

Is hyperconnectivity good for us?

By Jim Nowlan

As a child, I remember our telephone as a large wooden box attached to the wall. To place a call, mom or dad would lift the receiver from its cradle, which connected us with “Central,” our local telephone operator, who would connect us with the outside world. Inefficient, but it worked.

In recent weeks I have been playing commuter, taking a METRA train in to Chicago from an outer suburb. I try to sit in the single seats of the upstairs of the train car. The engineer dims the lights briefly before each trip starts. As I look down on the first floor of commuters in the dim light, I see lighted screens from smart phones, tablet computers and Kindles on the laps of half—I counted them—of the 20 passengers I can see from above.

There is silence. No one speaks; maybe they didn’t speak on trains before the internet, but I know that now half are deeply engrossed in. . . .what? Facebook, twitter, newspaper blogs, Youtube, searches on Google for information? I don’t know. But we’ve sure come a long way, baby, from the wall phone. Or have we?

So I turned to the experts. The Pew Research Center recently asked internet experts, futurists, technology geeks and other thoughtful people for their observations on the topic of what is being wrought by all this change.

Most of the 1,021 who responded agreed that the brains of those using the internet extensively are being “wired” differently from those over age 35. But they split roughly down the middle as to whether the results are positive or baleful for the generally younger generation.

Those who were positive agreed that teens and young adults “are learning more and they are adept at finding answers to deep questions, in part because they can search effectively and access collective intelligence via the internet.”

On the other hand, those negative on the consequences of the internet agreed that most of the young “spend most of their energy sharing short social messages, being entertained and being distracted away from deep engagement with people and knowledge.”

My teacher friend Randy Fritz of Williamsfield, IL said he sees his students texting one another constantly, yet “they don’t know how to search effectively over the internet.”

Clearly, we have an important new tool available to us. The internet and cloud computing (where one can retrieve his files from “the cloud” rather than store files on one’s own computer) are coming to serve as the external memory for our brains. (Note: I use the internet constantly for research, and am “on” Facebook but rarely use it, nor do I tweet or have a “smart phone,” though I’m getting one.)

Just as thousands of years ago people gave up the oral tradition when our forbears began to write things down, so maybe we are giving up the tradition of storing as much as we can in our brains, now that we pull down instantaneously from the internet the facts we need.

When I was young, parents complained about their teens spending too much time on the phone; now it is probably too much time texting and on Facebook.

Amber Case, a “cyberanthropologist,” told Pew, “The human brain is wired to adapt to what the environment around us requires for survival.” And super-fast exchanges of information may be critical to survival, at least job survival, in the world to come.

But Alvaro Retana, a technologist (even the terms to describe what we do are changing), worries that, “The short attention span resulting from the quick interactions will be detrimental to

focusing on the harder problems, and we will probably see stagnation in many areas: technology, even social venues such as literature.”

The ancient Greek philosopher Sophocles said, “Nothing vast enters the life of mortals without a curse.”

We simply have a new, extraordinarily powerful tool. As with the telephone, it depends on how we use it.

One worry I have is that as newer, faster, more ingenious—and costly—devices tumble out of Apple and elsewhere, the divide between the haves and those who have little will widen. Our schools and libraries will have to expand their capacities to try to fill the gap.

For parents and grandparents, I suggest that all be done to help your offspring keep up with the new technologies, so long as they are admonished to appreciate that the new devices, and how they use them, can help them succeed in life, or fall further behind.