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With a razor wit, Nicholas Carr cuts through Silicon Valley's unsettlingly cheery vision of the technological future to ask a hard question: Have we been seduced by a lie? Gathering a decade's worth of posts from his blog, Rough Type, as well as his seminal essays, *Utopia Is Creepy* offers an alternative history of the digital age, chronicling its roller-coaster crazes and crashes, its blind triumphs, and its unintended consequences.

Carr's favorite targets are those zealots who believe so fervently in computers and data that they abandon common sense. Cheap digital tools do not make us all the next Fellini or Dylan. Social networks, diverting as they may be, are not vehicles for self-enlightenment. And "likes" and retweets are not going to elevate political discourse. When we expect technologies—designed for profit—to deliver a paradise of prosperity and convenience, we have forgotten ourselves. In response, Carr offers searching assessments of the future of work, the fate of reading, and the rise of artificial intelligence, challenging us to see our world anew.

In famous essays including "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" and "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Privacy," Carr dissects the logic behind Silicon Valley's "liberation mythology," showing how technology has both enriched and imprisoned us—often at the same time. Drawing on artists ranging from Walt Whitman to the Clash, while weaving in the latest findings from science and sociology, *Utopia Is Creepy* compels us to question the technological momentum that has trapped us in its flow. "Resistance is never futile," argues Carr, and this book delivers the proof.

Utopia Is Creepy: And Other Provocations Details

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Benjamin says

Oh look someone printed out the internet and put it into a book! and what is the book about? The internet. So meta, much irony. Seriously this book is great and thought provoking, and with short sections since it's mostly blog posts, great for those of us with short attention spans.

Peter Mcloughlin says

Disturbing dispatches about our wired world. This is a collection of blog posts on the disenchanting aspects of the digital age. It is written from 2005 to 2016 and it reflects Carr's misgivings about the way the information superhighway has developed over the past decade or so.

Michael Doub says

I had read The Shallows by this author several years ago (which was very good), as well as his essay, Is Google Making Us Stupid? The first two thirds of this book were just reprints of some of his blog posts. This was fine, but lacked the depth of the final third of the book, which consisted of reprints of some of his essays and articles. If I could give this book two ratings I'd have given the first part three stars and the second part four. As s person with a somewhat wary view of technology, particularly social media, I appreciated his insights into how we have substituted breadth for depth with our glib online posts and our often shallow tweets. My favorite section was The Snapchat Candidate in which he explored the nature of the 2016 political campaign (prior to its outcome). Favorite line: "What Trump understands is that the best way to dominate the online discussion is not to inform but to provoke." I also enjoyed his exploration of man's relationship to his tools and how today's digital tools continually push us inward - we are "alone online, but we are alone together." I'm not a Luddite and like technology as much as the the next guy, but I do appreciate the author's thoughtful questioning of our unquestioning acceptance that technology.

Jcon4307justin says

I've never read his blog but this is mostly a collection of blog posts.

Felt a little like I was wasting my time at first, reading 10-year-old blog posts, but I stuck with it and most of his stuff was fairly timeless.

He's a consistent perspective: Namely, that maybe this Internet-fueled future we're all welcoming isn't always perfect.

He has a book I haven't read called The Shallows and his most frequent target seems to be excessive screen time and what it does to our brains and our world. Hard to argue with any of it.

And he's not shrill or unnecessarily partisan to his cause. He admits when maybe he might be overreacting, but it's still nice to hear this perspective when the zeitgeist is always that the next tech advance is a welcome boon.

Ietrio says

This is a collection of shallow populist articles. A Facebook page means you are a digital sharecropper for example. Who cares the poor sharecroppers were mostly black and where living in terrible conditions? I doubt Carr is a racist. He is simply an attention whore throwing words the same way a toddler throws tantrums.

Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

To be clear, I would've loved to have read a book of insightful, thought-provoking essays about how everything we assume about the internet is in fact wrong, as Nicholas Carr promises with his new book, *Utopia is Creepy and Other Provocations*; so what a profound shame, then, that what this book actually consists of is a bunch of reprints of three-page blog posts from Carr's website, a whopping 95 of them in less than 350 pages, giving us the same kind of puerile, surface-level-only look at issues that he claims is what's ruining the internet in general these days. That's an entirely avoidable situation in this case, which is what makes this such a particular tragedy; for the Pulitzer-nominated Carr is obviously a smart guy, former executive editor of the *Harvard Business Review* and a regular contributor to places like *The New York Times* and *Wired*, and I suspect he could've delivered a really intelligent book if he had just spent a year actually writing one from scratch, one that slowly and methodically builds up his arguments over the course of tens of thousands of words and a coherent single book-long outline. Instead, though, he's delivered what's essentially a series of 21st-century two-minute Andy Rooney elderly rants with no real point and certainly no solutions being offered -- "Wikipedia sure is full of mistakes, amirightfolks? 'Blog' sure is a funny name, amirightfolks? Second Life sure was overhyped, amirightfolks? AMIRIGHT FOLKS, AMIRIGHT AMIRIGHT??!!" -- thus ironically being exactly guilty himself of what he's complaining about in this book, how the internet has turned all of us into short-attention-span ADD morons who no longer possess the mental skills to follow a rational and extensively plotted argument. A book that would've already been a profoundly disappointing read on its own, it becomes even doubly so by this self-defeating, cloud-yelling aspect of its writing style; and instead of it being merely a book I don't recommend reading, today I am actively suggesting to stay far away from it, if for no other reason so to discourage publishers to continuing to offer up this kind of treacly pablum as proper intellectual fare.

Out of 10: **2.3**

Professor Shredder says

A collection of prior Carr essays. I would assume that many are available online, such as his infamous "Is Google Making Us Dumber" essay. In that sense, nothing here is really new. BUT! The book is still well

worth reading nonetheless as it collects Carr essays from 2005 to 2016, spanning the modern era of Web 2.0 and social (really, antisocial) media. It's like reading snapshots of real-time reactions to the media that promised utopia and later ate democracy. As always, Carr is a great read. This time, you get to see the development of his thinking over a tumultuous decade.

Shannan says

It is hard the give a single star rating to a collection. It starts in a time where MySpace was a thing and moves right up to Trump's adept use of social media.
There is some really poignant writing about how we are changing and plenty of philosophical jumping points whether you agree or disagree. There are some great essays that hit 5 stars but I'm not sure how much I recall. Great starting points for conversations. I think an English teacher could use this in class to provoke students to dissect their world.

C. Hollis Crossman says

Nicholas Carr is easily the most important popular voice in current discussions of digital technology and its effects on ourselves and society. It's not that he's the most technologically advanced or the most philosophical thinker around, it's that he's the most balance—he doesn't view the Internet and its many ancillary byproducts as wholly evil or wholly good. Instead, he sees digital technology as a thing to be carefully considered before giving it (and by necessity its inventors and gatekeepers) our unqualified allegiance and access to our every impulse.

That access is all too often used, as Carr demonstrates time and again, to make a cadre of rich guys even richer, at the expense of our bank accounts and our personal privacy. The utopia that is being built by the masters of Silicon Valley is contingent on the masses proffering their freedom of choice to a chosen few who promise to make life much easier for all involved. In their scenario, however, "easier" means untrammeled by the need for autonomous decision-making or any of the work that makes us truly human and gives us dignity and meaning. The glazed-eyed hordes of smartphone-using digital zombies guys like Ray Kurzweil imagine trooping into the future are indeed creepy, despite (or maybe because) such a scene is so often lauded by today's technophiles.

Most of the short essays in this volume were harvested from Carr's blog "Rough Type" and variously reworked to form a kind of flow of ideas. The longer essays from the back of the book have been previously published in places like the New Yorker and The New Republic, or in earlier books written by Carr. Some of them are quite funny ("Underwearables"), some are profound ("The Love That Lays the Swale in Rows"), some are terrifying ("Max Levchin Has Plans for Us"), and all of them are well-thought-out and impeccably written. Whether you agree with Carr's various theses or not, you'll likely enjoy reading this book.

It is an important one. Carr is one of the few even-keeled consciences of the digital pioneers and the rest of us caught in the seemingly unstoppable rush of digital proliferation. What is the world we are creating and allowing ourselves to live in? he demands. Is it a good world? Is it partly good and partly bad? Do we have any moral obligations to ourselves or future generations? How is the digital landscape changing not only the way we conduct and understand ourselves, but how we actually *are* in our psychological and physical being? Carr asks these questions and many more like them, all very important, and all of them questions we should

contemplate as individuals and as a broader community—locally, nationally, globally, and online.

Peter Geyer says

Last night I saw an advertisement of sorts for one of those machines that talk to you and apparently organise your life. The context was the Australian ABC show Gruen, which discusses, critiques and also satirises marketing and advertising, fronted by the comedian Wil Anderson and with panellists from various relevant companies who are essentially explainers, assessors and critiquers.

The person being organised and apparently liking it was Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, and shown alongside his recent appearance before a committee of the US Congress. His presentation strategy and what he said was systematically dismantled by a number of the panellists.

In a not dissimilar vein, Nicholas Carr writes about the current technological age as a kind of insider critiquer and this book is a collection of observations and comments from blogs or conventional publications, essentially chronologically organised but also in sections from his blog, from tweets and some longer pieces. He's not opposed to technology per se, but critical of the claims and assertions made by its developers and proponents.

The neobehaviourism of this organisations is routinely described (not necessarily using that term), and the nature of algorithms is one of the things examined in this context as eliminators of informality, which is an interesting way to put it. I would have used the terms eliminating spontaneity and encouraging unconsciousness, but then I have a particular bent.

There's an interesting critique of comments about the music business regarding the development of LP records which displays a good deal of knowledge rather than opinion, of personal interest.

It took me a while to read this book, as there were other things were going on, and some pieces were better than others, although Carr is clearly an excellent writer. Less successful were the Twitter section and a couple of the longer pieces, the last of which I failed to finish.

Having said that, this book provides some interesting points and astute observations on the who what and why of the digital age, past present and to come from a person who is a digital user but not blindly so.

Ron says

A collection of essays (blogposts, aphorisms, reviews and occasional essays) by a thoughtful critic of computer technology, robotics, the Internet and related issues. Carr is not willing to take the rosy predictions of what electronic media and other high-tech applications can do for us at face value. Can we increase human potential through genetic engineering and biomedical enhancements? Do we need to, and how do we parcel out such wonderful "improvements"? How is immersion in electronic media changing the way we read, concentrate, think, and connect ideas? Carr poses questions about the appropriate attitude toward and use of our computer filled life that needs to be posed.
Read as a bedtime read; the format of shart initial essays/blogposts was good for that. later, the aphorisms were dense, and the occasional essays and reviews longer, but well done, and worth pondering. Reading it at

night made that pondering less deep and lasting, but I will remember the book, and I hope his name, and look at other stuff. We need to ask more questions about what the fuck we are doing to ourselves.

Terence says

…and regards to Captain Dunsel.

Utopia Is Creepy is a collection of blog posts and essays touching on various aspects (some good but most problematic, at best) of our increasing reliance on technology. Carr isn't a Luddite; he's capable of seeing the benefits that high-tech has brought to the world. ("Technology is as crucial to the work of knowing as it is to the work of production" [p. 299].) His concern – like the actual Luddites – centers around the fear that humans are becoming servants of our tools, tailoring our lives to the needs of the machines.

Reducing everything to quantifiable (and monetizable) bits of data lessens the scope of human imagination and thought, and we are becoming much the poorer for it.

Browsing through the book preparing this review, I easily found cogent opinions about modern society, such as:

> One of the keynotes of technological advance is its tendency, as it refines a tool, to remove real human agency from the tool's workings. In its place, we get an abstraction of human agency that represents the general desires of the masses as deciphered, or imposed, by the manufacturer and the marketer. Indeed, what tends to distinguish the advanced device from the primitive device is the absence of generativity. It's worth remembering that the earliest radios were broadcasting devices as well as listening devices and that the earliest phonographs could be used for recording as well as playback. (p. 77)

But it's in the essay "The Love that Lays the Swale in Rows" where Carr most clearly expresses his misgivings. The title is from Robert Frost's "Mowing," a poem that – on its surface – describes a man scything his way through a field of grass but reflects what our relationship to technology *should* be. What modern technology all too often *is*, is alienating. It deprives us of agency in our drive to create a world of material comfort and instant gratification.

> If the source of our vitality is, as Emerson taught us, "the active soul," then our highest obligation is to resist any force, whether institutional or commercial or technological, that would enfeeble or enervate the soul….
>
> Automation severs ends from means. It makes getting what we want easier, but it distances us from the work of knowing. As we transform ourselves into creatures of the screen, we face an existential question: Does our essence still lie in what we know, or are we now content to be defined by what we want? (p. 313)

As usual, one can turn to Star Trek for an apt scene (or two) that distills the problem – this from the TOS episode "The Ultimate Computer." The M-5 has just completed a war games exercise and Kirk asks Spock for an assessment:

> KIRK: Evaluation of M-5 performance. It'll be necessary for the log.
>
> SPOCK: The ship reacted more rapidly than human control could have maneuvered her. Tactics, deployment of weapons, all indicate an immense sophistication in computer control.
>
> KIRK: Machine over man, Spock? It was impressive. It might even be practical.
>
> SPOCK: Practical, Captain? Perhaps. But not desirable. Computers make excellent and efficient servants, but I have no wish to serve under them. Captain, the starship also runs on loyalty to one man, and nothing can replace it, or him.

And earlier, Kirk expresses his misgivings to Dr. Daystrom:

> There are certain things men must do to remain men. Your computer would take that away.

Amen to that.

I mostly agree with Carr. I too have misgivings at the prospect of the nightmare utopias that the Ray Kurzweil's of the world want to impose on us. My optimistic side hopes that we're just going through the awkward phase of adopting and incorporating new things into our lives. Every revolution has its doomsayers – Plato feared that writing would ruin one's ability to memorize. While it did largely eliminate oral culture, literacy also opened up exciting new intellectual and spiritual vistas. Perhaps a few generations on, our descendants (who may or may not be "human" as we define the term) will celebrate the stunning scientific, intellectual and aesthetic achievements that computerization and its related technologies brought (while bemoaning the stultifying effects of the latest cultural revolution).

David says

Really just a collection of blog posts. The book is uneven but occasionally engaging.

Readers who enjoy blogs will enjoy this but fans of essays may be disappointed.

Rating: 3 out of 5 Stars

Sean says

More a compendium of blogs and articles than a full length book such as Nicholas Carr's The Glass Cage, Utopia is Creepy explores the often pernicious effects of technology on humanity and the individual psyche. The book only receives two stars because it does not envelop the reader in a unified overarching narrative but instead jumps from sub-theme to sub-theme. Overall, though, Carr lays out nicely the difference between a life on the screen vs one off with his trenchant commentary such as the following from page 49 on the means of creativity:

I was flipping through the new issue of the Atlantic today when I came across this nugget from Ray Kurzweil: "The means of creativity have now been democratized. For example, anyone with an inexpensive high-definition video camera and a personal computer can create a high-quality, full-length motion picture." Yep. Just as the invention of the pencil made it possible for anyone to write a high-quality, full-length novel. And just as that saw in my garage makes it possible for me to build a high-quality, full-length chest of drawers.

Or, on facebook's business model from page 107:

The desire for privacy is strong; vanity is stronger.

Ted says

There's an irony here. This collection consists in large part, of blog entries and "aphorisms" from the author's blog, Rough Type, along with reprints of articles and of a section from an earlier book. So, how is it that musings that originally appeared in electronic form work so well in a traditional book?

Obviously, the book is not dead (in fact, I have read that e-book sales have plateaued, while sales of physical books remain strong). There are reasons for that, including the fact that the technological revolution promised us is not everything its proponents make it out to be. Utopia is in fact creepy, and Nicholas Carr reminds us how and why that is so.

It's not that Carr rejects technology. After all, he runs a blog. But he does remind us that we have the ability, and the obligation, to use the technology wisely, so that it remains our tool, and we do not become its servants, or the servants of Apple, Google, Microsoft, or Facebook.

That's not always easy for us to do. After all, as Carr points out, there is a particularly American tendency to see advancing technology as the solution to all of humanity's problems, and as the key to fulfilling our desires. "We may blow kisses to agrarians like Jefferson and tree-huggers like Thoreau, but we put our faith in Edison and Ford, Gates and Zuckerberg. It is the technologists who shall lead us."

But, as we have moved from the 19th and 20th centuries' development of a technology of things, of gears and pistons, of pulleys, crankshafts, and turbines, and into this brave new world of virtual experience, we are losing something. "The screen provides a refuge, a mediated world that is more predictable, more tractable, than the recalcitrant world of things. We flock to the virtual because the real demands too much of us." For over fifteen years, Carr has insisted that we sit up, pay attention, and think about what the geniuses in Silicon Valley are really doing to us—that we pay attention to the real, and not just the tractable world the geniuses temp us with.

Because we have to remember this: Google does not offer a useful search engine out of the goodness of its founders' hearts. Google does what it does so it can track us, measure what we do, make inferences about our desires and interests, and (for a price) share that information with a company that hopes to fill that desire, or take advantage of that interest. This is not a bad thing in itself, but we do well to remember what is going on—some degree of awareness ought to mitigate the manipulation.

"Utopia is Creepy" contains dozens, scores, hundreds of pithy, often hilarious, insights. My favorite post, which I transcribe in full is this, under the title "Facebook's Business Model": "The desire for privacy is strong; vanity is stronger."

There is much, much more in this volume. Read it; then read Matthew Crawford's "The World Beyond Your Head." You'll still use the internet. But you won't think about it in the same way.