

# Damage of Digital Distraction

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The smartphone is an amazing device. Its sleek, glassy screen enables us to connect with friends, watch TV, search the web, process email, take photographs, read books, play games, and even do our devotions. What's not to love about that?

The answer may surprise you. It's a lot, actually. There is evidence that our digital devices are changing our brains so that we have smaller attention spans, reduced comprehension, and are more forgetful.

In the past, people used to think that our brain was hard-wired, rigid, and relatively unchanging; like the hardware of your computer. But scientists today are astounded by the number of changes that are constantly occurring. Rather than being hard-wired, our brain is plastic. It is moldable, changeable. For example, every memory that you have is a result of brain cells connecting. Memory is stored in connected neurons. Reading this article will give you new memories. Neurons that never had before connected will now be touching, and that union will constitute a memory.

Some brain neurons are dedicated to forming a mental map of locations. The excessive use of GPS navigation in the last decade has caused a lack of connections in this area. The number of people that have lost the ability to know their geographic location is astounding. People no longer look at maps for planning routes. They don't have a clear sense of direction. Reliance on GPS devices has caused this generation not to form a mental map of their world. Following the little blue line on the screen has resulted in a loss of spatial awareness. Although they've visited many cities, they are clueless about the location of one city compared to the next; nor do they know the major US highways like generations past. But mapping has little spiritual impact.

The lure of social media, online gaming, YouTube videos, and frivolous content is impairing the digital addict from valuable reading skill. This more important loss affects our knowledge of Jehovah as revealed in his word. The Biblical authors were fishermen, but they were also poetic, philosophical, trained in law, doctors, and lawyers. The Holy Spirit guided them to produce passages of scripture in the form of song, poem, metaphor, linear argument, and half-interpreted stories. If one's brain is unpracticed at processing a novel, a nonfiction linear argument, or a good poem, then he is at a disadvantage. Digital media is dominated by the frivolous, easy to understand, short and sweet, terse, emotionally charged snippets of content. Digital media is shallow. But the word of God is clear but so, so deep.

Digital technology is also changing the way that our brains take in and process information. That's of concern as well. I fear that the lure of the screen and the distraction of its notifications is shortening devotional time and leaving souls less sanctified. Your brain remembers not only facts but also stores processes. Learning to run efficiently with the right posture and stride is a procedure that can become an automatic habit over time as the mechanism is encoded in the brain. Learning to type and drive a stick-shift car are additional examples of procedural memory.

The procedure of reading on a digital device is stored in the brain in a different way than paper reading is. Reading on a digital device is not like reading a book. When reading on a digital device, your mind is constantly stimulated. There is the blue glow of the screen which shows us pictures, incoming notifications, hyperlinks to explore, menu buttons, and pop-up ads that all together keep our brains in a heightened state of alert. Also with the tap on the screen, you can check Facebook, Instagram, and your favorite blogs. Microsoft Windows just added a "People" button in their taskbar so that now you can "pin contacts to your taskbar and talk to them whenever." As if I need yet another way to interact with people! I can no longer type a paper without seeing the "people button" and think about contacting someone. Stop the madness! By design and for profit, your digital devices are made to distract you. They are designed to capture your attention. The result is that the procedural memory of sustained, focused, deep, and linear thought remains underdeveloped. Although many words are read on a screen, the process of

digital reading has taught our brains to crave a high level of stimulation. We are unknowingly making ourselves dissatisfied with paper books that inherently have a lower level of interactivity. Our brains become dissatisfied with the medium of paper and the longer deeper content that it contains. We zone out before we have grasped the scope of the whole argument. The result is that we don't think deeply. We've become shallow. We ought to dampen down our overactive brain circuits with proper media so that what we focus. Reading without distraction forms the preferred reading procedural memory and results in deeper understanding.

In contrast to the buzz and glow of a screen, the thirsty soul of the meditative man of God thrives on a less distracting experience. In that lower key environment, the Holy Spirit applies the word so that it becomes the very air that he breathes. King David was a busy man and knew the value of a quiet environment. He woke up early while all was calm and during those early morning hours the king after God's own heart meditated. Psalm 119:147-148: "I prevented [got up before] the dawning of the morning, and cried: I hoped in thy word. Mine eyes prevent [opened up before] the night watches, that I might meditate in thy word." Psalm 63:1: "O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is." A wise man places himself in a more subdued zone of stimulation that is profitable for his soul. And the Spirit, as the breath of the holy God, himself, nourishes that soul.

Our use of digital devices may also change how we experience and remember life. We are becoming more forgetful. Vivid and long-lasting memory of life's experiences is formed when our senses are fully tuned into the experience. You've experienced these vivid memories. Your first time being completely out of control on a snowboard is burned into your mind. Now, imagine a long hike up to the top of a mountain. The hike is exhausting, you are sweating, and your leg muscles are burning. Upon reaching the summit, your focus goes to your smartphone. You think, "This is a prop for my online content. I'm going to stand on my head and get a picture taken. That will be great for my profile." A few selfies and maybe a panorama later you head down excited to see the likes. But will you remember that experience

vividly? In reality, you just converted a beautiful, rich, God-sculpted scene that he made for his glory into an instagrammable prop that you intend to use to glorify yourself. If that's how you experience the summit of a mountain, then I would argue that you just exported an amazing multi-sensory memory out of your brain where it should have been stored and enjoyed for years to come and put it instead into your phone. You took an amazing experience that could have benefited you into old age and flattened it out into a two-dimensional image whose vividness will be greatly reduced in a year. A properly focused mind would have captured (truly captured!) the songs of the birds, the cool breeze, the fresh alpine scent, the stream at the base of the glacier, the colors of the birds hopping from rock to rock, the butterflies fluttering around that berry bush, and the layered mountain ranges with intermittent meadows and snowy peaks. Young people, don't waste the experiences that God gives you by focusing on yourself! Your digital device is degrading your memory. The wise man who summits the mount will "stand still and consider the wondrous works of God" (Job 37:14).

If you think it a travesty to, by digital distraction, obscure the glory of God on a mountain top, then what about obscuring his glory in the Scriptures! Do your love of self and the world keep you from seeing his glory in the Scripture? Read, young people. Kingdom treasure is in the Scriptures. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field" (Matt. 13:44).

Wise young people, buy the field! Expend your energy embracing the treasure. Forsake idle pursuits. Forsake idol pursuits, too.

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