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Google altering how and what we recall

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A new study confirms it: Google is altering your brain. More precisely, our growing dependence on the Internet has changed how — and what — our brains choose to remember.

When we know where to find information, we're less likely to remember it — an amnesia dubbed "The Google Effect" by a team led by psychologist Betsy Sparrow of Columbia University.

Goodbye, soul-searching; hello, facts-at-fingertips.

The finding, published in Friday's issue of the journal *Science*, doesn't prove Google, Yahoo or other search engines are making us dumber, as some have asserted. We're still capable of remembering things that matter — and are not easily found online, Sparrow said.

Rather, it suggests the human memory is reorganizing where it goes for information, adapting to new computing technologies rather than relying purely on rote memory. We're outsourcing "search" from our brains to our computers.

"We're not thoughtless empty-headed people who don't have memories anymore," Sparrow said. "But we are becoming particularly adept at remembering where to go find things. And that's kind of amazing."

In a series of four experiments at Columbia and Harvard universities, Sparrow and her team found that students are more likely to recall a trivial fact if they think it will be erased from the computer — and forget it if they're assured it will be there.

Similarly, the team proved that people are better at remembering where to find facts, rather than the facts themselves. The students, they found, recalled the names of files where information was stored, rather than the information itself.

This creates a mental dependency on instant access to information, the team noted.

No wonder the loss of our Internet connection feels like losing a friend, they wrote. Once we become reliant on a huge reservoir of information, it feels uneasy to be away from it, she said.

"We must remain plugged in to know what Google knows," the paper concludes.