

# Disarming the Weapons of Mass Distraction

**Madeleine Bunting**

“Are you paying attention?” The phrase still resonates with a particular sharpness in my mind. It takes me straight back to my boarding school, aged thirteen, when my eyes would drift out the window to the woods beyond the classroom. The voice was that of the math teacher, the very dedicated but dull Miss Ploughman, whose furrowed grimace I can still picture.

We’re taught early that attention is a currency—we “pay” attention—and much of the discipline of the classroom is aimed at marshaling the attention of children, with very mixed results. We all have a history here, of how we did or did not learn to pay attention and all the praise or blame that came with that. It used to be that such patterns of childhood experience faded into irrelevance. As we reached adulthood, how we paid attention, and to what, was a personal matter and akin to breathing—as if it were automatic.

Today, though, as we grapple with a pervasive new digital culture, attention has become an issue of pressing social concern. Technology provides us with new tools to grab people’s attention. These innovations are dismantling traditional boundaries of private and public, home and office, work and leisure. Emails and tweets can reach us almost anywhere, anytime. There are no cracks left in which the mind can idle, rest, and recuperate. A taxi ad offers free wifi so that you can remain “productive” on a cab journey.

Even those spare moments of time in our day—waiting for a bus, standing in a queue at the supermarket—can now be “harvested,” says the writer Tim Wu in his book *The Attention Merchants*. In this quest to pursue “those slivers of our unharvested awareness,” digital technology has provided consumer capitalism with its most powerful tools yet. And our attention fuels it. As Matthew Crawford notes in *The World Beyond Your Head*, “when some people treat the minds of other people as a resource, this is not ‘creating wealth,’ it is transferring it.”

There’s a whiff of panic around the subject: the story that our attention spans are now shorter than a goldfish’s attracted millions of readers on the web; it’s still frequently cited, despite its questionable veracity. Rates of diagnosis attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children have soared, creating an \$11 billion global market for pharmaceutical companies. Every glance of our eyes is now tracked for commercial gain as ever more ingenious ways are devised to capture our attention, if only momentarily. Our eyeballs are now described as capitalism’s most valuable real estate. Both our attention and its deficits are turned into lucrative markets.

There is also a domestic economy of attention; within every family, some get it and some give it. We’re all born needing the attention of others—our parents’, especially—and from the outset, our social skills are honed to attract the attention we need for our care. Attention is woven into all forms of human encounter from the most brief and transitory to the most intimate. It also becomes deeply political: who pays attention to whom?

Social psychologists have researched how the powerful tend to tune out the less powerful. One study with college students showed that even in five minutes of friendly chat, wealthier students showed fewer signs of engagement when in



Kamil Kotarba

An image from a series by Kamil Kotarba titled *Hide and Seek*, 2015

conversation with their less wealthy counterparts: less eye contact, fewer nods, and more checking the time, doodling, and fidgeting. Discrimination of race and gender, too, plays out through attention. Anyone who's spent any time in an organization will be aware of how attention is at the heart of office politics. A suggestion is ignored in a meeting, but is then seized upon as a brilliant solution when repeated by another person.

What is political is also ethical. Matthew Crawford argues that this is the essential characteristic of urban living: a basic recognition of others.

And then there's an even more fundamental dimension to the *politics of attention*. At a primary level, all interactions in public space require a very minimal form of attention, an awareness of the presence and movement of others. Without it, we would bump into each other, frequently.

I had a vivid demonstration of this point on a recent commute: I live in East London and regularly use the narrow canal paths for cycling. It was the canal rush hour—lots of walkers with dogs, families with children, joggers as well as cyclists heading home. We were all sharing the towpath with the usual mixture of give and take, slowing to allow passing, swerving around and between each other. Only this time, a woman was walking down the center of the path with her eyes glued to her phone, impervious to all around her. This went well beyond a moment of distraction. Everyone had to duck and weave to avoid her. She'd abandoned the unspoken contract that avoiding collision is a mutual obligation.

This scene is now a daily occurrence for many of us, in shopping centers, station concourses, or on busy streets. Attention is the essential lubricant of urban life, and without it, we're denying our co-existence in that moment and place. The novelist and philosopher, Iris Murdoch, writes that the most basic requirement for being good is that a person "must know certain things about his surroundings, most obviously the existence of other people and their claims."

Attention is what draws us out of ourselves to experience and engage in the world. The word is often accompanied by a verb—attention needs to be grabbed, captured, mobilized, attracted, or galvanized. Reflected in such language is an acknowledgement of how attention is the essential precursor to action. The founding father of psychology William James provided what is still one of the best working definitions:

It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others.

Attention is a limited resource and has to be allocated: to pay attention to one thing requires us to withdraw it from others. There are two well-known dimensions to attention, explains Willem Kuyken, a professor of psychology at Oxford. The first is "alerting"—an automatic form of attention, hardwired into our brains, that warns us of threats to our survival. Think of when you're driving a car in a busy city: you're aware of the movement of other cars, pedestrians, cyclists, and road signs, while advertising tries to grab any spare morsel of your attention. Notice how quickly you can swerve or brake when you spot a car suddenly emerging from a side street. There's no time for a complicated cognitive process of decision making. This attention is beyond voluntary control.

The second form of attention is known as "executive"—the process by which our brain selects what to foreground and focus on, so that there can be other information in the background—such as music when you're cooking—but one can still accomplish a complex task. Crucially, our capacity for executive attention is limited. Contrary to what some people claim, none of us can multitask complex activities effectively. The next time you write an email while talking on the phone, notice how many typing mistakes you make or how much you remember from the call. Executive attention can be trained, and needs to be for any complex activity. This was the point James made when he wrote: "there is no such thing as voluntary attention sustained for more than a few seconds at a time... what is called sustained voluntary attention is a repetition of successive efforts which bring back the topic to the mind."

Attention is a complex interaction between memory and perception, in which we continually select what to notice, thus finding the material which correlates in some way with past experience. In this way, patterns develop in the mind. We are always making meaning from the overwhelming raw data. As James put it, “my experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind—without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos.”

And we are constantly engaged in organizing that chaos, as we interpret our experience. This is clear in the famous Gorilla Experiment in which viewers were told to watch a video of two teams of students passing a ball between them. They had to count the number of passes made by the team in white shirts and ignore those of the team in black shirts. The experiment is deceptively complex because it involves three forms of attention: first, scanning the whole group; second, ignoring the black T-shirt team to keep focus on the white T-shirt team (a form of inhibiting attention); and third, remembering to count. In the middle of the experiment, someone in a gorilla suit ambles through the group. Afterward, half the viewers when asked hadn't spotted the gorilla and couldn't even believe it had been there. We can be blind not only to the obvious, but to *our blindness*.

There is another point in this experiment which is less often emphasized. Ignoring something—such as the black T-shirt team in this experiment—requires a form of attention. It costs us attention to ignore something. Many of us live and work in environments that require us to ignore a huge amount of information—that flashing advert, a bouncing icon or pop-up.

In another famous psychology experiment, Walter Mischel's Marshmallow Test, four-year-olds had a choice of eating a marshmallow immediately or two in fifteen minutes. While filmed, each child was put in a room alone in front of the plate with a marshmallow. They squirmed and fidgeted, poked the marshmallow and stared at the ceiling. A third of the children couldn't resist the marshmallow and gobbled it up, a third nibbled cautiously, but the last third figured out how to distract themselves. They looked under the table, sang... did anything but look at the sweet. It's a demonstration of the capacity to reallocate attention. In a follow-up study some years later, those who'd been able to wait for the second marshmallow had better life outcomes, such as academic achievement and health. One New Zealand study of 1,000 children found that this form of self-regulation was a more reliable predictor of future success and wellbeing than even a good IQ or comfortable economic status.

What, then, are the implications of how digital technologies are transforming our patterns of attention? In the current political anxiety about social mobility and inequality, more weight needs to be put on this most crucial and basic skill: sustaining attention.

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I learned to concentrate as a child. Being a bookworm helped. I'd be completely absorbed in my reading as the noise of my busy family swirled around me. It was good training for working in newsrooms; when I started as a journalist, they were very noisy places with the clatter of keyboards, telephones ringing and fascinating conversations on every side. What has proved much harder to block out is email and text messages.

The digital tech companies know a lot about this widespread habit; many of them have built a business model around it. They've drawn on the work of the psychologist B.F. Skinner who identified back in the Thirties how, in animal behavior, an action can be encouraged with a positive consequence and discouraged by a negative one. In one experiment, he gave a pigeon a food pellet whenever it pecked at a button and the result, as predicted, was that the pigeon kept pecking. Subsequent research established that the most effective way to keep the pigeon pecking was “variable-ratio reinforcement.” Give the pigeon a food pellet *sometimes*, and you have it well and truly hooked.

We're just like the pigeon pecking at the button when we check our email or phone. It's a humiliating thought. Variable reinforcement ensures that the customer will keep coming back. It's the principle behind one of the most lucrative US industries: slot machines, which generate more profit than baseball, films, and theme parks combined. Gambling was once tightly restricted for its addictive potential, but most of us now have the attentional equivalent of a slot machine in our

pocket, beside our plate at mealtimes, and by our pillow at night. Even during a meal out, a play at the theater, a film, or a tennis match. Almost nothing is now experienced uninterrupted.

Anxiety about the exponential rise of our gadget addiction and how it is fragmenting our attention is sometimes dismissed as a Luddite reaction to a technological revolution. But that misses the point. The problem is not the technology per se, but the commercial imperatives that drive the new technologies and, unrestrained, colonize our attention by fundamentally changing our experience of time and space, saturating both in information.

In much public space, wherever your eye lands—from the back of the toilet door, to the handrail on the escalator, or the hotel key card—an ad is trying to grab your attention, and does so by triggering the oldest instincts of the human mind: fear, sex, and food. Public places become dominated by people trying to sell you something. In his tirade against this commercialization, Crawford cites advertisements on the backs of school report cards and on debit machines where you swipe your card. Before you enter your PIN, that gap of a few seconds is now used to show adverts. He describes silence and ad-free experience as “luxury goods” that only the wealthy can afford. Crawford has invented the concept of the “attentional commons,” free public spaces that allow us to choose where to place our attention. He draws the analogy with environmental goods that belong to all of us, such as clean air or clean water.

Some legal theorists are beginning to conceive of our own attention as a human right. One former Google employee warned that “there are a thousand people on the other side of the screen whose job it is to break down the self-regulation you have.” They use the insights into human behavior derived from social psychology—the need for approval, the need to reciprocate others’ gestures, the fear of missing out. Your attention ceases to be your own, pulled and pushed by algorithms. Attention is referred to as the real currency of the future.

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In 2013, I embarked on a risky experiment in attention: I left my job. In the previous two years, it had crept up on me. I could no longer read beyond a few paragraphs. My eyes would glaze over and, even more disastrously for someone who had spent their career writing, I seemed unable to string together my thoughts, let alone write anything longer than a few sentences. When I try to explain the impact, I can only offer a metaphor: it felt like my imagination and use of language were vacuum packed, like a slab of meat coated in plastic. I had lost the ability to turn ideas around, see them from different perspectives. I could no longer draw connections between disparate ideas.

At the time, I was working in media strategy. It was a culture of back-to-back meetings from 8:30 AM to 6 PM, and there were plenty of advantages to be gained from continuing late into the evening if you had the stamina. Commitment was measured by emails with a pertinent weblink. Meetings were sometimes as brief as thirty minutes and frequently ran through lunch. Meanwhile, everyone was sneaking time to battle with the constant emails, eyes flickering to their phone screens in every conversation. The result was a kind of crazy fog, a mishmash of inconclusive discussions.

At first, it was exhilarating, like being on those crazy rides in a theme park. By the end, the effect was disastrous. I was almost continuously ill, battling migraines and unidentifiable viruses. When I finally made the drastic decision to leave, my income collapsed to a fraction of its previous level and my family’s lifestyle had to change accordingly. I had no idea what I was going to do; I had lost all faith in my ability to write. I told friends I would have to return the advance I’d received to write a book. I had to try to get back to the skills of reflection and focus that had once been ingrained in me.

The first step was to teach myself to read again. I sometimes went to a café, leaving my phone and computer behind. I had to slow down the racing incoherence of my mind so that it could settle on the text and its gradual development of an argument or narrative thread. The turning point in my recovery was a five weeks’ research trip to the Scottish Outer Hebrides. On the journey north of Glasgow, my mobile phone lost its Internet connection. I had cut myself loose with only the occasional text or call to family back home. Somewhere on the long Atlantic beaches of these wild and dramatic islands, I rediscovered my ability to write.

I attribute that in part to a stunning exhibition I came across in the small harbor town of Lochboisdale, on the island of South Uist. Vija Celmins is an acclaimed Latvian-American artist whose work is famous for its astonishing patience. She can take a year or more to make a woodcut that portrays in minute detail the surface of the sea. A postcard of her work now sits above my desk, a reminder of the power of slow thinking.

Just as we've had a slow eating movement, we need a slow thinking campaign. Its manifesto could be the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke's beautiful "Letters to a Young Poet":

To let every impression and the germ of every feeling come to completion inside, in the dark, in the unsayable, the unconscious, in what is unattainable to one's own intellect, and to wait with deep humility and patience for the hour when a new clarity is delivered.

Many great thinkers attest that they have their best insights in moments of relaxation, the proverbial brainwave in the bath. We actually need what we most fear: boredom.

When I left my job (and I was lucky that I could), friends and colleagues were bewildered. Why give up a good job? But I felt that here was an experiment worth trying. Crawford frames it well as "intellectual biodiversity." At a time of crisis, we need people thinking in different ways. If we all jump to the tune of Facebook or Instagram and allow ourselves to be primed by Twitter, the danger is that we lose the "trained powers of concentration" that allow us, in Crawford's words, "to recognize that independence of thought and feeling is a fragile thing, and requires certain conditions."

I also took to heart the insights of the historian Timothy Snyder, who concluded from his studies of twentieth-century European totalitarianism that the way to fend off tyranny is to read books, make an effort to separate yourself from the Internet, and "be kind to our language... Think up your own way of speaking." Dropping out and going offline enabled me to get back to reading, voraciously, and to writing; beyond that, it's too early to announce the results of my experiment with attention. As Rilke said, "These things cannot be measured by time, a year has no meaning, and ten years are nothing."

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A recent column in *The New Yorker* cheekily suggests that all the fuss about the impact of digital technologies on our attention is nothing more than writers' worrying about their own working habits. Is all this anxiety about our fragmenting minds a moral panic akin to those that swept Victorian Britain about sexual behavior? Patterns of attention are changing, but perhaps it doesn't much matter?

My teenage children read much less than I did. One son used to play chess online with a friend, text on his phone, and do his homework all at the same time. I was horrified, but he got a place at Oxford. At his interview, he met a third-year history undergraduate who told him he hadn't yet read *any* books in his time at university. But my kids are considerably more knowledgeable about a vast range of subjects than I was at their age. There's a small voice suggesting that the forms of attention I was brought up with could be a thing of the past; the sustained concentration required to read a whole book will become an obscure niche hobby.

And yet, I'm haunted by a reflection: the magnificent illuminations of the eighth-century *Book of Kells* has intricate patterning that no one has ever been able to copy, such is the fineness of the tight spirals. Lines are a millimeter apart. They indicate a steadiness of hand and mind—a capability most of us have long since lost. Could we be trading in capacities for focus in exchange for a breadth of reference? Some might argue that's not a bad trade. But we would lose depth: artist Paul Klee wrote that he would spend a day in silent contemplation of something before he painted it. Paul Cézanne was similarly known for his trance like attention on his subject. Madame Cézanne recollected how her husband would gaze at the landscape, and told her, "The landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness." The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes a contemplative attention in which one steps outside of oneself and immerses oneself in the object of attention.

It's not just artists who require such depth of attention. Nearly two decades ago, a doctor teaching medical students at Yale was frustrated at their inability to distinguish between types of skin lesions. Their gaze seemed restless and careless. He took his students to an art gallery and told them to look at a picture for fifteen minutes. The program is now used in dozens of US medical schools.

Some argue that losing the capacity for deep attention presages catastrophe. It is the building block of "intimacy, wisdom, and cultural progress," argues Maggie Jackson in her book *Distracted*, in which she warns that "as our attentional skills are squandered, we are plunging into a culture of mistrust, skimming, and a dehumanizing merging between man and machine." Significantly, her research began with a curiosity about why so many Americans were deeply dissatisfied with life. She argues that losing the capacity for deep attention makes it harder to make sense of experience and to find meaning—from which comes wonder and fulfillment. She fears a new "dark age" in which we forget what makes us truly happy.

Strikingly, the epicenter of this wave of anxiety over our attention is the US. All the authors I've cited are American. It's been argued that this debate represents an existential crisis for America because it exposes the flawed nature of its greatest ideal, individual freedom. The commonly accepted notion is that to be free is to make choices, and no one can challenge that expression of autonomy. But if our choices are actually engineered by thousands of very clever, well-paid digital developers, are we free? The former Google employee Tristan Harris confessed in an article in 2016 that technology "gives people the illusion of free choice while architecting the menu so that [tech giants] win, no matter what you choose."

Despite my children's multitasking, I maintain that vital human capacities—depth of insight, emotional connection, and creativity—are at risk. I'm intrigued as to what the resistance might look like. There are stirrings of protest with the recent establishment of initiatives such as the Time Well Spent movement, founded by tech industry insiders who have become alarmed at the efforts invested in keeping people hooked. But collective action is elusive; the emphasis is repeatedly on the individual to develop the necessary self-regulation, but if that is precisely what is being eroded, we could be caught in a self-reinforcing loop.

One of the most interesting responses to our distraction epidemic is mindfulness. Its popularity is evidence that people are trying to find a way to protect and nourish their minds. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who pioneered the development of secular mindfulness, draws an analogy with jogging: just as keeping your body fit is now well understood, people will come to realize the importance of looking after their minds.

I've meditated regularly for twenty years, but curious as to how this is becoming mainstream, I went to an event in the heart of high-tech Shoreditch in London. In a hipster workspaces with funky architecture, excellent coffee, and an impressive range of beards, a soft-spoken retired Oxford professor of psychology, Mark Williams, was talking about how multitasking has a switching cost in focus and concentration. Our unique human ability to remember the past and to think ahead brings a cost; we lose the present. To counter this, he advocated a daily practice of mindfulness: bringing attention back to the body—the physical sensations of the breath, the hands, the feet. Williams explained how fear and anxiety inhibit creativity. In time, the practice of mindfulness enables you to acknowledge fear calmly and even to investigate it with curiosity. You learn to place your attention in the moment, noticing details such as the sunlight or the taste of the coffee.

On a recent retreat, I was beside a river early one morning and a rower passed. I watched the boat slip by and enjoyed the beauty in a radically new way. The moment was sufficient; there was nothing I wanted to add or take away—no thought of how I wanted to do this every day, or how I wanted to learn to row, or how I wished I was in the boat. Nothing but the pleasure of witnessing it. The busy-ness of the mind had stilled. Mindfulness can be a remarkable bid to reclaim our attention and to claim real freedom, the freedom from our habitual reactivity that makes us easy prey for manipulation.

But I worry that the integrity of mindfulness is fragile, vulnerable both to commercialization by employers who see it as a form of mental performance enhancement and to consumer commodification, rather than contributing to the formation of ethical character. Mindfulness as a meditation practice originates in Buddhism, and without that tradition's ethics, there is a

high risk of it being hijacked and misrepresented.

Back in the Sixties, the countercultural psychologist Timothy Leary rebelled against the conformity of the new mass media age and called for, in Crawford's words, an "attentional revolution." Leary urged people to take control of the media they consumed as a crucial act of self-determination; pay attention to where you place your attention, he declared. The social critic Herbert Marcuse believed Leary was fighting the struggle for the ultimate form of freedom, which Marcuse defined as the ability "to live without anxiety." These were radical prophets whose words have an uncanny resonance today. Distraction has become a commercial and political strategy, and it amounts to a form of emotional violence that cripples people, leaving them unable to gather their thoughts and overwhelmed by a sense of inadequacy. It's a powerful form of oppression dressed up in the language of individual choice.

The stakes could hardly be higher, as William James knew a century ago: "The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will." And what are we humans without these three?

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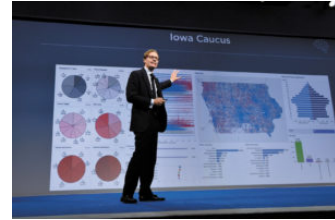
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