

Trevor Sawler

**Where We are Now
“tl;dr”**

It is an article of faith among those who develop web sites for a living that the average visitor to a web page will simply ignore a wall of text and move on to something easier to digest. People no longer want to read lengthy documents. The average user, web developers maintain, prefers to have quick summaries or brief overviews. In an ideal world, information should be compressed into a single headline. Gone are the days of insightful, well-written prose which examines an issue in detail; in their place we have the Twitterverse, the blogosphere, and Facebook.

In fact, dedicated Internet users (a group that I will, for the sake of simplicity, refer to as Netizens) have their own special language used to refer to such things—for example, “tl;dr” frequently appears in the comment section under a lengthy online document. The term stands for “too long; didn’t read,” and is rarely used as a deliberate criticism of a given document; instead, it is employed almost gleefully, and suggests that the reader takes pleasure in announcing to the world at large that he or she is not interested in reading the text, but is nevertheless willing to dismiss it out of hand simply because reading it is too much like work. This aggressive ignorance is indicative of the nature of the Netizens as a whole, and has, at least according to Nicholas Carr in his book entitled *The Shallows*, spilled over into everyday life.

My purpose here is not to offer yet another review of Carr’s book; it has received enough positive attention since its publication in 2012 that it does not require such treatment. It is an excellent, insightful, highly readable and well-written book, and I strongly encourage you to give it a try. Instead of discussing it in detail, however, I intend to use Carr’s book as a rough guide to examine one element of the issue that he does not consider in detail: where we are now, and what effect the digital age has upon both Netizens and their counterparts in the general populace. Carr outlines the basis of his argument in the prologue, and he does so in his typical engaging manner:

The clash between Net enthusiasts and Net skeptics, carried out over the last two decades through

dozens of books and articles and thousands of blog posts, video clips, and podcasts, has become as polarized as ever, with the former heralding a new golden age of access and participation and the latter bemoaning a new dark age of mediocrity and narcissism. The debate has been important—content does matter—but because it hinges on personal ideology and taste, it has gone down a cul-de-sac. The views have become extreme, the attacks personal. “Luddite!” sneers the enthusiast. “Philistine!” scoffs the skeptic. “Cassandra!” “Pollyanna!”

What both enthusiast and skeptic miss is what McLuhan saw: that in the long run a medium’s content matters less than the medium itself in influencing how we think and act... (2-3).

Carr concisely outlines the basic structure of his argument: there are those who embrace technology, and those who view it as little more than a way for Netizens with nothing to say being given ample opportunity to say nothing, and to do so at great length and to a vast audience. Yet both groups, he argues, are influenced by the technology itself, whether or not they are conscious of that influence.

This argument has much merit, and it is relatively easy to demonstrate. Simply visit any news organization’s web site, choose a random article, and then scroll to the bottom of the page, where readers offer their comments on the story. It is remarkably easy to distinguish between the interested reader and the devoted Netizen; the former might offer an opinion (perhaps misinformed, but genuine) while the latter will all-too-often write something that, to the non-Netizen, is nearly unintelligible and has little if any connection to the story. A case in point: as I write this, one of the most popular articles on CBC New Brunswick’s web site is entitled “Lure of shale gas royalties divides town.” The article examines the potential benefits and dangers inherent in shale gas development, and although its content is rather sparse, it does at least attempt to remain neutral and objective. As I write this, there are 261 comments on the story. One reader, who self-identifies as “Mainer1,” offers this:

“How is it the the same people who believe the hard data from the scientists at the US EPA and Environmental Defense that climate change is real, as it is, reject the science from [t]he same organizations that well-regulated fracking is safe, as it is? We are becoming a nation of Luddites.”

While I would not go so far as to suggest that Mainer1’s argument is well thought out or insightful, it at least suggests that he or she actually read the article, has thought about it, and has offered an opinion that is in some way related to the content of the story. Compare this comment with one by Greg Howard:

Here is a great song that says it all!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQ3Z8YvjXY0>

The link is to a Youtube video by Alex Hickey, and it consists of someone (presumably Hickey herself) playing a guitar and singing a song calling for a ban on shale gas exploration in Nova Scotia. While the song is well done, and it offers a heartfelt objection to fracking, it does little to further any meaningful conversation about the content of the article where Greg Howard’s comment appears. A little further down on the page is this comment by Frank Davis:

“‘A civilized society can get free power from sun and wind.’ I think in episode 7 of the second season of Deep Space Nine, there was a reference to a society that lived off of sun and wind power.”

Deep Space Nine? How is the content of this story in any way related to a twenty year old television program? I’m not entirely sure, but I am inclined to believe that the only part of the article that Frank Davis read was the headline. Of the 261 comments which appear under the original story, only a handful respond to the content of the story itself; the remainder consist of links to blog posts that are only tangentially related to the story, of vitriolic condemnations of the New Brunswick government in general, of personal attacks upon the premier of New Brunswick, or of tentative endorsements of shale gas exploration. This last

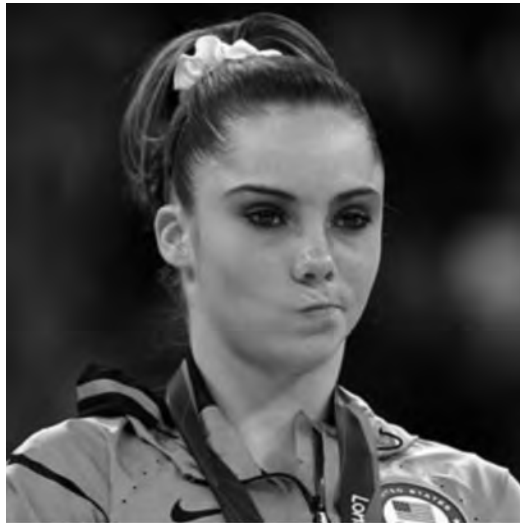
group of comments, it should be noted, bring about long chains of responses calling the intelligence, personal hygiene, and parentage of the original commenter into question. They are painful to read.

My point here is relatively simple: it does not take a great deal of effort to identify people who have read the article and given a meaningful response to it, and it is equally painless to identify those who are passionate about the topic but seem uninterested in reading the actual story. The Netizens clearly self-identify, even if they are not consciously doing so. I am not suggesting that Netizens are, as a group, less intelligent than their counterparts, nor am I suggesting that technology has somehow lowered the collective IQ of the general population; I am, however, suggesting that the way that we receive content in a digital age has coloured the way that we deal with, process, and respond to information; our responses to the things that we see, read, and hear has changed, and it has changed on a fundamental level. In the vast majority of cases, even those who would be aghast at the idea of being included in the ranks of the Netizens have begun to deal with the vast amount of information available in a fashion not all that different from their technologically inclined counterparts. Perhaps the simplest way to illustrate this change is to explore a phenomenon that has become pervasive in the digital world: the meme.

The term “meme” was coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book entitled *The Selfish Gene*. It is a shortened version of the Greek word *mimeme*, meaning “to imitate.” Dawkins used the idea of a meme to explore how concepts, ideas, fashions and so forth spread throughout a culture, and he did so from his perspective as an evolutionary biologist. When he coined the term in 1976, the latest craze could be expected to go on for years. With the possible exception of fashion, which somehow manages to transform itself nearly every year, a few decades ago things that captured the interest and imagination of the general population had a fairly impressive lifespan. Consider the hula hoop, the Rubic’s Cube, or role playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. Each of these became a cultural phenomenon, and to a certain extent each still enjoys a fair amount of popularity. Dawkins

explores the way that such cultural icons come into being and spread throughout a society, and he employs the language and terminology of evolution in order to address how, exactly, something becomes popular.

Yet if you ask anyone under the age of thirty what a meme is, that person would not respond using the language that Dawkins uses in his book; instead, you would hear about “Bad Luck Brian,” “Overly Attached Girlfriend,” or “Good Guy Greg.” In the digital age, the meme is no longer something that merely imitates; instead, it is something that communicates. Like tl;dr, the meme has become a kind of Internet shorthand used to express a concept with nothing more than a picture, sometimes with a small amount of superimposed text. For example, if a Netizen wishes to express that he is somewhat less than impressed, rather than bothering to write a sentence or two, he might instead respond with this image:



This image shows the American gymnast McKayla Maroney scowling during the 2012 Olympic Games in London. On August 5th, she performed a nearly flawless vault, leading many to believe that she would win the gold medal for the competition. During her second vault, however, Maroney failed to reach enough height to land on her feet and subsequently fell on

her backside. Maroney ended up taking the silver medal for the competition, and while she stood on the winner's podium, Bryan Snyder of the international news agency Reuters took this photograph.

Two days later, the photograph was uploaded to Tumblr, and it almost immediately achieved meme status. The image of Maroney was quickly combined with a wide variety of other images, and was used to express disdain, or the notion of "I am *not* impressed" on everything from historic events to modern politics. For example, mere days after being uploaded, this variation began making the digital rounds:



Clearly, Maroney is somewhat less than impressed with Obama's message of hope and change. From my perspective, though, the most interesting thing is not the conflation of a gymnast with the so-called leader of the free world, but rather the speed with which this image entered the public consciousness and became a part of the digital landscape. It took less than twenty-four hours for Maroney's image to, in common parlance, "go viral." What is even more fascinating, though, is how quickly this meme lost traction; its use as a means of expressing disdain

lasted less than six months (except on Facebook. It's still there, and probably will be for years to come. Facebook is where memes go to die a decidedly protracted death).

In the digital age, popularity is achieved almost instantly, and it disappears almost as quickly. This is a far cry from the description of the meme that Dawkins gave us a scant thirty years ago, and it is something that was not even contemplated by McLuhan. The Global Village, it would seem, has a rather profound ability to compress information into a single symbol that communicates effectively, and then discards that symbol in favour of a new one with no hesitation whatsoever. For Dawkins, the meme is the product of evolutionary forces, but for the Netizen, it springs forth fully formed, lasts at most a few months, and is without warning discarded on the digital scrapheap.

It seems as though popularity in the digital realm, then, consists of at least two important concepts: one is compression, and the other is an ephemeral lifespan. In many ways, this is indicative of the nature of the digital world itself: the information and content we receive is compressed, and it has a very short lifespan. Those Netizens who decry the amount of text they are faced with and respond with tl;dr are not terribly different from someone who would self-describe as a serious reader. For example, I often find myself merely scanning the headlines from a newsfeed in order to keep relatively current with world events; there is simply so much information out there that I cannot afford to spend five or six hours each day carefully reading articles, so I make do with headlines. Given the propensity for certain media outlets to editorialize from the headlines, this is almost certainly not giving me a balanced view of current events, but my willingness to do so is my own version of crying "tl;dr." I am fairly certain that I am not alone in this.

One might be inclined to blame this sort of thing on the speed with which we get information, and dismiss the entire phenomenon as a necessary byproduct of our fast-paced modern world. Yet, as Nicholas Carr points out, this is probably an overly simplistic attitude. In the section of his book entitled "The Deepening Page," Carr outlines the response of priests and politicians to the "tawdry novels, quack theories, gutter journalism, propa-

ganda, and, of course, reams of pornography” that poured into the marketplace shortly after the introduction of Gutenberg’s technology. England’s first official book censor, Carr tells us, wrote that “more mischief than advantage were not occasion’d to the Christian world by the Invention of Typography” (71). This was written in 1660—yet it is in many ways functionally equivalent to the argument of those who decry the dumbing down of society by Netizens in general.

That last point, the dumbing down of society, is a common criticism leveled at the digital age and its Netizens. Society no longer reads, such critics suggest, therefore how can its members be expected to think? Where is the critical faculty among Netizens? I maintain that there is much to suggest that such criticism is at best off the mark, and at worst simply wrong. Consider, if you will, the rise of fan-fiction, and the self-publishing industry in general.

Each and every one of the memes that I discuss earlier has its roots in some aspect of popular culture. In some cases, a meme begins life as a byproduct of mainstream media, as was the case with Maroney. In others, it is simply an image that captures the imagination of some online community (for instance, use your favourite search engine and look for “grumpy cat.” You’ll see what I mean). In the vast majority of cases, however, memes find their beginnings with some aspect of the entertainment industry. For example, Gandalf, Bruce Lee, Captain Jean-Luc Picard, and Darth Vader figure prominently in any number of memes, and this is for the simple reason that they are modern day archetypes—almost everyone instantly recognizes them, even if they have never seen the film or read the book where they have their origins. This instant recognition has brought about the rise of so-called fan fiction in recent years. A particular subset of the Netizen populace is interested enough in a particular topic to take the time to continue the story where the original storytellers left off. This has resulted in fan-fiction based on the Star Trek universe, on superheroes from D.C. and Marvel, on the *Harry Potter* phenomenon, and any number of other recognizable properties. As unlikely as it seems, fan-fiction has resulted in publications that far outpace their commercial, mainstream counterparts. Consider,

if you will, the top selling books from Amazon's Kindle store. As I write this, twelve of the top twenty books being sold under the fantasy category are either fan-fiction or self-published titles. The ratio is even higher in both science fiction and thrillers. Who are the people writing these books? Why, Netizens, of course. The very people who are supposedly responsible for the dumbing down of society in general, and the very people who give rise to the meme-of-the-moment. These people, who seem to value compression over conversation, and who appear to have the attention span of a gnat, take the time to construct book length narratives, and are gradually overcoming mainstream publishers in terms of both sales and popularity. It is nothing short of astonishing.

Before you raise the objection that science fiction, novels about elves and wizards, and spy stories are the flotsam and jetsam of the publishing industry, or the rough equivalent of second rate sitcoms, bear in mind that the same technology used to continue the voyages of the starship Enterprise is also being used to distribute work by up and coming poets, by highly acclaimed and well-published academics, and by truly gifted writers who are simply fed up with the (nearly insurmountable) barriers facing anyone trying to get into the publishing industry. It's not all about entertainment—there are some very fine artists and academics who are using the same technology in order to get before the reading public.

Also consider, if you will, something as well known as Wikipedia. Although educators all over the world speak the very name of this site with contempt, Wikipedia nevertheless represents a monumental effort, one that has effectively killed off an entire segment of the publishing industry. And where here does the content for Wikipedia come from? Once again, it is from Netizens. Yes, there is a singularly impressive amount of unimportant content contained within its pages, and yes, it has a distressingly large amount of inaccurate or misleading content, but then again so do its predecessors like the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The main thing, at least from my perspective, is that its pages are the result of innumerable hours of writing on the part of the very Netizens who are supposedly dumbing down our so-

ciety. Even if the writers of a given Wikipedia page are only interested in a comic-book hero, at least they are *writing*, and striving to do so in a way that is objective, is backed up with some measure of research, and consists of coherently written sentences.

This brings me back to Nicholas Carr and his fascinating consideration of how the Internet is “re-wiring” our minds. He concludes his book with a meditation upon the nature of the Internet, and how it affects people in our society. In the modern world, he says, there is “no peaceful spot where contemplativeness can work its restorative magic.” Instead, there is the

endless, mesmerizing buzz of the urban street. The stimulations of the Net, like those of the city, can be invigorating and inspiring. We wouldn’t want to give them up. But they are, as well, exhausting and distracting. They can easily... overwhelm all quieter modes of thought. One of the greatest dangers we face as we automate the work of our minds, as we cede control over the flow of our thoughts and memories to a powerful electronic system, is the one that informs the fears of both the scientist Joseph Weizenbaum and the artist Richard Foreman: a slow erosion of our humanness and our humanity (220).

This is a poetic passage, and one that comes after a great deal of supporting evidence. Yet this passage, and the pages that immediately follow it, have a fair bit in common with George Orwell’s *1984*, H.G. Wells’ *A Modern Utopia*, and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. It is also exactly what a Netizen would call pure, unadulterated FUD—that is, “fear, uncertainty and doubt.” I don’t want to overstate matters, or to misrepresent Carr’s book as an attack on technology in general, but there are certainly elements of this sort of thing found in his book, particularly in the last chapter. Although he never clearly indicates which side of the debate that he offers in the first chapter he favours—between those who cry either “Cassandra!” or “Pollyanna!”—there is certainly the suggestion that he is not entirely enthralled with those who embrace technology. It is this part of his book that I find problematic, and that I must take ex-

ception to. While the technology of the Internet has many, many problems, it is also living up, at least in part, to the promise that it seemed to offer when it first caught the attention of the world at large. Yes, it often favours compression over conversation, and it is rife with inanity and triviality; there is no denying this. Yet at the same time it seems to foster creativity, and it gives a voice to those who might otherwise lack one.

I must confess that while I will not be crying “Cassandra!” and sneering at the naysayers any time soon, I will maintain some measure of enthusiasm for technology. All the same, I will refrain from reading the comments below CBC news articles; otherwise, there is a good chance that I might start posting photographs of a certain American gymnast under a pseudonym of some sort. After all, it’s easier than typing, and everyone will know what I mean.