# Losing our minds to a machine

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Comment

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A RECENT survey conducted by a company indicated that almost 90 per cent of Malaysian children who go online have had negative experiences.

This ranged from harassment to being exposed to unwholesome images. However, many parents are unaware of them. Only 40 per cent supervised their children.

In the newly released book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains,* author Nicholas Carr argued that the Internet may cause our brains to be "rewired" and eventually reconstitute our lives and habits. The thought-provoking book is suggesting, not without controversy, that over time the human civilisation may also be acculturated by the Internet. Some even say this signals the beginning of another human civilisation, albeit the shallower kind!

There is no doubt that the Internet can have a significant cultural impact on people, much the same as television and radio. They are, after all, communication media intended to bring about (hopefully "positive") cultural changes. But the television has been dubbed an "idiot box".

The human brain has come a long way from the days of hunters and gatherers to the virtual world of cyberspace. At each point, the brain shapes the mind to allow new experiences to be expressed.

Nevertheless, there is nothing as pervasive as the Internet (considered as several TV screens), which prompted Carr's article *Is Google Making Us Stupid? (Atlantic Monthly*, July/Aug 2008). *The Shallows* can be regarded as an extension of the critique.

In the *Atlantic Monthly*, Carr quoted media theorist Marshall McLuhan who pointed out that "media are not just passive channels of information" without also shaping process and thought; and admittedly he was impacted when it comes to the capacity for concentration and contemplation, even reflection.

Coincidentally, this is the same discussion that I had with friends over dinner recently about reading books vis-a-vis surfing the Internet. It was observed that the new generation prefers the latter, and this requires different capacities compared with reading a book.

Changing from reading to surfing may need some getting used to in order to allow the brain to adjust. The Internet has its own "new intellectual ethics", as Carr puts it, in terms of various fonts, images and audio-visual interface with the "surfer", after all.

And it is this ethics that will give rise to the new future, and as of now deemed a rather shallow one -- which according to one reviewer of *The New York Times Book Review* can be "as wide as a vast ocean".

Carr quoted a 2008 United Kingdom study in the *Atlantic Monthly*: "It is clear that users are not reading online in the traditional sense; indeed there are signs that the new forms of 'reading' are emerging as users 'power browse' horizontally through titles, contents pages and abstracts going for quick wins. It almost seems that they go online to avoid reading in the traditional sense."

While we are still grappling with the differences between Generation X and Generation Y, it is made more complicated by the so-called Generation Google.

Although Gen Y is thought to be tech savvy, they still regard "books and conventional libraries" as the primary sources of knowledge as noted by Wikipedia. Generation Google, on the other hand, regards the Internet as their "first port of call for knowledge", which invariably will result in new experiences and habits.

What is worrying is the possibility of such habits (such as cut-and-paste) to negate the purposes of learning and lead to the "shallow" generation of tomorrow, notwithstanding its effect on the brain in the long term.

What is clear is that, with new technological inventions, we don't lose sight of their larger purpose to advance civilisation through the sharpness of mind. That is what education is all about pre-and post-Internet, and we are losing it to a machine!

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