

**The Brain In My Pocket: A Critical Textual Analysis of "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" by**

**Nicholas Carr**

When I first read the title of Nicholas Carr's article in *The Atlantic* magazine, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?," I had no intention of being convinced. In his article, Carr argues that modern Internet usage habits cause a loss of attention span, changing an individual's thought patterns and diminishing intelligence and culture. This type of argument is not new to me; very frequently, I am presented with the message that some factor in my immediate environment (such as sleep deprivation, environmental pollution, or food additives) will gradually destroy my health. Over time, I have learned to regard most of these messages as exaggerated and misguided. In particular, as a frequent Google user, I was initially resistant to the idea that Internet browsing could be harmful to me. After reading Carr's article, however, I feel differently; Carr's unique perspective on technology makes his argument very convincing. Carr is an avid outdoorsman from small-town Connecticut, and his writing reveals that he values contemplation, yet Carr has spent most of his career editing and writing articles about technology and business. On top of it all, Carr has a master's degree in English literature from Harvard (Cooper). In order to make his argument convincing, Carr uses a combination of a strong emotional appeal, marked by figurative language in a style typical of literary writing, and appeals to logic and credibility typical of arguments in business and technology publications. As well, Carr considers several counterarguments and structures his article in a way that accommodates resistant readers like myself.

Speaking of readers like myself, Carr seems to have structured the beginning of his article with his audience in mind. Carr's audience consists of readers of *The Atlantic*. *The*

*Atlantic* mainly focuses on economic issues, political issues, and culture. Hence, it can be inferred that Carr's audience mostly consists of well-educated, culturally aware people who are interested in technology and social science. His introductory paragraph suits them well. Carr begins his article with a reference to a scene from *2001: A Space Odyssey* where the main character slowly unplugs the brain of HAL, the artificial intelligence piloting his spacecraft. Besides merely serving as an introductory hook, this scene serves as a good starting point for the anecdote Carr shares in the second paragraph. There, Carr describes how he feels as if "something has been tinkering with [his] brain." More specifically, Carr states how he used to "spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose," yet now he "get[s] fidgety" and "feel[s] as if [he is] always dragging [his] wayward brain back to the text" (731). Carr's use of verbs such as 'think' and 'feel' alongside phrases such as "immersing myself in a book" and "dragging my wayward brain" lends the text an introspective, contemplative quality. While Carr does seem somewhat concerned about the recent changes in his thought processes, Carr does not adopt an alarmed tone, nor does Carr delve into a logical argument right away. This prevents Carr from alienating readers who disagree with his ideas and sets Carr's article apart from most distressing magazine articles about health, which tend to cite recent scientific research and use a dire, desperate tone. Instead, by describing with sincerity how his own thought patterns have been shaped by Internet influence, Carr seems to suggest that the thoughts of the reader (and the thoughts of the Internet-using public) have also been affected in similar ways.

Shortly after relating his anecdote, Carr makes an appeal to credibility by discussing how he has greatly benefitted from the Internet as a writer, and how he often finds himself "foraging in the web's info-thickets" for recreation. Carr also describes using the U.S. to find whatever

"telltale fact or pithy quote" comes to mind (732). By describing some of the subtle details of his own Internet usage habits, Carr appeals to credibility by showing his audience that he is not merely a philosopher in a vacuum or an out-of-date opponent of technological change, but rather an experienced Internet user himself, personally knowledgeable about his subject matter. Carr also presents himself as similar to the average Internet user, building common ground with his audience and reinforcing his credibility further. As well, by discussing both his Internet usage habits and his dwindling attention span, Carr presents himself as a sufferer of the very problems he laments. Through this approach, Carr distances himself further from the average health-related news article by deliberately avoiding a condescending stance towards his audience. By adopting a contemplative, objective stance instead, Carr suggests that his viewpoint is unbiased, making it credible.

After introducing his argument and showing that the Internet does affect human thought, Carr explores how the Internet influences culture. In so doing, Carr makes an appeal to emotion. Carr begins this appeal by describing how the Internet changes other forms of media, explaining that the Internet "injects" a medium's content with "hyperlinks, blinking ads, and other digital gewgaws," forcing Internet users to "scatter their attention and diffuse their concentration" (738). Carr's use of strong, jarring words such as "injects" and "digital gewgaws" suggests that the Internet is disrupting the traditionally quiet and thoughtful experience of viewing or listening to media, resulting in a shallower, inferior experience overall. Accordingly, the mood of Carr's writing seems to shift from contemplative to deeply concerned in this section, matching the appeal Carr is trying to make. Later, Carr describes how the "crazy quilt of Internet media" induces print newspapers and magazines to "introduce capsule summaries" and "crowd their

pages with easy-to-browse info-snippets" (738). Carr's use of words such as "summaries", "easy-to-browse", and "info-snippet" implies print publications as becoming less substantial as a result of Internet influence, causing society to lose something valuable. Carr also seems to imply that this disruption will continue until Western media is completely ruined, a slippery slope fallacy that strikes the audience as undesirable and deeply unsettling. Through a vivid emotional appeal, replete with colorful vocabulary, Carr seems to propose that the profundity of Western media is being replaced by a crazy, Internet-style shallowness, much to the detriment of Western culture.

As Carr continues with his emotional appeal, Carr's argument grows increasingly abstract. Eventually, Carr discusses the unsettling idea that Google might at some future time develop technology that "supplement[s], or even replace[s] [the human brain with] artificial intelligence" (742). By doing this, Carr enters a larger conversation about the possibility of artificial intelligence and its effect on humanity, one that has been discussed through science fiction novels for many years. Much has been written and said about artificial intelligence, and Carr does not attempt to discuss it here in full, but Carr does mention that, from the perspective of Google, "there's little place for the fuzziness of contemplation" and "ambiguity is not an opening for insight but a bug to be fixed" (742). That struck me as curious because, in my view, contemplation and ambiguity are two fundamental cornerstones of understanding. In my opinion, Carr's fundamental insight is this: as Internet influences reshape and reprogram people's thought patterns, human thought will grow less profound, and the foundations of human intelligence will weaken. Google really will make us stupid. Of the many unsettling arguments Carr makes in his article, that is perhaps the most unsettling one of all

## Works Cited

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(Note: Page numbers cited in article reflect the page numbers of the Norton textbook, not the Atlantic magazine.)

## **Appendix: Summary of "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" by Nicholas Carr**

In his article "Is Google Making us Stupid," Nicholas Carr argues overall that Google and the Internet are causing members of Western society to lose their attention span and their ability to think deeply about long pieces of text. Carr begins by quoting a scene from *2001: A Space Odyssey* where Dave, an astronaut, unplugs the brain of HAL, a computer that operates his spacecraft. From there, Carr describes how he feels like his thought patterns have changed, and how he is no longer able to maintain focus on a long article or book. Carr also talks about his own internet experience and his own internet usage habits, explaining how the internet has helped him greatly and how he often has to scan through the Internet to do research for his writing. As well, Carr shares some quotes and anecdotes from writers about how they now struggle to maintain concentration on long works of literature that they used to be able to read easily. Carr also cites and describes a couple of British studies showing that most individuals who used a British online database for research only skimmed articles and did not take time to read them. From there, Carr argues that human thought is a product of not only reading content, but also the manner in which one reads. To prove this, Carr cites research showing that readers of ideograms process text differently than readers of alphabetic characters. Carr seems to imply that readers who learn to skim over text Internet-style process text differently than readers who read more thoughtfully. Carr also cites the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche as an example and describes how, when Nietzsche started using a typewriter to write letters, his writing style changed. Carr also describes how the Internet has influenced other media forms (such as magazines and newspapers) to become shallower. As well, Carr moves on to discuss how the technological changes of the industrial revolution gave birth to the philosophy of

Taylorism, which values maximum efficiency at the expense of human creativity. Carr then describes Google as applying the philosophy of Taylorism to the organization of information, describing how Google eventually hopes to construct an artificial intelligence that could replace the human mind. Carr finishes his article by describing how other observers have predicted negative outcomes as a result of technological change, and how those outcomes were always belittled by the enormous benefits those technologies provided. To conclude, Carr returns to the *2001: A Space Odyssey* scene from the beginning and laments how, in the *2001* version of the future, the humans have become more robot-like than the robots.