

Searching the Internet inflates estimates of internal knowledge

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Working in groups is advantageous because different individuals can be responsible for different information, allowing each individual to develop more in-depth expertise. For instance, a plumber, electrician, and carpenter work together to build a house, but each is responsible for unique aspects of the project. This is an example of a transactive memory system: information is distributed across the group, and each group member is aware of what he or she knows, as well as who knows what.

Because the Internet surpasses any person in accessibility, speed, and breadth of knowledge, the Internet may be treated as an all-knowing expert transactive memory partner. However, in a recent paper in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, Fisher, Goddu, and Keil (2015) suggest that these same features may exacerbate potentially negative effects of transactive memory, in particular conflating knowledge for which a partner is responsible with knowledge one actually possesses.

Each of the experiments had an induction phase followed by a self-assessment phase. In the induction phase, [participants](#) rated their ability to explain the answers to common questions (e.g., "How do zippers work?") after either searching the Internet to confirm their explanation, or being specifically instructed not to use the Internet. In the subsequent self-assessment phase, participants were asked to rate how well they could explain the answers to groups of questions from a variety of domains that were unrelated to the induction phase questions.

Participants who searched the Internet in the induction phase rated themselves as being able to give better explanations than participants who were not allowed to search the Internet. This result was obtained even when participants in the Internet condition were given a specific web source to find (e.g., "Please search the scientificamerican.com page for this information") and participants in the no Internet condition were shown text from that same website. In other words, searching for explanations online led to increases in self-assessed knowledge even when both groups had access to the same explanatory content, and when Internet search did not involve effortful processes like choosing between sources. Higher self-assessed knowledge was also observed following unsuccessful Internet searches (e.g., searches that did not yield an answer to the question).

Increases in self-assessed knowledge following Internet search were reduced or eliminated in the following conditions: 1) when participants were provided with a link to access the web source in the induction phase, and 2) when autobiographical knowledge was probed in the self-assessment phase. These results suggest that it is the act of searching online that promotes increases in self-assessed knowledge, and this effect is limited to domains where the Internet might plausibly be of use.

Together, this series of experiments demonstrates that actively searching the Internet inflates our sense of the knowledge we actually possess because we fail to recognize the extent to which we rely on external sources for information. While similar illusions of knowledge have been obtained for other external information sources, these illusions may be particularly strong for the Internet because online information is easily and nearly constantly accessible, is retrieved quickly, and covers an incredible breadth of content. Such access to [information](#) has many benefits, but the authors caution that the strength of the illusion of [knowledge](#) with respect to the Internet could have negative consequences in situations in which the Internet is not available, and individuals think

they know more than they really do.

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