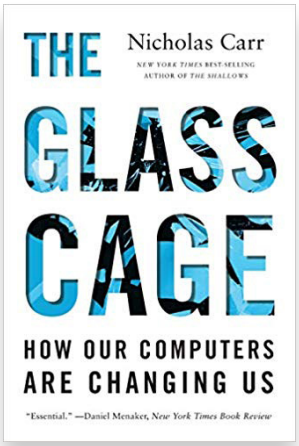

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicholas Carr
Nicholas Carr is a Pulitzer Prize finalist and a New York Times bestselling writer on technology and culture.

The Glass Cage

THE SUMMARY

W.W. Norton & Company 2014

INTRODUCTION: ALERT FOR OPERATORS

This is a book about automation, about the use of computers to do things we used to do ourselves. It's about automation's human consequences. As computers become our constant companions, it seems wise to take a closer a look at exactly how they're changing what we do and who we are.

CHAPTER ONE: PASSENGERS

The trouble with automation is that it often gives us what we don't need at the cost of what we do. The point is not that automation is bad. The point is that we're not very good about thinking rationally about automation or understanding its implications. Automation confronts us with the most important question of all. What does *human being* mean?

CHAPTER TWO: THE ROBOT AT THE GATE

We love our machines not just because they're useful to us, but because we find them companionable and even beautiful. But machines are ugly too, and we sense in them a threat to things we hold dear. Machines are cold and mindless, and in their obedience to scripted routines we see an image of society's darker possibilities.

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Convene

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CHAPTER THREE: ON AUTOPILOT

On a typical passenger flight these days, the pilot has become a computer operator. The experience of pilots also reveals the way the minds and bodies of the people using the systems work. The mounting evidence of an erosion of skills, a dulling of perceptions, and a slowing of reactions should give us all pause. A glass cockpit can also be a glass cage.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE DEGENERATION EFFECT

With a simple pocket calculator, you can automate very complicated mathematical procedures and free up your conscious mind to consider all that math adds up. But if you use the calculator to bypass learning, to carry out procedures you don't understand, it will simply be a black box, a mysterious number-producing mechanism.

INTERLUDE, WITH DANCING MICE

Tests reveal at low levels of stimulation, a person is so unengaged and uninspired that performance flat-lines. As the stimulus increases, performance increases. When stimulation reaches its most intense level, the person essentially becomes paralyzed with stress and performance again flat-lines. Automation also has a sometimes-tragic tendency to increase the complexity of a job at the worst possible moment.

CHAPTER FIVE: WHITE-COLLAR COMPUTER

Automation first relieves the worker of the need for manual effort, and then relieves him of the need for mental effort. The worker's opportunity to develop deeper talents, those involved in interpretation and judgment, dwindles. By changing the nature of intellectual endeavor, automation may erode one of the foundations of culture itself which is our desire to understand.

CHAPTER SIX: WORLD AND SCREEN

GPS encourages us to observe and manipulate symbols on screens rather than attend to real things in real places. What we see as mere drudgery may turn out to be vital to our fitness, happiness, and well-being. So *who cares?* probably isn't the right question. What we should be asking ourselves is, *How far from the world do we want to retreat?*

CHAPTER SEVEN: AUTOMATION FOR THE PEOPLE

If computers are advancing so rapidly, and if people are slow, clumsy, and error prone, why not build immaculately self-contained systems that perform flawlessly without any human oversight or intervention? Why not take the human factor out of the equation altogether? Abstract concerns about the fate of human talent can't compete with the prospect of saving time and money.

The Glass Cage

INTERLUDE, WITH GRAVE ROBBER

Like meddlesome parents who never let their kids do anything on their own, Google, Facebook, and other makers of personal software end up demeaning and diminishing qualities of character that have been seen as essential to a full and vigorous life: ingenuity, curiosity, independence, perseverance, daring. It may be that in the future we'll only experience such virtues vicariously through the exploits of action figures in video games.

CHAPTER EIGHT: YOUR INNER DRONE

Isaac Asimov's first law of robot ethics "a robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm" sounds reasonable and reassuring, but it assumes a world far simpler than our own. When an inscrutable technology becomes an invisible technology, we no longer know whether the software is aiding us or controlling us. We're behind the wheel, but we can't be sure who's driving.

CHAPTER NINE: THE LOVE THAT LAYS THE SWALE IN ROWS

Technology, by enabling us to act in ways that go beyond our bodily limits, also alters our perception of the world and what the world signifies to us. To resist invention is not to reject invention. When we enter the glass cage, we're required to shed much of our body. That doesn't free us; it emaciates us. Our highest obligation is to resist any force, whether institutional or commercial or technological, that would enfeeble or enervate the soul. Resistance is never futile.