CRITICAL THINKING NEEDED IN SEARCH FOR ANSWERS ONLINE

Rethinking how we look for information on the Internet

K RANGA KRISHNAN

With Google, other search engines and online resources such as Wikipedia and with our easy access via smartphones and computers today, the learning mode of committing facts to memory has become less relevant and partly obsolete.

In essence, we now have instantaneous access to an external memory that is almost infinite in its capacity. This shift is not necessarily a bad thing.

When we are faced with questions, we automatically think that the Internet will help us find the answers. In fact, we used to remember phone numbers, but now we just store them on our smartphone, and any information we can easily access we are less likely to commit to memory.

We memorise answers if that is the only way we will have easy access to the information. What we now try to remember is how to use the Internet to help get the answer.

We will still remember information important to us, but we are relying more on the Web to recall forgotten information and find new knowledge.

SELF-REINFORCING COMMUNITIES

In many ways, what has changed is ease of access. We always had the option of going to a library and doing a manual search, but more often than not, we would not have done so due to the hassle.

This new ease of access to information has changed how we behave.

We are now more likely to look for answers when we have questions.

But just like our own memory, this vast storehouse has many holes and can be filled with inaccurate information. In truth, you can find a website that confirms and strengthens almost any belief, whether it is true or not. It is also called "the illusion of consensual validation".

Now, if we rely completely on this external memory, we will have a full attic with jumbled facts and knowledge. It, therefore, becomes critical to understand how information is organised on the Web.

Knowing how to sort and find the right information at the right time and place is a skill that we may not intuitively have. In this respect, assessing the external memory is just like assessing our own internal memory system — the need for critical thinking does not diminish, irrespective of where and how the information is stored.

A pernicious problem is how to check the veracity of information on the Net. Individuals, over time, build patterns in how they search and, therefore, the risk is that we will only find and recognise as truth information that conforms to our belief system.

With potentially billions of users interacting via this medium, one can always find people with views and beliefs similar to one's own. Thus, this leads to building self-reinforcing communities of like-minded individuals who have a hard time looking beyond their viewpoint.

We have always, as humans, formed groups with like-minded individuals. Before this common collaborative and knowledge base online came into existence, the scale was geographically limited and the potential alliances more limited.

Our brain constantly evolves to help us adapt and survive in our environment.

It does so by taking information from the world through our senses and then interpreting that information through pre-existing knowledge.

Today, the vast store of external

> " With potentially billions of users interacting via this medium, one can always find people with views and beliefs similar to one's own. Thus, this leads to building self-reinforcing communities of like-minded individuals who have a hard time looking beyond their viewpoint.

● Professor K Ranga Krishnan is dean of the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School Singapore. A clinician scientist and psychiatrist, he chaired the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences at Duke University Medical Centre from 1998 to 2009.

knowledge has made this more complicated for our brain. In this new world, the ability to sift and critically evaluate, rather than memorise, has become the essential skill.

If we do not use critical thinking and search skills, we will have the problem of self-reinforcing communities developing.

If these communities do not interact with others and evaluate ideas critically, they risk falling into a stagnation trap and building a tinted lens to view the outside world.