UNCOMMON COMMON SENSE

By Bill Frayer

Here's Your Brain Online

If you're like me, you fire up your computer first thing in the morning, check your email, check out some newspapers from around the world, and perhaps visit a few other websites. How did we manage before the Internet? Remember when a topic would come up in discussion over a few beers and we couldn't immediately access the information to resolve a dispute? Now, we can "Google" just about anything. Has all this access to information made us wiser? Well, that is a topic for another day, perhaps, but there is increasing evidence that reading online has changed the way we think and read.

It is important to remember that we have regularly experienced huge changes in the way we

process and understand information. The development of writing diminished the importance of an oral tradition. The printing press made it possible for us to understand thoughts and ideas from previous lifetimes. And, of course, first radio, then television, discouraged many of us from reading books as we learned to prefer the passive immediacy of information packaged as entertaining video. Since the 1980's, we have begun to use the Internet as our primary source of reading and understanding our world, and it has changed the nature of reading itself.

Nicholas Carr, in his now-famous *Atlantic* article, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" points out that the Internet "is becoming our map and our clock, our printing press and our typewriter, our calculator and our telephone, and our radio and TV." It is becoming our primary source for information, communication and entertainment. Because our brains are plastic and adapt to the stimuli they receive, our ability to read and think are adapting to this new medium.

Neil Postman, the late social commentator from NYU, in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, pointed out that we have lost our ability to concentrate on complex written arguments. He uses the example of the Lincoln-Douglas debates in the 1854 when regular people stood in the hot sun and watched these two senate candidates debate the great issue of slavery for hours, with rapt attention. Television, Postman points out, has dwarfed our attention span and created a type of intellectual impatience which makes such an event inconceivable today.

Carr cites research that our online reading has further changed our appetite and ability to follow complex written reasoning. " 'We are not only *what* we read,' says Maryanne Wolf, a developmental psychologist at Tufts University. 'We are
how
we read.' Wolf worries that the style of reading promoted by the Net, a style that puts 'efficiency' and 'immediacy' above all else, may be weakening our capacity for the kind of deep reading that emerged when an earlier technology, the printing press, made long and complex works of prose commonplace. When we read online, she says, we tend to become 'mere decoders of information.' Our ability to interpret text, to make the rich mental connections that form when we read deeply and without distraction, remains largely disengaged."

Have we reached a point where we have replaced thoughtful wisdom with the endless access to up-to-date information? Will future generations of "plugged-in" people never experience the thoughtful prose of James Fallows or Buckminster Fuller? Will our computer-mediated thoughts and reasoning become more shallow, albeit more detailed? Does it matter? After all, we survived the development of writing, printing, radio and television. Nevertheless, I would suggest that our gradual loss of the appetite and ability to carefully read long, complex arguments may be problematic. Critical thinking requires reading deep, complex ideas, not

impatient skimming and hypertext links.

—Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.
T. S. Eliot