

# Unable to focus? Welcome to our distracted society's attention deficit

June 19 2008

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## **Understanding the science of attention and technology's role in eroding -- and perhaps someday improving -- our ability to focus**

Cell phones, Blackberries, e-mail, laptops allowing people to bring their work anywhere, news arriving in perfectly condensed and filtered snippets via the Internet and TV, never before has communication been so instantaneous and information distributed so quickly. Never before have people been so connected.

One would assume that this preponderance of advanced communication technology would promote a well-informed and close-knit society. While this is true to some extent and there are many benefits to be gained from these technologies, award-winning author and journalist Maggie Jackson surprisingly has found that compared to past generations, we are in fact less capable of quality analytical thinking, more ignorant about many issues, and more fragmented as a community. Never before have we been so disconnected. This, she concludes, is due to the erosion of attention. After extensively researching the history of communication and transportation technology, today's society, and scientific studies of human cognition, Jackson has documented her compelling case and some possible remedies in **DISTRACTED: THE EROSION OF ATTENTION AND THE COMING DARK AGE**.

MIT professor Alan Lightman calls it, "an important book... a harrowing documentation of our modern world's descent into fragmentation, self alienation, and emptiness—brought on, to a large extent, by communication technologies that distract us, dislocate us, and destroy

our inner lives."

Jackson's definition of "attention" stems from studies in neuroscience that have identified a cognitive system comprised of three networks—awareness, focus, and executive attention (planning and decision making)—that work together to act as the "brain's conductor, leading the orchestration of our minds." The awareness and focus networks are systems responsible for gathering information about the environment, and the executive attention network is responsible for making decisions based on that information. Sustained attention is necessary for learning, deep thinking, emotional development, building relationships, and many other essential tasks. Attention is the building block of intimacy, wisdom, and cultural progress. Without it, it would be impossible to function in any meaningful way.

In **DISTRACTED** Jackson demonstrates that the erosion of attention began with the development of communication and transportation technologies in the late 1800's. The introduction of the telegram meant that people could communicate across the globe almost instantaneously, and the advent of railroads and steamships allowed people to travel the world at unprecedented speeds. These developments changed the way that people viewed the world in terms of time and space. In today's world, this altered perspective has been greatly accelerated. Cell phones, e-mails, and numerous other devices compete for our attention. Because of this constant nagging, it becomes nearly impossible to utilize our capacity for sustained attention, and the implications are felt in business, the home, and society at large.

Jackson notes that the average worker switches tasks every three minutes and once interrupted takes nearly half an hour to go back to the original task. Families and friends find it increasingly difficult to meet face-to-face and even more difficult to do so without interruption or willful multitasking. News segments bombard us with superficially simple

pieces of information. We have essentially been ushered into a world of constant distraction in which reflective thinking and undivided attention (single-tasking) has become exceedingly rare.

This is a dangerous path to follow. Analytical reasoning exams show that children and college graduates have a decreased capacity for rigorous thought and analysis. These are important skills for running businesses, making informed political decisions, and innovating new ideas—all of which are necessary components of an advanced democratic society. Parents' lack of focused attention directed toward their children often leads to a myriad of emotional and behavioral problems. Not giving loved ones our undivided attention causes relationships to disintegrate. The erosion of attention is largely equivalent to the erosion of our society. Jackson warns that dark ages have been marked by brilliant technological innovations coupled with a lack of widespread interest in academic pursuits—much like the current atmosphere. *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL* agrees that *DISTRACTED* "concentrate[s] the mind on a real problem of modern life."

Still, Jackson remains optimistic. Although she makes it clear that if we squander our powers of attention our technological age could ultimately slip into cultural decline, she also notes that we are just as capable of igniting a renaissance of attention by strengthening our skills of focus and perception. Scientific studies have found that people derive real benefits from practicing meditation. Many researchers are harnessing technology itself to improve our ability to sustain attention. Scientists have utilized computer-based programs to increase the IQs and focus of children. Others have used programs to increase the working memory of children with ADHD. And programmers are developing software that prioritizes interruptions and identifies the best times to actually interrupt workers. We are capable of bringing sustained focus back into our lives.

Peter C. Whybrow, MD, director of the Semel Institute for

Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA, calls the book "An important and timely work [that] challenges us to reconsider the information saturated and demand driven world that we have created. Does our sensate culture, in eroding attention, threaten the self that is at the very pith of our humanity?" In his foreword, Bill McKibben agrees, "This book...forces our attention on...inattention. And in so doing, it asks us implicitly the uncomfortable question about what our lives are for." DISTRACTED is an original exposé of the multifaceted nature of attention, an engaging and often surprising portrait of postmodern life, and a compelling roadmap for cultivating sustained focus and nurturing a more enriched and literate society. More than ever, we cannot afford to let distraction become the marker of our time.

Source: Prometheus Books

Citation: Unable to focus? Welcome to our distracted society's attention deficit (2008, June 19) retrieved 20 April 2024 from

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