Nicholas Carr is a journalist, cultural and technology commentator, and professional skeptic on issues of the Internet, social media, and the potential consequences of our love affair with technological progress. A 2011 Pulitzer Prize finalist, he has written numerous articles, essays, contributions to his blog Rough Type, and five books, including The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains and a recent collection of pieces from 2005-15, Utopia Is Creepy: And Other Provocations (both Norton). Carr will be the opening keynote speaker at LJ and School Library Journal's virtual conference The Digital Shift, on October 19, and LJ recently caught up with him to find out where libraries fit into his thoughts on our wired world.

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LJ: How did you become a culture/tech critic?
Nicholas Carr: Back in the late 1990s I was an editor at the Harvard Business Review. That was the time of the dot-com boom and crash, and I edited a lot of articles about the Internet from more of a business and economics standpoint. I left in 2003 to write a book, Does It Matter?, about the business side of technology. As the Internet, big broadband, and so forth became more central to people’s lives, including my own, and we saw the rise of social media, I became more interested in the social, cultural, and personal consequences of our use of the net and computers and smartphones. I’ve been writing on that subject for ten years or so.

You talk about the need for knowledge to be contextual, rather than untethered pieces of information. What role can the library play in that?
I think the library as a physical space is very important. As human beings we tend to underestimate the importance of our bodies, our physicality, in all sorts of ways. Throughout history, for instance, there have been mnemonic devices that are all about putting memory or information into either imaginary or real spaces. What we’re learning about memory is that it seems to be very tightly tied, for instance, to spatial navigation. So there is this underestimated but really important spatial and physical quality to our intellectual lives, and I do think that libraries as spaces play a very important role in that.

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If you look at Google, for instance, it prioritizes information according to certain criteria, and it tends to emphasize things like [recentness] and popularity. Those things can be very good ways to organize information, but what the public needs to be reminded of—and I think libraries and librarians are well positioned for that—is that there are other ways to categorize and filter and think about information. The need for that kind of expertise in navigating all information sources is more valuable than ever now, when people have unlimited amounts of information at their fingertips but often are led to simply look at a few sources, maybe not the best ones.

The Shallows looks at how the Internet is challenging the way we read and think. Do you think distracted brains can be retrained?
We’re creatures of habit, and that goes for how we use our minds as well. If you spend all day on a smartphone and are constantly stimulated and juggling all sorts of little bits of information, then that’s what you become used to. And when you try to turn off the flow and concentrate on reading a book or a long article, it becomes more and more difficult because your mind has adapted to being stimulated.

On the other hand, I think it goes both ways. If we change our habits, if we learn a better balance between information inundation and quiet, more contemplative intellectual pursuits, then certainly we can adapt to both. That’s the big challenge and also the big opportunity we have, which is not to throw our smartphones or apps out but learn how to use them in a way that doesn’t dominate our minds and still allows us both the space and the encouragement to engage in some contemplative and reflective and introspective ways of thinking.

How do you approach that ideal when kids grow up with constant screen time?
The great thing about kids is that they’re very adaptable, much more so than adults. If you encourage a child to read a long book, they’re happy to curl up with that book for hours on end and really immerse themselves in the story. The important thing with kids is to make sure they have lots of different experiences. That means some time on screens, but also plenty of time to explore the world in different ways, to engage their imagination, to learn how to amuse themselves. That, unfortunately, is becoming more and more problematic as we push more screen time onto young children, both at home and at schools and even in libraries.

What can we do to intervene?
I think you try to raise awareness among people, parents in particular, and among teachers and school board members, of the fact that screens have an important use and an
educational use, but they also have limits. There are ways of learning, ways of developing cognitive capabilities that can only be done without screens. For instance, I think one of the most important challenges in bringing up or educating a child is teaching the child to...be able to be alone with his or her thoughts, to engage in a train of thought or reading a difficult work without being distracted and interrupted, because we know that distractions and interruptions undermine memory formation and cognitive processing. So through awareness building, through education about technology itself, I think—or at least I hope—we can make sure that we strike the right balance here.

How can libraries integrate technology, as well as hands-on initiatives like Maker spaces, without succumbing to “the next big thing”? As a society and as individuals we’re all very much given to enthusiasm about fads and fashions. But I think there is an argument to be made that libraries, as important as they are in a community, can’t do everything. Sometimes you have to say no. Certainly there’s room for experimentation, for partnering with other institutions in a community or academic institutions, but I think there is a danger—in public initiatives like Maker spaces, without succumbing to backlash?

A few years ago many people, including myself, believed that the print book was probably on its way to obsolescence. That outlook has changed dramatically in the last couple of years as ebook demand has flattened and print book demand has stayed pretty solid, and we see among students, for instance, a preference for print books over electronic books. I think the libraries will continue to [incorporate] digital services, but also [keep] a more traditional role as collections of print works—books and magazines and newspapers. Certainly we’ll continue to see the continued technologization of libraries, but also a need to think of their role as a mix of the new and the traditional.

Lately we’re seeing libraries plan for human-centered issues—connection, access, and services—rather than yet more tech growth. Do you feel that is progress or backlash?

I think what we’ve seen—and this will continue to grow—is a tension in the public between an ever-increasing dependency on computers and smartphones and a sense of wanting to back away from that dependency, both to figure out the best way to use the technology, so we’re not simply inundated and distracted all day long, but also how to fit the technology into a broader, more fulfilling life where you’re not glued to your screen. I think on many different levels libraries can play a role in helping resolve that tension.

Also, I hope that libraries will continue to see one of their roles as being a refuge from information overload, distraction, and interruption. One of the things that...people [seek to be] struggling with—or should be struggling with—is the fact that computer technologies...are very good at distracting us and interrupting us and tap into this deep instinct we have to know everything that’s going on around us all the time. And that’s fine, but what gets lost in that is the ability to shut off the distractions and actually think deeply about things, about a book or an article or an issue in the news. We need spaces that encourage a kind of deep attentiveness and a deep thoughtfulness, that give us a respite from the information overload we tend to suffer from whenever we pull out a smartphone or a computer.

What we thought was going to be a technology of decentralization, and democratization of media and information, has in recent years revealed itself to be a means of increasing centralization and centralization of power over the flow of information. We have these very powerful companies now, like Facebook and Apple and Google and Amazon and Microsoft, that are increasingly determining the ways we communicate. We need to be more skeptical about computer technology. Not with the intent to remove it from our lives but with the intent to make it serve human purposes, and social purposes, rather than being a distraction machine that generates lots of profits for a handful of companies, a handful of people, but may not be in our own best interest.

Your commentary in Utopia Is Creepy winds up in 2015. What issues are getting your attention a year later? Toward the end of the book I talk about some things that are still evolving and unfolding. [One is] the influence of social media on political discourse and how it has influenced the presidential campaign and continues to influence it. On the one hand social media allow candidates to speak directly to people. On the other hand, [they seem] to encourage not deep thinking about issues but provocations and insults—the types of things that tend to get a lot of attention very quickly on social media. I think that’s an experiment we’re in the midst of right now—how smartphones and Facebook and other social media influence campaigns and political discourse and the way candidates express themselves to the public.

Related to that is the ongoing issue of how much power and control a company like Facebook has over not just the way we converse with friends but over the information in the news that we see on a moment-by-moment basis. A good segment of the population is now getting most of its information and news through Facebook and other social media, yet we don’t really know how the software, the algorithms that those companies use, shape the information we receive. I think there’s this tension between the business interests of a company like Facebook, which wants to keep its algorithms hidden from us, and our public interest in knowing exactly how it’s determining what we see, what stories get promoted, and what don’t. As we become more dependent on these companies and their services in our day-to-day lives, there’s a real question of how secretive should they really be when it comes to the way they filter and supply information. That’s another big theme that continues to evolve.

What are you reading? I just finished Altamont (Dey Street: HarperCollins), which is about the infamous Rolling Stones concert in 1969—completely different from all the things I work on. And a book by Virginia Heffernan called Magic and Loss (S. & S.), which is about the Internet as a work of culture, a work of art, so it gives a more positive view than my own work but a very interesting one.

To learn more about the latest technology trends impacting libraries, come to L'J’s daylong virtual event, The Digital Shift.

The event will include presentations on digital outreach, including a session by Patrick Sweeney (author of this column) on digital community organizing. To register for free, visit ow.ly/dnRb302tosM