

REVIEW: NICHOLAS CARR, T. THE SHALLOWS: WHAT THE INTERNET IS DOING TO OUR BRAINS. NEW YORK: NORTON, 2010.

That we have entered into an irreversibly digital world is not disputed; what is seldom disputed is the impact of that entry on the users. This is seen most starkly in the commonplace acceptance of the Internet, with very few people asking the ‘difficult questions.’ One of those few people is Nicholas Carr, technology and culture writer, who has a particular concern for the personal and social impact of technology. In 2011, he was a finalist for that year’s Pulitzer Prize for his book, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*. This The Filter contribution reviews *The Shallows* and its consideration of the impact of the Internet on the human brain.

Early in the first chapter, Carr (2010, 5) comments that “over the last few years I’ve had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory.” He then concludes the chapter with this simple statement, “I missed my old brain” (Carr 2010, 17). With this, he launches into a thought-provoking analysis of the (probable) impact of the Internet on the human brain, together with the associated consequences. While critics have challenged his arguments and argued that he uses pseudo-science, this is a book that is well-worth reading, even if only as a primer to the topic.

The first two chapters of the book set the scene through the use of various contemporary and historical references, followed by an introduction to the phenomena of brain plasticity, an incredible development in neuroscience that turned many understandings of the human brain on their head. Chapters three and four then address the impact of the medium on the mind, from crayons in a child’s hand to the written text and onward. Attention is then given to the transition into the early digital age and on to the era of two ‘texts’ – the printed text and the digital text – in chapters five and six. The impact of the Internet on the brain and human functioning is then addressed in chapters seven to nine. In the final chapter, Carr (2010, 222) concludes by proposing that “the tumultuous advance of technology could ... drown out the refined perceptions, thoughts, and emotions that arise only through contemplation and reflection.” Quoting Heidegger, “[the] frenziedness of technology [threatens to] entrench itself everywhere,” Carr (2010, 222) concludes that “it may be that we are now entering the final stage of that entrenchment. We are welcoming the frenziedness into our souls.”

When reading the book, the main challenge is that presented by Carr’s use of both the experiences of people and the referencing of research. It is not always possible for the reader

to meaningfully evaluate the various arguments, as some of them will align with the reader's personal experience, while others will not. At this point, the subjective experiences of the reader can become the measure of the book, resulting in either a wholesale acceptance of the thesis or a wholesale rejection of the thesis. However, neither positions would be most beneficial; once read, the book is arguably best regarded as a primer to a very important topic – it is not a definitive word on the topic. Certainly provocative, definitely challenging, this is a very readable book that deserve attention.

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