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Wired for Distraction: Rethinking Attention in the Digital Age

I could make a strong bet that you will get a notification while reading this essay. I don't blame you if you want to check it. Odds are, you probably will. Where's it from? Is it a snapchat? An email? Someone liked your Instagram post? With the uproar of iPhones and cutting-edge technology, distractions consume us more than ever. We are attuned to the buzz of a notification and ready and willing to avert our attention once it occurs, which we all know is quite frequently. Many writers have explored the impact of phones and its distractions on human behavior. For example, Sam Anderson, writer for *The New York Times Magazine,* acknowledges how technology is hindering our ability to effectively concentrate yet argues that being easily distracted is an adaptive feature in the current generation that allows us to effectively navigate a fast-paced, technologically-engulfed world in his article "In Defense of Distraction." Although Anderson highlights how distraction can be utilized as a tool when used properly, student narratives from an English composition course at the University of New England demonstrate how the constant distraction from their phones negatively impacts them. Both Katie McGuire and Faith Santiago, first year undergraduate students at the UNE, express concerns on their personal abilities to effectively concentrate on a task in the presence of their phones. I agree that an optimal level of distraction aids in one's efficiency, however a constant attentional shift, especially one from our phones, has such a detrimental impact on our concentration that it

hinders one's potential to complete a task to its best ability, making it an overall maladaptive behavior.

We require some level of distraction from our environments as it allows us to seamlessly go from task to task in our daily routine. Distraction in its simplest definition is anything that requires us to shift our focus to something else. It's a billboard that catches your eye. A phone call while you are at work. A daydream while in class. Almost anything can be viewed as a distraction in some way or another. If we were unable to indulge in distractions around us, we would spend far too much time on simple or unimportant tasks, thus hindering our productivity and efficiency. Anderson explains the power of distraction when he writes:

> The truly wise mind will harness, rather than abandon, the power of distraction. Unwavering focus, the inability to be distracted, can actually be just as problematic as ADHD. Trouble with attentional shift is a feature common to a handful of mental illnesses, including schizophrenia and OCD. It's been hypothesized that ADHD might even be an advantage in certain change-rich environments (11).

In other words, being able to effectively shift one's attention allows one to efficiently navigate ever-changing environments, like the world we live in today, while hyper fixation has its dangers. Hyper fixation can be time-consuming and is the underlying principle behind unhealthy metal habits such as overthinking, obsession, and compulsion. Yet, despite the benefits that stem from distraction, it is crucial to acknowledge that too much distraction can be equally harmful to efficiency and productivity as hyper fixation. In addition, the source of distraction is an important aspect of this conversation. Anderson may have a point about the importance of distraction; however phones are such an extreme that his argument becomes faulty. Phones lead to excessive and constant attentional shifts, to the point where concentration can only occur for

short spurts of a few minutes or less. This lack of consistent focus manifests in decreased productivity and the mediocre completion of tasks.

The ability to so accessibly switch one's attention is an adaptive feature seen in the current generation that has been deemed advantageous in the technological realm. While using our phones, we are constantly bombarded by changing stimulation: video content tends to be short and chaotic, captions tend to be no longer than a sentence, cookies scatter every web page, and notifications are constantly popping in and out as banners on the top of our screens. Santiago highlights this overwhelming, fast-paced nature of phones when she writes, "When I go on social media, I am immediately flooded with content tailored to my interests, and that is no longer than 60 seconds. I never have to give it my full attention, or go out of my way to find content that I want to see." When navigating our constantly changing technology, being proficient in attentional shift becomes an advantage. Anderson highlights this theme of adaptation and complements Santiago's narrative when he writes:

> There's been lots of hand-wringing about all the skills [digital natives] might lack, mainly the ability to concentrate on a complex task from beginning to end, but surely they can already do things their elders can't, like conduct 34 conversations simultaneously across six different media, or pay attention to switching between attentional targets in a way that been considered impossible. More than any other organ, the brain is designed to change based on experience, a feature called neuroplasticity (11-12).

The brain is physically changing to favor this attentional switch and with that, the younger generation has skills that older generations do not. In agreement with Anderson, I constantly find myself engaging in technological habits that indicate my ability to constantly switch my focus. I can answer a text message while watching Tiktok, answer upwards of 50 snapchats in a minute

or so, and I always have several unrelated windows open on my computer at all times. This technological chaos is normalcy to me as I, along with the rest of the digital natives, have adaptations on my attention span, or lack thereof, that allow for seamless engagement with the technology.

Although a proficiency in attentional shift brought out by phones has allowed us to efficiently navigate the chaotic technological world, it has inversely harmed our ability to focus. We are so used to constantly shifting our attention that when we are required to focus on a task, we severely struggle to concentrate for even mere minutes at a time. This inability to concentrate manifests itself by tainting the quality of work put in to complete the task. McGuire and Santiago both express this concerning truth by sharing anecdotal evidence. When explaining how technology changes the way she thinks and writes, McGuire states:

> "There is a big temptation to either procrastinate or multitask. This often leads to making my work less thorough. I often find myself skimming readings and articles rather than engaging and learning. With easy access to fly through online books and find what I'm looking for right away, I lose the opportunity to think, gain more knowledge and make my writing detailed. Technology can take away from engaging in school and work and cause myself and others to think less. Along with multitasking, trying to stay in the present becomes difficult. Constantly getting notifications and having multiple apps and websites shifts my focus. Finding ways to battle these distractions are challenging…"

Santiago illuminates similar themes when she writes, "I am unable to properly focus on assignments without reaching for my phone and scrolling through TikTok. The idea of focusing deeply and thinking deeply about an assignment or any task that requires undivided attention is unappealing, especially as there are other ways I can occupy my time that require much less

effort." Both students highlight how they have faced serious struggles with their abilities to concentrate. The narratives written by McGuire and Santiago complicate Anderson's argument of the adaptive nature of attentional shift in the current generation as they supply firsthand accounts of how this acquired behavior is hurting the quality of their work. Digital natives who possess these seemingly adaptive skills, such as McGuire and Santiago, are only benefiting from them in the context of the technological world. These gained behaviors become maladaptive in the real world as they drastically inhibit one's ability to concentrate, to the point where quality of work is jeopardized.

With the rise of digitalization, we are living in constant states of distraction. In order to adapt to the overstimulating environment that technology creates, we have become efficient in attentional shift. Our brains are now hardwired to crave technological busyness: our computers are riddled with several tabs for a number of unrelated topics, we text while we talk to others, we engage in multiple conversations with people at all times. However, this adaptation that allows us to seamlessly navigate the online world is proving to be dangerous in reality. The minds of the current generation are so adapted to attentional shift, that they have lost their ability to concentrate for long periods of time, which has serious negative effects on productivity and work quality. With increased prioritization of the digital world, I worry that this inverse relationship will become ever more polarized. The brain will continue to grow more technologically savvy, yet at the price of vital skills we need to function in the real word.

Works Cited

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