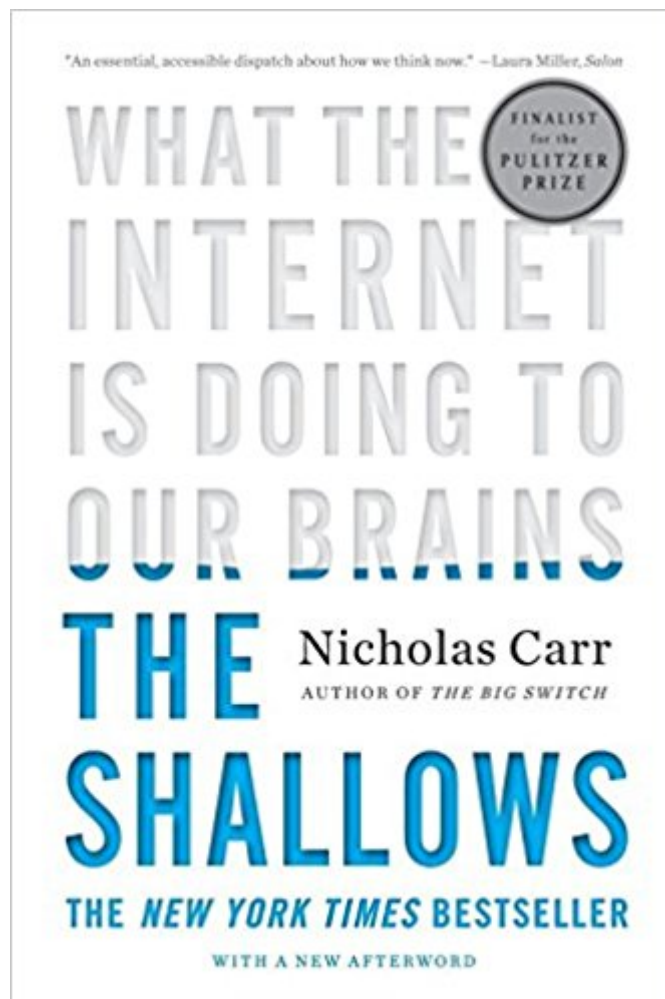




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# The Shallows: What The Internet Is Doing To Our Brains



## Synopsis

Finalist for the 2011 Pulitzer Prize in General Nonfiction: “Nicholas Carr has written a Silent Spring for the literary mind.” —Michael Agger, Slate “Is Google making us stupid?” —When Nicholas Carr posed that question, in a celebrated Atlantic Monthly cover story, he tapped into a well of anxiety about how the Internet is changing us. He also crystallized one of the most important debates of our time: As we enjoy the Net’s bounties, are we sacrificing our ability to read and think deeply? Now, Carr expands his argument into the most compelling exploration of the Internet’s intellectual and cultural consequences yet published. As he describes how human thought has been shaped through the centuries by “tools of the mind” —from the alphabet to maps, to the printing press, the clock, and the computer —Carr interweaves a fascinating account of recent discoveries in neuroscience by such pioneers as Michael Merzenich and Eric Kandel. Our brains, the historical and scientific evidence reveals, change in response to our experiences. The technologies we use to find, store, and share information can literally reroute our neural pathways. Building on the insights of thinkers from Plato to McLuhan, Carr makes a convincing case that every information technology carries an intellectual ethic —a set of assumptions about the nature of knowledge and intelligence. He explains how the printed book served to focus our attention, promoting deep and creative thought. In stark contrast, the Internet encourages the rapid, distracted sampling of small bits of information from many sources. Its ethic is that of the industrialist, an ethic of speed and efficiency, of optimized production and consumption —and now the Net is remaking us in its own image. We are becoming ever more adept at scanning and skimming, but what we are losing is our capacity for concentration, contemplation, and reflection. Part intellectual history, part popular science, and part cultural criticism, *The Shallows* sparkles with memorable vignettes —Friedrich Nietzsche wrestling with a typewriter, Sigmund Freud dissecting the brains of sea creatures, Nathaniel Hawthorne contemplating the thunderous approach of a steam locomotive —even as it plumbs profound questions about the state of our modern psyche. This is a book that will forever alter the way we think about media and our minds.

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## Customer Reviews

One of the major issues dividing the critics was whether Carr's claim that the Internet has shortchanged our brain power is, essentially, correct. Many bought into his argument about the neurological effects of the Internet, but the more expert among them (Jonah Lehrer, for one) cited scientific evidence that such technologies actually benefit the mind. Still, as Lehrer, in the New York Times Book Review, points out, Carr is no Luddite, and he fully recognizes the usefulness of the Internet. Other criticism was more trivial, such as the value of Carr's historical and cultural digressions--from Plato to HAL. In the end, Carr offers a thought-provoking investigation into our relationship with technology--even if he offers no easy answers. --This text refers to the Audible Audio Edition edition.

Carr's author of *The Big Switch* (2007) and the much-discussed Atlantic Monthly story "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" is an astute critic of the information technology revolution. Here he looks to neurological science to gauge the organic impact of computers, citing fascinating experiments that contrast the neural pathways built by reading books versus those forged by surfing the hypnotic Internet, where portals lead us on from one text, image, or video to another while we're being bombarded by messages, alerts, and feeds. This glimmering realm of interruption and distraction impedes the sort of comprehension and retention "deep reading" engenders, Carr explains. And not only are we reconfiguring our brains, we are also forging a "new intellectual ethic," an arresting observation Carr expands on while discussing Google's gargantuan book digitization project. What are the consequences of new habits of mind that abandon sustained immersion and concentration for darting about, snagging bits of information? What is gained and what is lost? Carr's fresh, lucid, and engaging assessment of our infatuation with the Web is provocative and revelatory.

--Donna Seaman --This text refers to the Audible Audio Edition edition.

The development of that magnificent resource for the mind, the Internet, has put us at a turning point in human history. The development of all the tools of the mind has provided turning points and in making his case Nicholas Carr takes us through what happened to us when we went from clay to papyrus to paper and from tablets to scrolls to books. With every one of these changes the world shifted some. Not as much as now though. At the same time that the Internet is changing the world, bringing us closer together around masses of information, it is changing our ability to think and it is changing our brains in dangerous ways. The issue is not the content of the Internet, but its process. The human adapts to its tools and its tasks. Give a man a hammer for a lifetime and his work and his body shapes to effectively drive nails. Take away his pen and give him a typewriter with a ball and his prose turns from fluid to staccato. (That happened to Nietzsche in the late nineteenth century.) In that process of adaption the brain, since it is not a machine but an organ, changes. These changes can be seen with instruments and their results observed in human behavior. This is the world of Nicholas Carr. I will describe a tiny fraction of what the Internet is doing to our brains.<sup>1)</sup> The brain, confronted with a glowing screen and the ability to hypertext its way from one interruption to another across the universe of knowledge from what its buddy in Australia thinks of rutabagas, to the spelling of rutabagas to the history of rutabagas to dishes that can be prepared from rutabagas leaves the brain sliding from one fact of surface interest to another fact even less useful, until it occurs to the brain to pursue the prompt on the pop-up menu and check the weather and get off of this slide onto the weather channel where a five minute video on playful seals on San Francisco Bay can be watched for free which does remind the brain that it could slide over to Facebook and find out if anyone "liked" the picture of the family cat posted an hour ago. And many do. Twenty-three "likes," praise the Lord. Just as the carpenter's arm grew its muscles to deal effectively with the hammer the brain changes to succeed in a slippery world of itty bitty bits of knowledge intended to interest momentarily and then disappear. So what will happen when it confronts a life choice? Will this passive instrument skidding from meaningless bit to another meaningless bit see itself suddenly as an agent? A "decider"? Or will it in panic seek the next button to push, even if that button bears the label "Self Destruct"? According to Time magazine this is happening now in the Silicon Valley high schools; kids depressed and without a sense of agency pushed around by the ripples on the surface of the Internet are choosing to leave

life. Rutabagas have lost their interest. Having your cat liked did not fill the hole intended for having yourself loved. And this child is not accustomed to doing things about things. This child does not do. This child is done to. With the same alacrity that he or she pursued the prompt to watch the seals he or she may *decide* it is time to end this.<sup>2)</sup> I discovered my wife of the last forty-three years with whom I have raised two children and now five grandchildren with much happiness when while sitting on her front lawn, I seriously told her my goals in life. She thought they were so funny she actually rolled over laughing. If I had instituted a computer search what algorithm would have found her an appropriate match? Yet this brain of mine sorted through whatever book-formed channels it had and locked in immediately on her as the *one*, the antidote to the man who takes himself too seriously. The Internet would have provided me many potential companions, each more serious than the last. That is the way it works. It finds my interests and then adds to the pile. If I follow its suggestions I become narrower and narrower, a better candidate to respond to the advertisers, a defined target, and a wealth of possibilities pass me by.<sup>3)</sup> For something to remain in long-term memory it must spend two hours in short term memory. (There is actually a tiny physical growth that must happen.) But on the trip through rutabaga land, things go in and out too quickly to be grafted on the long-term nodules. Of course it still exists in the computer's memory. When you know you need it, it can be sought. However the advantage of the human memory is that it coughs up stored information when you need it but do not know you need it. Not only does your intellect call on your memory, but your memory initiates conversations with your intellect. You won't have that ability any longer. And since your long-term memory is not being used the section of the brain devoted to long-term memory has already begun to shrink. Distant memories of your mother's tears, your father's embrace, your sisters admiration and your little brother's needs will be crowded out of the brain, and I doubt if you will find them in Internet land either.<sup>4)</sup> There are now residential therapy centers to assist the hooked to unhook from the Internet. The Internet lights up the same section of the brain as does cocaine. Didn't *you* know those grade school kids were getting a buzz? Makes what may be happening to my grandchildren a little less cute and a little less funny. Read *The Shallows* yourself. What I have written is just a corner of the future described there. See if it scares you! And if it does, see who else you can scare with it. Hope they have enough of an attention span left to read the book. (A sign of the times is that people who used to write books no longer can read them. Not enough slippy and slidey. Boring!) Can the majority of us survive without complex and nuanced thought? Without deep and poignant memories? Do we want to?

In this short but informative, thought-provoking book, Nicholas Carr presents an argument I've long felt to be true on a humanist level, but supports it with considerable scientific research. In fact, he speaks as a longtime computer enthusiast, one who's come to question what he once wholeheartedly embraced ... and even now, he takes care to distinguish between the beneficial & detrimental aspects of the Internet. The argument in question? - Greater access to knowledge is not the same as greater knowledge. - An ever-increasing plethora of facts & data is not the same as wisdom. - Breadth of knowledge is not the same as depth of knowledge. - Multitasking is not the same as complexity. The studies that Carr presents are troubling, to say the least. From what has been gleaned to date, it's clear that the brain retains a certain amount of plasticity throughout life -- that is, it can be reshaped, and the way that we think can be reshaped, for good or for ill. Thus, if the brain is trained to respond to & take pleasure in the faster pace of the digital world, it is reshaped to favor that approach to experiencing the world as a whole. More, it comes to crave that experience, as the body increasingly craves more of anything it's trained to respond to pleasurably & positively. The more you use a drug, the more you need to sustain even the basic rush. And where does that leave the mind shaped by deep reading? The mind that immerses itself in the universe of a book, rather than simply looking for a few key phrases & paragraphs? The mind that develops through slow, quiet contemplation, mulling over ideas in their entirety, and growing as a result? The mature mind that ponders possibilities & consequences, rather than simply going with the bright, dazzling, digital flow? Nowhere, it seems. Carr makes it clear that the digital world, like any other technology that undeniably makes parts of life so much easier, is here to stay. All the more reason, then, to approach it warily, suspiciously, and limit its use whenever possible, since it is so ubiquitous. "Yes, but," many will say, "everything is moving so fast that we've got to adapt to it, keep up with it!" Not unlike the Red Queen commenting that it takes all of one's energy & speed to simply remain in one place while running. But what sort of life is that? How much depth does it really have? Because some aspects of life -- often the most meaningful & rewarding aspects -- require time & depth. Yet the digital world constantly makes us break it into discrete, interchangeable bits that hurtle us forward so rapidly & inexorably that we simply don't have time to stop & think. And before we know it, we're unwilling & even unable to think. Not in any way that allows true self-awareness in any real context. Emerson once said (as aptly quoted by Carr), "Things are in the saddle / And ride mankind." The danger is that we'll not only willingly, even eagerly, wear those saddles, but that we'll come to desire them & buckle them on ever more tightly, until we feel naked without them. And we'll gladly pay anything to keep them there, even as we lose the capacity to wonder why we ever put them on

in the first place. Most highly recommended!

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