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The Online Male Takes a Licking and Keeps on Clicking

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Say you're halfway through a turkey sub when you have a sudden urge to Wikipedia the word "crush," because your nephew was bashfully asking what it meant, which reminded you of when you, too, were 13 and tripped on a chair on your way to the blackboard right in front of the girl with the pigtails, whom you suddenly feel like searching for on Facebook -- after all these years -- so you log on to your homepage, which is blitzed with photos from Nick's mushing trip in Alaska, including one with a comment about you that just landed in your inbox, where you have five urgent messages from Bob about a football blog that you click to and really mean to finish reading, but only after you're done smacking the ball on that pop-up Orbitz ad, the one with the baseball bat, once, twice, six times and . . .

Why did you leave your sandwich for the computer again?

Is this your brain, the male brain that is, on Google?

Recent research suggests that men and women use the Internet differently. The results strengthen stereotypes about men being more visual-spatial and focused on destinations while women inhabit verbal universes and are more inclined toward emotional connections and community-building.

The jury is still out on whether all this online activity is rewiring the circuitry of our brains. But as scientists and sociologists begin to probe the Internet's impact, some wonder if it is reinforcing sex differences or doing exactly the reverse, leading us instead toward a brave new wired world of gender neutrality. Then there are some who suggest the real concern is whether the Internet is dumbing us down. Hogwash, say others. What if, instead, Google were making us smarter?

A 2005 survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that men typically were quicker to use the Internet as a tool for online transactions, for experiences such as video games, or to find content. Women tended to use the Internet to join online communities and were more prolific in their use of e-mail.

According to Susan Pinker, a psychologist at McGill University and author of "The Sexual Paradox," male and female behavior on the Internet basically mirrors their differences in other parts of life.

"My expectations are that the Internet . . . will increase the skills that you already have," Pinker said.

Preliminary evidence suggests as much, she said. Violent computer games didn't encourage violence in boys, but violently inclined boys were naturally more attracted to violent computer games. And, she pointed out, women latched onto emoticons, those colorful smiley faces and such, as bonding devices for use in Internet chat rooms. Such use, Pinker said, was an organic outgrowth of women's natural tendency to use language socially.

Gordon Hotchkiss, founder of an online research firm, has been studying the way men and women interact with the Internet since 2003. Eye-tracking studies largely confirm the Pew data, he said. Men almost always get the lay of the land by scanning the navigation bar.

In one of his studies, a flash screen took a few minutes to load. Women stayed put on the page, waiting to watch the result once it appeared. But almost every man surfed away. "They all bailed out," said Hotchkiss.

But Hotchkiss ultimately believes there is an equalizing effect to Internet browsing. He stressed that across all his studies, men and women used different visual processes but eventually ended up in the same place, on the page or scanning the same material.

Another proponent of the gender-neutralizing hypothesis is Gary Small, a psychiatrist from the University of California at Los Angeles, who co-authored a study that mapped people's brains while they were browsing the Internet.

The study looked at 24 volunteers aged 55 to 76 who were asked to either search online or read while their brains were scanned using magnetic resonance imaging.

However one uses it, Small said, the Internet requires all users, men and women alike, to sharpen both their visual-spatial skills and verbal skills. And as both male and female brains adapt, "it's possible that you might not be able to tell a difference between the male and female brain at all."

Small's team explored in parallel a concern voiced by Nicholas Carr, a writer on technology who launched a debate last year with an article in the Atlantic magazine that explored whether the Internet was making us all stupid. Because our interactions with the Internet reflect its fractured, viral, weirdly random world, Carr worried that we might be losing our capacity for deep thought and the concentration required to follow a multi-page, linear argument, like, say, a book.

For some experts, Carr's anxieties are compelling and demand attention.

Because the brain is so plastic, said Maryanne Wolf, a professor of child development at Tufts University, we are compelled to question the impact of the Internet on it. Author of "Proust and the Squid; The Story of Science and the Reading Brain," Wolf put particular emphasis on the fragile circuitry of a child's developing brain. "There is this new vast repository of questions that the Google age forces us to raise," she said.

New technologies have historically been accompanied with a host of fears about their dumbing effects. According to Small, the more one uses it, the more Google seems to activate different parts of the brain. It could be, he said, that it is in fact making us smarter.

The knowledge that the Internet provides may be fragmented, unlike the "readily bundled" information of a book, said Rand Spiro, a professor of educational psychology at Michigan State University, but it allows informed users to be the author of their own searches. Spiro argued that the nonlinear approach to

information-gathering on the Internet can help a person learn to navigate the world better. How your brain adapts to the Internet depends in part on how you make the Internet adapt to your needs. The trick, he said, is teaching Web-savviness.

But even Small would acknowledge that the mind can easily lapse into that strange state best called Googlized.

Last week, Small's wife asked him to check something online, and next thing he knew he was browsing for bits of trivia. He emerged several sites and minutes later, having entirely forgotten whatever it was that his wife had asked him. He can't remember the trivia, either.

"It's frankly embarrassing for a memory expert," he said, laughing. "But I do remember the process."

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