

sucked into technology

I think I know what's going on. For more than a decade now, I've been **spending a lot of time online, searching and surfing and sometimes adding to the great databases of the Internet.** The Web has been a godsend to me as a writer. Research that once required days in the stacks or periodical rooms of **libraries can now be done in minutes.** A few Google searches, some quick clicks on hyperlinks, and I've got the telltale fact or pithy quote I was after. Even when I'm not working, I'm as likely as not to be foraging in the Web's info-thickets' reading and writing e-mails, scanning headlines and blog posts, watching videos and listening to podcasts, or just tripping from link to link to link. (Unlike footnotes, to which they're sometimes likened, hyperlinks don't merely point to related works; **they propel you toward them.**) *internet sucks you in*

For me, as for others, the Net is becoming a universal medium, **the conduit for most of the information that flows through my eyes and ears and into my mind.** The advantages of having immediate access to such an incredibly rich store of information are many, and they've been widely described and duly applauded. "The perfect recall of silicon memory," *Wired's* Clive Thompson has written, "can be an enormous boon to thinking." But that boon comes at a price. As the media theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out in the 1960s, media are not just passive channels of information. They supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought. And what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: **in a swiftly moving stream of particles.** *Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.* *moved slowly, almost drowning in info. now used to it*

always think about

I'm not the only one. When I mention my troubles with reading to friends and acquaintances—literary types, most of them—many say they're having similar experiences. The more they use the Web, the more they have to fight to stay focused on long pieces of writing. Some of the bloggers I follow have also begun mentioning the phenomenon. Scott Karp, who writes a blog about online media, recently confessed that he has stopped reading books altogether. "I was a lit major in college, and used to be [a] voracious book reader," he wrote. "What happened?" He speculates on the answer: **"What if I do all my reading on the web not so much because the way I read has changed, i.e. I'm just seeking convenience, but because the way I THINK has changed?"** *everything has changed*

Bruce Friedman, who blogs regularly about the use of computers in medicine, also has described how **the Internet has altered his mental habits.** **"I now have almost totally lost the ability to read and absorb a longish article on the web or in print,"** he wrote earlier this year. A pathologist who has long been on the faculty of the University of Michigan Medical School, Friedman elaborated on his comment in a telephone conversation with me. His thinking, he said, has taken on a "staccato" quality, reflecting the way he quickly scans short passages of text from many sources online. "I can't read *War and Peace* anymore," he admitted. "I've lost the ability to do that. **Even a blog post of more than three or four paragraphs is too much to absorb. I skim it.**"

seems like too many words and info in one place

we definitely are

Anecdotes alone don't prove much. And we still await the long-term neurological and psychological experiments that will provide a definitive picture of how Internet use affects cognition. But a recently published study of online research habits, conducted by scholars from University College London, **suggests that we may well be in the midst of a sea change in the way we read and think.** As part of the five-year research program, the scholars examined computer logs documenting the behavior of visitors to two popular research sites, one operated by the British Library and one by a U.K. educational consortium, that provide access to journal articles, e-books, and other sources of written information.