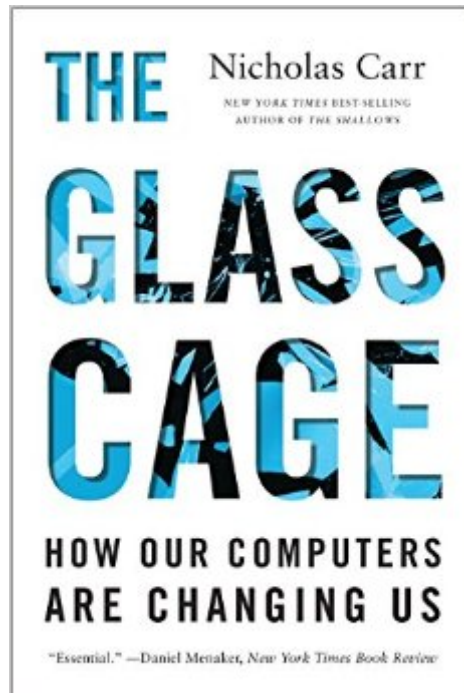


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The Glass Cage: How Our Computers Are Changing Us



Synopsis

At once a celebration of technology and a warning about its misuse, *The Glass Cage* will change the way you think about the tools you use every day. In *The Glass Cage*, best-selling author Nicholas Carr digs behind the headlines about factory robots and self-driving cars, wearable computers and digitized medicine, as he explores the hidden costs of granting software dominion over our work and our leisure. Even as they bring ease to our lives, these programs are stealing something essential from us. Drawing on psychological and neurological studies that underscore how tightly people's happiness and satisfaction are tied to performing hard work in the real world, Carr reveals something we already suspect: shifting our attention to computer screens can leave us disengaged and discontented. From nineteenth-century textile mills to the cockpits of modern jets, from the frozen hunting grounds of Inuit tribes to the sterile landscapes of GPS maps, *The Glass Cage* explores the impact of automation from a deeply human perspective, examining the personal as well as the economic consequences of our growing dependence on computers. With a characteristic blend of history and philosophy, poetry and science, Carr takes us on a journey from the work and early theory of Adam Smith and Alfred North Whitehead to the latest research into human attention, memory, and happiness, culminating in a moving meditation on how we can use technology to expand the human experience. ---

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Customer Reviews

My first question on seeing this book was, is it going to be as successful and thought-provoking as

Carr's previous book *The Shallows*? The answer is an unequivocal, "yes!" If you've not read *The Shallows* I recommend that you consider reading it first because many of the thoughts and ideas from it are continued, developed and extended in *The Glass Cage*. It's not a necessary prerequisite but it would enhance your appreciation of Carr's arguments. Carr's central thesis can be summed up in a quote often attributed to Marshall McLuhan, "we shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us." Carr's point, which he develops with many intriguing examples ranging from airline pilots, through doctors, photographers, architects, and even to farmers, is that this Faustian pact with technology comes at a cost. The cost, in Carr's view, is a loss of direct, experiential, formative contact with our work. The consequences of this slow loss of familiarity and connection with our work are subtle, insidious and will only increase while we follow this technocentric approach to automation. Carr is excellent at making his case. Most of his examples are familiar and those that less so, such as the automation of legal and medical opinions are interesting in that they affect us all. I felt that where Carr was less strong was in proposing solutions to the problems he raises. He works hard at explaining an alternative vision calling on the poetry of Robert Frost's as a springboard to a more humanistic approach to developing tools, but it is hard work selling an alternative to the easy, convenient future that so many of us seem to crave.

In this thoughtful follow-up to *"The Shallows"* Nicholas Carr explores precisely what we lose when we turn over more & more of our human skills to our devices. For many people, especially younger ones born into the digital age & never knowing anything else, there's no reason to learn a vast array of knowledge & incorporate it into life, since you can simply Google it. Such people believe that the device is always better & smarter than a mere fallible human being -- and they're superficially right, but ultimately wrong. Every digital device is essentially an idiot savant, far more efficient at its specific skill than most human beings, but utterly unable to go beyond its own extremely narrow parameters. A device can't make the leaps of inspiration & connection that a human mind can -- particularly a complex, well-educated & experienced human mind. But what about that vast array of knowledge, accessible to all at the touch of a finger? While many still believe that it allows anyone to learn about anything instantly, in fact it seems to narrow the focus of the human being. You don't have to see or hear anything you don't already agree with; you increasingly self-segregate among like-minded people, existing inside a mirrored bubble that reflects only you. Add to that the usual uses of the digital device -- pop culture trivia, cute viral videos, endless porn, etc. -- and it turns out that very few people are actually expanding their knowledge & experience. They haven't grasped the difference between a constant stream of information bits & a wider, more coherent whole that

those bits can create. They focus on the incredibly rich, detailed, shiny surface & never look below it ...

In *The Glass Cage*, Nicholas Carr follows up his previous work on the negative impact that the Internet is having on our brains to argue that automation is likewise diminishing us as human beings. The central argument is that excessive reliance on automation is undermining us both as individuals and as a society. Carr gives many specific examples showing how automation is deskilling work, lulling us into inattention (sometimes at the cost of lives) and generally producing sub-optimal outcomes. Aviation accidents where pilots have relied too heavily on cockpit automation at the cost of both attentiveness and skill provide the most dramatic examples. However, Carr also points to the Inuit, a Canadian native tribe, that is now using GPS to hunt and as a result losing an ancient ability to navigate. Medicine provides other examples, including the failure of electronic medical records and the downsides of AI in medicine. He also looks at the problems that will arise when military robots and self-driving cars have to make moral decisions, including possibly who to kill. Carr focuses almost entirely on the humanistic aspects of automation and gives only very limited attention to the question that probably is on most readers' minds: What about jobs??? For more on that, I would suggest reading *The Lights in the Tunnel: Automation, Accelerating Technology and the Economy of the Future*, which offers a comprehensive look at the impact of robots, AI and other automation technology on jobs and the economy. Carr offers a compelling argument against too much automation, and the book is very thought provoking.

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