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The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains

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Description
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The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains

Review By Jeffrey Barlow

Nicholas Carr has become one of America’s “public intellectuals” [1] in that his work has become iconic for us. As that work has focused increasingly upon the impact of the Internet, he has always had much about which to write [2]. His latest book, which should be read by everybody with a serious interest in teaching, learning, and the Internet, is The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains.

Part of the value of Carr’s research and publication has been their ability to be both broad in their implications and understandings, and deep in their research and their embedding within the Western intellectual tradition. To read one of Carr’s books is to also encounter many of the great minds of the Western tradition in whichever subject he may be discussing at the time [3].

Carr has been working on issues related to the Internet for some time. In May of 2003 he wrote a controversial essay, “IT Doesn’t Matter” in The Harvard Business Review. Then in 2004 he extended that analysis in the book, Does IT Matter? [4]. In the summer of 2008, he published a precursor essay to the present work in The Atlantic, “Is Google Making Us Stupid.” [5] By any standards Nicholas Carr is a Deep Thinker in matters relevant to the Internet—I capitalize the term here, because it is a critical element of Carr’s current argument that the Internet is making Deep Thinking increasingly difficult. This is because, Carr argues, persistent use of the Internet and other electronic devices literally rewires the brain and makes concentrated thought more difficult or at least, markedly less attractive to us.

Carr begins by first introducing the long-running argument between those who are interested more by the content of a new medium, and those who argue, like Carr via Marshall McLuhan, that the medium itself is the message.

As Carr states: “What both enthusiast and skeptic miss is what McLuhan saw: that in the long run a medium’s content matters less than the medium itself in influencing how we think and act
With this introduction, Carr then proceeds to interrogate the impact of the Internet as a medium on our thought processes.

In a chapter entitled “Hal and Me,” Carr discusses his own intellectual journey which began in 2007. He began to experience difficulty in focusing on his work, particularly on careful and concentrated reading, thinking about that reading, and writing carefully about it. Finally, after some initial consultations which convinced him he was not alone in his difficulties—that, in fact, other intellectuals of his acquaintance had expressed the same anxieties, he began to consider that the Internet itself was impacting his ability to concentrate. Finding evidence in leading research on the chemistry of the brain that he had reason to be concerned, Carr “unplugged,” moved to a rural area and limited his Internet use in order to be able to finish this book with a minimum of electronic interference or temptations.

Any simple summary of the The Shallows will surely be inadequate and incomplete, but I understand the argument of the work to be that we now know the brain is much more plastic than we once believed to be the case. It is capable of rewiring its neural system with surprisingly limited inputs in order to become better at tasks, whether these be perceptual or cognitive ones, or those impacting memory. This neuroplasticity is innate, continuous, and perhaps a key function enabling human evolution.

Unfortunately, it follows that the brain’s—as a limited system—changes may well come at the expense of some previous function:

“Experiments show that just as the brain can build new or stronger circuits through physical or mental practice, those circuits can weaken or dissolve with neglect. “If we stop exercising our mental skills,” writes Doidge, “we do not just forget them: the brain map space for those skills is turned over to the skills we practice instead.”36 Jeffrey Schwartz, a professor of psychiatry at UCLA’s medical school, terms this process “survival of the busiest.”37 The mental skills we sacrifice may be as valuable, or even more valuable, than the ones we gain. When it comes to the quality of our thought, our neurons and synapses are entirely indifferent. The possibility of intellectual decay is inherent in the malleability of our brains.”

The impact of electronic media—particularly of the quick scanning of materials read on the Internet is cumulatively a very heavy one, Carr and his sources argue. All the familiar tropes of negative views of the Internet are included such as short attention spans, superficial reading, and potentially addictive behavior. But there are also frightening new ones: The changes resultant from continual or frequent use amount to a rewiring of the brain itself, and further, will impact our ability to work in non-digitized media. We will be impatient with books requiring careful or repeated reading; our brain desires faster and broader inputs: “What it does mean is that the vital paths in our brains become… the paths of least resistance. They are the paths that most of us will take most of the time, and the farther we proceed down them, the more difficult it becomes to turn back.”
In underlining McLuhan’s argument that the medium is the message and not the content, Carr argues that even the act of placing a given body of content—say, this book itself—into a digital format inevitably makes it more distracting because of the bells and whistles which digitization usually adds. For example, I read my copy of *The Shallows*, for the purposes of this review and for the editorial in this issue of Interface, on both an Amazon.com© Kindle and an IPad. In doing so I was tempted by both the presence of an electronic dictionary just a click away, and by a powerful browser putting the Internet itself a click away, and in the case of the IPad, in large format and gorgeous color to boot.

Carr makes no bones about his position in the cultural wars implied by the above facts. He is convinced that deep reading of texts, in which a reader encounters another mind in a limited and quiet intellectual environment permitting a close contact between the reader and the author, may prove to have been a brief period in human history. We may be moving toward a period when there is a “reading class” and many other non-reading or perhaps “scanning” classes who get snippets of information and input over the Internet but can never consider it in depth. [10]

In a bit of intellectual judo, Carr argues that even the counter-arguments of those who “…suggest that the value of the literary mind has always been exaggerated…are another important sign of the fundamental shift taking place in society’s attitude toward intellectual achievement.” [11]

The author also cites details from numerous studies suggesting/proving that the sort of multitasking or scanning of information gleaned while reading interactively are inevitably inferior in terms of comprehension and lasting memory, to material simply read from a book. [12] Again, studies suggest that the damage of multitasking in terms of easily distracted users seems permanent. Those who multitask are less able to concentrate on a given task than those who multitask less. [13]

**Conclusion**

Carr’s argument is a very elaborate and complex one and no simple review in limited space, such as *Interface* affords, can possibly do it justice. Neither do I have the requisite expertise to fully consider, let alone refute, most of the research which Carr discusses. The book itself seems somewhat repetitive at points, and at others it seems to move rather quickly and perhaps too facilely along very complex chains of logic. But, however much we may cavil, perhaps in attempts to protect our own cherished views of the Internet, it remains irreducibly a work which must be read, and considered by all those interested in the impact of the Internet.

**Endnotes**

[1] For a useful definition of public intellectual see: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intellectual](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intellectual) Although this is a very broad entry (“intellectual”) I find this Wikipedia site sufficiently authoritative for my purposes, a definition embedded within a wider context and nicely foot-noted.


[8] Loc. 659-65

[9] Loc. 667-68

[10] Loc. 1870-1876


[12] Loc. 2156-2185

[13] Loc. 2489-2496

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ONE THOUGHT ON “THE SHALLOWS: WHAT THE INTERNET IS DOING TO OUR BRAINS”
Tyree Bord  
on January 30, 2014 at 6:13 PM  said:

Excellent items from you, man. I’ve keep in mind your stuff previous to and you’re simply too wonderful. I actually like what you have obtained here, really like what you are stating and the best way during which you say it. You are making it entertaining and you continue to take care of to keep it smart. I can not wait to read much more from you. That is really a great site.