

[Why Abundance is Good: A Reply to Nick Carr](#)

[Clay Shirky](#) - July 17th, 2008

<http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2008/07/why-abundance-is-good-a-reply-to-nick-carr/>

I think [Carr's premises](#) are correct: the mechanisms of media affect the nature of thought. The web presents us with unprecedented abundance. This can lead to interrupt-driven info-snacking, which robs people of the ability to find time to think about just one thing persistently. I also think that these changes are significant enough to motivate us to do something about it. I disagree, however, about what it is we should actually be doing.

Carr quotes [Maryanne Wolf](#)'s assertion that deep reading is indistinguishable from deep thinking. It's hard to know what to make of this claim; there are a host of people, from mathematicians to jazz musicians, who practice kinds of deep thought that are perfectly distinguishable from deep reading. Similarly, there are many kinds of reading for which the internet has been a boon; it would be hard to argue that the last ten years have seen a decrease in either the availability or comprehension of material on scientific or technical subjects, for example.

But the anxiety at the heart of "[Is Google Making Us Stupid?](#)" doesn't actually seem to be about thinking, or even reading, but culture.

Despite the sweep of the title, it's focused on a very particular kind of reading, literary reading, as a metonym for a whole way of life. You can see this in Carr's polling of "literary types," in his quoting of Wolf and the playwright Richard Foreman, and in the reference to *War and Peace*, the only work mentioned by name. Now *War and Peace* isn't just any piece of writing, of course; it is one of the longest novels in the canon, and symbolizes the height of literary ambition and of readerly devotion.

But here's the thing: it's not just Carr's friend, and it's not just because of the web—no one reads *War and Peace*. It's too long, and not so interesting.

This observation is no less sacrilegious for being true. The reading public has increasingly decided that [Tolstoy](#)'s sacred work isn't actually worth the time it takes to read it, but that process started long before the internet became mainstream. Much of the current concern about the internet, in fact, is a misdirected complaint about television, which displaced books as the essential medium by the 1970s.

As a consolation prize, though, *litterateurs* were allowed to retain their cultural status. Even as television came to dominate culture, we continued to reassure one another that *War and Peace* or *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu* were Very Important in some vague way. (This tension has produced an entire literature *about* the value of reading Proust that is now more widely read than [Proust](#)'s actual oeuvre.)

And now the internet has brought reading back as an activity. As Carr notes, "we may well be reading more today than we did in the 1970s or 1980s, when television was our medium of choice." Well, yes. But because the return of reading has not brought about the return of the cultural icons we'd been emptily praising all these years, the enormity of the historical shift away from literary culture is now becoming clear.

And this, I think, is the real anxiety behind the essay: having lost its actual centrality some time

ago, the literary world is now losing its normative hold on culture as well. The threat isn't that people will stop reading *War and Peace*. That day is long since past. The threat is that people will stop genuflecting to the *idea* of reading *War and Peace*.

Carr quotes Richard Foreman, who rightly observes that the 'complex, dense and "cathedral-like" structure of the highly educated and articulate personality' is at risk. But I worked with Foreman in the early 90's, when I was at another theater company down the block from his, and heard him make another relevant observation, in response to a question about why his plays weren't "realistic." The implication was that if his plays were wordy, abstract, and dense, it was because he was being intentionally difficult; his reply was that different themes require different forms and vice-versa, and that he didn't write like [Eugene O'Neill](#) because he was working on different themes than O'Neill.

This link between form and theme is true of any medium. Making the net's intellectual ethic as valuable as it can be will mean, among other things, securing for ourselves an ability to concentrate amidst our garden of ethereal delights. No matter how we solve that problem, though, it won't bring back the cathedral-like model. On the network we have, the bazaar often works better than the cathedral, from the individual mind to the overall culture. Getting networked society right will mean producing the work whose themes best resonate on the net, just as getting the printing press right meant perfecting printed forms.

Carr is correct that there is cultural sacrifice in the transformation of the media landscape, but this is hardly the first time that has happened. The printing press sacrificed the monolithic, historic, and elite culture of Europe by promoting a diverse, contemporary, and vulgar one. That upstart literature has become the new high culture, and the challenge today comes, yet again, from the broadening of participation in both consumption and production of media.

Given this change, the question we need to be asking isn't whether there is sacrifice; sacrifice is inevitable with serious change. The question we need to be asking is whether the sacrifice is worth it or, more importantly, what we can do to help make the sacrifice worth it. And the one strategy pretty much guaranteed not to improve anything is hoping that we'll somehow turn the clock back. This will fail, while neither resuscitating the past nor improving the future.

This is what I find so puzzling about Carr. Unlike know-nothing critics of the medium, like [Michael Gorman](#), [Sven Birkerts](#), or [Andrew Keen](#), Carr understands the net as well as anyone writing today. Yet his contrarian stance is slowly forcing him into a caricature of Luddism, increasingly unable to offer much of a suggestion for what to do next. A few years ago he could write, of Wikipedia, "Certainly, it's useful—I regularly consult it to get a quick gloss on a subject." Fast forward to the middle of 2008, and he is decrying not just Wikipedia, but Google, the [Industrial Revolution](#), and even the invention of clocks. I doubt Carr thinks European society was actually better before widespread time-keeping (and therefore before the printing press), but even pseudo-Luddism is a waste of his intellect.

William Saylor once remarked, "Everybody has got to die ... but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case." Luddism is a social version of that, where people are encouraged to believe that change is inevitable, except, perhaps, this time. This wish for stasis is bad for society, though not because it succeeds. The essential fact of Luddite complaint is that it only begins after a change has already taken place, so Luddites are mainly harmless whiners (except, of course, for the original Luddites, who were murderous thugs.) The real problem is

elsewhere; Luddism is bad for society because it misdirects people's energy and wastes their time.

The change we are in the middle of isn't minor and it isn't optional, but nor are its contours set in stone. We are a long way from discovering and perfecting the net's native forms, what Barthes called the 'genius' particular to a medium. To get there, we must find ways to focus amid new intellectual abundance, but this is not a new challenge. Once the printing press meant that there were more books than a person could read in a lifetime, scholars had to sharpen disciplines and publishers define genres, as a bulwark against the information overload of the 16th century. Society was better after that transition than before, even though it took two hundred years to get there.

And now we're facing a similar challenge, caused again by abundance, and taking it on will again mean altering our historic models for the *summa bonum* of educated life. It will be hard and complicated; abundance precipitates greater social change than scarcity. But our older habits of consumption weren't virtuous, they were just a side-effect of living in an environment of impoverished access. Nostalgia for the accidental scarcity we've just emerged from is just a sideshow; the main event is trying to shape the greatest expansion of expressive capability the world has ever known.

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[**Why Skepticism is Good: My Reply to Clay Shirky**](#)

[Nicholas Carr](#) - July 17th, 2008

<http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2008/07/why-skepticism-is-good-my-reply-to-clay-shirky/>

[Clay Shirky](#) begins by agreeing with the main thrust of my essay: that our intellectual technologies influence the way we think, and that the Web, in his words, "can lead to interrupt-driven info-snacking, which robs people of the ability to find time to think about just one thing persistently."

It's not just a matter of "finding time" to think deeply, though. What the Net may be doing, I argue, is rewiring the neural circuitry of our brains in a way that diminishes our capacity for concentration, reflection, and contemplation. This, as Shirky admits, would not be the first time that our technologies have changed the way we think. The human mind was designed, through evolution, to be highly adaptable—for better, or for worse.

One correction: In arguing that deep reading is indistinguishable from deep thinking, Maryanne Wolf was not saying that deep thinking is indistinguishable from deep reading, as Shirky mistakenly writes. Obviously, deep thinking can take other forms than deep reading, and these other forms of deep thinking are, I fear, also at risk because what they share is a requirement for sustained, undistracted concentration. (I would refer people to Wolf's book, *Proust and the Squid*, where she discusses the connection between reading and cognition at length.)

Shirky then strays beyond the bounds of my argument to express his dislike for, or at least impatience with, long novels and other sorts of "literary reading." We learn that *War and Peace*

is “too long, and not so interesting” and that we’ve been “emptily praising” other great works of literature “for all these years.” Shirky seems rather pleased to think of his opinions as “sacrilegious,” but I suspect that at least a few readers will see them as a highbrow form of philistinism. Either way, they have little to do with my worry that the Net is sapping us of a form of thinking—concentrated, linear, relaxed, reflective, deep—that I see as central to human identity and, yes, culture. I think Shirky is right that we will see new forms of expression emerge that are suited to the medium of the Internet—an eventuality to be welcomed—but that’s a different subject from the Net’s influence on cognition.

Shirky is nothing if not an optimist. He believes that, somehow, we will find a way to “secur[e] for ourselves an ability to concentrate amidst our garden of ethereal delights.” But here he’s stating a desire that he criticizes in others: a desire to turn the clock back. He simply assumes that the “ability to concentrate” will return even as the Net changes so much else about who we are and how we think. It’s telling that Shirky uses gauzily religious terms to describe the Net—“our garden of ethereal delights”—as what he’s expressing here is not reason but faith. I hope he’s right, but I think that skepticism is always the proper response to techno-utopianism.

Shirky ends by painting a caricature of me as a clock-hating Luddite. For the record, I like clocks, particularly those with dials, and harbor no illusions about turning them back.

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[Why Abundance Should Breed Optimism: A Second Reply to Nick Carr](#)

[Clay Shirky](#) - July 21st, 2008

<http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2008/07/why-abundance-should-breed-optimism-a-second-reply-to-nick-carr/>

First let me apologize to [Carr](#) for mis-attributing his own views on reading and thinking to Wolf. I stand corrected.

As for my comments on *War and Peace* & c. being beyond the bounds of his argument, he may not have intended for cultural anxiety to be his subject, but all of his examples, from Tolstoy to Foreman, are drawn from that realm, without so much as an anecdote from people whose engagement is with technical literature. If Carr wants us to conclude that the Internet is somehow bad for the spread of scientific or experimental knowledge (a hard sell, in my view), he’ll have to make that case directly; his friend’s hand-wringing about *War and Peace* isn’t going to carry the point.

Carr calls me an optimist, which is true. Here’s why: Every past technology I know of that has increased the number of producers and consumers of written material, from the alphabet and papyrus to the telegraph and the paperback, has been good for humanity. Carr argues that our period of abundance is different. The worries are numerous: the increased volume and availability of writing is leading not to wisdom but to triviality and distractions. The

young are abandoning the classical in favor of the vulgar. Venerable institutions are under possibly crushing new pressures. These complaints are not just familiar, they are accurate. However, they also have an inevitable feel about them, having been made at the beginning of every such expansion, from the printing press to the comic book to the act of writing itself.

Whenever the abundance of written material spikes, the average quality of written material falls, as a side-effect of volume. New forms start out tentative and incomplete, and can only compete for attention with older literature among people who prize experimentation. The abundance itself creates a distraction as people grapple with information overload. Institutions built around previous scarcities warn, often correctly, of the end of society as we know it. And the act of institutionalizing the new abundance necessitates complex, and occasionally revolutionary, change.

The only time Carr comes to the edge of a before-and-after comparison, though, he doesn't follow through. He notes that Nietzsche's writing style changed with the typewriter, but was this change for the better or the worse? There is a melodramatic reference to Nietzsche being "under the sway of the machine," but surely he was just as much under the sway of pen and ink before? It's not as if either form is more natural — spoken language is an evolutionary adaptation, but written language, in every form from cuneiform to unicode, is a technology, so there's no written mode that *isn't* under some sway or other.

Similarly, Kittler says the typewriter made Nietzsche's work more aphoristic, but Nietzsche was always an aphoristic writer, so was this a perversion or a purification of his style? Are we to understand the partially typewritten [*Beyond Good and Evil*](#) is worse than the handwritten [*Human, All Too Human*](#), even though the former is a re-working of the themes of the latter? I'd be surprised to find a philosopher willing to make that case.

As for my own views, contra Carr, I do not in fact believe that "the 'ability to concentrate' will return even as the Net changes so much else." Our previous powers of concentration were aided enormously by being in such a relatively empty environment, a state that I don't believe we could ever recreate. My argument instead is that technologies that make writing abundant always require new social structures to accompany them.

It's not as if books and periodicals as we know them began to flow from Gutenberg's studio in the 1450s. Among the things that needed to be invented after books got cheap were the separation of fiction from non-fiction; the discovery of new talent; the index; numbered versions of the same work; and so on through a host of inventions large and small.

We have a challenge before us in figuring out how to keep the distractions of the net at bay, now that new material is no longer hard to discover or access. Perhaps Carr is right that this time we will fail. Perhaps a medium that radically expands our ability to create and share written material will end up being bad for humanity. But that would be a first, in the three thousand years between the Phoenician alphabet and now.

One last note — the allusion in my calling the net a "garden of ethereal delights" is less religious than Carr makes out. In Bosch's triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, most of the overt religious references are in the side panels showing the extremes of Eden and Hell, but it is in the secular middle ground — the garden of earthly delights, suspended between utopia and dystopia — where things are getting really weird.