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Review

Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010). 276 pp.

Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010). 242 pp.

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Nicholas Carr and Clay Shirky, protagonists in a much-hyped debate over the merits and dangers of digital technology, would seem to have little in common besides their oppositional seating on the teeter-totter of contemporary techno-anxiety. Carr, whose book *The Shallows* expands a 2008 *Atlantic* article, “Is Google Making Us Stupid,” is the hero of digital pessimists who see the practices associated with 24/7 online access to people and information as so much

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bad cultural fruit that is gradually spoiling the sweetness of enduring interpersonal relatedness, the development of knowledge, and the formation of the Cartesian self.

For Carr, always-on, digitally-sponsored multitasking is rotting our brains—or at least rewiring them beyond modernist recognition. “Calm, focused, undistracted, the linear mind is being pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts—the faster the better,” he insists [10]. Carr worries that the volume of information which we are able to access along with associated practices of multitasking and skimming are resulting in “a reversal of the early trajectory of civilization: we are evolving from being cultivators of personal knowledge to being hunters and gathers in the electronic data forest” [138]. Citing numerous neurocognitive studies, he goes on to highlight the effects of our “chronic overactivity” with digital technologies as a threat not only to our ability to reason and reflect, but also “to our integrity as human beings” [214]. He pines for the dimming of a transcendentalist, literary contemplativeness from which Nathaniel Hawthorne was briskly jarred by the mechanized shriek of a train whistle that continues to scream into the fragmented reveries of our wired postmodern lives.

Shirky, by stark contrast, is a digital optimist who has aptly challenged the literary bias that undergirds Carr’s version of “deep thinking.” He tends to highlight the broader social benefits of new digital media. In particular, he is interested in the how time invested in online engagement with others creates greater opportunities for social good than do media consumption activities such as watching television or modern, private reading. “What makes the current age remarkable,” he argues, “is that we can now treat free time as a general social asset that can be harnessed for large, communally created projects, rather than as a set of individual minutes to be whiled away one person at a time” [10]. This “cognitive surplus”—the aggregation of free time that is spent in interactive digital environments—“provides an opportunity to create new cultures

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of sharing, and only in the hands of these cultures will our ability to share become as valuable as it can be" [143].

Shirky highlights the global participation, collaboration, and innovation allowed by digital media as elements of a revitalized civic realm that presses societies across the globe toward great transparency, freedom, justice and compassion. He cites spontaneous outbursts of online charitable giving and networks of cancer patients, writers, and software designers, and volunteer trash collectors coordinated through a Facebook page, all of them working at no charge to support, encourage, and solve problems with one another as evidence that "we have always wanted to be autonomous, competent, and connected," [84] but have lacked the opportunity to do so because of limitations in the available technologies of communication and collaboration. Citing his own body of social-psychological research, Shirky maintains that we are born to share. Cassandras like Carr, he suggests, make the mistake of "taking a new behavior for a change in human nature rather than a change in opportunity" [124].

While the differences in Carr's and Shirky's perspectives on digital technology could not be more pronounced, their approaches are quite similar, and they tend to mirror each other's strengths and weaknesses. Both are compelling storytellers, spinning anecdote after anecdote to illustrate, if not entirely evidence, their arguments. Likewise, both layer snippets of academic evidence together to buttress their claims. Given his rail against shallowness, Carr's work is probably marred more by the thinness in many of his claims. "There is no Sleepy Hollow on the Internet, no peaceful spot where contemplativeness can work its restorative magic," he insists, ignoring the myriad sites for prayer, contemplation, and meditation that populate the web. Though warnings about excessive multitasking and uncritical skimming are well taken, one is hard-pressed to understand exactly how accessing the *Book of Common Prayer* though an iPhone app or being interrupted by the monks of Virtual Abbey on Facebook for Compline inherently undermines contemplation.

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For his part, Shirky sidesteps questions of the impact of digital technology on persons and communities by simply deprioritizing them. "We should care more about public and civic value than about personal or communal value because society benefits more from them," he argues, "but also because public and civic value are much harder to create" [174]. Indeed, especially when the value of personal and communal sharing in a local or more intimate context is undermined though an unnecessary competition with the production of universalized civic "Goods." Where Carr's acknowledgement of the benefits of digital technology always seems a bit grudging, Shirky's attention to the risks—whether personal or social—is largely absent. He sites, for instance, the online micro-lender Kiva for its innovative approach to collaborative charitable giving, but ignores the controversy around the organization's fiction of person-to-person lending.[1]

Perhaps the most significant of the similarities between Carr and Shirky is that both are represented by digital literary agent provocateur John Brockman, which explains why their books were released days apart, manufacturing a media debate about the risks and benefits of digital technologies and supporting the convenient bundling of the two volumes on Amazon. Marketing manipulation notwithstanding, the two volumes offer important assessments of the current period of cultural transition as it is impacted by digital technologies that are more productively considered in conversation with one another than separately or in competition.

[1] Stephanie Strom, "Confusion on Where Money Lent Via Kiva Goes," *The New York Times*, November 8, 2009, accessed July 21, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/09/business/global/09kiva.html?_r=1.

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