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Depth perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This book review of *The Shallows* (Norton, 2010, 288 pages) examines how the internet and social media are affecting how we perceive ourselves as people, as members of society and as thinking beings. The author presents his evaluation of *The Shallows* through the lens of his own experiences as a university professor, describing two emerging trends among students: first, a vanishing attention span; and second, that cultural and intellectual depth of knowledge has grown astonishingly thin as more and more students become unmoored from the time-tested intellectual and cultural points of reference upon which a literate civilization rests.

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Nicholas Carr has earned a reputation as a thoughtful, incisive observer of the consequences and effects of communications technology. In the summer of 2008, his article in the *Atlantic* magazine, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" quickly gained far-reaching notoriety – perhaps as much for its provocative title as for the compelling argument it presents about the shadow side of internet use. The article caught the public imagination for another reason: it deftly articulated the growing cultural anxiety in the face of relentless encroachment by the internet. It appears that the received version of recent technological history as progress toward human transformation is not unfolding as advertised.

Two years later, we have another provocative title and an amplified, superbly-researched argument on the same subject. *The Shallows* emerges as a comprehensive and ambitious attempt to grapple with the deeper individual, intellectual and cultural consequences of our dependency on the internet. Carr argues that we are progressively sacrificing our ability to think and read deeply. The increasingly pervasive nature of the power of the internet is reformatting our ability to focus and disrupting the old linear thought processes that came with the medium of the book. In other words, the deep-sea diver in

thoughts, ideas and language is being increasingly replaced by the Jet-Ski surface skimmer. Offloading memory to external data banks heralds a major, fundamental change in the way we think. The internet – the very thing we need and find so indispensable – is the very thing that threatens the depth and distinctiveness of our thought processes.

Most readers will feel instinctively that “the shallows” toward which Carr imagines we are headed are already in sight. The serious attention deficit, the disconnected thoughts, the superficiality and emphasis on speed and reaction the internet promotes and rewards is everywhere in evidence. Nowhere can we see these shallows more clearly than from something called the “TweetDeck,” which provides the viewer with a full computer screen of all his Twitter-generated chatter. The TweetDeck is rewardingly quick. The numerous updates it provides in real time give one a sense of hyperconnection to the world of opinion, expressed in 140 characters. It is the perfect symbol of the delights and dangers of the disconnected, disjointed, surface skimmer’s world. The satirical website *The Onion* quipped in a faux-article recently that “it now takes only four minutes for a new cultural touchstone to transform from an amusing novelty into an intensely annoying thing people never want to see or hear again.” Satire is almost becoming redundant.

A word of caution: *The Shallows* describes; it does not prescribe. It is not a call to return to a simpler time, if such a thing were possible. Rather, it is a deeply engaging exploration of what the internet is doing to us.

Even the casual observer can see how heavy internet use has consequences. Deep focus is everywhere a casualty. It’s true in the office, where distraction from email, Blackberry and internet connection can be a serious challenge to productivity. It is most disturbingly true in the university as the Net generation comes of age, in two ways. First: the vanishing attention span. That generation (but not just that generation) is so thoroughly neurally wired to the patterns, expectations and rewards of the internet that that limited student attention span vanishes to zero before the seductive power of a Wi-Fi-connected laptop in the lecture hall. The second effect is more serious: the cultural and intellectual depth of their knowledge has grown astonishingly thin as more and more students become unmoored from the time-tested intellectual and cultural points of reference upon which a literate civilization rests. Nor are scholars themselves exempt: the digitization of journals and search engines has led to scholarship that follows prevailing opinion more often and more frequently. In fact, nobody who uses the internet can avoid its reach. As Carr notes, “we are evolving from being cultivators of personal knowledge to being hunters and gatherers in the electronic data forest.” More information does not equal more knowledge. In fact, it may end up producing less. Multitasking online, for example, is training our brains to “pay attention to the crap” as we become more and more “suckers for irrelevancy.”

Carr's argument is that our current state of distraction is unique and transformational. His claims are serious and sweeping. The burden of proof is therefore high. What makes the internet, say, different from previous technologies? Most mass media technologies have been the subject of cultural and moral anxiety at one time or another. Television and comic books are two such recent examples. There will always be those who extol the virtues of a new technology and those Cassandras who warn it will change everything. We also know that the internet as a technology has indeed opened up new possibilities, new ways of creating, thinking and especially connecting. We cannot live without it. We therefore have a responsibility to understand complex phenomena – both their advantages and their shadow side.

The Shallows relies on a powerful combination of historical insight, cultural criticism and scientific discovery to make its argument. Using an accessible yet compelling narrative style, Carr synthesizes a wealth of research on how human thought has been influenced by the tools of the mind – from orality and literacy to the printing press and electrical audio-visual technologies. The central historical event for him was the arrival of the printing press, where the literary mind became the “general mind” – open to all because of Gutenberg's invention. To read a book, Carr argues, was to engage in an unnatural process of thought – one that demanded sustained, unbroken attention. That attention – that focus – was a defining moment for the general human intellect, releasing its powers and allowing it to flourish. Carr argues that the most momentous intellectual achievements of the 19th and 20th centuries could not have been possible without the book as a sustained intellectual endeavour – from Einstein to Thomas Kuhn, through to Lord Keynes.

Some of the most arresting passages of Carr's book are the interconnections he makes with neuropathology and the neuroplasticity of the brain. In other words, the book examines the ways that the tools we use shape the human mind. Carr draws on extensive research to assert that neural pathways that fire together, wire together. He links the neurological responses of the human brain to the use of the internet to describe how the Net works against us by promoting and rewarding distraction while discouraging deeper contemplation. Meanwhile, the brain reorganizes itself to meet the demands of the technology. Most disturbingly, Carr cites numerous studies that show that the consequences of that distraction lead to less understanding and knowledge. He interweaves a sophisticated historical understanding, a scientific approach and a cultural perspective to produce a lucid and penetrating argument. His ability to map technological phenomena onto cultural and intellectual developments is both enjoyable and memorable.

The Shallows also levels an intelligent broadside against the prevailing orthodoxy of the Church of Google – specifically the faith of its founders in “efficiency as the ultimate good” and in the belief that we'd be better off if our

“brains were supplemented, or even replaced, by artificial intelligence.” The author is most disturbed not by the desire to create an “amazingly cool machine” that may outthink its creators, but the “pinched conception of the human mind that gives rise to such a desire.” Here again, Carr’s depth of historical understanding informs his perspective. What Frederick Winslow Taylor and scientific management did at the turn of the 20th century for the hand, he suggests, “Google is doing for the work of the mind” (p. 150). Its architecture, philosophy and profit structure are all driving it toward that goal. If Google is the internet’s High Church, Carr argues, then “the religion practiced inside its walls is Taylorism.” If that’s true, we should be worried.

The Shallows is tightly reasoned and well researched. It is also accessible and credible in its conclusions. This is clearly the work of a master craftsman. The book acts as an important corrective to the simplistic, two-dimensional technological utopian perspectives that too often dominate the popular discourse on current technological transformation. At the very least, *The Shallows* ought to neutralize some of the more hyperventilated claims about the liberating power of the internet. In Carr’s words: “we shouldn’t allow the glories of technology to blind our inner watchdog to the possibility that we’ve numbed an essential part of ourself” (p. 212).

In an interview promoting this book earlier this year, the Spanish daily *El Pais* asked Mr. Carr whether he had “the solution to save us.” His answer was very instructive:

In my opinion we are heading toward a very utilitarian ideal of the human mind, where what's important is how efficient you are at processing information, and we are moving away from the open-ended ideal of thought that does not necessarily have a practical end but that nevertheless stimulates creativity... If you are constantly distracted, do you have those times to be more contemplative? If we lose those are we going to lose some of the deepest sources of distinctive thinking? I think that as individuals we can escape the consequences of this change in our behavior, but for society as a whole there may be no going back (Carr, 2011).

If there is no “going back,” will deep and distinctive thinking, and the literary mind that powers it, retreat once again to become the province of a select few? The implications raise some interesting questions.

The Shallows’ mission is to describe a complex and pervasive phenomenon. Here, Carr succeeds in offering a highly original, coherent and sobering examination of the effects of our tools on the nerve centres of human cultural and intellectual generation. This book clearly calls for more research and deserves to be widely debated and discussed. For individuals, Carr offers an opportunity to contemplate the effects of our tools and daily routines on what we think about, and how we think about it. For that reason alone, this book deserves to

be read if we are to recognize the shallows, chart an independent course, and put out into the deep.

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