

6 The Citizen is the Product

I keep a list of things that have no name but need one. Like the feeling you get when you stare at a word so long that it looks like it's spelled wrong. Or that social glitch that happens when you're about to pass someone on the sidewalk, but neither of you can tell which side the other wants to walk on, so when the moment comes you both do that jerky little stutter-step thing that somehow, miraculously, always manages to resolve itself. Or when you're sitting in a chair and someone walks behind you, and you scoot forward to give them room to pass even when you don't need to, just to acknowledge their existence and the fact that they're passing. Or when you're in a taxi and your driver maneuvers in some way that cuts off another driver or pedestrian, and your impulse is to apologize to them because it's your taxi and you benefitted from his transgression, but on the other hand it wasn't *your* fault, so as you pass the aggrieved party you make some token gesture out the window, like a little pinched-lip half-smile, as though to half-assedly signal "Sorry!"

"The limits of my language," wrote the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, "mean the limits of my world."¹ We expand our awareness, both of ourselves and of our world, when we expand our language. We see things we didn't know to see before, and we learn how to talk about them with others.² What *did* we call "clickbait" before that word came into being? Or "binge-watching," or "humblebrag," or "FOMO"?

Diogenes also needed to coin new terms to describe the way he wanted to relate to the world. When people asked him where he was from, he replied that he was "a citizen of the world" – a *kosmopolitês*, or "cosmopolitan."³ No one had ever said this before, so no one knew what it meant. The term certainly didn't have the connotation it has

today: Diogenes was no moneyed jet-setter. In fact, at one point in his life Diogenes was put on sale as a slave. It's said that when the slave-master brought him before a group of potential buyers, he directed Diogenes to tell them what he could do. Diogenes retorted, "Govern men." One potential buyer was so impressed by this reply that he immediately purchased Diogenes and put him in charge of educating his children. The "citizen of the world," it seemed, had become the product.

We need new words to describe how we want to relate to our new empires of the mind. A vast project of industrialized persuasion has emerged under our feet. It competes to capture and exploit our attention, and we want to account for the ways this threatens the success of our personal and political lives. What we need, then, is a richer and more capacious way of talking about attention. As Tony Judt writes in *Ill Fares the Land*, "you must be able to name a problem if you wish to solve it."⁴

However, in our societal and political discussions we lack such a language. As a result, we've failed to account for the wider set of technological "distractions" that threaten us most. We still grapple with attention using conceptual tools developed in environments of information scarcity. We don't have a way of thinking about attention as a *thing*. The limits of our language are the limits of our attentional world.

What *is* attention? "Everyone knows what attention is," wrote William James in his 1899 text *The Principles of Psychology*. In reality, no one *really* knows what attention is. (And I'm not just taking the contrary position because my name happens to be the inverse of his.) The term "attention" is used in many different ways across a wide range of domains.⁵ In fact, even within the narrowly specialized psychology and neuroscience literatures, researchers can't seem to agree.⁶

Generally speaking, though, when we use the term "attention" in day-to-day parlance, we typically mean what cognitive

scientists call the “spotlight” of attention, or the direction of our moment-to-moment awareness within the immediate task domain.⁷ The “spotlight” of attention is the sort of attention that helps us do what we want to do. It includes the way I’m selecting certain pieces of information from my sensory stream as I write this: I’m looking at a certain section of my computer screen; I’m typing a particular key on my keyboard. (In fact, just as I was writing the previous sentence, a helicopter went *whopwhopwhop* past my window and disappeared behind a tree, momentarily distracting the spotlight of my attention.)

Yet this is exactly the surface-level sort of “distraction” at which our day-to-day language about attention already operates. Expanding our language means diving down to deeper levels of attention. How can we access those deeper levels with a view to clarifying the distinct challenges of the attention economy?

Perhaps pivoting our question may help. Rather than asking “What is attention?”, I wonder whether a better question would be, “What do we pay when we ‘pay’ attention?” In this light, new spaces of possibility open up that allow us to venture well beyond the domain of the “spotlight” of attention.

What *do* you pay when you pay attention? You pay with all the things you could have attended to, but didn’t: all the goals you didn’t pursue, all the actions you didn’t take, and all the possible yous you could have been, had you attended to those other things. Attention is paid in possible futures forgone. You pay for that extra *Game of Thrones* episode with the heart-to-heart talk you could have had with your anxious child. You pay for that extra hour on social media with the sleep you didn’t get and the fresh feeling you didn’t have the next morning. You pay for giving in to that outrage-inducing piece of clickbait about that politician you hate with the patience and empathy it took from you, and the anger you have at yourself for allowing yourself to take the bait in the first place.

We pay attention with the lives we might have lived. When we consider the opportunity costs in this wider view, the question of

attention extends far beyond the next turn in your life's GPS: it encompasses *all* the turns and their relations, the nature of your destination, the specific *way* you want to get there, *why* you're going there, and also your ability to ask any of these questions in the first place. In this view, the question of attention becomes the question of having the freedom to navigate your life in the way you want, across all scales of the human experience.

The great thinkers on the question of freedom can be of use here, in particular the nineteenth-century British philosopher John Stuart Mill. In his seminal text *On Liberty*, Mill writes that the "appropriate region of human liberty . . . comprises, first, the inward domain of consciousness . . . liberty of thought and feeling; absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects, practical or speculative." "This principle," he writes, "requires liberty of tastes and pursuits; of framing the plan of our life to suit our own character."⁸ Here, Mill seems to me to be articulating something *like* a freedom of attention. Crucially, he points out that freedom of the mind is the *first* freedom, upon which freedom of expression depends. The freedom of speech is meaningless without the freedom of attention, which is both its complement and its prerequisite.

But Mill also gives us a clue here about how we might think more broadly about attention – how we might take into account the full range of potential harms to which our "almost infinite appetite for distractions" might fall prey. So attention isn't just about what you're doing right now. It's about the way you navigate your whole life: it's about who you are, who you want to be, and the way you define and pursue those things.

This suggests that we need to move beyond a narrowly psychologized notion of attention. Georg Franck writes, "Attention is far more than just the ready supply of information processing capacity. Attention is the essence of being conscious in the sense of both self-certain existence and alert presence of mind. Attention is the medium in which everything must be represented that is to become real for us as experiencing creatures."⁹ This is an intriguing

direction in which to take the concept of attention. However, for our present purposes it seems overly broad.

Perhaps William James's description of "effort of attention" as "the essential phenomenon of will" points the way to a narrower and more useful middle ground. If we expand our notion of "attention" in the direction of conceptions of the human will, this may allow us to take a view that's wide enough to include more than just the immediate "spotlight," but not so ultra-wide that it encompasses totalizing concepts such as "consciousness," "being," "life itself," and so on. I'm not arguing here that we should think of attention as *coextensive* with the human will, but rather as a construct that we can usefully expand in that general direction. For our present purposes, we might think of this widened view of "attention" as the full stack of navigational capacities across all levels of human life.

The will is, of course, also the source of the authority of democracy. In this light, the political and moral implications of the digital attention economy start to move into the foreground. Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, "The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government." If the digital attention economy were compromising the human will, it would therefore be striking at the very foundations of democracy. This would directly threaten not only individual freedom and autonomy, but also our collective ability to pursue any politics worth having.

Of course, the "luminous conception" of the general will Rousseau writes about is not merely the aggregation of individual wills: it's the joined will of individuals where they are all "concerned with the common interest." That is to say, an individual can have a personal will that is contrary or dissimilar to the general will that he has as a citizen. So the political implications of undermining attention, in this broader sense, are not fully accounted for by considering merely the frustrated navigation of an individual's life, or even the frustrated navigation of many individuals' lives. We must also account for the unique frustrations of the citizen, and possibly even

the very idea of citizenship itself. Rousseau writes that if society were understood as a “body,” then “there would be a kind of common sensorium which would ensure that all parts are coordinated.” Following this metaphor, undermining the very construct of citizenship would be akin to short-circuiting the nervous system that coordinates the body politic. Indeed, there are many types of group decision-making biases and fallacies that psychology research has identified which routinely lead to collective action that does not reflect the collective will (and sometimes, as in the “Abilene Paradox,” even reflects its opposite).¹⁰

Can we expand the language of attention and use it to talk across questions of both individual and general will in order to clarify the threats the intelligent, industrialized persuasion of the attention economy poses to life and politics?

If we accept this broader view of attention as something akin to the operation of the human will, and we pair it with an understanding of the centrality of the human will for politics, then it’s hard to avoid viewing the attention economy as a project that ultimately targets and shapes the foundations of our politics. It is not merely the user, but indeed the citizen, who is the product.

To develop this wider notion of “attention” in the direction of the will, both individual and collective, let’s assume (at least for now) two more types of attention – two more “lights” – in addition to the “spotlight” of immediate awareness. These “lights” broadly align with the way the philosopher Harry Frankfurt views the structure of the human will.

It’s important to note here that I’m not making any sort of scientific claim or argument with these distinctions. My interest is primarily exploratory: think of this as one possible heuristic that may be useful for piercing through this problem space. Gordon Pask once called cybernetics “the art and science of manipulating defensible metaphors.”¹¹ This is a fitting description for our task here as well.

The “Spotlight” Our immediate capacities for navigating awareness and action toward tasks. Enables us to do what we want to do.

The “Starlight” Our broader capacities for navigating life “by the stars” of our higher goals and values. Enables us to be who we want to be.

The “Daylight” Our fundamental capacities – such as reflection, metacognition, reason, and intelligence – that enable us to define our goals and values to begin with. Enables us to “want what we want to want.”

These three “lights” of attention pertain to *doing*, *being*, and *knowing*, respectively. When each of these “lights” gets obscured, a distinct – though not mutually exclusive – type of “distraction” results.

NOTES

- 1 Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1921). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden. New York: Dover, 1999.
- 2 Kay, Paul and Kempton, Willett (1984). What is the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis? *American Anthropological Society*, March.
- 3 Diogenes Laertius vi. 63; Arrian VII.2.
- 4 Judt, Tony (2011). *Ill Fares the Land: A Treatise on our Present Discontents*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- 5 Rogers, Kenneth (2014). *The Attention Complex*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 6 Nobre, Anna C. and Kastner, Sabine (eds.) (2014). *The Oxford Handbook of Attention*. Oxford University Press.
- 7 Lavie, Nilli (2005). Distracted and Confused?: Selective Attention Under Load. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 9 (2), 75–82.
- 8 Mill, John Stuart (1859). *On Liberty*. London: Longman, Roberts & Green.
- 9 Franck, Georg (1999). The Economy of Attention. *Merkur*, 534/535.
- 10 Harvey, Jerry B. (1988). *The Abilene Paradox and Other Meditations on Management*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- 11 Pask, Gordon (1975). *The Cybernetics of Human Learning and Performance*. London: Hutchinson