

Truth in the Information Age

Does Google help or hurt our search for truth?

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“Use your brain, not your technology,” cautions “quiz princess” Hailley Field, after repeating the tiebreaking question at a Brainstormer Pub Quiz in California.

Teams huddle. Tension builds, and a group of admittedly nerdy friends with the cumbersome, yet apt, team name of “There’s No iPhone in Integrity” comes through for the win.

It doesn’t take a trivia **buff** to answer this one: Are there any “unGoogle-able” questions left in the world? Fueled by pocket-size power, we harness the current sum of human knowledge *at* our *fingertips*, plus a whole bunch of junk. Turning to technology for data, for knowledge—maybe even for truth—has become an impulse, a physical reflex. And it’s changing everything, from the way we consume and retain information to the sources we trust, sometimes *fervently* or blindly, to provide it.

Sweating the **organic chemistry** midterm the midnight before the test? Go to the educational website KhanAcademy.org and get an instant tutorial. Need to crack open one of those *confounding* Thai coconuts? Watch a YouTube video some guy made in his kitchen. Worried about how to bathe your newborn? Go to sites like BabyCenter.com and seek the collective wisdom of thousands of moms.

Technology has redefined knowledge in terms of who can access it [and] who can possess it. Everyone’s an expert, or can be in a matter of seconds.

And there’s nothing trivial about that.

Education online

[According to the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project,] 65 percent of teachers who instruct advanced high-schoolers and middle-schoolers agree [that the Internet makes students more self-sufficient researchers]. But 83 percent feel the amount of information available online is overwhelming to most students, and 60 percent believe today’s technologies make it harder for students to find credible sources of information.

A teacher’s view

Annie Hatch, a history and English teacher at Oakland's Life Academy High School, is one of those educators who says this now-we-have-it knowledge is a blessing and a burden. Blessing: There's so much information out there. Burden: There's so much information out there.

"I can't even fathom how different teaching before the Internet must have been," said Hatch, who is 29.

When Hatch was designing a new unit on the book *In the Time of the Butterflies*, she went online and found information about the Dominican Republic and historical events of the book's time period. She also found videos and interviews with the author and poems and other texts, countless images, comprehension questions, ideas of projects- "I mean, literally, everything," she said. "And there's the burden: There's no much out there, it can be overwhelming, time-consuming and confusing."

Because of the *glut*, Hatch often sees students use inaccurate sources in their papers, or "run wild with a theory they read on some websites that they assume must be telling the whole truth," Hatch said.

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Discussion Questions

1. How do you get information?
2. If there is no technology, how will you get information?
3. Do you think it is good for people to get much information?
4. What will you do if you get much information?
5. How do you use the massive information well that you searched online?
6. Do you think the information on the Internet is always right?
7. Do you believe the Internet makes you an expert on many subjects? Explain.
8. How can you be sure that what you read on the Internet is accurate?
9. Do you use and trust the website Wikipedia? Why or why not?
10. If you're a teacher, do you like your students doing a report only depends on the information that searched on the Net?