Editorial: "The Air is Full of People"   Marc Truitt

Within the last few months, two provocative books have been published that take different approaches to the question of how we learn in the always-on, always-connected electronic environment of "screens." While neither is specifically directed at librarians, I think both deserve to be read and discussed widely in our community.

The Shallows

The first, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (Norton, 2010), by Nicholas Carr, is an expanded version of his article "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" published in the July/August 2008 issue of *Atlantic Monthly* and discussed in this space soon after.[1] Carr's arguments in *The Shallows* will be familiar to those who read his earlier article, but they are more thoroughly developed in his book and worth summarizing here.

Carr's thesis is that use of connective technology—the Internet and the web—is leading to a remapping of cognitive reading and thinking skills, and a "shallowing" of these mental faculties:

> Over the last few years I've had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. . . . I'm not thinking the way I used to think. I feel it most strongly when I'm reading. I used to find it easy to immerse myself in a book or a lengthy article. . . . That's rarely the case anymore. (5)

The problem, as Carr goes on to describe at some length, chronicling in detail the results of years of neurological investigations, is that the brain is "plastic." "Virtually all of our neural circuits—whether they're involved in feeling, seeing, hearing, moving, thinking, learning, perceiving, or remembering—are subject to change." And one of the things that is changing them the most drastically today is our growing reliance on digital information. The paradox is that as we repeat an activity—surfing the Web and clicking on links, rather than engaging with linear texts, for example—chemically induced synapses cause us to want to continue the new activity, strengthening those links (34).

This quality of plastic neural circuits that can be remapped, when combined with the "ecosystem of interruption technologies" of the Internet and the Web (e.g., in-text hyperlinks, e-mail and RSS alerts, text messaging, Twitter, multiple widgets, etc.) is resulting in what Carr argues is a growing inability or unwillingness to engage with and reflect deeply upon extended text (91).[2] As Carr puts it,

> the linear, literary mind . . . [that has] been the imaginative mind of the Renaissance, the rational mind of the Enlightenment, the inventive mind of the Industrial Revolution, even the subversive mind of Modernism . . . may soon be yesterday's mind. (10)

There is much more. Carr offers pointed critiques of major Internet players and the roles they play in facilitating and exploiting the remapping of our neural circuits. Google, whose "profits are tied directly to the velocity of people's information intake," is to Carr "in the business of distraction" (156–57). The Google Book initiative "shouldn't be confused with the libraries we've known until now. It's not a library of books. It's a library of snippets. . . . The strip-mining of 'relevant content' replaces the slow excavation of meaning" (166).

Ultimately, for Carr, it's about who is controlling whom. While the Internet may permit us to better perform some functions—search, for example—"it poses a threat to our integrity as human beings . . . we program our computers and thereafter they program us" (214). Put another way, "the computer screen bulldozes our doubts with its bounties and conveniences. It is so much our servant that it would seem churlish to notice that it is also our master" (4).

Hamlet's Blackberry

Perhaps less familiar than Carr's work is William Powers' *Hamlet's Blackberry: A Practical Philosophy for Building a Good Life in the Digital Age* (HarperCollins 2010). Powers, a writer whose work has appeared in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *New Republic,* and elsewhere, describes the influence of digital technology (or "screens," to use his shorthand)[3] and connectedness on our lives:

> In the last few decades, we've found a powerful new way to pursue more busyness: digital technology. Computers and smart phones are often pitched as solutions to our stressful, overextended lives. . . . But at the same time, they link us more tightly to all the sources of our busyness.
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> Our screens are conduits for everything that keeps us hopping—mandatory and optional, worthwhile and silly. . . .

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The goal is no longer to be "in touch" but to erase the possibility of ever being out of touch. To merge, to live simultaneously with everyone, sharing every moment, every perception, thought, and action via our screens. Even the places where we used to go to get away from the crowd and the burdens it imposes on us are now connected. The simple act of going out for a walk is completely different today from what it was fifteen years ago. Whether you're walking down a big-city street or in the woods outside a country town, if you're carrying a mobile device with you, the global crowd comes along. . . . The air is full of people. (14–15)

Drawing inspiration and analogy from a list of philosophers and other historical and literary figures beginning with Plato and ending with McLuhan, Powers describes seven practical approaches, tools, and techniques for disconnecting from our screen-driven life:

■ Seek physical distance (Plato)
■ Seek intellectual and emotional distance (Seneca)
■ Hope for devices that might allow us to customize our degree of connectedness (Gutenberg)
■ Consider older, low-tech tools as alternatives where possible (Shakespeare via Hamlet)
■ Create positive rituals (Ben Franklin)
■ Create a "Walden zone" refuge (Thoreau)
■ Be aware of and take personal control from technology by being aware of that technology (McLuhan)

Powers then reviews how he and his family used these techniques to regain the sense of control and depth they felt they'd lost to screens.

In the past several months, I've tried a couple myself. I no longer carry a Blackberry unless I'm traveling out of town. I avoid e-mail and the Internet completely on Saturdays (my "Internet Sabbath"). The effect of these two small and easily achieved changes has been little short of liberating, providing space to think and reflect without the distraction of always-on connectedness. Walking my Lab Seamus has become a special pleasure!

▌ Bringing Libraries into the Picture

So, what do Carr's and Powers' theses mean for libraries, and what do they mean in particular for those of us who provide technology solutions for libraries? They remind us that there is a very real *human cost* to the technology of screens and always-on connectedness that have become our stock-in-trade in recent years. As well, they provide convincing evidence that there is a growing awareness, if not yet a general consensus, that people are coming to experience and understand these costs. Finally, they also make the point that things need not continue on their present course. I can imagine that if we in libraries take Carr and Powers seriously, there might be significant implications for service models and collections practices. Both books have been reviewed in all the usual mainstream places. Remarkably though, to me—and excluding a scant few discussion list threads such as that on web4lib several years ago—I've seen no discussion in the usual professional venues of their implications where libraries are concerned. Perhaps I'm simply not reading the "right" weblogs or discussion lists.

I'm not under the illusion that libraries or librarians can by themselves alter our rush toward the "shallows." Still, given our eagerness to discuss how we extend the reach of "screens" in libraries—whether in the form of learning commons, wireless access, mobile-friendly websites, clearing stacks of "tree-books" in favor of e-books, etc.—would it not be reasonable to think that we should show as much concern about the *consequences* of such activities, and even some interest in providing possible remedial alternatives?

One of my favorite library spaces in college was the Linonia and Brothers Reading Room in Yale's Sterling Memorial Library (see a photo of the reading room at http://images.library.yale.edu/madid/oneItem.aspx?id=1772930). Its dark oak paneling, built-in bookshelves, overstuffed leather easy chairs, cozy alcoves, toasty, foot-warming steam radiators, and stained-glass windows overlooking a quiet courtyard represented the epitome of the nineteenth-century "gentleman's library" and encouraged the sort of deep reading and contemplation that are becoming so rare in our institutions today. I spent many hours there, reading, thinking, dreaming—and yes, cat-napping too. I haven't visited the "L&B" in years; I hope it is still the way I so fondly recall it.

Over the past few years, as we've considered the various aspects of the library-as-space question, we've created all manner of collaborative, group-focused, überconnected learning spaces. We've also created book-free spaces (to say nothing of book-free "libraries"), food-friendly spaces, quiet and cell-phone-free spaces, and a host of others of which I'm sure I haven't thought. So, in an attempt to get us thinking about what Carr's and Powers' books might mean for libraries, here's a crazy idea to start us off: How about a *screen-free* space for deep reading and contemplation? It should be very low-tech: no mobiles, no laptops, no desktops, no networks, no clickety-clack of keys, no chimes of incoming e-mail and tweets, no unearthly glow of monitors. No food, drink, or group-study areas, either. Just a quiet, inviting, comfortable space for individual reading and

thought. Would some of our patrons adopt it? I'm willing to bet that they would. Do we not owe them the same commitment to service that we've worked so hard to provide to those who wish to be collaborative and "always-on"?

Absolutely.

No, we can't change the world or stop the march of the screens. But perhaps, as with Powers' "Walden Zone," we can start by providing a close-at-hand safe harbor for those of our patrons seeking refuge from the "always-on" world of screens.

References and Notes

1. Carr's *Atlantic Monthly* article appeared in volume 301 (July/Aug. 2008) and can be found at http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/6868/ (accessed Jan. 14, 2011); my *ITAL* column on the topic is at http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/lita/ital/272008/2703sep/editorial_pdf.cfm (accessed Jan. 14, 2011).

2. The term "ecosystem of interruption technologies" belongs to Cory Doctorow.

3. Powers uses the term "screens" to describe "the connective digital devices that have been widely adopted in the last two decades, including desktop and notebook computers, mobile phones, e-readers, and tablets" (1).