

### **LBAR Lesson III: Critical Arguments in Opposition to Cyberspace**

Assignment: Students should write a short paper (no more than a page) both summarizing and giving a reaction to Carr's argument. An accurate summary is essential; it will tell you if the students are doing the reading, as well as give you some sense if Carr is not in fact correct in his assessment.

Today's lesson begins the process of self-evaluation; we begin the movement outside of ourselves in order to gain some critical distance from ourselves. What we want to do is assess this thing Cyberspace, looking thereby for the advantages it offers, as well as any drawbacks it may portend. Yet this is not easy; when we say that Cyberspace has become an integral part of our everyday life, what we mean is that we already live, to some extent, in a Cyber-world. Asking about Cyberspace's benefits and drawbacks amounts to asking about our own opinions and practices; which, if any, are good (and for what reason), and which, if any, are lacking (and for what reason). We are looking then for some criteria whereby we can measure and hence judge our own world, which means in the first instance that we must stand outside that world so as to see it for what it really is. One of the best techniques for doing so is listening to critical commentary on our world, especially our Cyber-world, to see if there are not perhaps certain aspects of our behaviors that seem beneficial to us initially, but upon further reflection are in fact detrimental.

In practice, this will mean engaging with a piece that has stirred quite a bit of controversy recently. This piece, entitled "Is Google Making Us Stupid," was written by Nicholas Carr, an IT consultant who was already famous for making the controversial argument that IT (meaning people whose job was specifically to set up and maintain the computer systems within corporate environments) was increasingly irrelevant in the business world because of the increasing proliferation of standardized technology throughout society. But Carr set off a firestorm when he published this piece on the internet in *The Atlantic* in 2008. The argument is subtle, though not terribly difficult to follow: increasing usage of the Internet is actually *changing* the way people think. Note, he does not say it is changing how we think about the Internet; literally, it is rewiring our brains, and not in altogether good ways. The proliferation of information that is made possible through Cyberspace has the unintended consequence of shortening our attention span, which in turn means a decrease in our ability to concentrate on singular tasks for extended periods of time. Because of this, the depth of our thinking becomes increasingly shallow; we skim and absorb large quantities on the surface at the expense of delving deeply into quality.

According to Carr, this is not an accidental occurrence; his examples about Google's founders attempting to create social-level artificial intelligence suggest that our collective explosion of knowledge comes at the cost of our individual intelligence. Cyberspace, according to Carr, really is about removing boundaries and limits, one of which is your mind, at least as it is currently wired. The re-wiring of our minds is then a project to create out of many individuals with intelligence a collective intelligence. Carr acknowledges that his argument sounds suspiciously like that of a Luddite (the word Luddite means a follower of Captain Ludd, an imaginary figure in 19<sup>th</sup> Century England who was said to have led a revolt against the introduction of machine manufacturing in northern England), but he does not intend to throw the baby out with the bath water, so to speak. He does not dispute the very real advancements modern technology, even modern information technology like the Internet and Cyberspace, has brought. However, every technological advancement has also brought with it manifest drawbacks; Carr mentions that the concerns Plato's Socrates voices over the widespread use of the written word were not unfounded, that is, they did have the unintended consequence of hampering people's memories. So too with the printing press. Thus, Carr asks us to think in a similar way about

Cyberspace, and hopefully in doing so, helps us to avert some of the negatives associated with our Cyber-culture.