

Faith Santiago

Professor Miller

ENG110

1 April 2025

The Cognitive Shallow End

The capacity for adaptation has aided humans for hundreds of thousands of years. It's the reason that humans have become the dominant species on the planet, and adaptation is always occurring. However, due to the developments of technology, we have lost some adaptations that our ancestors once greatly relied on. For example, there has been a decline in humans' ability to see in the dark, since we now have flashlights and extensive lighting systems in our homes. As technology has become more and more advanced, it has drastically changed the way that humans think and act. This significant change has become a large topic of conversation in the 21st century and has a lot of contrasting perspectives. Some skeptics, like American journalist and writer Nicholas Carr in his article in *The Atlantic*, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?", believe that society is declining because of how technology has altered our minds. Meanwhile, there are people like Sam Anderson, a writer for *New York* magazine, who take a more progressive stance on our technology-induced changes in his article titled, "In Defense of Distraction" where he weighs the negatives of these changes with the benefits that they may bring. Having analyzed both of these arguments surrounding technology and its influence, I side with the skeptics and believe that the impact technology and the internet have had on human behavior and potential has purposely been more destructive than beneficial and is only projected to get worse if developments continue the way that they are.

Technological advancements greatly shape the minds of those who use them, and these changes come with their fair share of critics, like Carr, and supporters, like Anderson. Carr provides insight into his cynical idea by connecting his regular use of the internet to a loss of attention span and critical thinking that he has been experiencing. According to Carr, “[Media] supply the stuff of thought but they also shape the process of thought. And what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away at my capacity for concentration and contemplation. My mind now expects to take in information the same way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles” (Carr 2). The point Carr is making here is that with extensive use of the internet, our minds are mimicking the ways in which the internet functions. We expect information to be handed to us on a silver platter and are losing our ability to focus on a lengthy source and hunt for the knowledge we are seeking. As this transformation occurs, we are losing our ability for insightful discourse instead of surface-level intelligence. While Carr focuses on what we lose to technology, Anderson highlights what we gain from these mental modifications. Anderson proposes, “It’s possible that we’re all evolving toward a new techno-cognitive nomadism, a rapidly shifting environment in which restlessness will be an advantage again. The deep focusers might even be hampered by having too much attention...” (Anderson 11). To Anderson, having a distracted mind is beneficial in current times, as technology has altered the prevailing culture to be more rapidly changing and saturated with knowledge. In a world where our cognition is so greatly influenced by technology, the only way to keep up is to allow your brain to be more nomadic, constantly changing between topics and tasks, in order to take in the high-speed influx of information coming at it. On the one hand, I understand where Anderson is coming from; information travels fast these days, and it makes sense for our brain to want to process as much as it can, and the decline in direct focus on minimal topics is a necessary sacrifice for the

increased ability to focus in increments on a wide variety of knowledge. On the other hand, I think Anderson's perspective is over-inflating the benefits of mental "restlessness" (Anderson 11), and fails to recognize the impact of declining intelligence. As someone who has had access to technology and the internet my whole life, I struggle a lot with the decline in deep reading that Carr discusses. I cannot complete an assignment without feeling the overwhelming urge to check my phone and fall into a rabbit hole of distraction. The distracting nature of technology has hampered my learning as a student, and I know many of my peers feel similarly. While Anderson sees this declining attention as a mindset better suited for the digital age, Carr argues that this deficit in attention is very dangerous, and is leading to a decline in deep thinking, but in overall intelligence as well. While I can acknowledge that our mental changes can have the potential to be helpful adaptations, what good are they if we're adapting to a lower level of intellect?

Despite differing opinions on its impact, both Carr and Anderson conclude that technology is purposely designed to make people reliant on it to increase capital gain. Anderson believes this to be the fault of the internet, and compares it to a Skinner box, an experiment where a reward is given out each time the subject completes a task. Anderson writes, "The Internet is basically a Skinner box engineered to tap right into our deepest mechanisms of addiction...It dispenses its never-ending little shots of positivity, a life-changing e-mail here, a funny Youtube video there, in gloriously unpredictable cycles" (Anderson 7). Anderson argues that our tendency to get so easily distracted from our immediate tasks and mindlessly surf the internet is no mistake. It's a purposeful outcome due to the way the internet was designed. The internet is designed to alter our brain chemistry, delivering hits of dopamine that provide positive reinforcement for our distracted behavior. This reinforcement is the main reason the internet will remain widely utilized. The more the internet is in use, the more it will shape our brains, and

will, in turn, further encourage our addiction to it. While Anderson explains why and how we have become so reliant on the internet, Carr takes this idea a step further and discusses the selfish motives behind this reliance. Carr argues that creators of large internet-related companies such as Google treat intelligence as something mechanical that “leaves little place for the fuzziness of contemplation” (Carr 6), and that they do this because, “The last thing these companies want is to encourage leisurely reading or slow, concentrated thought. It’s in their economic interest to drive us to distraction” (Carr 7). The argument Carr is making is that the internet is encouraging distraction and using these addiction-like reactions to fleeting hits of positivity, as Anderson puts it, to increase their financial gain. The more distracted people are by the internet, the more data can be collected. If people were to focus deeply on their main tasks, then there would be no money gained from distracting pop-up ads or social media clickbait. I agree with Anderson and Carr and believe that because of the influence that technology has on people in the modern world, its negative effects will continue to get worse as long as these companies are profiting. In my experience on the internet, there are increasing efforts to get as much money as possible from users, from every website now having a subscription service, to perfectly tailored, addictive algorithms that keep users on websites and social media for longer. Companies are consciously modifying our thought processes and our ability to absorb and interpret information for their benefit. As long as there is profit to be gained, technology will continue to shape our attention for the benefit of the stakeholders, no matter the toll it takes on deep thinking and concentration.

I believe at its core, technology is meant to morph us into distracted and shallow, surface-level thinkers, and will continue to do so to maintain its monopoly on the modern world. We as consumers of technology must make ourselves and others aware of this fact, and work together to climb our way out of this so-called “poverty of attention” (Anderson 2) we have been

forced into. We must consciously make an effort to retreat from the easy shortcuts that the internet and technology have given us and put more time and effort into regaining our skills for deep, independent thinking.

Works Cited

Anderson, Sam. "The Benefits of Distraction and Overstimulation -- New York Magazine - Nymag." *New York Magazine*, 15 May 2009, nymag.com/news/features/56793/.

Carr, Nicholas. "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" *The Atlantic*, July 2008, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/.