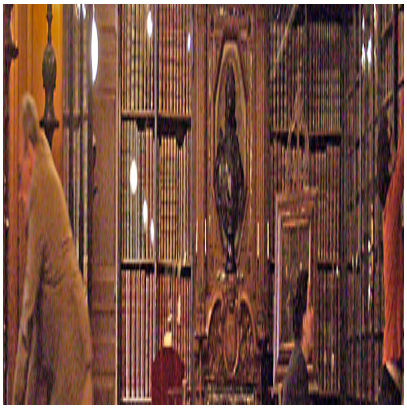

Shallow reading

Description

The Internet is changing the way our brains work, according to Nicholas Carr in his book *The* doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration

For all its benefits, he thinks the web habituates us to

browsing, clicking, skimming and jumping around information. So itâ??s harder now to read books and other substantial texts in a deep and concerted way. At best, we are now dumbed-down pseudo-intellectuals who flit along the surface rather than going deep, and this tendency affects anyone habituated to Internet use, not just the young who have been brought up with it.

I thought I would test this tendency in myself by treating Carrâ??s book in just this way, by reading the Amazon preview â?? skimming, skipping and jumping through it, and allowing myself to be distracted by extraneous associations and links. I might buy the book later.

Beneath the negatively flowing shallows of the bookâ??s polemic glides a countervailing current â?? that this tendency to explore interconnections and associations is no bad thing. The opposing view to

Carrâ??s celebrates the fact that habituated web users donâ??t rely on the linear narratives provided by texts as presented by their authors, but construct their own narratives.

Reading is now a co-creative process, and in any case, readers are also writers, as they cut and paste, appropriate, assemble, cross-reference and diarise via social media commentary, not to mention blogs, reviews, opinion pages, emails, tweets and text messages. Carr warns us against this superficial profligacy. But Don Tapscott, in his book *Grown Up Digital* to which Carr refers, tells us to embrace it. According to Tapscott:

> â??I believe that we will see that being immersed in an interactive digital environment has made them smarter than your average TV-watching couch potato. They may read fewer works of literature, but they devote a lot of time to reading and writing online. As we will learn, that activity can be intellectually challenging. Instead of just numbly receiving information, they are gathering it from around the globe with lightning speed. Instead of just trusting a TV announcer to tell us the truth, they are assessing and scrutinizing the jumble of facts that are often contradictory or ambiguous. When they write to their blog or contribute a video, they have an opportunity to synethesize and come up with a new formulation, which leads to a giant opportunity for them. The Net Generation has been given the opportunity to fulfill their inherent human intellectual potential as no other generationâ?• (p.98).

So Iâ??ve now been distracted by the Amazon preview of *Grown Up Digital* as well, pending a proper read at some later date. The comparisons are useful.

Going pop

With the license granted by both authors to entertain or test distracting associations (negative or positive) I felt led to distract myself further by reflecting on the style of literature represented by these two books. Hereâ??s what I believe.

1. Best-sellers such as *The Shallows* and *Grown Up Digital*, address a leisure reading market. The books make few intellectual demands on the reader. They can focus attention, provoke, and at times they can be inspiring. After reading *Grown Up Digital* I might feel inclined to listen more to what Net Generation kids have to say, rather than bracketing them as ignorant and unruly (if I ever did).
2. Within the books is a thread of reasoning that social scientists term â??technological determinism.â?• Carr and Tapscott seem to think that the outcomes and effects they describe are *caused* by the technology. The social, cultural and political forces that encourage such technological developments (eg smart phones, the web), and the technologyâ??s part in complex institutional, educational, economic and infrastructural networks get sidelined. This keeps the story focussed and simple.
3. The presentations in such books are *scientistic*, ie thereâ??s an appeal to the authority of science. Both writers appeal to brain science in particular. Knowing that the brain is capable of restructuring in response to new stimuli, such as clickable information sources, is not much different to saying that we are capable of learning and adopting new habits. According to Tapscott, we used to think that brains do not change and grow. Apparently, â??Modern scientists have now disproved this theoryâ?• (p.99). To have such confidence is *scientism*.

4. Popular literature operates with extremes. Itâ??s either all good or all bad; we are getting smarter or dumber; more connected or more isolated. It overuses overstatement and exaggeration.
5. The language is that of the â??paradigm shift.â?• The pop digital literature sets out to convince us that we are missing out on some important insights, and then admits us to a set of secrets. In this case we need to tune in to the Net Generation.
6. In keeping with the demands of leisure reading, the arguments are emotional and emotive. Any narrative, however prosaic or abstract, has this. But for leisure reading the means are set firmly on the personal: you the reader, me the author, or a third party. Itâ??s not enough that Tapscott interviewed some adolescent activists at a venue â??where you can literally bump into Bill Gates, Bono, Google CEO Eric Schmidt, and Pakistanâ??s President Pervez Musharraf all in one dayâ?• (269), but the introductions were facilitated by â??British actress and screenwriter Emma Thompson,â?• who said â??get ready to be inspired.â?• My own superficial speed reading habits compel me instinctively to jump these sections.
7. Calls to action: in a way, such books are long drawn out manifestoes. They seek to be instrumental and change behaviours, generally by offering advice. Much of that is geared to business, but sometimes how to keep your political party in power. For Tapscott, â??Hire more young people,â?• â??Donâ??t broadcast to Net Geners. Think interaction, not unidirectional communicationâ?• (268). The book is an instrument in itself, a means of garnering livelihood or profit for the author, and so it needs a large market.
8. Pop literature of course breaks many of the rules of academic writing. It selects evidence to make its case, generalises from too few cases, makes scant reference to intellectual context, and fails to subject its hypotheses to the scrutiny of opposing voices. But academic writing often does this too.
9. In order to keep the story simple, popular non-fiction writers either deliberately or unwittingly ignore the massive literature in social science, history, philosophy, cultural theory, media studies and the arts and humanities in general that has a bearing on the topic at hand. The only foray into English literature entered into by Carr or Tapscott is the observation that EngLit teachers are finding it harder to get students to read books. Never mind what those books might be saying.
10. Popular non-fiction has the capacity to become part of the phenomenon they purport to describe. I never worried whether or not Marshall McLuhan was right about the way electronic media change the way we think. His books changed the way many people thought â?? about how technology changes thinking. This is why I think some popular books need to be read (or browsed) by academics. Some books rise from the shallows to exert considerable cultural influence, to be explained, explored, contextualised, criticised and possibly resisted. They also provide evidence of opinion and insight. Dare I say, as they are *shallow*, they can be skim read with ease, or dipped into.

Shallow reading is just like deep reading in that we come to the text with our own baggage, ie our own presuppositions about what the text contains. The peril of so-called â??shallowâ?• reading is that we miss out on many of the opportunities to let the text challenge our presuppositions.

Without the analysis, comparisons, stories, associations and nuances offered by the full text we may simply use it to reinforce our own prejudices. So as a confessed shallow reader of *The Shallows* and *Grown Up Digital*, Iâ??m probably just reading into the texts what I want or expect to see. This is all about hermeneutics, about which more could be said. See blog posts tagged Interpretation.

References

- Carr, Nicholas. 2011. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. New York: WW Norton.
- Tapscott, Don. 2009. *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Note

Also see posts on Secrets of writing for the web, Manifestoes and madness and Writing texts that flow.

Category

1. Culture

Tags

1. books
2. brain
3. generation Y
4. hermeneutics
5. interpreation
6. Net Generation
7. popular non-fiction
8. shallow reading

Date Created
February 16, 2013
Author
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