

Imagining the Internet

Elon University/Pew Internet Project

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ELON UNIVERSITY TECHNOLOGY MAGAZINE

Is the Internet making us stupid?

By Bonnie Efrid

“Google it.”

The Internet has changed the answer “I don’t know” to “Google it.”

Some say the Internet will lead to improved education, and other think of it as some must have thought of the calculator back in 1961. (Thanks to Google for that fact.) Good-bye head math, hello calculator. Good-bye books, hello Google.

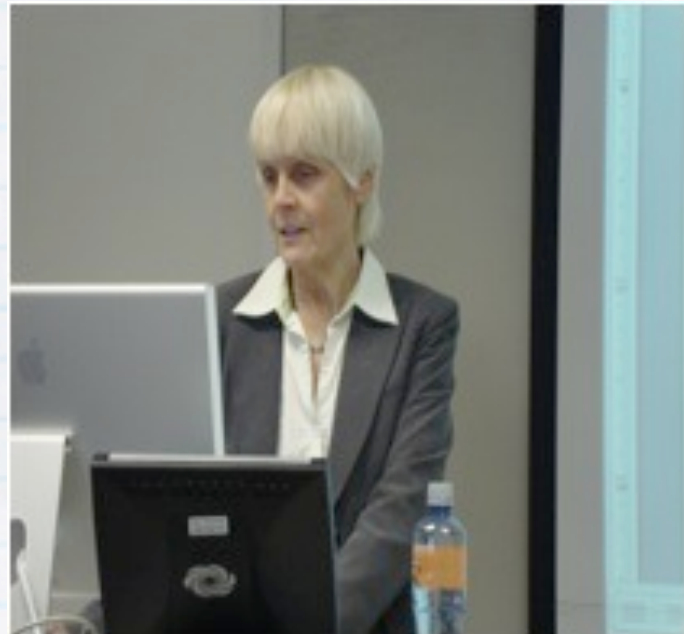
This is a concept many communication researchers are fascinated by. How will the Internet continue to change the world?

Professionals like Janna Anderson, associate professor and director of Imagining the Internet at Elon University and Lee Rainie, director of the Pew and Internet & American Life Project, were determined to find out before they started the project called Imagining the Internet in 2000.

As a parent of an Elon graduate and a member of the Elon Parents Council, Rainie pitched the idea of starting the project because “he thought it would be really cool to do something like Ithiel Sola Pool,” Anderson said. Pool was a revolutionary figure in the studies of social sciences and wrote “The Technologies of Freedom,” published in 1983.

Anderson got on board with Rainie and they began the project.

She said the basis of the project is to collect reactions and information from expert communication researchers and typical Internet users to determine their hopes and concerns for the future as the use of the Internet changes their lives.



Anderson & Rainie ask experts what they think

Rainie and Anderson have conducted four major surveys in which they poll people and gather their opinions. In survey four they asked people, “Is Google making us stupid?”

“Google has only been around for a decade,” Anderson said. “Look at how much it has changed our lives.”

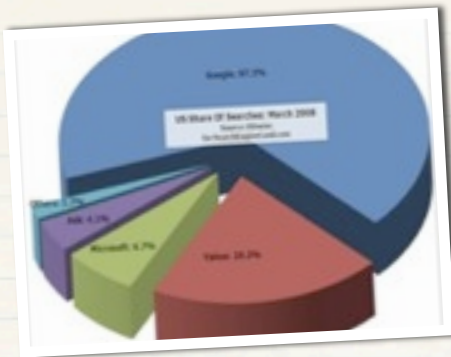
They found that most people think Internet tools like Google actually make us smarter. Anderson said that the question of how to measure intelligence has been raised, as Google has become the public’s encyclopedia.

The Imagining the Internet surveys are not scientific samples, but instead are a way to collect



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qualitative data about the impact of recent technology like the iPhone, Facebook and Twitter. “We don’t care about the numbers so much, but rather what people say,” Anderson said.

Since 2004, Anderson and Rainie have conducted surveys every two years to detect changes and update their findings as technology and habits evolve. The 2010 survey allowed respondents to share about the evolutionary changes of intelligence, knowledge, identity, gadgets and the values of the Internet.

“I think the most important question we asked was about control,” Anderson said, noting the power-struggle between traditional governments and other entrenched interests and global Internet contributors. “The Internet removes hierarchy. It removes bottlenecks. It removes control.”

The new business models of the Internet have changed economics, for instance, so now, Anderson said, “Some corporations are trying to find a way to put the genie back in the bottle.” She said some governments,

including China’s, and some corporations, including Fox, want to retain old structures of information control.

“The entrenched institutions feel threatened by the Internet,” she said, comparing it to the conflict arising when Gutenberg’s printing press challenged the power of the Catholic Church back in the early to mid 1400’s.

Anderson said every tool “has positive and negative impacts on society.” In the recent survey most people were optimistic in answering questions. For instance, the “Google question.”

Seventy-six percent of experts agreed that the Internet will actually enhance human intelligence by 2020.

Anderson is quick to point out that these predictions are merely, well, predictions. “We don’t think these people can actually tell us what’s going to happen in 2020,” she said, but in answering these questions they share their hopes and concerns—ones we should all consider.

Anderson’s work with the Imagining the Internet project has produced published books, four surveys and multiple essays written in addition to the online site.

Anderson seems to enjoy the work. “I’m never disappointed in the result,” she said. “The Internet is a world-changing tool and it has definitely made a difference in the lives of people around the globe.”

1. **Google**

63.01%

2. **Yahoo! Search**

11.08%

3. **Bing**

9.70%

4. **Ask**

2.69%

5. **AOL Search**

not listed

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For more information on Imagining the Internet visit:

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