

Google stops thinking?¹

In the 1960s, media theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out that media are not merely passive channels of information. He famously wrote, “The medium is the message.”² Media not only supply the stuff of thought, but also shape how we think. More than that, the Net is eating away at our capacity for focus, reflection and creativity. Our minds are now caught up processing information in just the way it moves around in the Net: in a rapid stream of particles. Once we were scuba divers; now we are dudes on Jet Skis. In short, we have sight without insight.

The cost is that we are losing the ability to read long works or reflect on the suttas. (Some even complain that such a reflection as this is too long!) In fact, it is not just the way we read that has changed: the way we think, too, has changed. No more are we likely to be willing or able to read a long passage and absorb, even enjoy, it. Our thinking has now taken on a “staccato” quality: we quickly scan short passages from many sources online. Imagine how a short attention span would make us perceive a longish-looking sutta as being forbidding or boring!

We have become skimmers – after reading a few passages from a book, article or digital passage, we “bounce” off to another paper, book or site. Such new forms of “reading” is more of a “power browsing” of horizontally glancing through titles, contents pages and abstracts, going for a quick kill. It is as if that we go online to avoid reading in the traditional sense. Some of us Buddhists, too, are skimmers, going around collecting teachers and rituals, but fearing to look within our own minds to better ourselves. We have become dependent on the system.

Maryanne Wolf, a developmental psychologist at Tufts University and author of the multidisciplinary *Proust and the Squid: The story and science of the reading brain* (2007), notes that “we are not only *what* we read. We are *how* we read.” When the printing press first made available pamphlets and books, we enjoyed deep reading. However, she notes, when we read online, we tend to be “mere decoders of information.” So we lose the ability to interpret the text and to make rich mental connections with the best that culture or spirituality has to offer. We easily fall for well marketed religion rather than seek the true gems that would shine on us.

Healthy reading habits teach our minds to translate the symbolic characters we see into the language we understand. If the media we use are wholesome, our reading then links up more neural circuits in our brains. Studies have shown that readers of ideograms, such as Chinese speakers, develop a mental circuitry very different from those of us reading an alphabet-based text (like this one).

The neural connections extend across many regions of the brain, including those that govern memory and the interpretation of visual and auditory stimuli. Chinese speakers, for example, are adept at “reading” not only sounds but also tones. If we lack the ability to read deeply and feel for ourselves, we would become emotionally tone-deaf, so that we would only be impressed by the surfaces of teachers, but lack any insight into the true nature of teachings.

¹ Inspired by Pulitzer finalist Nicholas Carr, “Is Google making us stupid?” July 2008, *The Atlantic*: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/>. For student’s critical thinking exercise, see Mauk & Metz, *The Composition of Everyday Life: A guide to writing*, 4th ed, 2013:318-323.

² M McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1964: ch 1.

In 1882, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), his vision badly failing so that simply trying to focus on a page brought on a crushing headache, received a Malling-Hansen Writing Ball typewriter.³ Soon he was able to type with his eyes closed. His words now flowed through his finger-tips onto paper. He was the first philosopher to use the typewriter.

But the machine changed his writing style. A friend noticed that his already terse prose became tighter, more telegraphic. From arguments, his writings changed more into aphorisms, from philosophy he had turned to literature. Nietzsche noticed this, too, and wrote in a letter to a friend, Peter Gast, that “our writing tools are also working on our thoughts.”⁴

In 1926, British mathematician, Alan Turing, wrote that a digital computer (then only a theoretical machine) could be programmed to do the function of any other information-processing device. We are seeing this today. The Internet – the most ubiquitous of computing systems – is becoming our typewriter, printer, library, calculator, telephone, clock, radio, TV, map, and club.

Most of us have become totally dependent on the computer and the Net. When the Net takes hold of a medium, that medium takes the Net’s shape. The media are then infested with hyperlinks, intruding ads, and other digital baubles. The content we need is always parasited by other contents (the latest news headlines, internet browser ads, etc). Our attention is then disrupted. When this becomes a habit, our mind is then easily distracted and scattered.

We talk of programming the computer, but the reality is that we are also being reprogrammed to obey its every command and quirk. Much of this was anticipated by American mechanical engineer, F W Taylor, the father of scientific management and automatization of humans. “In the past the man has been first,” he declares, “In the future the system must be first.”⁵

Taylorism is today the religion, “belief system” (Schmidt), preached by Google from its cathedral in Mountain View, California. Its CEO, Eric Schmidt, proudly declares that Google is “a company that’s founded around the science of measurement,” and is striving to “systematize everything” it does. This naturally includes “Google meditation” for “gaining competitive advantage on exams and increasing creativity in business.”⁶ There is also “Google Buddhism,” the seeking and browsing without end, giving you what you desire: just keep googling.⁷

Google seeks to develop “the perfect search engine” that “understands exactly what you mean and gives back exactly what you want.” All our prayers will be answered, as it were. Information, even religion and learning, have become instant commodities, measurable things. So we have reincarnated into the Eloi, a race of ineffectual childlike surface-dwellers, feeding on easily harvested fruits, but, in turn, systematically harvested by the man-eating subterranean Mor-

³ [Malling-Hansen Ball typewriter](http://stunlaw.blogspot.sg/2012/12/the-author-signal-nietzsches-typewriter.html). See also <http://stunlaw.blogspot.sg/2012/12/the-author-signal-nietzsches-typewriter.html>.

⁴ F A Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* [1986], tr G Winthrop-Young & M Wutz, 1999: 200-208 esp 204.

⁵ See *The Principles of Scientific Management*, 1911: Intro.

⁶ See David DeSteno, “The morality of meditation,” NYTimes 5 July 2013: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/07/opinion/sunday/the-morality-of-meditation.html>.

⁷ On different kinds of searches, see **Esanā Sutta 1 & 2** (It 54+55), SD 43.10(3a+b): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/43.10-Patilina-S-a4.38-piya.pdf>

locks.⁸ Such visionaries warn us in one same voice: know what's happening and chart our course with care.⁹

The best way to get out of such a mental-slave system, or at least to master the system wholesomely, is to understand and practise Buddhist teachings of life-affirming truth and immeasurable joy. The moral precepts are based on the values of life and individuality. To be true individuals is to have full access to our minds, keeping them calm and clear, so that we enjoy true beauty beyond the keyboard and computer screen.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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⁸ H G Wells, *The Time Machine*, 1895.

⁹ On the visions of George Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty-four" and of Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World," see Reflection, "**Cost of living**," R302: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/R302-130724-Cost-of-living-117.pdf>