Technology Book Review Fall 2013

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Despite the generation into which I was born, I consider myself a technologically inept individual. I do not have gadgets and only use the internet for email and shopping at the holidays. Yet, after reading Nicholas Carr’s “The Shallows” I realize that even the little exposure I have had to the Internet and other technologies is affecting the way I think and learn. In “The Shallows” Nicholas Carr attempts to prove that the internet is changing the way we live and communicate as well as physically altering our brains. Carr uses his own obsession with the internet to narrate the book and illustrate the effects of the internet.

To prove his theory, Carr explores the history of technology from paper to radio to television and finally through the progression of computers. Carr does a wonderful job of comparing the sociological changes alongside the progression of technology. He argues that books and other forms of print, just like the internet provided an outlet for us to “get lost”, to delve into another world. Reading, however, requires concentration focus on a singular media. The internet, however, caters to the nature of human curiosity and allows the brain to scatter and run several thought processes at one time. Today scientists have found that students can no longer concentrate on reading an entire book cover to cover. Instead, they skim and only ready select sentences and phrases to piece together the main ideas. Carr recalls having difficulty getting through an entire book. As well, I caught myself doing it while reading this book at times!

Carr dislikes the notion that humans can no longer concentrate on a single goal without other stimulation. So, he did some research on the physiology of the brain and discovered that the brain is elastic, meaning, it can change depending on the stimulation and input it receives, and that it stores information as either short term or long term memory depending on the repetitiveness of the input. The internet allows us to send several inputs to the brain at once which results in an overload and the inability to store critical information and make connections with already existing information. Some of the research Carr references goes so far as to imply that the increased use of technology and the internet it causing ADHD. Being a biology teacher, I rather enjoyed reading this part of the book. While I am not sure I agree that it is the sole cause, I think it is certainly a factor.

After reading this book I am convinced of what I already suspected, that the internet is evil. Yes, it has its benefits, however, it is destroying society’s ability to communicate and focus. All teachers should be aware that too much technology can inhibit a student’s ability to learn. If we concentrate our teaching methods to only using technology then we run the risk of students not fully understanding material as it might not be stored as long term memory. We need to emphasize textbook or article reading. As a science teacher I need to be able to incorporate a healthy mix of technology based work and reading/writing type work because a lot of science is memorization and being able to store information long term. I also might limit the amount of access students with ADHD have to the internet so as not to proliferate their inability to concentrate. Instead, I could provide them with short tangible tasks, one at a time so that they learn to focus on one thing for even s short period of time and then progress to longer assignments.

While this book is extremely well researched, I did not like that Carr does not even mention the benefits of the internet. Like most opinion books, this is a very one sided view of the internet’s effect on humans. It is, however, extremely convincing, but like the scientist I am, I need to explore the other side of the argument before making an informed decision. I also did not agree with his philosophy that journalism as a profession will die. I think that the nature of it will simply change. Despite the almost nonexistent weaknesses in “The Shallows” I would recommend that everyone read this book.

Carr, N. (2011). The shallows: What the Internet is doing to our brains. WW Norton.