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BOOKSHELF

Pay Attention, Please

The new Darwinian imperative may be ‘the survival of the focused.’

By Christine Rosen

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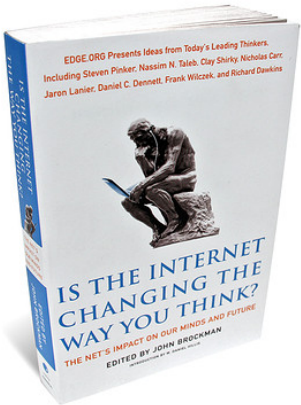
In the mid-20th century, the French sociologist Jacques Ellul posed 76 “reasonable questions” that he thought we should ask about any new technology. They included moral questions such as “What values does its use foster?” and “What is lost by using it?” and social ones such as “What are its effects on relationships?” Today, as we rush to embrace the latest gadgets and apps, we tend merely to ask: “What does it do?”

Luckily, John Brockman, the founder of the online science-and-technology site Edge.org, decided to pose a bigger question to a varied group of 150 writers, artists, scholars, scientists and pundits: “Is the Internet changing the way you think?” The result is a diffuse but provocative sampling of the ways in which we live with technology today and think about its effects.

Although the sciences are heavily represented among Mr. Brockman’s contributors, the volume ranges beyond the usual suspects (e.g., the ubiquitous technology booster Clay Shirky) to include visual artists, architects and musicians whose voices are all too often missing from discussions of technology and contemporary culture.

Whether poets or programmers, the book’s contributors write from the perspective not of “digital natives” but of creatures from an earlier age who have had to adapt to the changes wrought by the Internet. As members of a transitional generation, they are poised to address both practical and philosophical themes.

Most of the contributors are enthusiastic about the bounty that the Internet provides, particularly to scientific research, global communication and personal expression. Indeed, several contributors are disparaging of those who question the Internet’s costs, dismissing such people as “neophobic” or “curmudgeons and troglodytes.” Still, a few writers belie such easy caricature. The neuroscientist Joshua Greene suggests, in a blunt but apt metaphor, that the Internet, for all its revolutionary pretense, is “nothing more, and nothing less, than a very useful, and very dumb, butler.”



One theme emerges frequently from enthusiasts and skeptics alike: Precisely because there are such vast stores of information on the Internet, the ability to carve out time for uninterrupted, concentrated thought may prove to be the most important skill that one can hone. “Attention is the fundamental literacy,” writes Howard Rheingold, the author of “Smart Mobs.”

As playwright Richard Foreman observes of his time spent online: “I can’t help being reminded of the Greek philosopher who attributed his long life to avoiding dinner parties. If only I could avoid the equally distracting Internet, which, in its promise of connectedness and expanded knowledge, is really a substitute social phenomenon.” Thomas Metzinger, a philosopher, argues

that the Internet isn’t changing the way we think; it is exacerbating the deceptively simple challenge of “attention management.” “Attention is a finite commodity, and it is absolutely essential to living a good life,” he argues. The way we use the Internet today represents “not only an organized attack on the space of consciousness per se but also

IS THE INTERNET CHANGING THE WAY YOU THINK?
a mild form of depersonalization. . . . I call it public dreaming.”

Edited by John Brockman

Harper Perennial, 408 pages, \$14.99

These are not the laments of technophobes. MIT professor Rodney Brooks, an expert on robotics, worries that the Internet “is stealing our attention. It competes for it with everything else we do.” Neuroscientist Brian Knutson imagines a near future in which “the Internet may impose a ‘survival of the focused,’ in which individuals gifted with some natural ability to stay on target, or who are hopped up on enough stimulants, forge ahead while the rest of us flail helpless in a Web-based attentional vortex.”

The substitution of the virtual for the real is another common theme. Paleontologist Scott Sampson worries about “the loss of intimate experience with the natural world.” And computer scientist Jaron Lanier, the father of virtual reality, says that the Internet has “become gripped by reality-denying ideology.” Several of the book’s contributors, particularly artists and architects, make solid arguments for the importance of unmediated experiences to the creative process.

A few contributors are entirely undisturbed by the possibility of a virtual future. “Large-scale communal games such as Second Life will become disconcertingly addictive to many ordinary people who understand little of what goes on in the engine room,” predicts the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. “And let’s not be snobbish about that. For many people around the world, ‘first life’ reality has few charms, and, even for those more fortunate, active participation in a virtual world is more intellectually stimulating than the life of a couch potato slumped in idle thrall to *Big Brother*.”

Artist and pop musician Brian Eno offers a more compelling assessment of the opportunity costs posed by the Internet: “I notice that the desire for community is sufficiently strong for millions of people to belong to entirely fictional communities, such as Second Life and World of Warcraft,” he writes. “I worry that this may be at the expense of First Life.” For Mr. Eno, as for many participants in the online world, the Internet’s ability to give us free music, images and information has increased rather than replaced the desire for authentic experience, whatever that might be.

In the end, the most striking essays in “Is the Internet Changing the Way You Think?” encourage us to look back rather than ahead. We are good at storing the past online—the fleeting, trivial past as well as the distant, information-rich past of researched history—but have we improved our ability to learn from it? Mr. Brockman’s book suggests that we must reckon honestly with the many ways in which we have already used technology, both for good and for ill. You don’t have to be a troglodyte to recognize that there isn’t an app for that.

Ms. Rosen is senior editor of The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology & Society.

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