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Technology and the Mind, Body and Soul

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Abstract

"Both *The Shallows* and *The Next Story* do an excellent job of motivating the reader to consider their use of media, but it seems to me that the different approaches taken by these authors are rooted in fundamentally different pictures of what it means to be a human being."

Posting about two books that discuss the effects of technology on our lives from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Comments

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     Title: The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains
     Author: Nicholas Carr
Publisher: W & W Norton & Company
Publish Date: June 2011
Paperback: 304 pages
Price: $15.95
ISBN: 978-0-393-33975-8

     Title: The Next Story: Life And Faith After The Digital Explosion
     Author: Tim Challies

Publisher: Zondervan
Publish Date: March 31, 2011
Hardcover: 208 pages
Price: $19.99
ISBN: 978-0-310-32903-9

"We are welcoming the frenziedness [of technology] into our souls" concludes Nicholas Carr at the end of his Pulitzer-prize finalist book *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*. This conclusion that references the soul is an interesting (if slightly off-topic) concluding sentence for a book that has dedicated 200-odd pages to describing the bio-physical changes that are resulting from the current rise of internet culture. The implications of the statement are important ones for Christians to consider, and another recent book in the area of media-ecology, *The Next Story: Life and Faith After the Digital Explosion* by Tim Challies, attempts to take on these Christian implications. The two books, then, provide different and complementary insights about how the current cultural shift affects our lives.

Throughout *The Shallows*, Carr brings his reader along on a journey he took himself; a journey investigating why he found himself increasingly unable to concentrate, especially in reading books. In a readable, not overly-scientific way, the reader meanders through the biology of cognition (a subject he terms "neuroplasticity") and how technology grows and shifts along with our thought processes, arriving mid-way through the book at the communication tool he will focus on for the rest of the book: the internet. The remainder of the book builds on the previous discussion of neuroplasticity and the written word, discussing how the internet (intentionally!) reshapes our minds.

The primary focus of the book are the biological, chemical, and physical changes that our internet behaviors induce in our brains. The journey of discovery is both insightful and terrifying and will most likely leave you with a desire to consider your own internet habits, but the book feels like a downhill slide—it leaves the reader wanting more. Perhaps this desire for more is just a desire for guidance in executing change (of which Carr provides little), but perhaps the desire is an understanding of why we should be concerned about the changes on a deeper level; if the brain is reduced to physio-chemical processes, why does it matter what neural pathways we form? Thus, ending his last chapter with a statement about the soul seems out of place, though not irrelevant to the discussion.

In *The Next Story*, Tim Challies observes that "we are molded and formed into the image of whatever shapes us", a fact that is "consistent with the way God created us." While *The Shallows* clearly describes this biological reshaping of our thought processes, its tendency toward reductionism does not acknowledge that human beings are more than collections of neurons. By virtue of having been created in the image of God, human beings have spiritual as well as physical aspects, and if our biological aspects are being drastically re-shaped by our use of digital technology, it stands to reason that our spiritual aspects are also being affected. The shaping of ourselves as whole beings, then,

is the question that Challies addresses in *The Next Story*.

Challies was motivated to write *The Next Story* for much the same reason that Carr wrote *The Shallows*: a sense that he was losing control of his life and a nagging question about whether his tools were serving him or he was serving his tools. This book addresses technology on slightly broader sense than *The Shallows* (Carr focused on the internet, while Challies focuses on technology, which he broadly defines as "the creative activity of using tools to shape God's creation for practical purposes") and explores how we as Christians can live in "the sweet spot" of technology—between our experience, theory, and theology. He divides the book into two parts, the first part (about a quarter of the book) exploring how to use the three aforementioned topics as lenses, and the second part applying those lenses to specific applications (truth, relationships, identity, etc.) in the Christian life.

The first part of *The Next Story* parallels *The Shallows*, exploring the bio-physical and sociological changes caused by our use of technology, but left by itself it does not leave the reader with the urge to run out and curb media-use habits. The overview provided is both broader and shallower than Carr's; however, *The Next Story* provides a better overall picture for the role that technology plays in our lives and society. Challies pays particular attention to exploring the morality of technology, arguing that it is our actions with technology (and not the technology itself) that determine whether something is "good" or "evil." His approach, while thought-provoking, seems to absolve the designer of responsibility for considering the morals embedded in a particular design. He then asks the reader to consider whether technology itself is an idol or facilitates other idols, preparing the way for the second part of the book: applying our theology, theory, and experience to our use of technology in the Christian life.

The second part of *The Next Story* functions as a guide to self-reflection. Chapters start out by connecting our experience to the theoretical and theological foundation laid in the first three chapters. For example, in the chapter on "Mediation/Identity", Challies discusses how screens shape our experience ("Where were you on September 11, 2001?"), then leads into theory by discussing how we are using devices to mediate communication with other people. He moves into our theological experience by observing that if it is God's ultimate plan to have unmediated communication with us (Adam and Eve in the garden) and if we are designed in His image, then our best communication mode with other humans will also be unmediated. He pushes the chapter toward its conclusion by discussing the implications of internet communication for Christian community, particularly as it applies to the cyber church. The chapter finishes with a set of application points and questions for reflection, encouraging the reader to consider the implications of the chapter's ideas in the context of his or her own life.

Both *The Shallows* and *The Next Story* do an excellent job of motivating the reader to consider their use of media, but it seems to me that the different approaches taken by these authors are rooted in fundamentally different pictures of what it means to be a human being. Carr's physical-changes approach strongly suggests a framework of naturalism—the idea that our bodies and thoughts are chemicals, while Challies emphasis on soul implies an understanding of human beings that acknowledges a pistic aspect of humanity. As human beings, we operate within the Creation, which has a physical-chemical structure, and Carr's work clearly shows how our actions affect the physical structure, while Challies' work encourages us to think more deeply about how our use of technology can affect our souls—those things which, many argue, make us unique among the Created creatures. Both books are worth a read and they complement each other nicely, but consider yourself warned: you will want to rethink your technology habits when you are done!