More speed, less analysis?

In many ways, the internet has been a boon for the written word. (1) How much of our days are now taken up with reading and writing emails, tweets, status updates and blog posts?

However, though we may be reading and writing a great deal more than we used to, we are doing it in very different ways. Take letters and emails, for example. In the past we would sit down with a piece of paper and a pen and think carefully about what we wanted to say, knowing that any changes would result in ugly crossings out, or in having to start again from scratch. Now we can fire off an email in seconds.
The way we read has also changed. We talk about reading a book from cover to cover, because traditionally we start at the beginning and read through to the end. However, this is not how we read online. Instead, we start on a particular page, but may not even finish that page, as a link takes us off to a passage on another page, and so on. (2) This is known as ‘associative’ thinking and it uses the brain in a very different way from ‘linear’ reading.

There are certainly advantages to developing associative thinking skills. Using the brain in this way means that we are getting better than ever at multi-tasking. It ensures that we can work at speed and develops our ability to think outside the box. Being able to switch backwards and forwards between emails and other tasks is useful in a working environment, but constant distractions make it very difficult to read at a deeper level. We are therefore much less likely to be critically analysing what we read, making inferences, thinking in an abstract way or gaining any real insight.

In his article Is Google making us stupid?, Nicholas Carr suggests that we are not only less likely to be reading deeply, but that we may be becoming less capable of doing so. Reflecting on his own experience and that of his contemporaries, he concludes that many people, including ‘literary types’, are no longer able or willing to become immersed in a book or a longer article. They become fidgety or lose their train of thought. And, Carr argues, this may be not just because it’s more convenient to read associatively, but because the way people think is actually changing, too. (3) The work of Gary Small, a professor of psychiatry at the University of California, concludes that being constantly exposed to new media strengthens new neural pathways – connections between different parts of the brain – that are related to associative thinking, but also simultaneously weakens the pathways which enable us to follow a narrative or fully digest and understand information.
We might, therefore, face the prospect of a whole new generation that lacks the ability to think critically and deeply about what they are reading.

But haven’t we been here before?

The Ancient Greek philosopher Socrates was very suspicious of the written word, concerned that people would lose the ability to memorize long texts. He was, of course, quite right, but future generations, who increasingly became used to having books, no longer saw a need for this skill, and now, in our modern world, it is not valued at all.

Ultimately, the world is changing and our brains are probably changing in line with the new demands they face, just as they have always done throughout history. However, while we may not be bothered about having lost our once prodigious ability to memorize, are we as willing to lose our ability to read deeply? If not, we need to consider just how we can maintain our critical, deeper reading skills, while also engaging in our daily digital diet.