The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains
(Book Review)

By: Nesren E-Baz, Joycelyn Saulter, Jennifer Cadwell, Samantha Visor, Latricia Garrett, Halee Porter

Houston Baptist University

EDUC 5306

November 16, 2014
The internet is an amazing tool for supplying our brains with information. With every new technology there is much discussion over its effects, good and bad, however most argument is over content versus medium. As McLuhan suggests, “The medium is the message”, and the medium is what affects changes in the brain. According to McLuhan and Carr, “what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity of concentration and contemplation.” The internet is changing the way the brain thinks and processes information. (P2) According to Carr, technology is taking away from our critical thinking skills. We search the web for quick precise answers, and skim pages looking for pertinent or interesting information. The internet provides an easier alternative in finding information. Taking away from our rigorous thinking and concentration in finding the answers we need. We’ve become dependent on the speed of the internet versus the beauty of thinking things through until a solution is reached; and are losing the innate ability to be critical thinkers. Philip Davis, a doctoral student in communication stated, “I skim. I scroll. I have very little patience for long, drawn out, nuanced arguments.”( P3). In short, we have traded our calm, focused, undistracted mind for a new kind of mind that wants to absorb information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts-The faster the better. (P5) The mind now expects individuals to take in information as fast as the internet distributes it; therefore leaving us with the feeling of anxiety that sometimes can become an overwhelming factor in our lives.

Carr supports his theory tracing the history of thought and the effects of new technology on changes in the brain beginning with oral history and ending with the internet. He describes how physically we have become dependent on clocks, and how written language and Guttenberg's printing press not only spread the thoughts of others,
but strengthened individual critical thinking. Socrates initially argued that the technology of the alphabet would alter a person’s mind and not for the better. However, written words liberated knowledge from the bounds of limited memory, and opened the mind to new frontiers of thoughts and ideas. Ong, states that while oral culture produced powerful and verbal performance of high artistic quality, he argues that literacy is absolutely necessary not only for the development of Science, but of history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature and art.” (P.52) As printed books and reading became more widespread, access to new ideas and content (both good and bad) were more easily available. The brain was not only being filled during the process of reading, but it also made connections, interpretations, and compared ideas, thus causing it to develop at a more rapid pace with deeper understanding. Before the internet, writing was personal with individuals own thoughts and insights. Internet articles look alike and reference the same information. Thoughts are repeated and information is delivered robotically. Additionally, the internet is bidirectional allowing anyone to comment and make changes on existing information. As the internet becomes more increasingly our choice of storing, processing, and sharing; our brains are once more being rerouted.

Previously, the brain was viewed as something like a concrete structure. However, the British Biologist, J. Z. Young, argued that” the structure of the brain might in fact be in a constant state of flux, adapting to whatever task it is called on to perform.” (P16) Freud too, wrote in 1895, “The brain and in particular the contact barriers between neurons, could change in response to a person’s experiences.” (P17). James Olds also states, “The Brain has the ability to reprogram itself on the fly, altering the way it
functions." (P22). Nonetheless, once the brain operates in a certain way, a habit is created, and the farther we proceed using this path, the more difficult it becomes to turn back. Thus, the internet leaves us with an inability to process new information at a desirable rate.

Initially, man invents technology to solve a problem, however, in many ways technology shapes and reshapes the circuitry of our brains, and man ends up having little control over technology after it is invented. Any repeated experience influences our synapses and the rewiring of our brains. Walter Ong wrote, "Writing and print and the computer, are all ways to technologize the word. "Once technologized cannot be de-technologized.(P.74)

In summary, Carr states the internet reduces our ability to develop interpersonal skills with fellow human beings. We are slowly losing our connectivity to human the presence so much that we are missing the finer points of what makes us a beautiful species - communication, relationships, social and cultural achievement and much more. The internet not only affects our interpersonal relationships, but our cognitive processes as well. According to Carr, the development of a well-rounded mind requires the ability to find and quickly analyze a wide-range of information and a capacity for open-ended reflection. Carr sums up his argument with “as the Net reroutes our vital paths and diminishes our capacity for contemplation, it is altering the depth of our emotions as well as our thoughts.”

The Shallows: What The Internet is doing to Our Brains has many critics. In a New York Times article, Our Cluttered Minds by Jonah Lehrer had mixed emotions about the book. Lehrer states, “The Shallows is most successful when Carr sticks to
cultural criticism, as he documents the losses that accompany the arrival of new
technologies." (Lehrer, 2010) However, Lehrer disagrees with Carr when he proclaims
that the Internet changes and alters our mind in a negative way. The book never
demonstrates how the Internet enhances our way of thinking and improve cognitive
task. Lehrer felt that the negatives along with the positive aspects should have been
presented in the book for a more powerful argument. (Lehrer, 2010)

One other author that agreed with Carr’s point-of-view is that of Kurt
Armstrong. His opinion focuses on that of the development of the brains of the
millennial age group. He states that, “the way we think is changing because the actual
structure of our brain is changing” (Armstrong, 2011). Armstrong states that,
“Technology has become ideology. We’re up to our eyeballs in the stuff, and as is often
the case with whatever immediately surrounds us, it’s difficult to actually see”
(Armstrong, 2011).

Author John Walter did not agree with Carr. Walter argues that no facts
presented in the book to provide the accusations that Carr is trying to deliver. He
believes the book was based on personal opinion instead of factual evidence. He
argues, “To make broad, sweeping statements as he does just because he and some
people he knows has a problem with concentrating is a huge logical leap in dark.”
(Walter, 2014).

As I sit back and ponder my own thoughts about the book, I see valid points
presented by Carr, along with many inconsistencies. I agree that the internet can be
poisonous to the mind, but my biggest disagreement is that the Internet is altering our
mind. The internet is making negative and inappropriate material easily assessable. It’s
feeding our brain unnecessary trash and clouding our judgment. I believe that the Internet benefits and adds on to our thinking skills.

Additionally, I also feel as that the internet it has become a replacement for human connectivity. Social interaction is such a vital component to human beings; however, we are spending hours using the internet as a means for gathering information and making virtual relationships versus spending that valuable time with fellow humans. Even though technology provides a wide variety of connectivity and social interactions between individuals, it is not meant to replace face to face interactions. Human connections are still important - no matter the time or era. I’m glad Carr explored the intricacies of how the internet affects our brains; thus allowing me to make this conjecture about our beauty as humans.

In conclusion, the Internet (like all technology) has many pros and cons. Carr’s argument that the internet is changing the function of our brain has some validity. The brain changes to accommodate what it does the most. I also believe the brain is overloaded by information and people are losing the ability to reflect and formulate original thoughts. Does the internet have positive benefits? Definitely. Can it greatly affect behavior, social interaction, and thought processes? Yes. The key is balance.

References
