



Attention is a resource or a human trait?

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An economy deals with how to allocate its resources efficiently in the service of specific objectives (maximizing the profits). But how does attention fit in this definition? Will it be a resource that will be exploited or an objective that will be maximized?

The attention economy is an approach for the management of information that treats human attention as a scarce commodity and applies economic theory to solve various information management problems. But, "Is our attention limited and can it be used as a function to run algorithms to persuade us to do something that we wouldn't do otherwise?" Facebook, twitter, youtube, Netflix are no alien terms. They are the saviors of the modern dreadful lifestyle. The subscriptions, followed pages, watch history provide recommendations on the basis of our choices. We feel the master of utopia. But are we really the masters or are the recommendations the bait pulling us to the inevitable web of absent-mindedness? The recommendation algorithms running behind the sky-scraping revenue-generating tech-giants work on persuasive technology. They are embedding the social utilities in our lifestyles and tricking us to believe that it is fine to risk our time and mental health.

John Cassian said, "Our mind wanders around like it were drunk." It is hard to tame the human mind. It jumps from one situation to another taking everything as it comes. Is our mind an explorer or a wanderer? Does it know what it seeks or strolls frivolously? Holding a smartphone in hand, wearing a smartwatch and carrying a laptop in the bag, we dawdle from one place to another. We think owning these devices makes us more independent and connected, but completely disregard how paralyzed we are, giving the remote control of our attention to our nemesis. The persuasive technology seems to be more focussed on manipulation. Author Jonathon Fields says that the difference between persuasion and manipulation comes down to three things:

- The intent behind your desire to persuade that person
- The truthfulness and transparency of the process, and
- The net benefit or impact on that person

The motive of the tech firms is not unknown to the people. Even we ourselves see videos on social media platforms on how these companies are using our mind trait i.e. attention to monopolize our time to generate high revenues for themselves. The more are the number of hours spent on social networking sites, higher are the profits earned by them, making them more worthy and aids them to survive for the long-haul. Cristos Goodrow, VP of engineering at YouTube, said, "A few years back, we made a big decision at YouTube. While everyone seemed focused on how many views a video got, we thought the amount of time someone spent watching a video was a better way to understand whether a viewer really enjoyed it. It wasn't an easy call, but we thought it would help us make YouTube a more engaging place for creators and fans."



Youtube changed its manifesto, from targeting the viewership of content creator to the views by the user. The recommendation algorithms are specifically designed to cater to the choice of content of every user by providing related links. Our minds are vulnerable and with every consensual decision to watch a video or post, there is a forced ad break or a recommendation to latch onto.

The law regulates the actions of the people in the country. The constitution shelters the rules to abide by. While the protocols set the rules for the privacy of users to prevent exploitation. But do the protocols mention the extent of psychological effects? Are the processes transparent? While increasing the volume of headphone a warning is issued by phone to not listen at high volume due to the risk of damage to ears. Then, why don't we get any warning on video streaming apps and social media sites during excessive usage? According to Common Sense Media, kids have 10 times the amount of screen time they did in 2011 and spend an average of six hours and 40 minutes using technology. Is '6 hours 40 minutes per day', a safe limit of usage?

Have we become so addicted to the gadgets, that in the present Information Age, we have started abusing technology? We are chained to them such that we have transcended the line from attentiveness to a nebulous manner of state. Even with the rising awareness of the adversities of social media, many apps are now providing tools to monitor the time spent on their site. But, do we track our time?

So, what is the net impact of the media platforms on us? How does it affect us and the ones around us? We jeopardize our time, which could be used in something productive. The time spent on gizmos, more than 3/4th of it is wasted in feeding our distractions due to poor self-denial. Our social skills and physical activities are deteriorating. It is mentally draining us, out-turning to impoverished attention.

We are more trapped when our minds are easily manipulated and free to jump from one decoy to another, while a disciplined mind's attention is freer and more independent being incarcerated in the walls of self-control and principles. With the commendable marketing skills of the mammoth technological establishments, is it right to say that we are naive?

Mathew Crawford said, "Attention is a resource and a person has only so much of it." But aren't resources renewable or non-renewable? How can we state if our attention is limited and rule out the possibility of it being a renewable resource? Is attention the mere form of being present and attending or is it about being receptive? A depressed person has a very poor attention span due to the shrinkage of grey matter. It affects their ability to multitask like having a conversation while doing work. With proper medication and therapy, depression is curable. It takes time to heal but the symptoms die out. The attention span also improves. There are new zeal and motivation.

Our psychology and attention span can be changed for better or for worse. Then, does it not make attention a renewable resource after all?