



Living in the Age of Distraction

Are we so distracted that we can
no longer pay attention to where
we are and where we're going?

MARGARET WHEATLEY says we better unplug soon.

FOR YEARS I ASSUMED that the *Titanic* tragedy was a result of human arrogance, the belief in the indestructibility of the newest, largest, fastest, fanciest ship of all time. But actually the *Titanic* went down because of distraction. Other ships had been warning about the iceberg-filled waters for days, but the *Titanic's* captain changed course only slightly and

did nothing to slow the ship's speed. When the radio operator received a call from a ship that was surrounded by ice—this was less than an hour before the collision—he responded, “Shut up, shut up, I’m busy.” By the time lookouts spotted the iceberg ahead, it was too late to slow the *Titanic's* momentum.

Although overused, the *Titanic* is a chillingly accurate metaphor for our time. Distracted people don't notice they are in danger. Rumi said: “Sit down and be quiet. You are drunk and this is the edge of the roof.”

The evidence is plentiful these days that distracted people cause harm to themselves and to

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others. We read reports of fatal train accidents caused by the engineer texting and of commercial flights crashing because pilots were chatting. Pedestrians and drivers are killed because they're on the phone or texting. We need look no further than ourselves to observe distraction. How long can you focus on any activity these days? How many pages can you read before wandering off? How many other things are you doing while you're listening to a conference call? Have you stopped writing emails that make multiple requests because you only get a reply to the first one? Do you still take time for open-ended conversations with friends, colleagues, or your children?

An Ecosystem of Interruption Technologies

In the 1930s, T.S. Eliot wrote, "We are distracted from distraction by distraction." It's a perfect description of our present day. How did we get here—to this life of incessant connection but total distraction—where even if we recognize that we're hamsters on a wheel, we can't get off?

The answer is that our lives, relationships, and politics are being shaped by an ecosystem of interruption technologies. Between smartphones, tablets, and personal computers, we have instant and constant access to each other and to the Internet. Superficially, this seems to be a great benefit, but in practice we can now be interrupted at any time, in any place, no matter what we are doing.

Throughout history, technology interacts with its users in predictable ways: it changes behaviors, thinking processes, social norms, and even, as neuroplasticity studies show, our physical brain structure. It may be hard to accept, but the truth is that the tools we create end up controlling us.

I learned of the devouring, deterministic march of technology from the work of French philosopher, educator, and political activist Jacques Ellul. You may not have heard of him, but it was Ellul who gave us the now-trusted concept "Think globally, act locally."

Here is Ellul's harsh clarity: Once a technology enters a culture, it takes over. It feeds on itself,



assisted by eager adoption and demands for more of it. Social structures, such as values, behaviors, and politics, can't help but organize around the new technology's values. The predictable result is the loss of existing cultural traditions and the emergence of a new culture.

Gutenberg's printing press, because it put information into the hands of everyday people, is credited with the rise of individualism, literacy, complex language, private contemplation, the literary tradition, and the advent of Protestantism. By 1500, just fifty years after its invention, more than twelve million books were in print in Europe (and people were already complaining that there were too many books).

Many of us would like to reject this deterministic description of human disempowerment. But we can validate how technology transforms culture

by looking at what has become accepted behavior in the past few years. Do you remember when people talking out loud on a street were labeled crazy, when intense, emotional conversations were held in subdued voices in private places? Do you remember having time to think with colleagues and family to work out problems, rather than exchanging rapid-fire texts? When you used to walk into a colleague's office to ask a question rather than fire off an email? When you enjoyed taking time for conversation rather than rushing to get the information you need right now? How many times have you been distracted as you've read this article?

This is evidence of how the ecosystem of interruption technologies is reshaping culture. We might still value curiosity, contemplation, privacy, conversation, and teamwork, but are these values visible in our day-to-day behaviors? The contradic-

tion between what we value and how we behave doesn't mean we're hypocrites. It simply shows that technology has taken over, as it always does.

To Be Everywhere Is to Be Nowhere

Right now, you may want to call my attention to all the wonderful benefits of the Internet—it's a revolutionary technology that makes you not only more efficient but also more effective. I agree with you. I couldn't do my work or write a book without search engines, e-books, and email exchanges, and I couldn't stay connected to my family when I'm traveling.

However, we have to focus beyond the content, as beneficial as it is. Marshall McLuhan wrote that

At BlizzCon, an annual two-day gathering of online game fanatics, 15,000 attendees buzz about gaming rooms like this one. Donning headphones, they immerse themselves in World of Warcraft and other popular electronic games.

the content of a medium is just “the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind.” We have to notice how we are being affected by the *process* of texting, calling, posting, linking, searching, and scanning.

More than just creating distraction, our growing addiction to the Internet is impairing precious human capacities such as memory, concentration, pattern recognition, meaning-making, and intimacy. We are becoming more restless, more impatient, more demanding, and more insatiable, even as we become more connected and creative. We are rapidly losing the ability to think long about anything, even those issues we care about. We flit, moving restlessly from one link to another. It may seem like we’re in the process of discovery, but many studies now show that multimedia environments—with links, photos, videos, bottom text crawls—don’t encourage learning and retention, because so much information overloads our circuits.

Nicolas Carr, in his compelling book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, describes us as minds consumed by the medium. “The Net seizes our attention only to scatter it. We focus intensively on the medium itself on the flickering screen, but we’re distracted by the medium’s rapid-fire delivery of competing messages and stimuli.” He quotes Seneca, the Roman philosopher from two thousand years ago: “To be everywhere is to be nowhere.”

Self-Manufactured People

The Internet, by design, gives individuals the capacity to fragment information and use it however they choose. Today, there are hundreds of millions of personal filters operating at cyber speed, taking others’ expressions out of context, selecting parts they like, and constructing selves for public viewing. What’s being created is millions of individual identities, brilliantly displayed. What’s being lost is a sense of collective identity, of the shared meaning that transcends the individual and brings coherence to a culture. We’re losing the capacity and will to enter into each other’s perceptions, to be curious to see the world from another point of view.

Our insatiable appetites for self-creation and self-expression have transformed us into twenty-first-century hunter-gatherers. We’ve become addicted to

where the next click might lead us, so we keep hunting incessantly. Overwhelmed by inputs, caught in our self-sealing cycles, we devolve into self-manufactured people driven apart by rigid opinions and lonely for acceptance, into hungry ghosts grasping for the next new thing to satisfy us.

I chose the word *devolve* very carefully.

The most dire consequence of this instant-access, information-rich world is that it has changed the very nature and role of information. In living systems, information is the source of change; Gregory Bateson defined it as that which makes a difference. Information no longer plays this mind-changing role. No matter how reputable the science, or how in-depth and thorough the investigative reporting, no matter the photos and evidence, we sort through the information with our well-formed personal filters. Information doesn’t change our minds; we use any report or evidence merely to intensify our assaults on the other’s opinions.

When we aren’t interested in disconfirming information, when we fight to protect our own opinions rather than work together for a reasonable decision, the world becomes unpredictable and random. It seems as if there’s no order, but it’s we who are the source of the chaos.

When we don’t think and discern patterns, events seem to come and go out of nowhere. We don’t prepare for natural disasters; we mock leaders who take time to make decisions as “indecisive”; we refuse to read well-developed analyses; we criticize complex legislation for its page length. At work, we demand five-minute presentations and elevator speeches to “get” whatever the issue is. If something complex requires more time to understand, we’re too busy. Just like the radio operator on the *Titanic*.

The world, of course, is neither random nor chaotic. It’s our lack of thinking that makes it appear so. Before many disasters, the information is there that could have prevented a tragedy. After a disaster, I wait to see how long it takes to reveal the information that was suppressed, the voices of warning that were silenced. This is always the case. Before the economic collapse, a few people saw the illusion for what it was (and were able to profit from the meltdown). One year before Katrina, the federal government had simulated just such a catastrophic hurricane, but officials failed to do the prep work specified in their action plans.

We have made this world into an unpredictable, fearful monster because we’ve refused to work with it intelligently. And the ultimate sacrifice is the future. Thinking forward is impossible for those reacting fearfully moment by moment. Tibetan cosmology includes a class of beings who “hurl the future away from themselves,” as far from their awareness as possible. Seems they saw us coming.

The Practice of the Three Difficulties

The only antidote to this culture of interruption technologies is for us to take back control of ourselves. We cannot stop the proliferation of seductive technologies or the capacity-destroying dynamics of distraction or the techno-speed of life. But we can change our own behavior. In the eighth century, the Buddhist teacher Shantideva admonished, “The affairs of the world are endless. They only end when we stop them.” Goodness knows what was so distracting in the eighth century, but he speaks well for our time.

To restore good human capacities—thinking, meaning-making, discerning—we need to develop discipline. We need to be mindful of distraction, and disciplined enough to shut off the computer, put the phone down, make time for casual conversations, sit patiently, and listen—all without getting anxious that we’re wasting time, that we won’t get through our to-do list, that we’re missing out on something. The practice described in the Buddhist lojong (mind training) slogans as the “three difficulties” can restore sanity and capacity to our daily lives: 1) You notice the behavior. 2) You try something different. 3) You commit to practicing that new behavior until it becomes natural.

Deciding to practice nondistractedness is quite difficult. At least that’s my experience. We become aware of the frantic, anxious lives of those around us. We see just how many distractions there are and how addictive our behavior has become. Then we apply the antidote: we notice our distraction, we commit to try new behaviors, and gradually we regain memory, thinking, focus, meaning, relationships. And, hopefully, we avoid the iceberg looming dead ahead. ♦

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