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“As We May Think,” Vannevar Bush

The internet, hypertext specifically, today embodies a great deal of the ideas that Bush imagines in his paper as a way of indexing information and making it accessible to a large percentage of the population instantaneously. Bush dreams of “selection by association, rather than indexing.” The internet search engines are generally good sources for finding information on infinite topics and thus allow for “selection by association.” One is even capable of finding a specific word in a text through the browser and, therefore, pinpoint the exact piece of information that s/he is in search of.

However, I do not believe that the internet encompasses all of Bush’s aspirations for a method of sharing knowledge. First, because the internet is accessible to anyone, there is a great deal of information that is not from a legitimate source. It is sometimes difficult to pinpoint who the author of certain documents and web pages is. Wrong or incomplete information can be just as destructive or more than the lack of information.

Second, Bush envisions an apparatus that can capture voice, writing and photography at once in order to make a record of information the instant that information is discovered. Although the internet captures text, images, audio and video they are all still separate venues in which to transfer information. I do not think that Bush’s apparatus has yet been invented to the extent that he describes it. The apparatus would be a single medium in which to store all information at once, perhaps even storing the smell of a particular substance.

Third, Bush mentions that “mere compression...is not enough; one needs not only to make and store a record but also be able to consult it.” If there were a search engine that could classify information into more specific fields, the research process would be much more efficient. If authors of web pages could follow to a standard, retrieval of information would be quicker. Bush concludes that in order for mathematicians to exchange information and build on one another’s work, they have to agree on a certain set of symbols in order to communicate. I feel that the internet may need to be simplified in some ways to make communication more effective.

Finally, hypertext is one of the first steps to realizing Bush’s vision. I envision a more interactive mechanism of the future that would allow the user to engage other senses in the transfer of knowledge such as touch or smell. Perhaps there will be a type of screen that can morph into different shapes and change temperature. A two dimensional computer screen, a keyboard and mouse are not enough to absorb the user and transfer information as vividly as Bush describes in his paper.