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978-1-107-04190-5 - Literature in the Digital Age: An Introduction

Adam Hammond

Excerpt

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Part I

*Is Literature Dying in the
Digital Age?*

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Chapter 1

The Digital Medium and Its Message

At the time of his death in 1980, Marshall McLuhan was principally famous for two things: for having said, “The medium is the message” and for having deeply confused an entire generation by doing so. When I was growing up in Ontario in the 1980s, I remember watching a government-sponsored commemorative TV advertisement about McLuhan, part of a series of sixty-second celebrations of eminent Canadians. In the ad, an actor portrays a tweedy, mustachioed McLuhan leading a seminar at the University of Toronto. Suddenly he has his Eureka moment: “No, no . . . The medium is not more *important* than the message it carries. . . . It – it’s obvious. The medium *is* the message.”¹ Students leave the class, excited by the power of the gnomic phrase, yet also utterly perplexed by it. Back in the classroom, the fictionalized McLuhan paces about, ranting madly in solitude. Unable to fit his rambling theories into the minute allotted, the advertisement cuts him off mid-sentence. McLuhan had undoubtedly come up with something important, the advertisement implied – but exactly what it was remained entirely unclear.

Today, McLuhan has come into focus. In part this is because the things he said about electronic media like radio and television turned out to be more applicable to digital media such as networked computers and smartphones. As *Wired* magazine recognized when it posthumously named McLuhan its “Patron Saint” in 1993, his theories only really began to make sense with the arrival of the internet. Since then, as the digital medium has extended further and further into our daily lives, we have come increasingly to feel the truth of McLuhan’s statement, “The medium is the message.” So much of what we consume online is just the old media fed to us in new ways: Netflix is mostly made up of old TV shows and movies; YouTube is replete with MTV-style music videos and commercials; the most popular podcasts are radio shows. As McLuhan said, “The content of the medium is never the message because the content is always the old medium.”² The real change comes from the new medium itself, which “creates a new situation for human association and human perception.”³ Even when the content of digital media is identical to its analog predecessors, we can feel how the digital medium itself changes our

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lives: all-night Netflix binges abetted by the ability to watch whatever we want, whenever we want; the comments section on an old music video from the early 1990s that connects us with diehard fans of a song we thought everyone had forgotten; the favorite weekly podcast on a topic so obscure it would not stand a chance on commercial radio. “*That*,” McLuhan contends, “is the effect the medium has – that total, pervasive effect – *that* is the message, the social change that is brought about.”⁴

No group is more sensitive to the changes inherent in the shift to digital forms than readers of literature. What the digital age has accomplished, above all else, is to defamiliarize the act of reading. It has done so by offering us choices. We begin reading an article in a print magazine on the bus; when we get to work, we finish reading it on the magazine’s website. In the living room, we read novels on our tablets; in bed, we thumb the pages of a paperback. Reading a photocopied scholarly article, we discover another article we would like to consult; opening our laptops, we head for the library website and download the PDF. As we shift back and forth between print and digital forms, reading becomes an increasingly self-conscious act. We study not only the words on the page or the screen but also the way that the medium itself seems to shape our reading. Is it harder to concentrate on a long novel on an iPad, where e-mail notifications and Twitter messages easily break the spell of narrative? Does an embedded video in an “enhanced e-book” enrich the reading experience or merely distract from it? If the ability to discuss a novel with an online reading community transforms a solitary experience into a social one, is this for the better or worse?

This chapter takes up the big questions that accompany the shift from printed to digital forms: how reading is changing in the digital age and how our shifting reading practices are reshaping our society and ourselves. It explores these issues through the debate initiated by Nicholas Carr’s 2008 article, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” – perhaps the most influential public account of the message of the digital medium. For Carr and his respondents Clay Shirky and Sven Birkerts, the debate turns on three key points: (1) the question of attention, of whether the printed book fostered the ability to concentrate in depth and at length and whether discontinuous reading habits promoted by digital forms are destroying this ability; (2) the question of whether print fostered individual consciousness and whether electronic media privilege group consciousness; and (3) the question of democracy, of whether the digital age – with its promises of unrestricted access to texts and new horizontal forms of association and collaboration – is inherently more democratic than the era of print. Because the debate between Carr, Shirky, and Birkerts unfolded online, it affords us the opportunity to test whether the characteristics of digital textuality themselves

support one side of the argument or the other. And because the debate was later taken up in a series of printed book-length analyses in the popular and academic press, we can ask the same of the printed medium.

“Is Google Making Us Stupid?”

Nicholas Carr’s 2008 *Atlantic* cover story “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” opens with a paradigmatic statement of the heightened media-consciousness characteristic of the digital age. “Over the past few years,” he writes,

I’ve had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. My mind isn’t going – so far as I can tell – but it’s changing. I’m not thinking the way I used to think.⁵

The precise change that Carr perceives is a slackening in his ability to focus: “What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation,” he says: “My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles.” One activity makes Carr feel these changes most acutely: reading. “Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy”:

My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I’d spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That’s rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I’m always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle.

As the article continues, it becomes clear that it is a specific type of reading – *literary* reading – that Carr believes is most threatened in the digital age. Polling some acquaintances – “literary types, most of them” – he hears from one friend, formerly a “voracious book reader” with an English Literature BA to prove it, who has stopped reading literature entirely; another friend reports, like a voice from a post-apocalyptic film, “I can’t read *War and Peace* anymore. . . . I’ve lost the ability to do that. Even a blog post of more than three or four paragraphs is too much to absorb. I skim it.” Carr himself, another English major, writes, “Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.”

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It's no coincidence, Carr argues, that we are most aware of the internet's cognitive effects while reading – nor is it coincidental that reading is the activity most affected by the spread of the digital. This is because reading *created* the very mindset that the digital age is now dismantling. In making this argument, Carr follows McLuhan very closely. In works such as *The Mechanical Bride* (1951) and *Understanding Media* (1964), McLuhan argued that Western thought was powerfully shaped by the development of the alphabet and its extension through the printing press. The repetition and uniformity that were made possible by the printing process, he postulated, served to promote the repetition and uniformity of Western linear logic, while the mass-produced book, read in private from the reader's fixed point of view, helped encourage the notion of individuality. Carr invokes McLuhan explicitly, elegantly summarizing his notion that “media are not just passive channels of information” but in fact “shape the process of thought” as they “supply the stuff of thought.” Carr further accepts McLuhan's basic premise that the printing press was instrumental in shaping the Western mind. “The kind of deep reading that a sequence of printed pages promotes,” Carr argues,

is valuable not just for the knowledge we acquire from the author's words but for the intellectual vibrations those words set off within our own minds. In the quiet spaces opened up by the sustained, undistracted reading of a book . . . we make our own associations, draw our own inferences and analogies, foster our own ideas.

In the busy, noisy, frantic space of a digital text, by contrast, it is impossible to achieve the concentrated serenity that supports the literary mind. Even an identical text transferred from print into an electronic format enters into a chamber of digital disruptions:

When the Net absorbs a medium, that medium is re-created in the Net's image. It injects the medium's content with hyperlinks, blinking ads, and other digital gewgaws, and it surrounds the content with the content of all the other media it has absorbed. . . . The result is to scatter our attention and diffuse our concentration.

The deep reading fostered by print is important not only because it is necessary for comprehension, Carr argues, but also because it supports a particular kind of subjectivity. Behind the fast, cheap, superficial, “Jet Ski” mode of internet skim reading “lies a different kind of thinking,” Carr says, and “perhaps even a new sense of self.” Literary reading is not only the most conspicuous victim of a new and widespread form of attention deficit disorder – it is also the linchpin of the cherished notion of the individual consciousness as active, engaged, and

critical. If our ability to read literature is at stake in the digital age, Carr implies, so too is the very notion of the individual.

Clay Shirky and the Democratic Riposte

“Is Google Making Us Stupid?” quickly became a touchstone for arguments about the social and cognitive effects of the internet – and it was on the internet itself that this debate initially took place. At the same time as the hard copy appeared on newsstands, *The Atlantic* ran the full text of the article for free on its website. The digital version of the article spread quickly through links on social media and in personal e-mails, and it rapidly inspired a wide-ranging digital response, from the comments section of the *Atlantic* website to blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. One of the most fascinating venues for this digital debate was the website of the venerable *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which invited a distinguished group of thinkers to participate in a blog-based forum it named “Your Brain Online.” The first to respond was Clay Shirky, a writer on the social effects of the internet who presented a forceful rebuttal of Carr’s position. Shirky begins by accepting some of Carr’s premises. He agrees with Carr’s McLuhan-derived notion that “the mechanisms of media affect the nature of thought” and admits that the “unprecedented abundance” of information online has the power to steer our reading practices toward what he calls “interrupt-driven info-snacking.”⁶ Shirky recognizes that Carr’s article, despite its expansive title, is “focused on a very particular kind of reading, literary reading, as a metonym for a whole way of life.” Shirky is indeed willing to go so far as to accept that literature, literary reading, and the “whole way of life” that they supported, are dying.

His objections center on two points: first, Carr’s insistence that the internet is responsible for the death of literature; and second, the notion that the death of literature should be lamented at all. “Here’s the thing,” Shirky writes: “no one reads *War and Peace*. It’s too long, and not so interesting. . . . The reading public has increasingly decided that Tolstoy’s sacred work isn’t actually worth the time it takes to read it.” But it was television, not the internet, that initiated this move away from literary reading, which by the time of the internet’s popularization was already long underway. The only difference is that in the television age literature managed to retain some of its “cultural status.” As Shirky writes, “*Litterateurs* . . . continued to reassure one another that *War and Peace* or *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu* were Very Important in some vague way.” The internet, however, finally led the public to withdraw this empty veneration. Citing Carr’s own remarks that “we may well be reading more today than we

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did in the 1970s or 1980s, when television was our medium of choice,” Shirky argues that “the internet has brought reading back as an activity” – just not *literary* reading. “Because the return of reading has not brought about the return of the cultural icons we’d been emptily praising all these years,” he says, “the enormity of the historical shift away from literary culture is now becoming clear.”

For Shirky, the real thrust of the shift to digital textuality – the real cultural significance of the internet – is its expansion of democracy. In a follow-up to his original post on the *Encyclopedia Britannica* blog, Shirky describes the internet as “a medium that radically expands our ability to create and share written material,” adding, “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.”⁷ If we are currently undergoing an initial bout of information overload, struggling to spot the pearls of wisdom as we zip along the surface of online reading, we need only give ourselves time to adjust. “Technologies that make writing abundant,” Shirky says, “always require new social structures to accompany them.” Rather than casting a wistful retrospective gaze on the passing of a literary culture tainted by snobbery and exclusivity, Shirky argues that we ought to focus our attention on the new artistic possibilities of a democratic, inclusive, post-literary digital age. “Getting networked society right,” he writes, “will mean producing the work whose themes best resonate on the net, just as getting the printing press right meant perfecting printed forms.” “Nostalgia for the accidental scarcity we’ve just emerged from is just a sideshow,” he concludes; “the main event is trying to shape the greatest expansion of expressive capability the world has ever known.”

The Gutenberg Elegies Revisited

Shirky’s post, even more than Carr’s original article, was geared to provoke a reaction. With haste and vehemence that would have made Tolstoy proud, nearly everyone who had ever finished *War and Peace* emerged to announce that fact and defend the cherished work. Larry Sanger, the co-founder of *Wikipedia*, temporarily laid down his arms against his natural enemy, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and posted a long response on its website, entitled “A Defense of Tolstoy & the Individual Thinker”: having “read *War and Peace* twice” and “loved it,” Sanger accused Shirky of “plain old philistinism.”⁸ Nicholas Carr joined the conversation as well, responding to Shirky on the *Britannica* forum with

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charges of “techno-utopianism” and “a highbrow form of philistinism.”⁹ The most surprising figure to join in the debate on the *Britannica* forum, however, was Sven Birkerts.

In 1994 – nearly fifteen years before “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” and shortly before the internet had begun to make its widespread social impact – Birkerts published *The Gutenberg Elegies*, a remarkably prescient book that anticipated many of Carr’s arguments. In a chapter titled “The Death of Literature,” Birkerts invokes McLuhan to argue, “We are in the midst of an epoch-making transition”: “the societal shift from print-based to electronic communications is as consequential for culture as was the shift instigated by Gutenberg’s invention of movable type.”¹⁰ This transition is most readily perceived, Birkerts argues, in the act of literary reading: “Who among us,” he asks, “can generate the stillness and concentration and will to read Henry James, or Joseph Conrad, or James Joyce, or Virginia Woolf as they were meant to be read?” Working from similar theoretical and anecdotal bases, Birkerts’s chief worry – as with Carr – is that the new electronic regime will disrupt the model of subjectivity fostered by the printing press. The “circuit and screen,” he writes, are “antithetical to inwardness,”¹¹ and the electronic era is thus one in which “the human individual fac[es] the prospect of the erasure of individual selfhood.”¹² The rapid technological advances since the early 1990s have severely dated many of Birkerts’s descriptions of electronic threats to individual subjectivity. The seriousness of his warning that we are, “appliance by appliance,” “wiring ourselves into a gigantic hive”¹³ is greatly undercut by the particular appliances he names: “Telephone, fax, computer-screen networks, e-mail, interactive television – these are the components out of which the hive is being built.”¹⁴ Yet if we set aside the CD-ROMs, the fax machines, and the “VCRs, with Nintendo capacities,” Birkerts’s account of a new form of technologically linked “hive mind” remains chillingly prophetic. Substitute his devices for ours, and his statement, “The idea of spending a day, never mind a week, out of the range of all our devices sounds bold, even risky,” is truer today than in 1994.¹⁵

Birkerts’s arguments in *The Gutenberg Elegies* indeed serve as effective preemptive counters against the kind of democratic “techno-utopianism” in which Shirky engaged in the 2008 debate. Contra Shirky, Birkerts sees the digital world as carrying an antidemocratic thrust “The techno-web and the democratic ideal are in opposition. Our whole economic and technological obsession with getting on-line is leading us away – not from democracy necessarily, but from the premise that individualism and circuited interconnection are, at a primary level, inimical notions.”¹⁶ If digital interconnection is leading us away from a

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notion of democracy premised on the plurality of strong, independent citizens, Birkerts proposes to use the printed book as a weapon against its incursions. Like Carr, Birkerts sees reading as a McLuhanian “counter-environment”: a place outside the dominant media environment from which we can register and study its effects. “We hold in our hands a way to cut against the momentum of the times,” Birkerts writes. “We can resist the skimming tendency and delve; we can restore, if only for a time, the vanishing assumption of coherence.”¹⁷ In a moment of rare optimism, he perceives “the possibility for a genuine resurgence of the arts, of literature in particular”:

The book . . . will be seen as a haven, a way of going off-line and into a space sanctified by subjectivity. So long as there is a natural inclination toward independent selfhood, so long will literature be able to prove the reports of its death exaggerated.¹⁸

In a rousing peroration, Birkerts ends *The Gutenberg Elegies* with a prescription for resisting the encroachment of the electronic: total abstinence. Echoing the words attributed to Satan in the hellfire sermon in James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, “*non serviam*, I will not serve,”¹⁹ Birkerts closes his volume with this statement: “From deep in the heart I hear the voice that says, ‘Refuse it.’”²⁰

Alas, the voice was not strong enough to keep Birkerts away from his computer in the summer of 2008. Incited by Shirky’s blithe dismissal of *War and Peace* – not to mention his insulting characterization of Birkerts as a “know-nothing” – Birkerts emerged from digital hibernation to reiterate his elegiac theses. In a line delivered with all the polish of a car-commercial slogan, Birkerts asserts, “*War and Peace* has achieved – and for over a century represented – a certain standard of greatness”; its “value,” as such, cannot be read as “a function of popularity.”²¹ As to Shirky’s insistence that we must focus our attention on “trying to shape the greatest expansion of expressive capability the world has ever known,” Birkerts argues that intimate familiarity with works like *War and Peace* is a prerequisite for such a project:

Shaping needs not only shapers, but some consensus vision among those shapers of what our society and culture might be shaped toward. I don’t know that we trust the commercial marketplace to tell us. So, some deep comprehension of our inheritance, including the work of the now-derided Leo Tolstoy, is essential.

Thus Birkerts’s sense of the stakes of the shift to digital media had not changed since *The Gutenberg Elegies*. “I prize a sense of inhabiting my self-constituted