

The Pendulum seeks to inspire, entertain and inform the Elon community by providing a voice for students and faculty as well as a forum for the meaningful exchange of ideas.

Editorial

Established 1974

The Pendulum is published each Wednesday of the academic year. The advertising and editorial copy deadline is 5 p.m. the Friday before publication. Letters to the editor and guest columns are welcome and should be typed and e-mailed with a telephone number for verification. Submissions are accepted as Word documents. The Pendulum reserves the right to edit obscene and potentially libelous material. Lengthy letters or columns may be trimmed to fit. All submissions become the property of The Pendulum and will not be returned. You can reach The Pendulum by e-mail at pendulum@elon.edu. If you have questions or concerns about an article contact a section editor. Please do not respond to reporters directly.

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Learning how to forget

When knowledge loses its permanence

Revolutions in communications technology are credited with making life easier and encouraging ties between distances and cultures, but it also must be noted that such revelations bring about a change in a populace's mentality. Even if a message remains the same, the conduit through which it's conveyed is guaranteed to uniquely contort it.

The progression from spoken word to text, then to recordings and telegrams, phones and faxes and eventually the Internet's instantaneous outreach, isn't notable merely for the time it cut out of communicating, but for the irreversible change it brought about.

"They will not use their memories. They will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence," Plato quoted Socrates in "Phaedrus." "They will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing."

Socrates was referring to the advent of written texts replacing spoken word as the main vessel through which stories, lessons and knowledge were passed on from one generation to the next. His fears, stated plainly, were that if ideas were given physical embodiment, their importance would decline.

After all, if an individual can go to a book for information, what use is there in retaining whatever is learned? Socrates feared knowledge would be leased, not owned, by society.

That prediction has never been truer than right now. On a scale the ancient Greeks never could have predicted, innumerable

amounts of information are right at the fingertips of entire countries.

The hunt for knowledge has changed from a long trek through library corridors, while leafing through yellowed texts with a notebook riddled with hectic notes. Now, almost every question can be answered with a quick Google search and a click on the first link.

But is it such a bad thing? Though it may be handy to pull out obscure facts in dire moments, and an elaborately well-founded improvisation may be useful for a presentation here and there, it appears as though the cultural momentum is moving toward temporary, readily available information.

A study released in April from The Ohio State University, suggesting higher amounts of time devoted to Facebook were influencing lower grades at the university, seemed to validate the critical view of this huge breadth of information. With such a deluge of names, dates, interests and the like eating space that presumably would be devoted to memorizing pertinent information for exams, it seemed it was obvious that students actively gobbling information would have less time and space for schoolwork.

But the study's claims were called into question after Josh Pasek, a Ph.D. candidate at Stanford University, released a study that used a significantly larger polling base to draw the conclusion that there was little to no reason to justify the claims that Facebook was rotting the intellect of its users.

"The question is not whether individuals are using a particular medium, but how," the study imparts.

It's not just the Internet that contributes to the clutter. The expansion of television

channels has led to, like the Internet, a diverse and at times incredibly inane, landscape. The problem isn't that there are hundreds of channels or millions of Web sites covering news and world events — it's the way in which users interact with their choices.

There's a natural predilection to gravitate toward information that either fits a cookie-cutter worldview or serves to placate instead of agitate. As more and more options fall into society's lap, it's inevitable that without rigorous objectivity, said worldview will become increasingly myopic.

Instantaneous information is, at face value, perfectly innocent. Being able to rent movies right on YouTube, receive medical advice with just a few search terms and be given a rundown of pertinent news events on Drudge Report is convenient and in no way inherently insidious.

But the manner in which it changes the way society thinks, remembering links — not facts — or being satisfied with a quick search as opposed to going through articles containing at least a bit of context, has far-reaching implications. The point of contention is simple. Is it our role to set limitations on how much our own thought processes are altered by technology, and to encourage others to do the same? Or is societal change inevitable, and knowledge that vanishes with a passing breeze simply too commonplace to change?

The danger in giving up on human-held knowledge, though, is that those who acknowledge this change can use this to their own advantage, manipulating these temporary memories with pandering, baseless claims that will be received as fact because there isn't anything upstairs to claim otherwise.

The speed of knowledge

Messenger pigeon:

30 mph

Pony Express:

10 days

First-Class Mail:

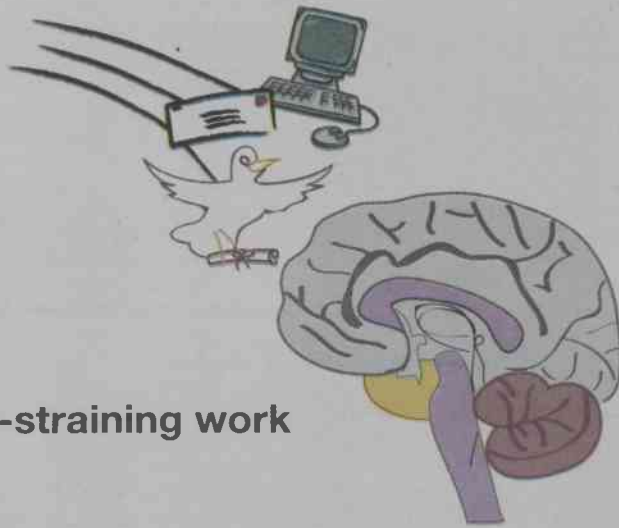
2-3 days

A book:

Hours of eye-straining work

Google:

A few minutes



INFORMATION COURTESY OFBBC, UPS

MIRIAM WILLIAMSON | Graphics

CORRECTIONS...

The Sept. 9 column, "Don't be at his Beck and call," incorrectly said, "While Cooper is one of those responsible for the slough of misinformation that's out there ..."

The intended wording is as follows: "While Cooper is not one of those responsible for the slough of misinformation that's out there ..."

TO COMMENT...

We appreciate original responses to Pendulum articles. Feedback of 500 words or fewer can be sent in several ways.

Letters to the Editor and columns can be e-mailed to pendulum@elon.edu or sent to 7012 Campus Box, Elon, N.C. 27244. Content will be edited for clarity, length and accuracy. All submissions must include a name and phone number.

A message board also accompanies each article online at www.elon.edu/pendulum where commentary can be quickly posted.

ILLUSTRATING THE ISSUES:

