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Who's creating?

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XTRA THE KNOWLEDGE GAME

WHO'S CREATING?

DR MANOJ THULASIDAS

MAJOR changes are afoot. They have been afoot for the last 20 years. I'm talking about how we learn things, how we read, how we do basic arithmetic and so on.

In high school, I used logarithm tables to work out results in physics and chemistry experiments. Calculators were not allowed. Though inconvenient, this practice honed my arithmetic skills – skills that calculators and spreadsheets have eroded by now.

Similar erosion is taking place in our reading skills as well. We don't read to retain information or knowledge any more. We search, scan, locate keywords, browse and bookmark. The Internet is doing to our reading habits what the calculator did to our arithmetic abilities.

Easy access to information is transforming our notion of (dare I say, respect for?) knowledge in a fundamental way. In a knowledge economy, knowledge is fast becoming a cheap commodity. We don't need to know stuff any more; we just need



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to know how to find it.

I was talking to a lecturer the other day. According to him, a good lecturer is not the one who knows most and has a deep understanding of the subject but the one who can locate the answer the fastest.

The power of instant information came with the Internet, which made experts of all of us. We can now make intelligent comments and informed decisions on anything.

Suppose, for instance, your child's doctor recommends the procedure "myringotomy", quite possibly something you have never heard of before. But

you can Google it, read (sorry, browse) the first couple of search results, and you will know the rationale behind the doctor's advice, the exact procedure, its risk factors and benefits, and so on. In 10 minutes, you will know what took the doctor years of hard work to learn.

This easy access to knowledge may, quite mistakenly, diminish your respect for the medical degree. This diminished reverence for knowledge is unwise; a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.

A doctor's expertise is not so much in memorising a webpage of information, but also in knowing all the special circumstances where that information doesn't apply.

Besides, the webpage you happened to read may be just plain wrong. We should be careful not to mistake easy information for deep knowledge. Let's guard our respect for true knowledge and wisdom despite the access to ready information.

Such a misguided lack of respect is evident in the workplace as well, where managers think they can always hire specialised knowledge at will.

I had a friend who was planning to roll out a product using Bluetooth, back when it was an emerging technology. I pointed out the obvious flaw in his proposal – he didn't know much about Bluetooth. His reply was: "No big deal! I'll just hire somebody who does!"

My worry is, when everybody wants to hire a Bluetooth expert and nobody wants to know how it works, there won't be experts much longer.

Knowledge is not cheap, although our easy access to it through the Internet may indicate otherwise. When we all become users of information, our knowledge will stop at its current level because nobody will be creating it any more.

We are not there yet, but I worry that we are heading that way. I worry about the support structure of our knowledge base. How will our knowledge empire stand when all its foundations are gone?

The writer is a scientist from the European Organization for Nuclear Research (Cern), who currently works in quantitative finance in Singapore. His internationally-acclaimed book, The Unreal Universe, is available in local bookstores and at www.TheUnrealUniverse.com

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