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In the news

GOOGLED BRAINS?

The accessibility of an encyclopedia of knowledge at the click of a mouse — thanks to search engines like Google — is reducing our ability to remember information, a new study shows. The research, led by Betsy Sparrow from Columbia University, New York, USA, found that this reduced recall has been replaced by an increased adeptness at locating answers.

"Our brains rely on the Internet for memory in much the same way they rely on the memory of a friend, family member or co-worker," explained Sparrow (*ibtimes*, 15 Jul 2011) — that is, Google is a form of 'transactive memory'. "People worry more about the internet because that is more transparent as a type of external memory. I think that is why it causes so much concern about how intelligent people will be in the future," she said (*YouTube*, 15 Jul 2011). "The brain is very specialized in its circuitry and if you repeat mental tasks over and over it will strengthen certain neural circuits and ignore others," says Gary Small, Director of the Memory and Aging Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, USA (*The Atlantic Wire*, 15 Jul 2011).

Roddy Roediger, a professor of psychology at Washington University, Missouri, USA, who was also involved in the study, added: "With Google and other search engines, we can off-load some of our memory demands onto machines." (*Global Post*, 16 Jul 2011).

Indeed, this potential positive implication of the study was echoed by Boris Leheta, President of Michigan Neurology Institute, Michigan, USA. "Maybe technology can alleviate us from excessive information overload," he said (*MedlinePlus*, 14 Jul 2011). Technological advances are often initially subject to some criticism and concern, but as Leheta also noted, "Would you say that someone who used an abacus in the past wasn't challenged mathematically? Maybe the technology we think could be detrimental might turn out to be positive".

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