

Connected, but Disengaged:

The Price We Pay for Easy and Unlimited Access.

Richard Foreman, a play writer, says:

I come from a tradition of Western culture, in which the ideal (my ideal) was the complex, dense and “cathedral-like” structure of the highly educated and articulate personality—a man or woman who carried inside themselves a personally constructed and unique version of the entire heritage of the West. [But now] I see within us all (myself included) the replacement of complex inner density with a new kind of self—evolving under the pressure of information overload and the technology of the ‘instantly available’. As we are drained of our inner repertory of dense cultural inheritance, we risk turning into ‘pancake people’—spread wide and thin as we connect with that vast network of information accessed by the mere touch of a button. (Quoted in Carr)

To build a cathedral is a process, and so is developing personal understanding and psyche. In any case, a certain amount and variety of high quality materials are needed, but a mountain of marble, stone, iron and glass is not a cathedral. It is how we work with it that potentially can result in a fine structure. The internet provides an unlimited access to information, material, and sources that can be used to build knowledge and develop intellect. On the other hand, the way the internet makes us search for, read, and absorb the material that it conveniently and freely offers us, are not necessary beneficial when it comes to the process of developing our personal knowledge and intellect.

Back in the eighties, when NMU ski coach, Sten Fjeldheim, was about to write his Master thesis, the work of searching and finding material to use was a multi-step process. At that time, the Olson library at NMU could not offer him the necessary range of material he needed for his research. However, the library belonging to University of

Minnesota was known for having a good selection of recent articles in the field of Sports Science. Lucky for him, his in-law lived in Minneapolis. He and his wife, Pam, could do the seven hour drive together, and use the weekend to combine visiting her parents and searching the university library for interesting information. Before he left Marquette, he did a lot of research planning what he wanted to search for. After spending almost two days in the library, he could finally decide which articles were worth photocopying for deeper review. He paid for using the copy machine, found his car, and started his drive home. Compared to today's possibility of using the internet to find the information we want, Sten Fjeldheim's process seems distant in many ways. He had to do a lot of preparation just to begin research. He spent time, both physical and mental energy, and money on his research. Though the library in Minnesota was known for being well updated, he still had the uncertainty that somewhere, more relevant articles may have existed. Subsequently, there is no doubt that there were a lot of costs we nowadays get away from. On the other hand, what did he earn?

First, to get the most out of his search among the bookshelves in Minneapolis, he was forced to prepare himself. We have heard many times, and it was initially said by inventor Wilhelm Graham Bell, "Preparations is the key to success." Next, the fact that he, himself had to choose from the library's generous collection, meant that he had to organize a lot of research in order to prioritize quality articles. By doing so, he began the process of getting to know his material. Third, the costs contribute to the value. When we have something we find valuable in our hands, it is more likely that we will treat it with respect and appreciation, followed by a desire to get the most out of it. In addition, the reality that he had a limited amount of articles, together with the uncertainty whether he had the best or not, also had him questioning whether he got the most out of it. This multi-step process warm up the brain, and, build feelings, anticipation, commitment, energy, enthusiasm, and desire, to begin research. Conclusively, searching for material can be looked on as either time-consuming, or a great preparation for further reading and studying.

There are many different types of reading. Among others, skimming, leisure reading and deep reading, can be mentioned. They are all useful in different contexts. To be able to skim-read is important when we want a first impression of something, to see if it is worth to reading. A researcher, like Master student Fjeldheim, wants to learn from the work other researchers have done, and from this input, hopefully, develop his or her own and original, new thoughts and thesis within the field. This kind of deep thinking is indistinguishable from deep reading (Carr). However, “no human being was born to read,” as Maryanne Wolf, a professor in the area of cognitive neuroscience, says. “We can do so only because of our brain’s protean capacity of rearrange itself to learn something new,” she continues (Wolf). Therefore, the different types of reading also need to be learned, and continually stimulated to be maintained.

The concept of deep reading requires focus, discipline, concentration and dedication. It can be compared with a high quality workout in the gym, when you are truly engaged in each exercise you do. In other words, deep reading is a pretty intense activity. For this reason, it is beneficial to begin the reading with fully charged batteries. Sten Fjeldheim’s search process, helped to create this initial state of energy. We have the initial attitude for doing some deep reading; however, the internet can easily hinder it. One of the characteristics of deep reading is that is sustained and undistracted (Carr). The internet’s reigning business model is one that offers us the material we are interested with, nestled in distraction. This is how they make their money. “The faster we search, across the Web – the more links we click and pages we view – the more opportunities Google and other companies gain to collect information about us and to feed us advertisements” (Carr). Sten Fjeldheim had a limited amount of articles and books to work with. This meant that no matter how tedious, the research bound to the paper it was printed on, did not offer any easy, flashing, tempting flights. He had no choice but to stick with it, catching his breath every time he turned the page, in order to complete the task.

The art of training for improving performance is a rhythmus flow of work and rest. It is when the athletes recover from training they absorb their training and consequently

get stronger and more fit, including getting ready for the workouts to come. However, recovery and absorption does not necessary mean lying passively on the couch. It can equally mean doing something different; activating other systems of the body than those that are tired. Variation is the key word in this context. I can use the internet to do a huge variety of tasks. However, I'm still sitting in the same position in front of the same screen. Sten Fjeldheim's walking between the bookshelves in Minneapolis, searching for material, was something totally different from the work he later did with it. If he needed to send a letter to one of the article authors, he had to walk to the post office. Yes, it was time consuming. On the other hand, it gave the day a casually break, an opportunity for fresh air and clearing the mind. Keep engagement alive with breaks of varying lengths and activities. Before the age of the internet and computers, a day at work involved a series of different moves to do different tasks. Just think about Sten Fjeldheim in the library in Minneapolis. This reality contributed to give a naturally variety in both physical and psychological working posture. Today, in the age of online societies and "open landscape" working environments, everything has become so confusingly similar. The search for information, the reading and the writing, not to forget even sending and receiving mail, are all happening sitting in the front of the same screen. Activities that before naturally were kept separate, and forced us to one thing at a time, are now all mixed together.

When I look around, no one seems to question the activity of multitasking. There seems to be a common perception that multitasking saves time, enabling one to get things done faster and better. The truth though, appears to be a little different. From a large body of solid scientific research conducted over the last two decades, it is clear that dividing the brain's attention between two or more tasks has costs, both in performance and time (Patoine). "The bottom line is that if you try to do more than one thing at the same time, you're going to have a decrement in performance," says Jordan Grafman, who is chief of cognitive neuroscience at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, and continue:

I think that one of the big trade-offs between multitasking and ‘unitasking’, as I call it, is that in multitasking, the opportunity for deeper thinking, for deliberation, or for abstract thinking is much more limited. You have to rely more on surface-level information, and that is not a good for creativity and invention. (Quoted in Patoine)

To hyperventilate is to breathe more and faster than necessary, because the body is not able to absorb all the oxygen you breathe in. This kind of breathing could also be called superficial- or shallow breathing. Sometimes an eager and enthusiastic athlete is in danger of reaching the state of overtraining, or hypertraining, as the world’s best running coach, Jack Daniels, describes it (Daniels). An athlete in this situation is no longer able to absorb the training he or she is doing. What this athlete needs then, is a coach who is able to force them to take a longer break. In contrast to the internet, the library in Minneapolis was not open 24 hours a day. Sten Fjeldheim’s most obvious choice in the evening, was to go home to Pam’s parent’s house, eat a homemade, hearty dinner, have a nice conversation, go to bed, and get ready for the next day.

A part of our Western mindset has been to think that more is better, and speed means progress (Levine). However, to make progress is a process, and to access “more” does not necessary contribute to make the process better.

Never has a communications system played so many roles in our lives—or exerted such broad influence over our thoughts—as the Internet does today. Yet, for all that’s been written about the Net, there’s been little consideration of how, exactly, it’s reprogramming us. (Carr)

Why are the intellectuals so quiet about the consequences of today’s internet? I have two possible answers: All the sweaty years they spent in the libraries, before the invention of the internet, make them really appreciate the new life and possibilities the internet provides. The experiences from the library-years also trained their brains to use the internet in a most beneficial way. However, as they enjoy the attention they receive from their witty, to-the-point worded Twitter messages etc., they are not open eyed enough, to see that they meet the internet’s possibilities with a totally different

base than the generation growing up now. The second opportunity is that they have already changed themselves, and in this state of more shallow thinking they are no longer able to see what is going on. Technological visionary Edward Tenner cautioned, "It would be a shame if the very intellect that produced the digital revolution could be destroyed by it" (Wolf).

If a runner stops exercising for a certain period of time, his body will no longer be able to run as fast as it once did. The same can be said about the brain's capacity to think hard and deep. The intellect needs to be consistently stimulated to stay alive. There are many different workouts for a body, along with a huge variety of how to train the brain. In many ways, the internet has made things easier for us. However, at the same time it has made it more difficult to be exposed to a daily variety of brain activities that seems to be meaningful and necessary. This lack of variety and meaning makes it less motivating to stimulate the brain, because we get tired of just doing a whole lot of pretty similar activities. Mohey Mowafy, who is a dedicated and genuinely engaged professor at NMU, within the field of Human Nutrition, repeats almost every lecture: "Motivation is only first gear. Habits is what keeps you going." Internet offers a plethora of information. However, unless equipped with the proper skill set to efficiently search, read and absorb this information, one will be lost in the web of distraction. Let us fight the fight, so Sten Fjeldheim's strongest call still yields: "You make you!"

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Kjell-Christian Markset
EN 109/Professor Kuehnl
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