



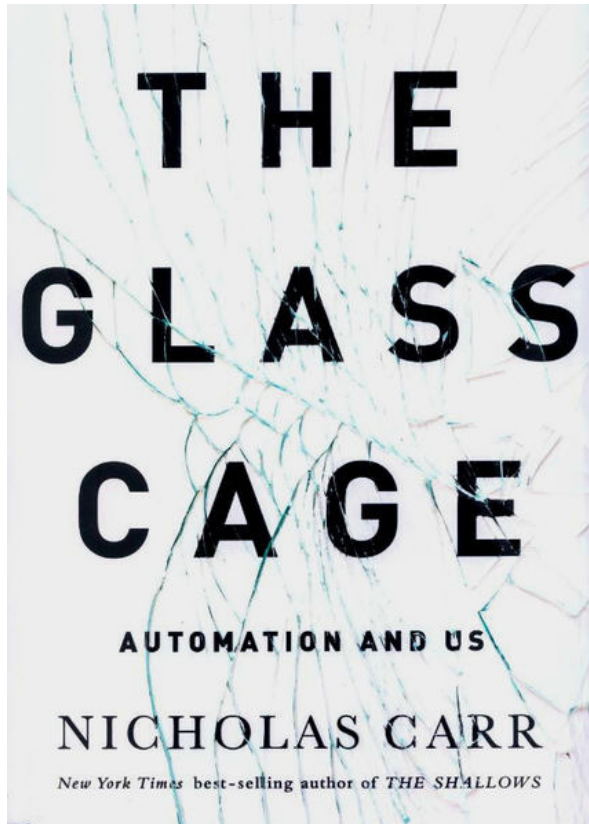
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DAILY NEWS

'The Glass Cage' is enlightening

Posted: Sunday, October 26, 2014 1:00 am

"The Glass Cage: Automation and Us" by Nicholas Carr. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Co., 2014. 276 pages, \$26.95.



“Computer automation makes our lives easier, our chores less burdensome,” Nicholas Carr asserts in the introduction to “The Glass Cage: Automation and Us,” his new treatise on the hidden dangers posed by overreliance on technology. “We’re often able to accomplish more in less time – or to do things we simply couldn’t do before. But automation also has deeper, hidden effects. It can narrow our perspectives and limit our choices. It can open us up to surveillance and manipulation. As computers become our constant companions, our familiar, obliging help mates, it seems wise to take a closer look at exactly how they’re changing what we do and who we are.”

Carr was a writer-in-residence at the University of California, Berkeley, and was an executive editor of the Harvard Business Review. His articles have appeared in The Atlantic, The New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, Wired and the New Republic. His previous books include “The Big Switch: Rewiring the World, from Edison to Google,” “Digital Enterprise: How to Reshape Your Business

for a Connected World” and “The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains,” which was a finalist for the 2011 Pulitzer Prize. He currently writes “Rough Type,” a widely read blog at www.roughtype.com. “The Glass Cage,” his most recent contribution, is exceptionally well-researched, with 28 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction and nine chapters that form the main narrative.

Let me cut to the chase: I really liked “The Glass Cage.” I found Carr’s prose crisp, clear and unmistakable; it was easy to follow his reasoning, and he backs up his observations and conclusions with solid evidence and a convincing case. It is obvious the author is intimately acquainted with the subject matter he so eloquently tackles in his latest volume and the confidence with which he presents his arguments is undeniable. We are just now beginning to understand the potential effects of our seemingly insatiable reliance on automation. Because something is technically possible does not necessarily mean it should be pursued.

One of my favorite chapters was “On Autopilot.” Here, Carr recounts the rise of automated systems in the airline industry. Although the fully electronic gyroscopic autopilot, which the Sperry Corp.

introduced in 1940, has undoubtedly made air travel much safer, it has become more apparent that overreliance on computerized systems can have a downside, as the author unambiguously explains: “When onboard computer systems fail to work as intended or other unexpected problems arise during a flight, pilots are forced to take manual control of the plane. Thrust abruptly into a now rare role, they too often make mistakes. The consequences, as the Continental Connection and Air France disasters show, can be catastrophic.”

Perhaps the scariest chapter in the book, at least to me, was “Your Inner Drone,” the final installment in Carr’s cautionary tale about the uncharted waters we are moving deeper into on a daily basis. In this thought-provoking conclusion, Carr presents several hypothetical situations that are particularly frightening simply because they are all within the realm of possibility. Of all the areas being revolutionized by automation, modern warfare is perhaps the most worrisome.

“As currently deployed, missile-carrying drones aren’t all that different from cruise missiles and other weapons,” Carr reflects. “A person still pulls the trigger. The big change will come when a computer starts pulling the trigger. Fully automated, computer-controlled killing machines – what the military calls lethal autonomous robots or LARs – are technologically feasible today, and have been for quite some time. To a computer, a decision to fire a weapon isn’t really any different from a decision to trade a stock or direct an e-mail message into a spam folder. An algorithm is an algorithm.”

If you are a fan of “Person of Interest,” one of today’s highest-rated TV shows, you will immediately recognize the poignancy of the danger Carr is describing. The main plotline of the CBS drama revolves around exactly this kind of scenario. Convinced human beings are no longer capable of making decisions in our collective best interests, a highly-placed computer genius and self-proclaimed savior decides to turn our fate over to “Samaritan,” a mass surveillance computer system. Well, you get the idea.

What Carr is essentially saying in “The Glass Cage” is we should not be so quick to dismiss this kind of storytelling as pure fiction. If you read carefully what the author is saying, it eventually dawns on you that we are presently on such a course, although it is not being orchestrated by any sinister forces. As our dependence on automated technologies continues to grow and expand with each passing innovation, we may be inadvertently creating a world we will ultimately find undesirable and even detrimental to our own existence.

“Even the smartest and most diligent workers can be dumbed down by the digital tools meant to assist them,” Hiawatha Bray notes in a review of “The Glass Cage” he wrote for the Boston Globe. “Carr tells of a British research study of radiologists who used software to scan mammograms for evidence of breast cancer. The doctors were good at spotting obvious tumors, because the software picked them right up. But they were lousy at spotting subtler cases, apparently because they’d come to rely too much on the computer, and not enough on their own eyes and brains.”

Automation has certainly made our lives easier in many respects. But innovation invariably precipitates unintended consequences. If you are as concerned about the future as I am, I believe you would find “The Glass Cage” enlightening. I recommend it highly.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*