Thomas Shields  
April 18, 2011  
*Drive Us to Distraction*   
Classical Writing Herodotus Week 24 Argumentative Essay

When Ray Tomlinson sent the first email in late 1971[[1]](#footnote-1), he and fellow researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology introduced a new era of communication and, though they didn’t know it, a new lens on reality. When, nineteen years later, MIT Professor and British Physicist Tim Berners Lee set up the first website[[2]](#footnote-2), the Internet had begun. Three years later the World Wide Web opened for use by anyone with the technical knack and knowhow.[[3]](#footnote-3) This new way of storing and retrieving information was intriguing, and it wasn’t long before a virtual community was formed. In 1995, just two years after the general availability of the Web, Classmates.com was formed. It was followed up by a plethora of ‘social networking’ sites such as SixDegrees, Friendster, Myspace, Facebook, and Twitter.[[4]](#footnote-4) Facebook reports that people spend over *700 billion minutes* on Facebook each month.[[5]](#footnote-5) One can’t help but wonder what people used those 700 billion minutes for before the creation of the Internet. Google has about 350 million users, Facebook about 210 million, and Twitter 42 million. These numbers combined only account for 11% of Internet use.[[6]](#footnote-6) These numbers are already outdated, with sites gaining hundreds of thousands of users every day. This increasing and ever-pervasive use of the Internet has introduced distractions never before known to man, distractions that bring with them a fragmented, multi-track view and approach to even the most serious of activities.

The problem with the Internet is not an inherent one, to be sure. It stems from improper use and a characteristic that enables users to do something very convenient: multitask. As computers evolved, software and hardware improvements allowed users to perform multiple tasks simultaneously. Listening to music, chatting with friends, and writing school reports are no longer mutually exclusive, as non-aural, text-based communication replaces face-to-face conversation. It is now extremely easy to retrieve information, but this simplicity comes at the expense of relevance, as text messages, tweets, Facebook ‘pokes’, and dates for a history project all come flying in at once.

Though it seems that these scenarios should be easy to avoid, the growing egocentricity of the culture gets in the way. With the Internet came a sudden, inexplicable urge to ‘share’ information with ‘friends,’ which they probably don’t care about. People are unwilling to turn off the phone or log off because they just can’t miss that important status update. The Internet makes multitasking possible, narcissism makes it feasible, and laziness makes it deadly.

In the words of John R. Muether, “Multitasking fragments our thinking, and moments of reflection are punctured by the urgent text message. Concentration drifts after a few paragraphs, and we have lost the art of deep and thoughtful reading.”[[7]](#footnote-7) When one’s thinking becomes fragmented, he becomes like a poorly operating hard drive – slow, jerky, and unreliable. The lines in thought that divide thoughts, people, names, information, and facts get blurred, containers get dumped out and mixed about, and too many things are at the forefront of the mind simultaneously. Besides causing a lack of relevance in activity and conversation, fragmented thinking makes it easy to drift. When multitasking, stopping to think about the task at hand is an activity virtually extinct: one simply stops, and moves on. When thinking about too many things at once, the Christian loses sight of the ultimate mindset he is to have, set forth in 1 Corinthians 10:31 “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” Human frailty makes distraction possible, the Internet makes it feasible, and together they make it deadly.

The problem with this distraction is that, quite frankly, it wastes time. Andrew Sullivan comments, “When it comes to sitting down and actually reading a multiple-page print-out, or even, God help us, a book, however, my mind seizes for a moment. After a paragraph, I’m ready for a new link. But the prose in front of my nose stretches on. I get antsy. I skim the footnotes for the quick info high that I’m used to. No good. I scan the acknowledgments, hoping for a name I recognise. I start again. A few paragraphs later, I reach for the laptop. It’s not that I cannot find the time for real reading, for a leisurely absorption of argument or narrative. It’s more that my mind has been conditioned to resist it.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

With previous advances in communication, such as the printing press and the telephone, only the method of exchange was modified. The same book was handwritten and block-typed, the same note of urgency sensed in a face-to-face conversation or over Bell’s telephone. But the Internet is not only changing the method of communication; it is changing the substance as well. Nicholas Carr states:   
“[The Internet] suppl[ies] the stuff of thought, but [it] also shape[s] the process of thought. And what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Because of the unique way the Internet channels information, a person no longer controls the information he receives. Previously one would be presented with text that, though decked in a fancy cover or spruced up with artful illustrations, contained merely the information the author intended to convey. Now, websites can decorate information with more than pretty pictures. Hyperlinks, advertisements, and helpful ‘related’ links often take up more space on a page than the actual article. Information is pumped into a person’s brain with the method, style, frequency, rate, and decoration that the sender chooses. The information source is suddenly in complete control of where, when, and how information is viewed, whereas previously it controlled only the actual content. A book picked up at a store was guaranteed to remain as it was at its purchase, but a page on the Internet can lead to helpful information one day and a cluttered mess of unrelated links the next.

Carr explains the disastrous result of succumbing to this means of information communication:   
“When the Net absorbs a medium, that medium is re-created in the Net’s image. It injects the medium’s content with hyperlinks, blinking ads, and other digital gewgaws, and it surrounds the content with the content of all the other media it has absorbed. A new e-mail message, for instance, may announce its arrival as we’re glancing over the latest headlines at a newspaper’s site. *The result is to scatter our attention and diffuse our concentration.* The Net’s influence doesn’t end at the edges of a computer screen, either. As people’s minds become attuned to the crazy quilt of Internet media, traditional media have to adapt to the audience’s new expectations. Television programs add text crawls and pop-up ads, and magazines and newspapers shorten their articles, introduce capsule summaries, and crowd their pages with easy-to-browse info-snippets.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Information fragmentation seeps into more circles than just the internet, as Carr points out. Surrounding now even newspaper articles are sports scores, breaking news, and crossword puzzles. Shortened article or information length leads to a shortened time of focus and a rapidly changing information input. This is a hard habit to break, and when longer, important things are encountered, they’re often discarded as too time consuming or tackled half-heartedly with a constant eye on the cell-phone text messages.

The result is twofold. First, it makes people into machines. Information is received at blazing speeds in bursts and random assortments, is retained for the present occasion, and disposed of. The human brain is being morphed into a kind of computer: receiving information, loading commands into memory, executing a process, and disposing of the information when the event is complete. Information is retrieved on demand and replaced. Communication is automated and impersonal. Microsoft Bing’s director Stefan Weitz hypothesized glasses that would retrieve information about a person when they recognized him and feed it to the wearer.[[11]](#footnote-11) In this transactional[[12]](#footnote-12) view of relationship, a friend becomes a ‘Facebook friend,’ then a ‘contact,’ ultimately deteriorating into nothing more than an information source. Ultimately, this is linked to a flaming narcissism. Even for those who still claim ‘friends,’ they “collect friends in [their] desire to build status. Online personalities (even to the point of multiple identities and gender-bending) are carefully constructed as [they] crave the attention [they] hope it stirs.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

It’s not just that the Internet is fulfilling a request, giving the world bucket loads of information that they can’t often handle and generating a fragmented multitasking interface. People never asked for it. But, as Carr explains, it’s a little more:   
“The idea that our minds should operate as high-speed data-processing machines is not only built into the workings of the Internet, it is the network’s reigning business model as well. The faster we surf across the Web—the more links we click and pages we view—the more opportunities Google and other companies gain to collect information about us and to feed us advertisements. Most of the proprietors of the commercial Internet have a financial stake in collecting the crumbs of data we leave behind as we flit from link to link—the more crumbs, the better. The last thing these companies want is to encourage leisurely reading or slow, concentrated thought. It’s in their economic interest to drive us to distraction.” As long as multitasking provides a positive business model, it will be hard to change. The widespread hearty welcome of the fragmentation, multitasking, information overload, and shallow relationships the Internet provides surely will not help the problem go away either.

The second and more detrimental result of this all-pervasive fragmentation is its effect on Christians. When distraction reigns and diversion of attention is the norm, it becomes very difficult for a Christian to have the right kinds of relationships with family, friends, and ultimately God. Meditation on God’s Word (Joshua 1:8) and earnest and continuous prayer (Ephesians 6:18, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18) become difficult and cumbersome. At the heart of this problem lies the inherent narcissism of mankind (Romans 3:23), as mentioned previously. Mankind likes to display himself, to show himself off. Internet social networking sites only feed that desire, and the increasing portability of devices increases the accessibility of a person. No longer can a person sit down to read the Bible, for the moment he looks up he is confronted with so many new emails, however many text messages, and a few phone calls to boot.

Ultimately, the Internet, multitasking, and virtual interaction serve only to isolate people. Now they live in a world of their own imagination, choosing not only their styles, but their friends, their contacts, their universe. Shane Hipps writes “Digital social networking inoculates people against the desire to be physically present with others in real social networks – networks like a church or a meal at someone’s home.”[[14]](#footnote-14) John Muether states that “Contrary to the inconvenience and inefficiency of genuine community, virtual communities have the advantage of allowing one to leave as easily as one joined. Disappearing can be as simple as not responding to an email…Or there is a one-click means of ‘unfriending’ a cyberpest. With these exit strategies, social networks are less communities than life-style enclaves. One sociologist has aptly described them as ‘networked individualism.’”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The Internet is not a bad thing. The speed of communication is much greater, and a wealth of information is easily accessible. Lots of tasks that would never have been thought to be computer-operated are taking advantage of computers and networking to increase their efficiency. But these things come at a price. High-level data processing and blazing fast communication and information exchange bring about multitasking, and with it a mindset of fragmentation which seeps into everyday life. Muether begins his article by saying “Let’s begin with a reasonably safe prediction: you are not likely to finish this article. That is not merely because of the prose of the author (though I concede it doesn’t help). It is based on reliable statistics that indicate how attention spans have shortened.” He ends with a challenge: “Our challenge is to reckon with the multitasking, split-screen, ringtone culture of the internet…Technological restraint is good for the soul, the mind, and the church. We need to reshape our environment to enlarge our attention spans and deepen our commitments to friends and community. You made a small start by finishing this article. Now read the next. Then write a letter to a friend. Texting or blogging is cheating.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

## Bibliography

John Muether, *Virtual Friendship*, Tabletalk April 2010, Vol. 34, No. 4.  
The Gospel Coalition, <http://thegospelcoalition.org>   
Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?”, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/6868/>  
The Reformation Study Bible, ESV, Ligonier Ministries  
Nicholas Carr: *Internet, Brains, & Social Networks*, Mars Hill Audio Journal 105, Track 2  
“The First Email”, Ray Tomlinson <http://openmap.bbn.com/~tomlinso/ray/firstemailframe.html>   
“Tim Berners-Lee” on Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tim\_Berners-Lee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tim_Berners-Lee%20) [http://info.cern.ch/](http://info.cern.ch/%20) Cailliau, Robert. "A Little History of the World Wide Web". <http://www.w3.org/History.html>, via Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Website>  
 Timeline: a history of social networking, Laura Davies: <http://lauramdavies.wordpress.com/2010/02/11/timeline-a-history-of-social-networking-sites/> Facebook Press Statistics - <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>  
 Superpower: Visualizing The Internet, BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/8562801.stm>  
HuffPost Tech – Huffington Post - <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/04/bing-director-stefan-weit_n_844004.html>

1. “The First Email”, Ray Tomlinson <http://openmap.bbn.com/~tomlinso/ray/firstemailframe.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://info.cern.ch/>, “Tim Berners-Lee” on Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tim_Berners-Lee> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cailliau, Robert. ["A Little History of the World Wide Web"](http://www.w3.org/History.html). <http://www.w3.org/History.html>, via Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Website> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Timeline: a history of social networking, Laura Davies: <http://lauramdavies.wordpress.com/2010/02/11/timeline-a-history-of-social-networking-sites/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Facebook Press Statistics - <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Superpower: Visualizing The Internet – BBC News - <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/8562801.stm> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John Muether, *Virtual Friendship*, Tabletalk April 2010, Vol. 34, No. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Andrew Sullivan, UK Sunday Times, quoted on The Gospel Coalition, [http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2008/06/29/is-google-making-us-stupid/](http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2008/06/29/is-google-making-us-stupid/%20) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?”, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/6868/>, quoted on The Gospel Coalition [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. HuffPost Tech – Huffington Post - <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/04/bing-director-stefan-weit_n_844004.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Nicholas Carr: *Internet, Brains, & Social Networks*, Mars Hill Audio Journal 105, Track 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. John Muether, *Virtual Friendship*, Tabletalk April 2010, Vol. 34, No. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels,* quoted in *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. John Muether, *Virtual Friendship*, Tabletalk April 2010, Vol. 34, No. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-16)