

## The Attention Economy: Digital Distraction and Political Persuasion in Everyday Culture

Jonatan Jalle Steller (Leipzig)

The academic use of the term *attention economy* was significantly coined by Michael H. Goldhaber, Georg Franck, and Jonathan Beller to describe a shift starting in the 1990s: with information becoming abundantly available through the internet, they argued, capitalism increasingly turned to monetising interaction by identifying human attention as a currency and thus changed how the public sphere was organised. The concept has entered more popular parlance through Tim Wu's *The Attention Merchants*, which extends it to include, for example, the invention of newspaper advertising and prime-time television. Most recently, Robert van Krieken pointed out that recognising how various media use attention as a valuable resource can help us understand a number of cultural phenomena of the present day ranging from the popularity of smartphone games to the fetishisation of 'influencers' on *Instagram*, Donald Trump and Boris Johnson's continued celebrity status, and the conversion of racism and xenophobia into political platforms by the alt-right.

The aim of this panel is not just to put forward political economy as an important perspective in studying cultural practices and products, but more specifically to consider the implications of an economic and thereby political climate in which continuously producing and marketing a Self translates to cultural, social, economic, and even political capital. The attention economy has brought about forms of distraction and persuasion that go beyond mere advertising into the realm of manipulation or even – to use a term recently re-used by Alan Macleod – propaganda. Persuasion has become industrialised in the form of targeted advertising and opinionated entertainment, and thus contributes to an alleged shift in power to a 'vectorialist class' in control of access to information. Business models in the attention economy focus on selling small and ultimately meaningless successes to customers in exchange for the adoption of an approved behaviour, which calls into question their freedom and autonomy.

If accepted for the *Anglistentag* 2020, this panel welcomes six contributions of 20 minutes plus 10 minutes of discussion each. The third 90-minutes slot will be organised as an open space in which both panellists and participants are invited to collaborate on responding to the overarching questions and problems identified during the first two slots.

## Guiding Questions

- What is the underlying logic of social media products such as *Twitter* and *Instagram*?
- What impact does the common practice of user manipulation have on convergent media such as music, cinema, network and streaming television, video games, comic books, and literature?
- In how far is fandom complicit in the commodification of human attention?
- Alternative media need to work in the same economic conditions as 'mainstream' ones. What strategies do they use to accommodate or subvert dominant forms of persuasion?
- What does the vectorialist class look like and how does it exert power?
- What effect does the attention economy have on political discourse and protest?
- How far does the attention economy reach on a continuum from freedom to determinacy?
- Does *hegemony* as 'consensual power' still adequately describe common power balances under the impact of persuasive and manipulative tactics?

## Bibliography

Beller, Jonathan. *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*. Dartmouth College P, 2006.

Citton, Yves. *The Ecology of Attention*. Translated by Barnaby Norman, Polity, 2017.

Crogan, Patrick, and Samuel Kinsley. "Paying Attention: Towards a Critique of the Attention Economy." *Culture Machine*, vol. 13, 2012, pp. 1–29.

Franck, Georg. "The Economy of Attention." *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2019, pp. 8–19.

Goldhaber, Michael H. "The Attention Economy and the Net." *First Monday*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1997, n. pag.

Macleod, Alan, ed. *Propaganda in the Information Age: Still Manufacturing Consent*. Routledge, 2019.

Tufekci, Zeynep. "'Not This One': Social Movements, the Attention Economy, and Microcelebrity Networked Activism." *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 57, no. 7., 2013, pp. 848–870.

van Krieken, Robert. *Celebrity Society: The Struggle for Attention*. 2nd edition, Routledge, 2018.

van Krieken, Robert. "Georg Franck's The Economy of Attention: Mental Capitalism and the Struggle for Attention." *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2019, pp. 3–7.

Williams, James. *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*. Cambridge UP, 2018.

Wu, Tim. *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2016.