

Carr and Postman: What the Internet is Doing to Us

Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2011), 228 pages

Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (Penguin Books, rev. ed. 2005), 163 pages

Reviewed by Edward Trudeau

Nicholas Carr is concerned that the Internet is making us dumber. He believes this is not merely the result of the content we are consuming *via* the world wide web, text messages, email, Twitter and Facebook, but a side effect of the medium through which this content is transmitted and consumed. Even more ominously, the change, according to Carr, is not limited to a deleterious effect on the way we think, but includes the neural structures in our brains that *enable* thinking.

Carr's argument seems to reprise and extend the warnings of Neil Postman from twenty-five years ago, who predicted that television was producing a culture that was no longer interested in the deep sort of deliberative thinking that has characterized Western philosophy for two and a half millennia. Yet *The Shallows* is not merely an update to *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, filling in a few technical details Postman got wrong; it changes the argument in important ways.

To understand this change, it is helpful to remind ourselves of the situation in 1985 when Postman was writing; a brief forward to the Twentieth Anniversary Edition of *Amusing Ourselves to Death* penned by Postman's son Andrew does just that. North American readers who lived through those days will almost certainly be surprised by one or two items they had forgotten, and slip back to a time when television was rapidly becoming the dominant paradigm for mass communication, beginning to displace what Postman calls the typographic culture.

In the early chapters of both books, Postman and Carr trace the development of typographic culture from its roots in Greece. Both acknowledge Socrates' ambivalence about writing and Plato's ultimate embrace of it, and each treat topics such as the development of the codex in the Roman era, subsequent typographic conventions designed to aid readers, Gutenberg's press and the sudden, broad availability of cheap printed material, and the educational and cultural precedents that developed around the book. The history of the book is not only a recounting of its technological maturation, but a tale of new behavioral norms and the realization of a cultural epistemology. They report this history so well and clearly that it is well worth reading both accounts to get a complete picture.

One might fairly characterize the typographic culture praised by Carr and Postman as requiring a active commitment on the part of the reader: a commitment at once physical and mental, extended over a prolonged period of time. In this core elucidation of the typographic culture, Postman and Carr are in agreement. They both maintain that complex and subtle arguments

require the kind of linear deliberation at which literate culture excels, and although they do not say so explicitly, it is clear from their respective laments that in order for us to wrestle with the deepest questions of our world and ourselves, we must employ just this kind of attentiveness. The epistemological argument largely derives from Marshall McLuhan, whose 1964 observation, “the medium is the message,” warns that every communications medium operates by its own inner principles. While this theorem is essential to their arguments, Postman and Carr differ both on the type of media that concerns them and in how they claim those media influence our thought individually and socially.

Postman’s argument revolves around the triple effect that modern communications have on discourse, “introducing on a large scale irrelevance, impotence and incoherence” (p. 65). He sees the origin of these effects in the telegraph, the first medium that separated time from distance by making information at any wired location, no matter how far, immediately available. That which constituted “news” was no longer associated in any immediate way with those who received the information – it was therefore largely irrelevant, even if it may have generated curiosity or interest. Such information has little impact on the recipient’s daily actions, and so it makes no claim on him. It is information without power to effect change. The logic of the medium encourages short, self-contained messages that need no external context to understand, and which may be fed in a constant, incoherent stream where nothing is related to what came before or comes after.

The telegraph accustomed us to decontextualized information, but the photograph brought an entirely new visual language, according to Postman. He argues that the photograph lacks a syntax with which to make claims about the world; since it only records concrete particulars, it cannot make a proposition anyone can argue or agree with. In its particularity it creates its own kind of dissociation from context – an instant in space and time that, like the newscast about a distant war, must be framed by commentary to be understood by the viewer. We gradually come to live in these “pseudo-contexts,” which Postman claims were “invented to give fragmented and irrelevant information a seeming use” (p. 76). Television is the grandchild of a marriage between the telegraph and the photograph, and its principles of transmission and graphics constitute a new mode of communication that has come to dominate all others, even those that remain firmly within the typographic culture. That mode is entertainment.

The second half of Postman’s book is dedicated to a general explanation of the effects of show business on public discourse, and then to its specific effects on faith, politics, and education. These are some of his wittiest and most incisive chapters, and although jaded readers may find his contempt of televised politics modest by modern standards, they may also raise an eyebrow in surprise at his critique of generally lauded educational programming such as *Sesame Street*.

Whatever the particulars of his analyses, the point he drives home with great effectiveness is that show business is not just a pejorative term for “junk” programming, but essential to the form of communication that the televised media demand. The most serious topics are accompanied by the same kind of sound and motion – graphical logos and musical themes – as game shows. The

explicit rules of *all* productions are that the viewer must not need to understand its history or context; that the narrator and participants be engaging and attractive; that each feature be short enough that the viewer's attention not wander; and above all, that the viewer leave behind whatever was just seen for the sake of whatever is next.

It is primarily the change in the mode of *public* discourse that is problematic for Postman. Television is first and foremost a *social* problem. Its inherent epistemological assumptions cannot be avoided through personal discipline, since they have become so widespread as to be inescapable. He points out that some modes of communication are clearly not suited to certain types of content, as smoke signals would be to philosophy. In particular, the medium of television is inadequate to express the kinds of deliberative argument that characterize the greatest achievements of typographic culture.

This is a decisively different concern than that voiced by Carr in *The Shallows*. Carr's attention is focused on the change in individuals brought about by the technology of the medium. In fact, he expressly diminishes the effects of television, which could only "display but not replace the book" (p. 77). Although he admits that graphical media were "endlessly entertaining," they can in a sense *only* be a social issue, whereas the technology by which we consume internet content is fundamentally changing the way our brains operate, and perhaps even training us to crave consumption that follows its inner logic. The kind of neural reprogramming Carr indicates sounds much more like a biological epidemic that spreads throughout a population by infecting individuals; its means of transmission is the internet technologies of email, web pages, and social media. Not only are we letting ourselves turn into witless spectators, Carr sees us quickly losing the mental capacity to think as deeply as our literate forebears through a restructuring of our brains.

That such a fundamental change could occur in the first place is a large claim to lay on the very young research being done in neuroplasticity, but Carr supports well his argument that the brain's neurons change much more deeply in response to stimuli than had been previously thought. These changes reinforce the tendency to behave in the same way the more they are used – in other words, habits of thought become ingrained the more they are trained or reinforced. Such conditioning has always been taken for granted, but perhaps not to the level that Carr suggests – that is, not merely the attenuation of content or the atrophy of skills that have gotten "rusty," but the capability to follow an argument, to remain focused on a task or project for a long duration of time, or to think creatively.

It sounds even more far-fetched that the technology of the medium could be the cause of such profound change. Carr hangs the bulk of his argument on the different ways we consume information in the internet age. He points to differences in how we manipulate books in comparison to a mouse and screen; to hyperlinks and multi-media content that increase cognitive load and entice a reader to pause and change course frequently; and to the ability to search and quickly move to items of interest (pp. 90-91). Together, Carr claims, "The Net's cacophony of stimuli short-circuits both conscious and unconscious thought, preventing our minds from

thinking either deeply or creatively. Our brains turn into simple signal-processing units, quickly shepherding information into consciousness and out again” (p. 119). The more we engage in this kind of information consumption, the more addicted we become to interruption and change. These stimuli even engage our natural hunting instincts, making it almost impossible to stop checking for new mail, new tweets, new text messages, and continuous, real-time updates.

Just as Postman noticed with respect to television, Carr observes the physical world being rearranged to match more closely the virtual. Where Postman saw textbooks being redesigned like a television show, Carr sees magazine layouts mimicking web pages. Carr agrees that this social phenomenon is inescapable, no matter how much one attempts to isolate oneself. However, Carr’s internet teetotaler doesn’t suffer the personal neurological consequences of using hypermedia, whereas everyone must endure the entertainment culture whether he watches TV or not. And lest we mistake the internet for the only remaining threat, Carr reminds us that studies show television consumption has gone up in the internet age, even as individual internet use continues to rise (p. 87).

There is no doubt that both Carr and Postman view the intellectual achievements of Western modernity since the printing press to be the highest we have yet attained, at least generally among the population. Leaving aside the question of whether there have been more brilliant minds prior to widespread availability of the book, their homage to enlightenment philosophy, modern science, early America, and great literature is clear testimony to their common belief that typographic or literate culture revolutionized the world for the better. Aside from their admission that the book wasn’t always edifying, readers should keep in mind that very little about the role printing played in the development of Western culture is problematic for either Carr or Postman.

Carr in particular implies that the mind emerges from activity of the brain *tout court*, and there is nothing more to be said about the exercise of will or the development of character with respect to the media we consume. His resolution of the debate between rationalism and empiricism by neuroplasticity (p. 28) is vastly oversimplified – and more evidence of his unwritten assumption that the methods and results of modern science, which owe much to the book, are true knowledge, and are at risk in the internet age. Unfortunately, despite all the dots he tries to connect, not much deliberate research is available to help decide this question, and so he makes his case with very specific studies that suggest more general support for his position. For example, he cites evidence that multi-tasking reduces comprehension to support his point that distracting web pages impede our ability to learn, without any demonstration that the web page constitutes sufficient distraction to bring about this effect (pp. 130-33). Again, the conclusions aren’t hard to accept, but it is worth reserving judgment while research continues in this area.

Postman prefers to make his case rhetorically and through illustrative anecdotes, though he cites some statistics in defense of his claims. On the other hand, we have nearly thirty years to reflect on his predictions, and television turned out to be merely a stage in the development of media after all. If Carr is right, then the internet has become an even more significant and urgent

problem. The question is whether thirty more years will develop yet another media revolution that will marginalize the effects of the Internet.

We frequently say that the pace of technological change is accelerating; we expect more changes in media in shorter periods of time, largely because when we look at the trend leading from book to telegraph to photograph to radio, TV, the web, the personal music player, and smart phones, we see ever-compressing waves of introduction and adoption. That has contrasting implications for us as consumers of technology: we are always in the midst of a media revolution, and yet the frequency has to have some upper bound beyond which no wave can ever achieve critical mass before the next obliterates it.

One consequence of this continual revolution is that we are effectively subjected to a series of grand experiments. The evidence proves Postman's warning has merit: the fundamental change in discourse brought about by television has turned some of the most sobering subjects into entertainment. But how many are left to take note of the change? It takes a critic who straddles the technological divide to recognize the possibility that something valuable might have been lost with the new medium, and for this reason alone Carr should be given a fair read, even if he appears alarmist.

The pace can't increase indefinitely; in order to spark a media revolution, there must be sufficient participants to make the technology pervasive, or it remains a subculture. Even if we eventually invent instantaneous delivery or reconfiguration of devices, humans require time to adopt and become dependent on a new technology or medium. Although there may always be a generation not yet weary of upheaval, we need not follow Postman into an inevitably Huxleyan future, or relapse into Twitter-addiction with giddy despair along with Carr.

Before confronting questions of how much internet or television is too much, and before trying to decide which devices and channels to buy, it is worth stepping back and asking what constitutes true knowledge and real discourse. We probably already have answers to those questions, and Carr and Postman give us an opportunity to reflect on them with fresh perspective, and to refine or amend our answers.

Edward Trudeau holds an MA in theology from Franciscan University of Steubenville, and is the Director of Software Development at DIT, Inc. His interests include finding appropriate uses for internet technologies in family life and education.