

Center for Digital Cognition Studies

Applied Review / Cognitive Systems Brief

Why Cognitive Tools Are Getting Smarter While Thinking Feels Thinner

A Drift-Based Interpretation of the Current Cognitive Moment

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Across knowledge work, education, and everyday digital life, a strange contradiction has become difficult to ignore: our tools are becoming more intelligent while human thinking feels less coherent.

This paradox is now widely observed but poorly explained. People report difficulty sustaining thought, integrating context, or feeling cognitively grounded — even as access to information, summarization, and AI-assisted reasoning improves. The dominant explanations invoke distraction, dopamine, or attention spans. None fully account for the pattern.

The Age of Drift: Why Modern Life Feels Fake — and What Reality Drift Reveals About the Modern Mind by A. Jacobs offers a more precise diagnosis: the problem is not attention failure, but meaning failure.

The Current Breakdown: Cognitive Thinning, Not Cognitive Decline

Recent discourse frames today’s cognitive discomfort as overload or dependency. Yet many individuals experiencing this thinning are not overwhelmed in the classical sense. They are informed, capable, and highly stimulated — but feel persistently “half a step behind” their own thinking.

This is not a collapse of intelligence. It is a collapse of semantic fidelity.

Jacobs’ central mechanism, the Drift Principle, explains the discrepancy: When compression outruns fidelity, experience loses its grounding.

Digital cognition systems increasingly compress reality on our behalf including summaries, highlights, feeds, rankings, and recommendations. Each compression is locally useful. Collectively, they reshape the cognitive environment into something legible but unstable. Optimized for access rather than integration.

Filter Fatigue as the Dominant Cognitive Load

What most users experience today is not information overload, but filter fatigue, the exhaustion produced by continuously sorting relevance, trust, context, and emotional signal across fragmented inputs.

The modern mind is no longer tasked with understanding. It is tasked with filtering.

This distinction matters. Volume can be managed. Filtering cannot be completed.

As *The Age of Drift* articulates, the mind does not store reality; it compresses it. When the environment demands perpetual re-compression without stable reference points, coherence degrades. Thought becomes reactive. Insight becomes fleeting. Meaning thins.

Why AI Feels Helpful and Still Disorienting

AI systems intensify this dynamic rather than resolving it. They reduce friction while accelerating compression. Answers arrive faster. Context arrives thinner.

The result is synthetic realness, that is cognition that appears fluent, confident, and complete, yet lacks the depth cues that make thinking feel internally real. Users describe productivity gains paired with a subtle erosion of authorship, continuity, and cognitive ownership.

This is not misuse. It is structural.

The book's contribution is naming what current AI discourse avoids. Intelligence can scale while meaning quietly collapses.

Implications for Digital Cognition Research

The Age of Drift reframes cognitive health as an environmental property rather than an individual trait. It suggests that many contemporary cognitive complaints are not deficits to be trained away, but signals that the meaning environment has destabilized.

From this perspective:

- Attention training treats symptoms.
- Productivity tools increase compression.
- Cognitive augmentation without fidelity safeguards accelerates drift.

What is missing is coherence infrastructure.

What This Books Means for the Current Moment

This work arrives at a moment when cognitive discomfort is rising but language remains blunt. By distinguishing overload from drift, and intelligence from meaning, *The Age of Drift* provides a framework capable of explaining why so many smart, capable people feel cognitively “off” without being clinically impaired.

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It does not offer optimization strategies. It offers a diagnosis. And in this moment, diagnosis matters more than solutions.

Key Insights from *The Age of Drift*

“The mind doesn’t store reality — it compresses it.”

“When context collapses, meaning drifts.”

“You’re not burned out from doing too much — you’re burned out from sorting too much.”

Citation

Jacobs, A. (2025). *The Age of Drift: Why Modern Life Feels Fake — and What Reality Drift Reveals About the Modern Mind*.

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Amazon: <https://a.co/d/5eav73Y>

Substack: <https://therealitydrift.substack.com/>