

Part Four: Organizational Processes

15 Google, The Digital Age, and Your Memory

01:25:46:05 --:--:--:--

- This is The Rundown.

I'm Hari Sreenivasan.

01:25:48:08 --:--:--:--

If you've ever noticed

01:25:49:14 --:--:--:--

that you don't bother
remembering things

01:25:51:14 --:--:--:--

that you can find
on the internet,

01:25:53:04 --:--:--:--

you aren't alone.

01:25:54:05 --:--:--:--

And there's a new study
in the journal Science

01:25:56:09 --:--:--:--

that delves into that
and much more.

01:25:58:02 --:--:--:--

The title of the paper is called
Google Effects on Memory:

01:26:00:20 --:--:--:--

Cognitive consequences
of having information

01:26:02:27 --:--:--:--

at our fingertips.

01:26:08:02 --:--:--:--

We're joined by lead author
Betsy Sparrow,

01:26:10:03 --:--:--:--

a psychologist
from Columbia University.

01:26:12:04 --:--:--:--

Thanks for being with us.

01:26:13:13 --:--:--:--

- Thank you.

01:26:14:07 --:--:--:--

- So what are the kind
of key findings here?

01:26:16:07 --:--:--:--

You're essentially telling me

01:26:17:23 --:--:--:--

that I am able to take
the space

01:26:19:09 --:--:--:--

where I used
to remember things,

01:26:20:28 --:--:--:--

and now I'm remembering how
to find the information better?

01:26:26:23 --:--:--:--

- The overall findings are

01:26:28:03 --:--:--:--

that when people
don't know things,

01:26:29:26 --:--:--:--

they tend to think
about the computer first.

01:26:31:29 --:--:--:--

They think about the place
to find it.

01:26:33:23 --:--:--:--

When people expect
to have information

01:26:35:20 --:--:--:--

accessible to them later,

01:26:37:00 --:--:--:--

they don't remember it as well
as when they don't expect to.

01:26:39:18 --:--:--:--

So they do locate it externally
instead of internally.

01:26:42:03 --:--:--:--

And then finally, yes,

01:26:43:09 --:--:--:--

that people tend to prioritize
where to find things

01:26:45:20 --:--:--:--

as opposed
to the things themselves,

01:26:47:14 --:--:--:--

which actually I think
is pretty adaptive.

01:26:53:17 --:--:--:--

- so what kinds of information
are we essentially keeping

01:26:56:05 --:--:--:--

on the internet and not keeping
in our brains anymore?

01:26:58:19 --:--:--:--

- My guess is mostly
the information

01:27:00:14 --:~:~:~:~:~

that we don't have
to use in our day-to-day lives,

01:27:02:22 --:~:~:~:~:~

the things that we
aren't experts in--

01:27:04:18 --:~:~:~:~:~

so the things that we aren't

01:27:05:26 --:~:~:~:~:~

the transactive memory source
for other people.

01:27:08:04 --:~:~:~:~:~

- So what is transactive memory?

01:27:09:21 --:~:~:~:~:~

- so transactive memory
is this idea

01:27:11:14 --:--:--:--
that we have
external memory systems

01:27:13:08 --:--:--:--
that are available to us,

01:27:14:17 --:--:--:--
and typically,
or historically,

01:27:16:07 --:--:--:--
they were described
as other people.

01:27:18:01 --:--:--:--
So there would be other people
in our lives,

01:27:20:02 --:--:--:--
say, in our office
or our home life,

01:27:21:24 --:--:--:--
who would know specific things,

01:27:23:11 --:--:--:--
and so we would go to them

01:27:24:19 --:--:--:--
when we needed to know
the answers to those things,

01:27:26:29 --:--:--:--
but we wouldn't bother

01:27:28:03 --:--:--:--
to encode
the information internally.

01:27:30:00 --:--:--:--
We would just know
what they knew

01:27:31:19 --:--:--:--
and know to go to them
to find out.

01:27:33:08 --:--:--:--

- So, you know, people
have been complaining

01:27:35:11 --:--:--:--

about this idea ever since
we had the written word.

01:27:37:21 --:--:--:--

I mean, there
were philosophers saying,

01:27:39:19 --:--:--:--

"Oh, my God,
we're gonna forget everything.

01:27:41:22 --:--:--:--

"The oral tradition
is where it's at.

01:27:43:16 --:--:--:--

We really need
to remember this."

01:27:45:06 --:--:--:--

Is this kind of
that next evolution?

01:27:46:29 --:--:--:--

Are we essentially
taking our memories

01:27:48:26 --:--:--:--

and putting them outside
of our brains?

01:27:50:23 --:--:--:--

Not memories, I should say,
but huge chunks of our brain

01:27:53:07 --:--:--:--

and putting them outside?

01:27:54:17 --:--:--:--

- I don't think so,
necessarily.

01:27:56:06 --:--:--:--

I think, you know, that there

may be more information

01:27:58:17 --:--:--:--
that we look up quickly online

01:28:00:04 --:--:--:--
when we could oftentimes,
you know,

01:28:01:27 --:--:--:--
go back inside our own memories
to find it.

01:28:03:27 --:--:--:--
We're just, you know,
in a hurry.

01:28:05:16 --:--:--:--
So the stuff is still there,

01:28:06:28 --:--:--:--
it's just we're not accessing it
as much as we used to.

01:28:09:10 --:--:--:--
And I also think it's not
all that different

01:28:11:11 --:--:--:--
from the transactive memory
sources that we've always used.

01:28:14:02 --:--:--:--
It's just more salient
to people

01:28:15:21 --:--:--:--
that we're using it this way.

01:28:17:04 --:--:--:--
So people don't really think
about the other people

01:28:19:15 --:--:--:--
in their lives
that they're using,

01:28:21:07 --:--:--:--
you know,
as external memory sources,

01:28:23:03 --:--:--:--
but the computer
is really--

01:28:24:18 --:--:--:--
you know, everyone realizes
that they're doing this.

01:28:27:02 --:--:--:--
You know, it resonates
with everybody.

01:28:28:29 --:--:--:--
So it seems that much more,
I guess, scary in some ways,

01:28:31:09 --:--:--:--
you know, the idea
that we're locating everything

01:28:33:19 --:--:--:--
that we learn outside
of ourselves,

01:28:35:12 --:--:--:--
and so does that have
any kind of impact

01:28:37:08 --:--:--:--
on our ability to remember
things in general?

01:28:39:12 --:--:--:--
I don't think that's the case,

01:28:40:27 --:--:--:--
but I actually don't have data
on that.

01:28:42:23 --:--:--:--
- It leads me
to this question of,

01:28:44:12 --:--:--:--
if we're using this transactive
memory online so much,

01:28:46:26 --:--:--:--
what happens on those moments

01:28:48:06 --:--:--:--
when we're not connected
to the internet?

01:28:50:06 --:--:--:--
Do we just get dumber?

01:28:51:11 --:--:--:--
- [laughs]

01:28:52:03 --:--:--:--
Well, like I said,
it depends.

01:28:53:19 --:--:--:--
It depends on how much you want

01:28:55:04 --:--:--:--
to know the answer
to the question.

01:28:56:26 --:--:--:--
So if it's something
that's really crucial

01:28:58:27 --:--:--:--
to something you're doing
at the time,

01:29:00:25 --:--:--:--
you'll find some other way,
right?

01:29:02:17 --:--:--:--
You'll call up the person
who might know.

01:29:04:15 --:--:--:--
You know, you'll actually trek
over to the library

01:29:06:25 --:--:--:--
to look up the information.

01:29:08:07 --:--:--:--
I mean, it really depends.

01:29:09:17 --:--:--:--
This is actually one

of the things

01:29:11:07 --:--:--:--
my husband and I
were talking about.

01:29:13:00 --:--:--:--
You know, we said,
what does happen

01:29:14:22 --:--:--:--
if you just want to know
the name of an actress?

01:29:16:26 --:--:--:--
That's not particularly
important, you know?

01:29:19:00 --:--:--:--
And so we thought,

01:29:20:01 --:--:--:--
well, you know,
you could kind of do

01:29:21:18 --:--:--:--
this kind of daydreaming thing

01:29:23:04 --:--:--:--
where you kind of go back
in your mind and think about,

01:29:25:16 --:--:--:--
all right, you know,
where was I

01:29:27:03 --:--:--:--
when I saw this person?

01:29:28:09 --:--:--:--
Was it in black and white?

01:29:29:18 --:--:--:--
Was it in color?

01:29:30:16 --:--:--:--
You know, was she older,
was she younger?

01:29:32:14 --:--:--:--

And then sometimes you might come to the answer

01:29:34:19 --:--:--:--
and then other times
you might not

01:29:36:09 --:--:--:--
and you probably just forget
about it.

01:29:38:03 --:--:--:--
- Okay and we
should also mention

01:29:39:22 --:--:--:--
that you had help
from Jenny Liu

01:29:41:09 --:--:--:--
of the University
of Wisconsin Madison

01:29:43:06 --:--:--:--
and Daniel Wegner
of Harvard University.

01:29:45:06 --:--:--
But Betsy Sparrow,
the lead author

01:29:46:28 --:--:--:--
and psychologist
from Columbia University,

01:29:49:02 --:--:--:--
thanks so much for joining us.

01:29:50:17 --:--:--:--
- Thank you.

01:29:51:09 --:--:--:--
- This is The Rundown.

01:29:52:14 --:--:--
I'm Hari Sreenivasan.
Stay with us.