and in understanding the deeper nature of what they are dealing with.

Faced with this somewhat apocalyptic situation, what might be the response of the information science disciplines and professions. Well, Appleyard, and those whom he quotes, do not believe that all is lost. People can be taught to pay attention, to switch off and think, to look below the surface, to compare and contrast and reach a synthesis, to "turn off, to ignore the beep and ping". This sounds not unlike what was always claimed as the strength of the traditional library: that it gave a physical and conceptual 'place' where distractions could be minimised and deeper thinking aided. Perhaps we may discover that this is one of the contributions of the information specialist for the coming century.

Provided, of course, that we can refrain from adding to the overload and distractions of those who might rely on us, by an unintentional aping of the distracted manners of the world around us.

David Bawden