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Power Over Attention

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Upcoming Events

Moderated by [David Gleason](#)

Roundtables:

- **"Conscious Life vs Technology"**
May 13, 27
- June: TBD

Artificial Intelligence: What it Means for You, May 20,

7pm, Town Hall

All are Open to the Public

Happy Friday!

Who—or what—directs our attention, and to what ends?

In today's world of constant scrolling, attention is often directed by algorithms. This can be good, as when it serves up a good recipe. Not so much when it turns around and sells our eating habits.

Note that attention is not the same as consciousness. Attention moves quickly, shifting from one activity or thought to another, while consciousness feels steady—foundational to the sense of self.

When we direct attention from a deeper place we increase clarity, focus, and resilience.

This matters because many online systems are built to capture and hold our attention for profit. The question becomes: how much control do we keep, and how much do we give away?

In the weeks ahead, we'll explore how to reclaim that control.

-David

Summary

This newsletter seeks to address several fascinating questions about our control over attention in the context of social media and AI. These thoughts arose from the [April 2nd Issue](#) and April 8 Roundtable:

1. Why is attention so valuable?
2. How much of our attention is under our own control, and how much is directed by others?
3. If others, how is it used for our own good? How is it used extractively?
4. How can intentionality and mindfulness help?

Definition

Attention is the cognitive process of selectively focusing mental resources on specific information while filtering out other stimuli.

It operates as a limited-capacity system that prioritizes what enters conscious awareness and what gets processed more deeply. At any given moment, the brain receives far more sensory input than it can handle; attention acts as the gating mechanism that determines which signals are amplified and which are suppressed.

The Value of Attention

Attention may be our most precious resource. It determines what we perceive, what we learn, and ultimately how we act. Yet it is not fully under our control. Sustained attention requires quieting distractions from internal, subconscious intuition to sophisticated algorithms designed to direct it.

So who controls our attention, to what ends, and how can we reclaim it?

The “Attention Economy”

Social media operates within the attention economy, where human focus is treated as a commodity. Platforms capture attention, shape behavior, extract data, and sell targeted access to advertisers. Every click, pause, and scroll becomes part of a behavioral profile used to predict and influence future actions.

This process, sometimes described as “surveillance capitalism,” transforms lived experience into monetizable data. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle: more engagement produces more data, which improves targeting, which drives more engagement.

Giving Attention

At best we cultivate and curate our attention, directing it for sustained periods.

Teachers, for example, catalyze learning with dynamic storytelling that both sustains engagement and deepens understanding. Designers use visual hierarchy, contrast, spacing, and layout to help users efficiently navigate information. Leaders frame and articulate ideas that establish shared goals.

Practices like mindfulness and meditation strengthen the ability to direct attention deliberately, improving decision-making and emotional regulation. In these contexts, attention is cultivated as a vital tool for growth.

Taking Attention

However, the same mechanisms can extract attention for profit or power. Social platforms are engineered first and foremost to capture and hold attention, often with little regard for user well-being. Reward-triggering techniques generate little hits of dopamine, creating a desire, a motivation to re-engage.

Habitual screen checking is triggered by the lack of rewards, fear of missing out, and, occasionally, important info. Why people check their phones midsentence.

Once the user gets reengaged, features like infinite scrolling, autoplay, likes, and notifications eliminate natural stopping points and encourage continued engagement. Once hooked, users easily get mired in soul-sucking content generated by attention-seekers and AI.

Personalization

Personalization algorithms learn what triggers engagement and continuously refine content to maximize it, often prioritizing emotional intensity—outrage, fear, or novelty—over accuracy or value. Social validation loops (likes, shares, follower counts) create powerful feedback systems that encourage repeated interaction.

"Dark Patterns"

Manipulation occurs most effectively when it bypasses conscious choice. “Dark patterns” in interface design—such as sexualized images, hidden opt-outs, and confusing defaults—nudge users into unintended actions. Algorithmic feeds prioritize content that captures attention, not necessarily what is true or beneficial.

Undermining Personal Sovereignty

Over time, this can distort perception, reinforce biases, and erode autonomy. Emerging technologies such as deepfakes (likenesses, video, voices) and highly persuasive AI systems further complicate the landscape, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish authentic information from fabricated or manipulative content.

Bad actors can exploit these tools to spread disinformation, influence opinion, or simply exploit the power of collective attention at scale. AI makes it easier to target individuals.

Fractured Attention

The psychological impact is significant. Constant exposure to fast, fragmented content can reduce attention span and increase distractibility. For some, this resembles or exacerbates conditions like ADHD, as the brain becomes conditioned to expect rapid stimulation and immediate reward.

Scrolling behavior, in particular, creates a loop of anticipation and gratification that is difficult to interrupt. What feels like choice is often a conditioned response.

Intention as Antidote

Directing attention effectively requires *intention*. Over time, intended goals, needs, and values become subsumed as habitual and behavioral. That's what makes ethics worthy of attention.

Values-driven decisions engender reliability and integrity, trust and deep relationships. When we define what matters to us, our morals and values, we create intentions -- frameworks for directing our attention. Ethics and behavioral norms flow from there.

Directing attention effectively requires clarity about what matters to you. When we define our values and goals, we create a framework for allocating attention. Over time, repeated choices shape habits, and habits shape identity. Without intention, attention defaults to whatever is most stimulating or accessible—often these days, what others have engineered to capture it.

Practical Strategies for Attention Sovereignty

The flood of information is coming through our devices like water through a firehose. Some people are crying foul and unplugging, at least for a while at a time, and finding some balance, but you can't really avoid it completely, can you?

Other than cutting the cord, here are some suggestions:

- Reduce notifications
- Set time boundaries
- Curate and verify information sources
- Limit algorithmic scrolling
- Practice mindfulness while online, e.g., posture, breathing, and body awareness

Attention, like any cognitive resource, can be trained.

In Sum

Ultimately, attention shapes experience. It determines not only what we see, but who we become. In an environment where countless systems compete to capture and monetize it, the ability to direct attention is a form of personal sovereignty. We become addicted to tech like all pleasure-center stimulants (smoking, gambling, sex).

Alternatively, cultivating good intentions builds character traits like mindfulness, clarity, and wisdom—the Himalayan monk. These intentions in turn (and mostly automatically), guide where, how, and why to focus our attention.

Read More

- [*The Attention Economy and the Collapse of Cognitive Autonomy*](#) by Rai Hasen Masoud at Georgetown Law, 7/15/25
- [*A World Appears - A Journey Into Consciousness*](#) (book) by Michael Pollan (2026) -- [challenging and rewarding, see esp the introduction]

From April 2 Newsletter:

- [*Attention*](#), Wikipedia
- [*The Ethics of Attention in Simone Weil*](#) from Philosopheasy. 8/27/25
- [*Cultivating Ethical Attention in Psychology*](#), by Finn Janning, PhD in *Psychology Today*, 9/2/25
- [*The power of attention: understanding its role in our lives*](#) by Pernilla Kaitah, University of Antwerp, 2024
- [*Is social media addictive? The science reveals what's at stake*](#), Jackie Flynn Mogensen in *Scientific American*, 3/24/26
- [*A minute to calm your strong emotions*](#), (YouTube, 1 min) guided meditation by Thich Nhat Hanh, 1/9/24
- [*Practicing Mindfulness*](#), (YouTube, 1 min) Rush University System for Health, 2022
- [*The power of setting intentions & how to set mindful ones*](#), blog post from Calm.com, 2/13/26

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