



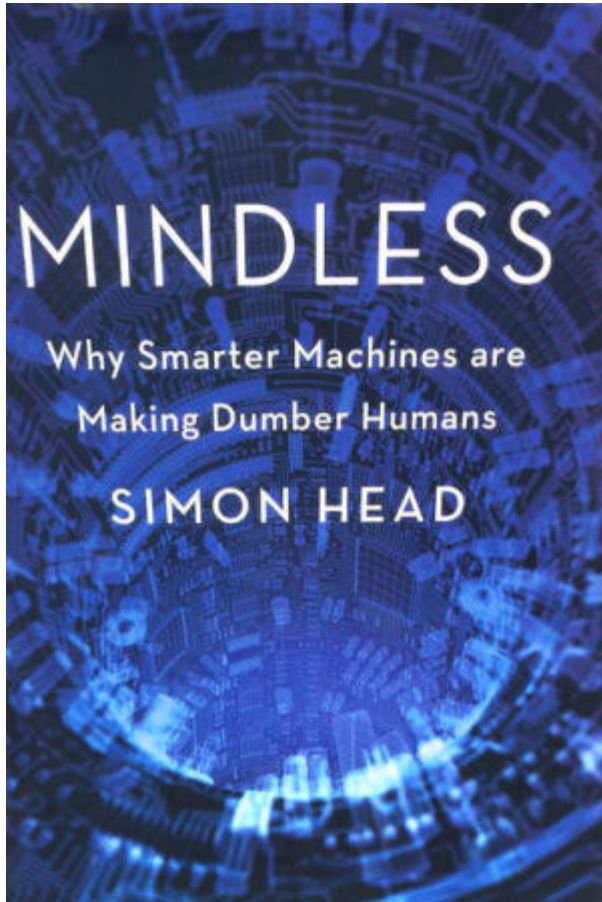
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DAILY NEWS

'Mindless' can be pretty depressing

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"Mindless: Why Smarter Machines Are Making Dumber Humans," by Simon Head. New York, NY: Basic Books. 2014, 230 pages, \$26.99 (hardbound).



"The emerging relationship between technology and work in the U.S. economy of the late 20th and early 21st centuries suggests that the corporate sector is relying on information technology both to simplify and accelerate the processes of business output, and so increase the output of labor, and to deskill labor, diminish its role, and so weaken its earning power," Simon Head asserts near the beginning of his new book, "Mindless: Why Smarter Machines Are Making Dumber Humans."

"The widening gap between the growth of labor's output and its real earnings is the desired outcome of this regime," he continues. "When the output of labor rises and its real earnings stagnate or decline, then, other things being equal, the cost of labor per unit of output will fall and profits will rise."

Unfortunately, this is precisely what many Americans are experiencing, albeit to a greater or lesser extent depending on where they are in the societal hierarchy. As the critic Robert Skidelsky notes in his blog at the Washington Center for Equitable Growth, "Simon Head wants to make humans partners rather than competitors of machines, in a manner that restores the

dignity of work. But he underestimates the scale of the reversal of contemporary business culture needed to retain worthwhile jobs for the majority."

"Mindless" is extensively researched, with 16 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the 10 chapters that form the main text. One of the aspects of the book I found especially interesting was the global perspective Head takes in developing his various arguments. To be sure, he tends to focus predominantly on the United States and the United Kingdom with many of his examples and case studies, but he also provides the reader with illustrations from other countries with a variety of political and cultural orientations such as China, Korea, Japan, Germany and Russia. If you follow closely what Head is saying, however, the consequences for the average worker, regardless of where that worker resides on the planet, become painfully obvious.

At the heart of Head's thesis is the notion that advanced technologies are slowly and systematically removing the requirement that employees actually have to think about what they are doing in order to be productive. Whereas most businesses report they look for applicants with well-developed decision-

making and problem-solving skills when engaged in the hiring process, the reality may be they are creating work environments that limit the degree to which these skills are valued.

Although the scope of Head's book is rather broad, he does seem to spend a disproportionate amount of time dissecting Amazon.com and its role in perpetuating the trends he outlines in chapter after chapter.

“Amazon's system of employee monitoring is the most impressive I have ever come across and combines state-of-the-art surveillance technology with the system of 'functional foreman,' introduced by Taylor in the workshops of the Pennsylvania machine-tool industry in the 1890s,” Head explains in “Walmart and Amazon,” the second chapter. “Amazon tags its employees with personal satellite navigation computers that tell them the route they must travel to shelve consignments of goods, but also sets target times for their warehouse journeys and then measures whether targets are met. All this information is available to management in real time, and if an employee is behind schedule she will receive a text message pointing this out and telling her to reach her targets or suffer the consequences.”

Head is a senior fellow at the Institute for Public Knowledge at New York University as well as a senior member of St. Antony's College at Oxford University. He also serves as director of programs at the New York Review of Books Foundation. A regular contributor to Salon.com, this is his second book. His first was “The New Ruthless Economy: Work and Power in the Digital Age,” which was published in 2005.

I found most of “Mindless” to be pretty depressing. Head is not very optimistic about the prospects of the middle class in light of all the changes he describes during the course of his book. Whether you are a blue-collar worker whose job is being replaced by a machine or outsourced to another country, or a white-collar worker whose knowledge and skills are slowly being replaced by increasingly sophisticated monitoring systems, the future seems bleak. I was therefore somewhat encouraged when I got to the final chapter of the book, “Any Way Out?” Here, the author offers a glimmer of hope in a sea of pessimism.

“If a clear majority of Americans are losing out in today's economy, as they are, the political task is to create a dominant coalition from among them that would include low-income minorities and whites of the Wal-Mart and Amazon world, middle managers and middle administrators whose real incomes have been steadily eroding, and even non-elite professionals of the non-concierge economy suffering the same fate,” Head concludes. “With its failure to reward the majority of Americans, the economy's present course is unsustainable, and as this becomes more and more apparent, volatility will spill over to the public debate and open it up.”

Translation: Things will get better, but first they will probably get worse. And although there are reasons to be optimistic – and Head points these out at several points throughout the narrative – we all need to be more aware of what's really happening in the global marketplace. Many Americans seem blissfully oblivious to the ominous changes looming on the horizon – changes that will affect them in ways they probably have not thought much about. It's time to move these challenges to the front burner. A good first step would be to read this book.

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