A Reflection on *The Shallows: What The Internet Is Doing To Our Brains* by Nicholas Carr

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Is Google making us stupid? This is the title of a provocative 2008 essay in The Atlantic Monthly written by Nicholas Carr. Carr is no stranger to writing provocative pieces regarding technology issues. He set off a storm of controversy with a 2003 Harvard Business Review article titled “Does IT Matter?” He turned the 2003 piece into a book of the same title and turned the 2008 article into the book we now are considering.

In a nutshell, Carr’s thesis is that the Internet is exposing us to far greater opportunities to expand what we know but at the cost of knowing about things less thoroughly. Having studied and used the 2003 article in my teaching, I see distinct parallels between the two. Indeed, I believe his central caution regarding the Internet is best described by how it is used rather than a neo-Luddite call to reject using it altogether.

Perhaps a side step will be useful. Carr’s 2003 article created and continues to create controversy in information systems and information technology domains because, I believe, it is misread. Folks look at Carr’s title in the abstract and conclude that he certainly is wrong. “Why just look at all that information technology has enabled us to do! How can it be that it doesn’t matter.” However, Carr’s argument is more nuanced. Of course IT matters, he says as much. But his argument is that simply having IT “stuff,” the best and latest of it, does not generate strategic value to an enterprise. It is a necessary but not sufficient condition to strategic prominence. Rather, what one does with the “stuff” you have is what matters.

The current text I think creates a similar subtlety. The Internet has introduced a seismic change in our environment much like Guttenberg’s press did in the 1500s. The Internet has made knowledge accessible and available in ways that are enormously helpful. Just think of the way it has transformed our ability to do scholarly research.

However, like most things, the Internet does adhere to a favorite axiom of economists: there is no such thing as a free lunch. Carr quotes Marshall McLuhan: “The effects of technology…alter ‘patterns of perception steadily and without resistance.’” (Carr, p.3) Carr continues, “[M]edia aren’t just channels of information. They supply the stuff of thought, but *they also shape the process of thought*.” (Carr, p. 7, italics mine) Carr documents the effects of Internet use on memory formation and retention. He discusses the plasticity of the brain and reminds us of what many of us first heard at the Attachment Conference several years ago. Recalling Hebb’s Rule, neurons that fire together, wire together, Carr explores the possible harm that can arise from overuse of the Internet. Surprisingly, it seems it takes very little use to make a substantial difference in how we are influenced.

I recall reading Marshall McLuhan as a college freshman a very long time ago indeed. I confess that I didn’t get it. But Carr’s work provides an understanding of just what McLuhan was saying. As Carr notes, McLuhan alone saw “that in the long run a medium’s content matters less than the medium itself in influencing how we think and act.” (Carr, p.3) We are being transformed by the Internet. The question is whether we realize by how much.

In June 2014 two scholars from Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand published the results of the research they conducted on reading retention from documents containing hyperlinks. Their results are quite similar to those Carr reports: “[R]esearch continues to show that people who read linear text comprehend more than those who read text peppered with links.” (Carr, p. 127) The influence of the Internet medium has affected all forms of communication. Letter writing is passé, we now communicate with texts and tweets. Even email seems a thing of the past.

Are we reading more, but learning less? Are we trading deep understanding for superficialities? On the one hand we have the benefit of the Internet bringing to our fingertips and eyes more information, more quickly than ever before. On the hand, it is as if the Internet is turning us into creatures with severe attention deficit disorders. The more we use the Internet, the less we can stay focused on a single thread—we are compelled to follow trail after trail of electronic droppings.

We must be cautious and prudent in our use of the Internet, lest the bad overtake the good. This is the question we need to grapple with as educators and scholars. While Internet research is quick, what is lost by never slowly moving through the library stacks looking at titles organized by the library’s taxonomy? Google can return an unprecedented quantity of material to a query. But how can I know which is truly the best result? Isn’t it almost like drinking water from a fire hose? It’s information but is it relevant and is it the most pertinent?

What is our responsibility to provide balance—a both-and rather than an either-or environment for our students? And if we have a responsibility, how do we operationalize it? McLuhan is correct, that the medium becomes the message. How do we maximize the good and minimize the bad? This, it seems to me, is the question for the academy.