

THE QUALIA OF ATTENTION!

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THE GOLDFISH MYTH

**ATTENTION IS LIKE WATER. IT FLOWS. IT'S LIQUID.
YOU CREATE CHANNELS TO DIVERT IT,
AND YOU HOPE THAT IT FLOWS THE RIGHT WAY."**

APOLLO ROBBINS, PICKPOCKET MAGICIAN

It is a truth, universally acknowledged in the media and advertising industry, that humans now have shorter attention spans than goldfish. This is unfortunate, and somewhat ironic, since it is fake news.

In 2015, an insight team at Microsoft Canada released a report called "Attention Spans," which included this shocking statistic. It made headlines all over the world, from The Guardian to The New York Times. It continues to worm its way into innumerable agency and media company presentations. It's a striking image, appending something that feels true to something we think we know, bolstered by association to a reputable source. It is a case study in how fake news spreads because it is false in every conceivable way.

The Microsoft report was based on studying brain activity but the headline was not derived from that research. It is sourced to a company called Statistic Brain, which appears, upon visiting the site, to be a research company. A chart with the fishy fact appears there. A reverse image search leads to the source of the claim, a software manual called Building Information Modeling and Construction Management. Here the chart is sourced to the National Center for Biotechnology Information and US Library of Medicine but when asked, both denied any knowledge of research that supports it.

The 'goldfish fact' was entirely fabricated.

The comparison doesn't even make sense. First of all, you think you know that a goldfish has a short attention span, but think carefully – don't you mean you think goldfish have an eight-second memory? The factoid adapts that piece of folk knowledge to suit its persuasive purpose. Further, it turns out that goldfish do not even have short memories! Quite the contrary, they are "a model system for studying the process of memory formation, exactly because they have a memory" according to Professor Felicity Huntingford at the University of Glasgow.

Motivated reasoning means we want to believe certain things more than others. "That's why I can't concentrate!" we thought. "It's not that we are distracted by the innumerable options of modern media, it's that our attention spans have been eroded."

What do we think we are even saying? Scientists don't recognise the idea of a normative 'attention span'. How much attention we apply to something depends on what we are trying to achieve.

It's a psychological faculty evolved over millions of years, but it's changed dramatically in ten?

If it were getting shorter, why are films getting longer? How do surgeons or video gamers manage?

Our susceptibility to believe this nonsense indicates how dim our understanding of attention truly is. The lie feels true, which increasingly has currency, because we are suddenly faced with abundance, where very recently there was scarcity. We live surrounded by innumerable channels all clamoring for attention to flow to them.

CHAPTER 2

PEAK ATTENTION

‘THE ECONOMY OF ATTENTION - NOT INFORMATION - IS THE NATURAL ECONOMY OF CYBERSPACE. ATTENTION HAS ITS OWN BEHAVIOR, ITS OWN DYNAMICS, ITS OWN CONSEQUENCES AN ECONOMY BUILT ON IT WILL BE DIFFERENT THAN THE FAMILIAR MATERIAL-BASED ONE.’

WIRED, 1999

We live in a world with many more options and we find it harder to maintain focus because they are always alternatives at the touch of a button tempting us towards novelty or confirmations. There were, of course, always alternatives available, but having them in our hand at all times is something new.

Every tiny bit of our attention takes something from us, and we have a limited amount of time and cognitive resources each day.

We consent to trade our attention for subsidized content – that’s the value proposition for advertising for the consumer - except with billboards. That’s why David Ogilvy hated them, because there is no consent and no immediate value transferred to the individual.

Howard Gossage, the advertising sage of San Francisco, had a similar point of view:

“What is the difference” he wrote, “between seeing an ad on a billboard and seeing an ad in a magazine? The answer, in a word, is permission – or, in three words, freedom of choice.”

It wasn’t until Jean Claude Decaux created a better value exchange by using some of the money from billboards to pay for street furniture and other civic amenities that governments and culture embraced them more comfortably and thus he became the biggest outdoor media company in the world.

Media companies have always aggregated and sold attention but this was limited by the amount of time spent consuming media, and by interest, and by language. The emergence of ad networks and social platforms created a new kind of attention mining company that could operate globally without producing content—simply by being an aggregator or indexer - which brought with it tremendous profits. Thus the battle for attention intensified, as other companies began to understand the commercial value of attention at global scale.

Media consumption has been growing for years, as new channels and technologies crept into previously unoccupied attention niches. We can now Tweet from the toilet, Snap from the sofa, and email from, well, everywhere. In the face of plenty, we gorge ourselves, on food or information, because we evolved when it was relatively scarce and existentially valuable. Variety also matters because “the more options we have, the more us hungry, hungry hominids will eat in general”.

‘WE ARE MOVING FROM A WORLD WHERE COMPUTING POWER WAS SCARCE TO A PLACE WHERE IT NOW IS ALMOST LIMITLESS, AND WHERE THE TRUE SCARCE COMMODITY IS INCREASINGLY HUMAN ATTENTION’

SATYA NADELLA

But attention is a function of an awake consciousness — and there are only so many hours in the day. This is why growth in total time spent consuming media has plateaued. According to eMarketer, “by 2018, growth in total time spent is expected to be a negligible 0.1%”. We can consider that a proxy for “peak attention”, a zero sum game in which attention is always being acquired from something else that has it. Thus the arms race escalates, chasing our attention with every new trick.

An ever growing number of advertisements have been shoved into this aggregated pool of attention. The last time a total figure was estimated Comscore claimed that 5.2 trillion digital impressions were served in the USA alone in 2012. Trillions [that’s US so it means thousands of billions] of ads being served to 300 million people. Well, sort of.

Despite only being measurable by unreliable proxies, human attention has become the world’s biggest commodity, funding the corporate behemoths of our time.

Since impressions only measure potential - an 'opportunity to see' - more robust measures for attention have been developed, such as “attention minutes” or time spent, in counterpoint to IAB guidelines that insist one second of exposure should count. But even this only measures an aspect of attention - duration. “Time spent is a useful, but blunt, measure,” according to Tim Elkington, chief strategy officer at the IAB. “Attention looks beyond that.”

CHAPTER 3

THE QUALITY OF ATTENTION

“LOVE IS THE QUALITY OF ATTENTION WE PAY TO THINGS.”

J.D. MCCLATCHY

Attention is a challenging idea to explore because, as the focused end of human consciousness, it can only be experienced subjectively and is, beyond that, philosophically impossible to prove exists in other people.

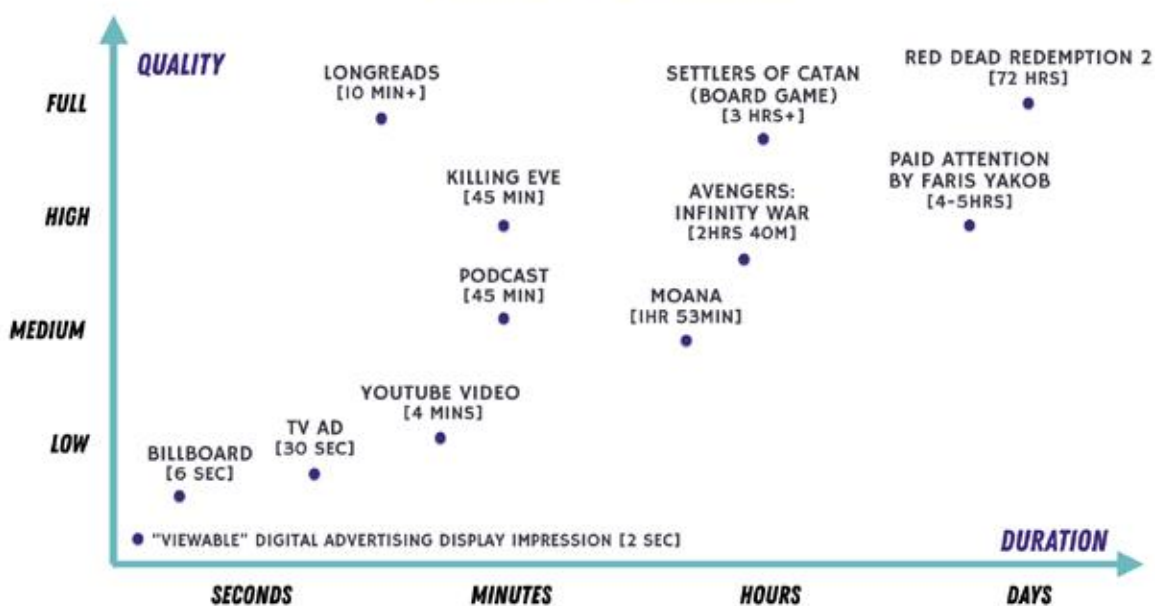
That makes measuring it hard, which is why we end up with proxies, with impressions measuring potential and duration measuring time spent. The corollary of its subjective nature is that each of us can — and should — explore our own attention in order to learn more about it.

The qualia of your attention - the internal and subjective component of the experience - is uniquely, exclusively yours. Learning more about it allows us to regain some of the control of our media diet.

Of course, this also brings the nature of measuring something so unusually abstract, so essentially qualitative, into question — because attention is not binary, it is not simply on or off, and it comes in various flavors and levels of intensity.

Intensity is usually understood as a measure of the quality of attention, the amount of cognitive processing being deployed, the amount of focus. Some media experiences require higher levels of attention by their nature: video games need your focused attention in order for your avatar to survive. Some garner higher levels based on context, like watching films in the darkened room of a cinema with commercial and social reminders to turn off your phone. Reading is more participatory than passively consuming video and thus requires more attention, and so on.

AXES OF ATTENTION



GENIUSSTEALS.CO

THE FUNCTION OF ATTENTION

‘HOW MUCH ATTENTION WE APPLY TO A TASK WILL VARY DEPENDING ON WHAT THE TASK DEMAND IS’

DR. GEMMA BRIGGS

Why do we pay attention to some things and not others? Regardless of how exactly it works – it evolved to keep us alive, like every human faculty.

Attention can be applied consciously to achieve tasks at hand, which means it is a tool of the intentions. But it can also be snatched away without volition, when we hear an alarm or a bear. This is called a “phasic alert” and keeps us out of danger. It relies on pattern recognition so as to rely on lower energy consumption for your brain while maintaining an always on base level of vigilance.

From this, we understand there are different routes to attracting attention – relevance and interruption being the most obvious, with emotional arousal being a key feature of both.

“We choose what we pay attention to, so the act of focusing is wedded to our life, our identity projects and goals. We find that consumers can pay attention to media because they want to realise their goals. These goals may be functional in nature (utilitarian goals) or emotional (value-expressive goals) (Park and Mittal, 1985).”

We live in an age of endless interruptions, notifications, emails, advertisements, updates, news and so on, which all tend to operate by taking our attention away from the goal we had at hand, be it work or leisure related. That is, of course, the inherent nature of interruptive advertising. In such an environment, the arms race continues to spiral, and our attention is being deflected further away from our goals, through the use of manipulative design patterns, psychological tricks and creative pyrotechnics.

TIME WELL SPENT

“THERE ARE GOOD WAYS AND BAD WAYS TO GET MY ATTENTION. WHACKING ON MY EGO WITH A CROWBAR WILL GET MY ATTENTION, SURE, BUT IT'S NOT GOING TO LEAVE ME WELL DISPOSED TO THE MESSENGER.”

CHARLES STROSS

Every waking moment is explored and mined by media entities driven by the need for growth to get more of your attention and algorithms that learn how to hack it. In the battle for attention, editors and engineers have learned that emotional arousal is key. Stoking anger and fear and creating an unending sense of urgency with never-ending breaking news cycles and infinite 'news' feeds keeps people engaged.

Further, the nature of the of digital advertising ecosystem is predicated on invasive tracking of personal data, which consumers opt in to but without knowing, or indeed being able to know, what it actually means:

“Privacy of data simply cannot be negotiated person by person, especially because there's no meaningful informed consent. People cannot comprehend what their data will reveal especially *in conjunction* with other data. Even companies do not know this, so they cannot inform anyone.” - Zeynep Tufekki

This is all because attention has come to be understood as a commodity to be exploited, a resource to be mined. But should it be?

Our attention is finite on a per capita [and collective] basis – and how we choose to deploy it is how we spend our lives. The more our attention is consumed, the less time and cognitive resources we have left to use to think.

Attention is consciousness, it's experience and to think of it as a commodity is itself so dehumanizing. It's like taking whatever is unexplainable about the human experience and saying let's sell that: Let's sell the core thing to our human experience.” Tristan Harris, Founder of Centre for Humane Technology

Understanding it as a commodity is “one way of conceiving of our time. But it's also a quantification that tramples across other, qualitative questions.”

Even the original call for the attention economy in 'Attention Shoppers!' (1997) recognized that. Attention, the author explained: 'comes in many forms: love, recognition, heeding, obedience, thoughtfulness, caring, praising, watching over, attending to one's desires, aiding, advising, critical appraisal, assistance in developing new skills, et cetera. An army sergeant ordering troops doesn't want the kind of attention Madonna seeks. And neither desires the sort I do as I write this.' For all the sophistication of a world in which most of our waking hours are spent consuming or interacting with media, we have scarcely advanced in our understanding of what attention means.”

Part of what attention is beyond a resource to be mined is the faculty by which we encounter the world and as such it impacts who we are and the ultimate quality of our life.

“There is now little question that how one uses one's attention, moment to moment, largely determines what kind of person one becomes. Our minds – our lives – are largely shaped by how we use them.” Sam Harris, Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion

Ancient disciplines of attention such as meditation are increasingly being used to help navigate the predatory environment we find ourselves in.

With all these demands on our attention, people feel like they have less free time, especially in the USA, where media consumption has plateaued and where people work the longest hours. Media consumption has also plateaued in the UK, which, coincidentally, has the longest working hours in Europe. We haven't left time for ourselves and are seeing now a counter trend of digital detoxing and mindfulness. Ten years ago, either would be considered fringe behaviors but they are now increasingly common and culturally resonant. Free time has become screen time and numerous studies have begun to demonstrate that this is making us less happy and more anxious.

The “constant noise from the internet and social media likely serve to amp up people's anxiety and angst” according to Dr. Harsh Trivedi [CEO of Sheppard Pratt Health System] and prolonged social media use makes people unhappy, whereas small amounts [under one hour a day] seem to increase happiness. Things involving humans are rarely black and white.

Further, the framing of attention solely as a resource leads us towards its exhaustive exploitation, because this is the nature of capitalism, which tends towards reductionism. Our metaphors inform our behavior.

“In defining attention as the contents of a global reservoir, slopping interchangeably between the brains of every human being alive. Where is the space, here, for the idea of attention as a mutual construction more akin to empathy than budgetary expenditure – or for those unregistered moments in which we attend to ourselves, to the space around us, or to nothing at all?”

When so much of our day is mediated, our attention consumed, do we end up “starved of reality”, as Jaron Lanier has suggested?

Attention is not a commodity like coal or oil, it is an aspect of humanity. Though like physical natural resources, mining it at scale has consequences for us all, individually and culturally. Every quantum of attention that is used by a company leaves us with less for ourselves. Instead of making active choices, we may tend toward a passive state, being fed whatever the stream, algorithm or television channel wants to show us.

With more cognitive surplus, we’re able to actively engage with media that adds to our lives. Research across platforms shows the more agency we feel we have, the more active the media consumptions and participation choices we make, the happier we tend to feel afterwards. There is a social component to the utilization, which renders it is, if it is a resource, more akin to a commons than a commodity and a tragedy of that commons has already occurred.

CONTEXT, COMMUNICATIONS AND THE COMMONS

Both the immediate and macro context impacts how communication is received. People report feeling as though there is never enough time, that they are always busy. The overall cultural climate is increasingly characterized by stress and anxiety, by feeling burned out from constant, escalating media stimuli, the always on demands of connected working and social media performance and, of course, politics.

A side effect of the political climate has been an increase in news consumption but a recent survey from the American Psychological Association found that, for many Americans, “news consumption has a downside”:

“More than half of Americans say the news causes them stress, and many report feeling anxiety, fatigue or sleep loss as a result, the survey shows. Yet one in 10 adults checks the news every hour, and fully 20% of Americans report “constantly” monitoring their social media feeds – which often exposes them to the latest news headlines, whether they like it or not.”

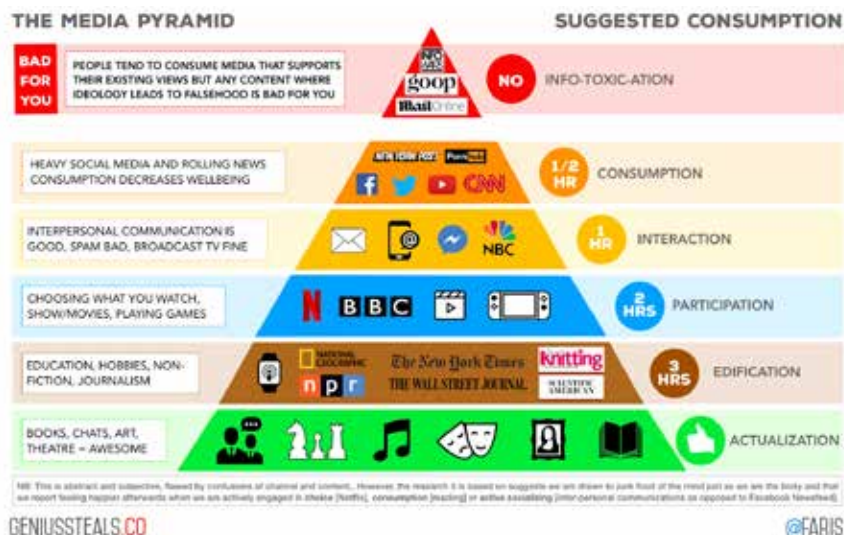
Despite it making us feel worse, we have evolved to seek out new news, and the current environment exacerbates our existing tendencies.

“So if the evidence suggests the news can stress people out, why do they keep going back for more? The human brain is wired to pay attention to information that scares or unsettles us – a concept known as “negativity bias”. In a state of nature, our survival depends on finding rewards and avoiding harm, but avoiding harm takes priority.”

Due to confirmation and negativity bias – and a host of other manipulated heuristics – we tend to be drawn to these preceding types of content. However, the suitability of these environments for brand communication has been questioned, because the immediate context of news is so distressing, and because news channels have become polarized and driven towards more extreme positions, which impacts both brand safety and communication impact.

Studies show that “the positive influence of media context on reception of ads and brands increases when a particular text (editorial, news story, commentary) elicits positive emotions) when consumers have a low level of engagement with the product advertised”. When you have limited existing feelings towards a brand, congruency between the ad and context impact your feelings about it.

When we are stressed, we tend to shift attention more frequently and when lacking sleep we tend to check Facebook more often. Our cognitive resources are being depleted, and making us less able to muster the will power required to manage our own attention. That’s why we created the Media Pyramid, using research on how certain media consumption affects psychological well being, as a tool to help people allocate their attention with intention



Whilst not designed as a planning tool, the pyramid can help apply a set of qualitative filters to media and communication planning.

Strategic communications planning considers context, channel effects, historical profitability, and numerous other criteria beyond target audience, cost, reach and frequency when developing a communication and investment plan.

The object is to leverage different communications tools appropriately to maximize their integrated effectiveness, rather than settling for the media efficiency of reaching the target audience as cheaply as possible, which could be established by a spreadsheet – or an algorithm.

There are a number of ways to understand the media pyramid's primary vector. It was designed to balance media consumption

in order to maximize reported psychological wellbeing. Like the original food pyramid, the media near the top makes people feel bad after extended consumption and media towards the bottom tends to make people feel better. Since we process information differently depending on context, it follows that medium has an impact on the efficacy of brand communication.



Additionally, it maps well against a spectrum of passive to active consumption and to attention levels and quality [which includes viewability, context, modality and anything else relevant to the effect]. The level and quality of the attention being bought is an important consideration that the cost of impressions doesn't necessarily reflect. The quality of attention isn't properly priced.

Media options at the top of the pyramid where context is most abandoned in favor of efficient targeting and is fastest in building reach and this works well for sales activation, which is corroborated by meta-analysis from the IPA DataBank.

The primary thesis of my book Paid Attention is that while attention is the determinant resource being bought, sold and allocated in advertising exchanges between

companies and people it is a complex, precious thing and deserves respect in its capture and utilization by brands. It is a commons that needs renewing and protecting.

When framed this way it creates a number of novel ways of thinking about the advertising value proposition and how consumers pay for content and experiences, either fully, or partially, with their finite attentional resources. A commons requires protecting to prevent its eponymous tragedy in order that all may continue to profit from it.

Communication and context are inextricably bound in the consumption experience, a consideration which is too often neglected in the current vogue for producing 'content' to distribute through

every available digital channel. It is a qualitatively different experience reading a book on paper vs Kindle vs smartphone or tablet. The content is identical but the context is different. We know the mere presence of a smartphone fractures attention:

"We see a linear trend that suggests that as the smartphone becomes more noticeable, participants' available cognitive capacity decreases. Your conscious mind isn't thinking about your smartphone, but that process – the process of requiring yourself to not think about something – uses up some of your limited cognitive resources. It's a brain drain."

It follows that reading on paper vs digital screen has a similar impact, of reducing the tendency to shift attention, because there are no notifications and less temptation to “just check” social media. It’s easier to not think about something when it’s not in your hand.

Quality is a multivariate aspect of all media choices, but hopefully the pyramid can help build quality communication plans

for brands. Adding in a robust qualitative layer turns the metrics of media and “growth hacking” back into human beings.

Using communication channels to their fullest extent means adapting ideas and creative advertising to best leverage the medium’s strengths and weaknesses. One filter of quality is the level of attention different media hold, which should change how brands utilize them.

Using them in concert means understanding the different roles for channels, how they work together, and what the cumulative multiplier is.



Reframing attention as a commons that we all own reminds us treat it with respect for the good of all instead of attempting to monetize as much as possible ourselves. A commons unites individual profit motives with social protection of resources. Perhaps that simple adjustment in thinking can help address some of the systemic problems in the current media environment.

“If you want to solve a problem, it helps to incorporate the profit motive, which we can do by shifting the focus of technology from

exploiting the weakest links in human psychology to a commitment to empowering users.

What would human-driven technology look like? It would empower users rather than exploit them. Human-driven social networks would enable sharing with friends, but without massive surveillance, filter bubbles and data insecurity.”

- Roger McNamee (early investor in Facebook)

Balancing all these considerations, making choices about how to allocate vast sums of money with the best chance of achieving a brand’s objectives, whilst embracing the nuance of reception modality, context, human psychology, paying appropriate attention to the goals of consumers and being respectful of the value of every individual’s attention is what makes communication strategy a subtle, strategic craft.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Faris Yakob is the author of *Paid Attention*, and contributing author to *Creative Superpowers* and *Eat Your Greens*. He and his partner Rosie are the co-founders of **Genius Steals**, a nomadic creative consultancy helping brands, agencies and rebels find the awesome.

Their newsletter, *Strands of [Stolen] Genius*, has been named one of the “7 Essential Reads for the Curious Creative.”

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