

THE LAND OF DISTRACTION



By Maggie Jackson

I think we're beginning to see a time of darkness when, amid a plethora of high-tech connectivity, one-quarter of Americans say they have no close confidante, more than double the number thirty years ago. It's a darkening time when we think togetherness means keeping one eye, hand, or ear on our gadgets, ever ready to tune into another channel of life, when we begin to turn to robots to tend to the sick and the old, when doctors listen to patients on average for just eighteen seconds before interrupting, and when two-fifths of children eight and under live in homes where the television is kept on all or most of the time, an environment linked to attention deficiencies. We should be concerned when we sense that short-term thinking in the workplace eclipses intellectual pattern making, and when we're staking our cultural memory largely on digital data that is disappearing at astounding

rates. We should worry when attention slips through our fingers.

For nothing is more central to creating a flourishing society built upon learning, contentment, caring, morality, reflection, and spirit than attention. As humans, we are formed to pay attention. Without it, we simply would not survive. Just as our respiration or circulatory systems are made up of multiple parts, so attention encompasses three 'networks' related to different aspects of awareness, focus, and planning. In a nutshell, 'alerting' makes us sensitive to incoming stimuli, while the 'orienting' network helps us select information from among the millions of sensations we receive from the world, voluntarily or in reaction to our surroundings. A baby's first job is to hone these skills, which are akin to 'awareness' and 'focus', respectively. In a class of its own, however, is the executive network, the system of attention responsible

for complex cognitive and emotional operations and especially for resolving conflicts between different areas of the brain. (We fire up four separate areas of the brain just to solve a simple word recognition problem, such as coming up with a use for the word *hammer*.) All three networks are crucial and often work together, and without strong skills of attention, we are buffeted by the world and hindered in our capacity to grow and even to enjoy life. People who focus well report feeling less fear, frustration, and sadness day to day, partly because they can literally deploy their attention away from negatives in life. In contrast, attentional problems are one of the main impediments to attaining 'flow', the deep sense of contentment that people find when they are stretching themselves to meet a challenge. Without the symphonic conductor of attention, the music of the brain disintegrates into cacophony.

Attention also tames our inner beast. Primates that receive training in attention become less aggressive. One of attention's highest forms is 'effortful control', which involves the ability to shift focus deliberately, engage in planning, and regulate one's impulses. Six- and seven-year-olds who score high in tests of this skill are more empathetic and less aggressive. Moreover, effortful control is integral to developing a conscience, researchers are discovering. In order to put back the stolen cookie, you must attend to your uneasy feelings, the action itself, and the abstract moral principles – then make the right response. All in all, attention is key to both our free will as individuals and our ability to subordinate ourselves to a greater good. The Oxford English Dictionary defines attention as “the act, fact or state of attending or giving heed; earnest direction of the mind,” and secondarily as “practical consideration, observant care, notice.” The word is rooted in the Latin words *ad* and *tendere*, meaning to “stretch toward”, implying effort and intention. Even the phrase ‘attention span’ literally means a kind of bridge, a reaching across in order

to widen one's horizons. Attention is not always effortful, but it carries us toward our highest goals, however we define them. A culture that settles for numb distraction cannot shape its future.

This morning, I sat in the library trying to harness my thoughts, but like runaway horses, they would not be reined in. We missed the first birthday of a baby whose parents are two of our closest friends, and I stewed about that for a while. Someone I interviewed for my newspaper column was peeved that an editor hadn't confirmed this evening's photo shoot, and a flurry of e-mails ensued. A man outside my study room made a long, illicit phone call and gesticulated threateningly when I asked him to stop. The old water pipes hissed in a new, odd way. I have never thought of myself as easily distracted, although I always have had an Olympic capacity for daydreaming, failing to complete my sentences, and slips of the tongue. (Go put on your pyjamas, I'll tell my daughter at noon, when I really mean bathing suit.) A friend generously diagnoses me as having “too many words” in my head. But perhaps the ultimate weak spot in

my own capacity for focus is that I'm observant and 'sensitive' – a label I grew to hate as a child. I notice much of the ceaseless swirl of social intonations, bodily signals, and facial expressions around me. Even in the relative quiet of the library, the world tends to come rushing in, jumbling and splashing about inside me, a restless sea.

Yet isn't that essentially the starting point of attention? Attention is a process of taking in, sorting and shaping, planning, and decision making – a mental and emotional forming and kneading of the bread of life. The first two forms of attention – alertness and orienting – allow us to sense and respond to our environment, while the third and highest network of executive attention is needed to make ultimate sense of our world. Our ability to attend is partly genetic, yet also dependent upon a nurturing environment and how willing we are to reach for the highest levels of this skill, just as a naturally gifted athlete who lacks the opportunity, encouragement, and sheer will to practice can never master a sport. Today, our virtual, split-screen, and nomadic era is eroding opportunities for

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deep focus, awareness, and reflection. As a result, we face a real risk of societal decline. But there is much room for hope, for attention can be trained, taught, and shaped, a discovery that offers the key to living fully in a tech-saturated world. We need not waste our potential for reaching the heights of attention. We don't have to settle for lives mired in detachment, fragmentation, diffusion. A renaissance of attention is within our grasp.

I didn't set out to write about attention. I was curious why so many Americans are deeply dissatisfied with life, feeling stressed, and often powerless to shape their futures in a country of such abundant resources. At first, I sought clues in the past, assuming that lessons from the first high-tech era – the heyday of the telegraph, cinema, and railway – could teach us how to better manage our own shifting experiences of space and time. Instead, I discovered that our gadgets are bringing to a climax the changes seeded in these first revolutions. Is this a historical turning point, a “hinge of history”, in Thomas Cahill's words? In researching this next question, I discovered stunning similarities between past dark ages and our own era. At the same time, I began studying the astonishing discoveries made just in our own generation about the nature and workings of attention. As I explored these seemingly unrelated threads, I realised that they formed a tapestry: the story of what happens when we allow our powers of attention to slip through our fingers. Realising this loss is intriguing. Considering the consequences is alarming.

When a civilisation wearies, notes Cahill, a confidence based on order and balance is lost, and without such anchors, people begin to return to an era of shadows and fear. God-like amid our five

hundred television channels and three hundred choices of cereal, are we failing to note the creeping arrival of a time of impermanence and uncertainty? Mesmerised by streams of media-borne eye candy and numbed by our faith in technology to cure all ills, are we blind to the realisation that our society's progress, in important ways, is a shimmering mirage? Consumed by the vast time and energy simply required to survive the ever-increasing complexity of our systems of living, are we missing the slow extinction of our capacity to think and feel and bond deeply? We just might be too busy, wired, split-focused, and distracted to notice a return to an era of shadows and fear.

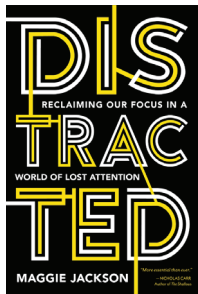
On the August day in 410 when the Goths brutally sacked Rome, the emperor was at his country house on the Adriatic, attending to his beloved flock of prize poultry. Informed by a servant that Rome had perished, the emperor, Honorius, was stunned. “Rome perished?” he said. “It is not an hour since she was feeding out of my hand.” The chamberlain clarified himself. He'd been talking about the city, not the imperial bird of that name. Apocryphal as this story may be, the point is apt. For in the years leading into a dark age, societies often exhibit an inability to perceive or act upon a looming threat, such as a declining resource. Twilight cultures begin to show a preference for veneer and form, not depth and content; a stubborn blindness to the consequences of actions, from the leadership on down. In other words, an epidemic erosion of attention is a sure sign of an impending dark age.

Welcome to the land of distraction. ■

From Distracted, by Maggie Jackson.

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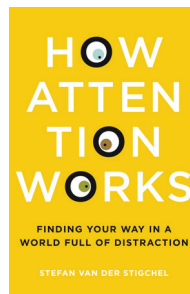


Maggie Jackson

A dark age

Are we heading into a dark age? To ask this question is first to wonder whether we at present have much of a collective appetite for wrestling meaningfully with uncertainties, and whether we have the will to carve out havens of deep thinking amid the tempests of time. To deepen the riddle, note that there are likely as many definitions of a dark age as there are lost civilizations buried beneath the earth's shifting sod and sand. To the late urban studies guru Jane Jacobs, a dark age is a "cultural collapse" that leads to an "abyss of forgetfulness." Anthropologist Joseph Tainter treats a dark age as simply a decline in literacy, a kind of minor player in the larger economic and political drama of collapse. Perhaps no two scholars holding a mirror to the past will see quite the same reflection.

How Attention Works



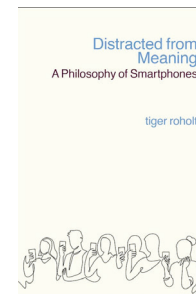
Stefan van der Stigchel

To no avail

Less than a year after the tunnel was reopened, a 63-year-old motorcyclist suffered serious injuries when he failed to notice that the extra tunnel was closed and crashed straight into the barrier. It was the twentieth such accident since the renovation job. The authorities tried to warn road users more effectively by hanging up additional warning signs, using vehicle-mounted flashing arrows, and installing steel traffic cones. In addition, the barrier itself was fitted with flashing LED lights and made to appear larger.

The warnings were all to no avail. Drivers continued to crash into the barrier at high speed without even taking their foot off the gas.

Distracted from Meaning



Tiger Roholt

True multi-tasking

When I discuss smartphone-distraction with students, some acknowledge that off-task smartphone-use in class may negatively affect academic performance; other students are of the opinion that their extensive experience with multitasking enables them to manage such situations well. The latter idea is that they can pay attention to what is happening in class in addition to, occasionally, paying attention to what is happening within their smartphones. Some social scientists who write about smartphone-distraction claim that there is no such thing as true multitasking. For example, Michelle Fei writes: "Unfortunately, there is a very real limit to the ability of the human brain to multitask. True multi-tasking refers to performing two tasks simultaneously. This is something the human brain is not able to do."