

Book review

Superbloom: How Technologies of Connection Tear Us Apart

by *Nicholas Carr*

W.W. Norton and Company

New York, NY

2025

260p.

ISBN: 1324064617

Review DOI [10.1108/JEET-12-2025-062](https://doi.org/10.1108/JEET-12-2025-062)

Nicholas Carr is a New York Times bestselling author and a former executive editor of the Harvard Business Review. He has authored articles for the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times and the Atlantic. His latest book, *Superbloom*, is a 260-page publication of W.W. Norton and Company, retailing for \$29.99.

The book draws its title from a notorious event in 2019 when a field of poppies in Southern California bloomed in such numbers that they covered Walker Canyon in a blanket of brilliant orange color. The extraordinary site began to draw social media influencers looking for an eye catching backdrop for their posts to increase their digital reach. The superbloom became #superbloom as hordes of fans and followers were drawn to the poppy fields, causing the predictable deterioration in both the flowers and the beauty of the site. Criticism began to spread in the place of excitement and the once proud influencers had to condemn themselves and apologize for their actions. Carr adopts the poppies incident as a metaphor for the entire age of digital communication, a technology that began with tremendous promise and enthusiasm for bringing humanity to a new age of community but ultimately and insidiously contributing to the polarization and isolation of people.

After the opening tale of the poppies presages the arc of the book, Carr launches into a detailed history of digital communication technology. In *Part One: Collapse*, he reaches back to Charles Horton Cooley, an early 20th century sociologist, to establish the premise that communication media shape the structure and function of a society. He demonstrates Cooley's proposition across centuries of communication development beginning as far back as the creation of writing. Carr argues that developments in communication have a destabilizing effect on society. The more powerful tools one has available for communication, the more society will grow in dynamism, the faster it will change, ultimately devolving into tribalism. Carr sets this pattern of communication technology producing social devolution against a modern assumption that better communication tools will produce more communication, which will result in greater understanding and social harmony. He uses Mark Zuckerberg as the mouthpiece for this modern assumption but also traces its origins to the pre-digital age.

Alongside the technological developments in communication, Carr traces the legal and regulatory regimes that governed those technologies. The Federal Communications Commission regulated broadcast media and imposed standards on what could be disseminated to a general audience. Private communications, whether by letter, telegraph or telephone, were protected unless they imposed serious and imminent danger to the



community. The advent of the internet and social media platforms like Facebook, however, blurred the distinction between private and public communication. The platform's technology substituted algorithms for regulatory controls at the same time as it expanded many individuals' scope of communication from those they knew to the entire online world.

In *Part Two: The Tragedy of Communication*, Carr turns his attention to the social evolution caused by the advent of social media. Beginning with the young, users developed speedier genres of communication like text speak and emojis and relegated once popular communication tools like email to more formal settings. He sadly notes the impact these developments have on younger users' development, both in communication skills and in their ability to process ideas more generally.

Also in *Part Two*, Carr traces the psychological theory of how more communication with someone typically results in liking them less. Relying on a selection of studies, he outlines the process through which to know a person is to not love them. Once our communication with someone reveals an unattractive attribute about them, we become predisposed to grow increasingly hostile toward that person, resulting in what Carr refers to as a "cascade" of divergence. Technologies that allow us to communicate with more people more quickly allow that cascade to accelerate in both time and degree. He also notes that the "democratization" narrative, which holds that anyone can now have a mass audience through social media, is flawed. Algorithms do not promote the most thoughtful, liberating or life-giving material available on the internet. They promote communication that solicits the most reactions, and since negative reactions are often the most powerful, the algorithms tend to preference communication that produces a negative response. The result tends to be an adverse selection of negative voices filling the social media space that may contribute to the disintegrative cascade.

In the book's final section, *Part Three: Everything is Mediated*, Carr recounts some of the societal impact the new communication technologies have produced. Gen Z became more physically isolated even as they became more digitally connected. Social media has been tied to increases in depression and anxiety in young people, particularly young girls. The power of communication technologies is highlighted by the fact that this psychological impact was felt across all cultures that shared the technology. The advent of AI, chatbots, robots and wearable technologies pose new horizons of potential harms and benefits both for users and for society as a whole.

The book concludes with well-documented endnotes, organized by chapter, and an index of terms that will be helpful to those using the text for research purposes.

At its core, Carr's argument is that developments in communication tools produce more communication but that this increase in communication does not produce more understanding. Rather, it produces increased polarization of social and political views and the concomitant breakdown into social and political tribes. It is possible that Carr is half right. Social media and other advanced communication modes may have led to increased understanding; they just did not lead to increased agreement or appreciation. It is hard to argue that we would be better off not knowing the truth about ourselves or each other but is the communication technology at fault for our increased mutual awareness producing discomfort? It may be that improvements in communication technology do allow us all to understand others better, but by doing so we come to better understand each other's base natures. Social media may allow us to see one another more clearly than ever before and that vision of who we really are frightens us. It causes us to retreat into like-minded groups for self-protection and affirmation.

In a utilitarian analysis of digital technologies, to the extent that our communication tools have produced psychological damage, and Carr provides adequate evidence that they have, that damage must be measured against the utility those same tools have provided. The fact

that people continue to engage in social media and other digital communications, with the evidence available as to their harm, implies that, on balance, they consider them beneficial and valuable. The market has voted for social media platforms. Indeed, investors have rewarded those providers with some of the highest market valuations in history. Alphabet's market capitalization recently passed the \$3tn mark (Shibu, 2025). Despite concerns about its investment in AI and virtual reality technologies, Meta Platform's market cap has grown to over \$1.75tn (Deffenbaugh, 2025).

A Hobbesian analysis would not necessarily be satisfied that people find social media to have produced more harm than good. Is it possible that the benefits of digital communication could be captured while mitigating some of its burdens? This would likely require a regulatory regime and Carr has demonstrated the less-than-effective history of communications regulation, particularly in the US. One reason why the US Congress may be reluctant to take a harder line on digital communications providers is that they are aware of the geographic mobility of those companies and their products. The fact that TikTok, a Chinese-owned firm, became one of the busiest social media platforms in the US implies that Meta, Alphabet, or any other digital media company could relocate to a more politically receptive climate if the regulatory regime becomes too onerous.

There is a theistic critique of Carr's argument, that this knowledge we have gained about the true levels of depravity in our species serves to separate us from one another. Rather than attacking the problem of social polarization through regulating digital communication technology, one might attack the problem by dealing with the true culprit, our own sordid natures. Being confronted by one another's angry thoughts or vicious rhetoric may be an invitation for us to respond with the compassion, the patience and the empathy we associate with the divine. Rather than social media inevitably driving us into tribalism and polarization, it could call us to a deeper, wiser level of understanding and interaction with one another, a level of interaction where we return good for the evil we receive. Throughout the same history that Carr recounts of communication development, people could always be judged by how they engaged those who were vulnerable, particularly those who thought, or understood the world, differently than themselves. The humanistic vision of Cooley or Zuckerberg may not be in our future, but a world in which the Godly-wise lead us out of a dystopian spiral of social disintegration into a future where we can both know each other better and love each other more is not impossible.

Mankind has often found itself technologically extended beyond its moral maturity. Modern communication tools certainly have the ability to make us all into more powerful monsters, but they need not. In our families, we learn to appreciate those whom we know most intimately, warts and all. That capacity for learning and compassionate appreciation is certainly available outside our families as well. Social media and other digital communication tools can be used to harness our better selves for the good of everyone, if we first allow those better selves to be called out.

Carr's book is a timely lesson in that same curriculum of a creative humankind struggling to be both human and kind in the face of creative technologies. It is a well-researched retrospective on the events that brought us to our present situation. It may provide either a prediction of a continued dystopian spiral or a corrective opportunity that leads to a richer, more cohesive community. It is a valuable read for those invested in the social media sphere, for academics preparing the next generation of media users and creators, and for anyone who wants to better understand the times in which we live.

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