

ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER IS THE NEW PANDEMIC

I would straightaway, without any subtlety, drop the bombshell: We suffer from Attention Deficit because we have spent and are spending too much time on the Net. Though for a long time there have been other distractions to our reading habit like the electronic media with its fare of movies, music, news, soap operas, entertainment, and advertisements that took a toll on our capacity for concentration and focus, none of them is as powerful as the Net that combines all their distracting powers and in addition, offers much more in the form of social media to scatter our ability to concentrate. The continuous bombardment of our brains with sense stimuli in short bursts of sounds, videos, and texts for the larger part of the day – has led to the fragmentation of our attention. The printed text of a book in comparison is hardly as exciting or stimulating – if not downright boring! To cite a common experience – waiting in an airport lounge nowadays, one hardly finds anyone reading a book; everyone is hooked to their smartphones. Whereas previously, books were a common sight. No wonder the bookstores are all closing down and the libraries are empty. The AH Wheeler book stalls in the railway stations which were a common sight earlier have been reduced to a trickle. Though it can be argued that books are available online, it cannot be denied that reading books as such is going out of fashion. And there's a reason for this.

THE INTERNET SCATTERS OUR ATTENTION

The more we spend time on the Net, the more we get used to taking in information in short bursts, in flashes or in the form of videos of short duration. None of them requires much concentration or focus. In fact, it is not in the interests of commercial establishments like Google that we stay focused on the same screen for a long time. Nicolas Carr writes in his book *The Shallows*: "Google's profits are tied directly to the velocity of people's information intake. The faster we surf the Web – the more links we click and pages we view – the more opportunities Google gains to collect information about us and to feed us advertisements. Its advertising system is specially designed to figure out which messages are more likely to grab our attention and then place those messages in

our field of view. Every click we make on the Web marks a break in our concentration – and it's in Google's economic interest to make sure we click as often as possible. The last thing Google wants is to encourage leisurely reading or slow concentrated thought. Google, is quite literally, in the business of distraction".

An extract from AN ODYSSEY OF THE MIND, Winner of the Best Book Award in Non-Fiction at the Pioneer Literary Awards Festival, 2024