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The Shallows by Nicholas Carr

The Shallows by Nicholas Carr is a great book about the effects of modern-day technology on our brain. In his introduction he mentioned why he wrote this book: because when he started to use this technology, he realized that something was changing in his brain. He could no longer focus when reading more than a page and his conscious began to start drifting elsewhere (17). Despite these negative effects, the author still found himself using his computer. When he first started to use modern technology, he thought it “was just a simple tool that did what you told it to do” but quickly realized the machine “in subtle but unmistakable ways, exerted an influence over you” (23). With this introduction, Nicholas Carr set up the rest of the book to look at how our brain functions and adapts, as well as how it has evolved over the time of history, and now in the modern-day, mankind and technology are in a feedback loop where both have influence over each other.

Exploring how the brain functions, the old belief is that once the brain has reached its adult phase, it was immutable. What we have been able to find out in recent developments is the brain is able to change, and the neurons are able to form new connections, break old ones, and create new nerve cells. Compared to the old belief, this was a huge discovery. Though we do not know the specifics of how our brain is able to do this, we do know this has new implications. Carr writes, “ Our ways of thinking, perceiving, and acting, we know now, are not entirely determined by our genes. Nor are they entirely determined by our childhood experiences. We change them through the way we live – and, as Nietzsche sensed, through the tools we use” (38).

The tools that we use are expressions of ourselves that influence the way we live. Carr points out that “every technology is an expression of human will through our tools, we seek to expand our power and control over our circumstances” (49). He then traces the different tools that have been used and developed through history such as art, scientific discoveries, writings, and maps. These tools have helped in the progression of mankind and has been leading us to the technological revolution we now live in ourselves. Each development has shown how human brains are adapting and are proof of heightened cognitive abilities over time.

One of these heightened abilities is the ability to read, that used to only be a skill of highly educated people. These days, it is standard to know how to read yet Carr argues that we are now going in the wrong direction. At first “to read a long book silently required an ability to concentrate intently over a long period of time” and “developing such mental discipline was not easy” (65). With the creation of the net, which is a new medium, this discipline and concentration is beginning to fade. We now skim articles, get distracted by other hyperlinks and articles, and begin to lose concentration much quicker. This is starting to rewire brains to want and crave quick media while breaking the old connections that allowed us to concentrate and focus.

Nicholas Carr quotes Christine Rosen, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington DC, over her first experience using a Kindle. ““ My eyes were restless and umped around as they do when I try to read for a sustained time on the computer. Distractions abounded” (98). She then noted that she went right on the internet looking for other information on the book she was reading. After taking longer to finish the book than she anticipated she noticed that a week later she found it hard to remember what she actually read. This is just one example of how the changes in the medium of how we learn and get information is changing, and not for the better.

Not only are we getting distracted, but we are also losing our dependency on our brain and memory. Carr mentions this was Socrates who predicted this: “As people grew accustomed to writing down their thoughts and reading the thoughts others had written down, they became less dependent on the contents of their own memory” (158) There is an argument made for why this could be a good thing as argued by Peter Suderman, a writer for *American Scene*. He is quoted as saying, “Why memorize the content of a single book when you could be using your brain to hold a quick guide to an entire library?” (161). It may serve us better to know where we have stored certain information, than memorize that information. This allows us to have access to much more than we could have trying to memorize certain things that we could easily forget later.

The last point the author talks about is the implications of technology on our humanity. We keep creating technology to be more like us, but “what makes us most human, is what is least computable about us” and our “emotion and empathy” (182). With the rise of artificial intelligence, the line between what makes us human is becoming more blurred, and we are

encouraging this as we continue to program computers to be more like us. And since we use these computers and they have an influence back on us, we are in a feedback loop. Carr notices that “we program out computers and therefore they program us” (187). The final call to action from the author is to not go easy into our new age and be conscious of what we might lose if we accept this age without questioning ideas, the effects, and our humanity.

In Data 303, we have discussed chat GPT many times and tried to comprehend the ethics behind it as well. Applying our talks to this book, I believe the more we use artificial intelligence, the more we become and think like it. I like the quote from Carr where it talks about us programming computers and computers programming us. It is changing our brain to think more like it, and in a sense the programmers behind the computers have a large effect on how we think and get our information. It seems like we may be losing our free will through the subtleties hidden in computer programming.

To put this into a Christian perspective, we believe in free will and as mentioned in the paragraph above, we seem to be losing it due to the influence technology is having on us. We are losing the ability to think for ourselves and form our own beliefs. This is very important to be aware of especially as Christians because not everyone shares the worldview that we have so we still need to be able to use discernment in the information we are finding on the internet and the subtle effects it has on our thinking. Overall, I would recommend this book especially for those who are interested in the effect that technology is having on mankind and the direction we might find ourselves going in.

Works Cited

Carr, Nicholas G. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. Atlantic Books, 2020.