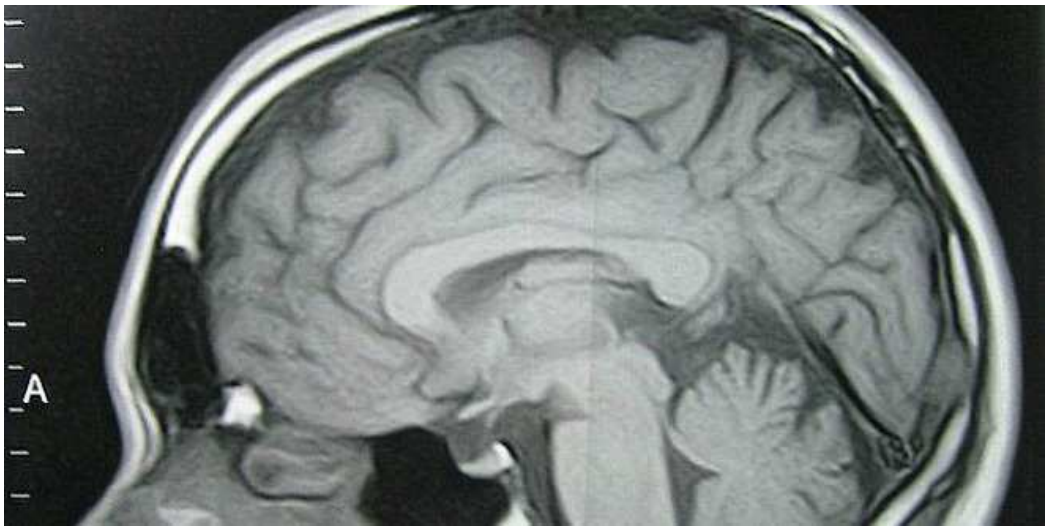
Is the Internet Good or Bad for Your Brain?

By Alvaro Fernandez, SharpBrains.com 11/2/2013



The controversy itself is superficial; as the obvious reality is the internet and technology are not only here to stay, but constantly evolving and permeating more of our lives.

And, rest assured, the so-called “Flynn Effect” (the sustained increase in “raw” IQ scores since the 1930s) suggests that, if anything, the impact of technology on the population at large has been more positive, or at least neutral, than negative.

The real conversation should be how we can best use the Internet in smarter ways that help us to monitor and enhance the brain, and how can we actively prepare to manage information overload.

A surge of innovation is already pointing at ways in which the Internet can, for the first time, enable better brain health care for everyone with a brain and Internet access. It will soon be simple for an individual to conduct an at-home assessment that will provide a baseline for their cognitive health, which is key given the growing interest from the public in being more proactive with their overall health and wellness in general and, specifically, how to improve brainpower. More baby boomers are recognizing the brain’s status as their most important asset and the need for “brain fitness” in order to lead a productive life.

This, in turn, is already changing research and preventive health practices. Keeping this aggregated information in the cloud allows researchers and developers to examine the data and identify “digital biomarkers” to inform

prevention, diagnoses and treatment in a constellation of brain and mental disorders that are now mostly defined by subjective symptoms.

“Big Data” applications are becoming available and capable of helping personalize brain health tools at the individual level, based on both past data and information gathered over time. Tablet-based screenings can be instrumental in diagnoses of Alzheimer’s and MCI. Mobile devices are already entering the sports world, with cognitive tests for concussions. Institutions like AAA have begun large-scale web-based assessments and cognitive training that works on driver’s cognitive skills in order to become safer (and less expensive to insure) drivers.

Now, every new technology presents a fair set of challenges. The flow of information can be overwhelming and lead to “paralysis by analysis.” Chronic multi-tasking can make us less productive, not more. Increased choices and uncertainty can lead to increased stress and anxiety. It is important to note that these are quasi-universal features of modern life, not the type of conditions of disorders that our medical system is set up to address.

And this is why ubiquitous, scalable technology such as the Internet must be part of the solution. A significant opportunity ahead of us is how to leverage consumer-facing, Internet-enabled platforms to optimize brain function to better process information, to enhance working memory, to better regulate one’s stress and emotions. All of these facets of brain health are critical if we are to thrive at a human and considerate level in an information-choked society.

So is the internet good for the brain? The answer can be a resounding “yes” if the analytical and collaborative power of the internet is used properly to monitor and enhance brain functionality in a cost-effective, scalable manner. The trick will be in properly preparing and guiding people to adapt to the mental demands of a modern society. Fortunately it is us, not the Internet, who have a plastic and resilient brain.

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