

The Battle for Attention

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This cultural revolution could not have come so far so fast without tapping into a very personal resource, located in the inner realm of conscious experience: human attention. There is growing recognition that attention has become an exceedingly valuable and hotly contested commodity.¹ It is also sometimes noticed that the market in this resource has a strange and seemingly objectionable structure, in that the owner of the resource would usually prefer that it not be sold and is almost never the one who pockets the proceeds from the sale.

It is hard to think of any other “commodity”—supposing we are willing to bring it under that ominous and omnivorous term—that is as crucial as attention to the tenor of our daily lives. When attention is depleted, there can be no heightened passion, no true friendship, no love. Without attention, we are not genuinely available to anyone at all—not to our children, not to our work associates, not to the strangers walking past us on the sidewalk. Even our most private deeds unfold at arm’s length without the perfecting consummation of enthusiasm. Attention has these enormous powers because it serves as the portal to thinking and acting. No course of activity can so much as suggest itself to us unless our attention is structured by some awareness of its possibility. And no activity fully worthy of a human being can blossom unless it is carried forward and completed by avid attention to the valuable possibilities latent in it.

It is, then, a matter of no small consequence that this resource is now so heavily exploited. Indeed, commercial competition for it appears to be making a significant contribution to one of the defining psychological maladies of our age: attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). There is a well-documented positive correlation between increased screen time during childhood and subsequent diagnoses of ADHD.² Nearly one in five American children between the ages of eleven and seventeen has been diagnosed with ADHD.³ Of those who have been diagnosed, more than half are having their condition treated with

powerful psychoactive stimulants.⁴ We are medicating children (and, increasingly, adults) in rapidly growing numbers in hopes of reclaiming our capacity for sustained attention. It would be a stunning coincidence if the rise of this epidemic were not due in large part to the simultaneous rise of fierce competition for the resource we are now trying so desperately to repossess.

The first harbingers of this problem were discernible even at the humble beginnings of the age of commercial marketing. As Emily Fogg Mead (mother of Margaret Mead, and a brilliant thinker in her own right) explained in 1901, “The successful advertisement is obtrusive. It continually forces itself upon the attention. It may be on signboards, in the streetcar, or on the page of a magazine. Everyone reads it involuntarily. It is a subtle, persistent, unavoidable presence that creeps into the reader’s inner consciousness.”⁵ This intrusion into the public consciousness had advanced sufficiently by 1925 that future president Herbert Hoover, then secretary of commerce, was moved to praise the assembled executives of the Associated Advertising Clubs of the World in the following terms:

You have devised an artful ingenuity in forms and mediums of advertising. The landscape has become your vehicle as well as the press. In the past, wish, want, and desire were the motive forces in economic progress. Now you have taken over the job of creating desire. In economics the torments of desire in turn creates [sic] demand, and from demand we create production, and thence around the cycle we land with increased standards of living.⁶

The cycle described by Hoover counts as virtuous under any outlook that gives priority to increasing gross domestic product—which is to say, almost any currently influential political position. We continue to make efforts to stoke the cycle today. Yet there is a vast difference in ubiquity and effectiveness between the magazine ads and signboards that so concerned Emily Fogg Mead and the various electronic screens to which we now devote so large a share of our daily attention. What was once a peripheral nuisance has become a perpetual assault. This is what has made it possible to bring the acculturation of children and adolescents and the continuous reacculturation of adults within the ambit of the economy.

The battle for attention has changed not only in intensity but in form. Mead was interested in the direct appeal for attention made by advertisements themselves. But it is not the ads themselves that command the lion's share of our attention now. The job is done, instead, by the enterprises known as attention brokers. This market sector aims to harvest the resource of human attention so that it can be auctioned, via lightning-fast automated processes, to the highest bidder. The profitability of these corporations depends in large part on the number of eyeballs attending to their offerings. But it also depends on the quality of the harvest. Attention is generally most valuable when it is uncritical and suggestible, though for some (usually political) purposes its value is enhanced when it is inflected by anger or hatred.

The time and attention we now devote to our various “black mirrors” has become an astonishingly profitable commodity. Seven of the ten most valuable companies in the world today are either in the attention brokerage business or in the business of making the hardware and software this market sector requires.⁷ If the net effect of this market sector is the unplanned socialization of children and resocialization of adults, then (re)socialization is, by a very wide margin, the most heavily capitalized undertaking of the contemporary economy. The embedding of the culture in the economy, then, is not a peripheral economic phenomenon. It is, in the most literal sense, a big deal.

Proselytizing Without True Believers

It is not easy to get a clear-eyed view of the dimensions of this transmutation, since we are still in the middle of it. As Hegel said about such matters, the owl of Minerva (i.e., wisdom, in the form of clarity about a deep cultural change) flies only at dusk, and we have probably only reached midafternoon. Still, I am prepared to venture that this engulfing of culture by the market will appear in retrospect as one of history's more thorough and far-reaching revolutions in value—comparable in depth and eventual ripple effects to the Christianization of the late Roman world. What inclines me to offer this bold prediction is not merely the global reach of the change under discussion, nor merely its

unprecedented capacity to penetrate nearly every passing moment of life with its “glad tidings.” What most strongly inclines me to regard the change as radical is that its basic dynamics beggar description.

For example, we might be tempted to say that what we are witnessing is the rise of a novel culture with increasingly global reach, promulgated by an equally novel form of acculturation. This would not be flatly wrong, but it carries a penumbra of suppositions and connotations that simply do not fit our moment. A culture, we are inclined to think, is a way of seeing, thinking, and acting, internalized by some group of humans and passed down to their children over some stretch of generations, that provides a shared orientation to life and a shared set of customs, ideals, institutions, and practices. A culture shapes our predeliberative sense of the world around us and the meaningful actions it makes possible. Acculturation, in turn, is the process by which we pass along to the next generation a form of life that we ourselves have internalized and that expresses our sense of how it is good for us to live and to be.

This picture of culture and its relation to acculturation is a bedrock element of our sense of what we human beings have in common. We would be astonished to discover a human community that did not attempt to pass along to its children a form of life that had won the affirmation of its elders. We would be utterly flabbergasted to discover a community that went to great lengths to pass along a form of life that its elders regarded as seriously deficient or mistaken. Yet we have slipped unawares into precisely this bizarre arrangement. We devote an extraordinary share of our accumulated wealth and creative talent to the task of imprinting the young with an evaluative outlook most of us view with abiding suspicion.

The intrusion into our attention of commercial messages is by no means the whole of the change underway. To take its full measure, we would have to consider the effects on our psyches of social media, smartphones, and an array of virtual experiences, including the video games that so thoroughly claimed the attention of my sons when they were children. Yet commercial advertisement has

the benefit of being a quantifiable phenomenon. Hence, it permits us to begin to take the measure of this change. Consider, then, the following statistics. The average six-year-old in the United States sees 40,000 commercial messages per year and can name 200 brands.⁸ Worldwide expenditures on advertising are expected to exceed \$800 billion in 2023⁹ and to approach \$350 billion in the United States alone.¹⁰ By comparison, the total annual budget of the Vatican for all purposes is about \$860 million.¹¹ Even if the Vatican devoted half of its annual budget to proselytism, its budget for reshaping the minds of the citizenry of the world would be barely more than 1/2000th of the amount spent each year on commercial advertising.

This might seem an inapt comparison. After all, advertisers are not attempting to win converts to a religion. They are trying to sell goods and services. Further, their messages are not all the same. Each is trying to sell a different good or service. If the message of one advertiser meets with success, this will often mean failure for some other advertiser. Yet there is a common core to the messages advertisers put before our minds: They tell us that consumption is a centrally important pathway to the happy life, and that a wide range of corporations have made it their purpose to help us along this pathway. That is, they provide a picture of the good life and an ideological justification of the prevailing economic order in terms of that picture of the good life. They invite us to enjoy a passive reconciliation with the social order. One simply eases into the armchair or feels the instantaneous surge of the car at the touch of the accelerator, and directly experiences how the world of things has been sculpted by others so as to guarantee its responsiveness to the wishes it has itself helped to uncork.

These palpable signs of what economists are wont to call (misleadingly, I think) our consumer sovereignty might well dull our taste for political sovereignty, breeding acquiescence in oligarchy or corporatocracy. If so, then corporate interests do not find their way into politics only by hiring lobbyists and by paying to amplify the speech of favored candidates. These interests are continually waging a campaign that is political in the broadest sense—a campaign to sustain the unreflective allegiance of the populace to the prevailing form of socioeconomic life.

Aside from this possible threat to political autonomy, advertising promulgates a particular, highly dubious conception of the human good. This picture of the good life may well be too fragmentary to count as what the political philosopher John Rawls would call a “comprehensive conception” of the human good, but it is suited to serve as an element of such conceptions. The \$650 billion worth of commercial messages that make their bid each year for the eyes and ears of the world are a de facto form of proselytism on behalf of the class of comprehensive conceptions of the human good that give this consumerist element a central place.

If indeed this does count as a form of proselytism, it is the most potent sort of proselytism the world has ever seen. It makes a more successful bid for the continuous attention of humankind, and does more to shape the actual perspectives, daily activities, and desires of human beings, than any prior program of proselytism. Yet what is unprecedented about this proselytism is not its scope or success but its automaticity. It has no need of true believers. Those who create and disseminate its communiqués have reason to do their jobs, and to make their messages maximally effective, even if they do not believe the specific product they are peddling to be good, and even if they view consumerism with deep ambivalence.

We cannot say with empirical certainty that this global proselytism goes forward without true believers, but I have a hunch that it does. The world business community would not waste \$650 billion per year on ads that did not work. At the same time, though, I doubt that this massive advertising effort is bringing consumers’ considered evaluative judgments into line with the desires and actions to which it gives rise. It makes reluctant consumers of us, uneasy with our own desires.

This conjecture fits nicely with the empirical evidence I have been able to find. For instance, it makes sense of a survey that found that in the United States, home of the world’s most avid consumers, more than 80 percent of the population believed that their fellow Americans bought and consumed far too

much and that young people were objectionably obsessed with material acquisitions.¹² The survey respondents cannot all have been right yet all have been acting on the judgments the survey unveiled. The idea of the reluctant consumer also helps to explain why there is hardly a single serious thinker who unapologetically champions consumerism, despite its pervasive and growing influence over actual human behavior.¹³ It explains, in other words, why consumerism and distaste for consumerism have arisen together, as two halves of a single remarkably successful psychological form.

There are reasons to suspect, then, that this program of proselytism does in fact go forward with relatively few true believers. That is, it might well be the case that its agents of persuasion would prefer a world that was less consumerist, yet realize that if they were to refuse to perform their role, someone else would happily take their place. If these ruminations are on target, the contemporary phenomenon of automatic consumerist proselytism would seem to count as a “tragedy of the commons.” Everyone supposedly would prefer a less consumerist cultural environment even at the cost of the personal benefits each of us would have to forego to sustain such an environment. The difference from more familiar tragedies of the commons (e.g., global warming, depletion of fish stocks, overgrazing of pastures) lies in the fact that the public good under threat is a feature of the cultural rather than the natural environment. So we might call it a tragedy of the cultural commons.

In a 1972 US Supreme Court case much discussed by political philosophers, *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, the majority ruled that Wisconsin’s mandatory schooling requirements impinged upon the religious liberty of Amish parents because it required them to immerse their children each school day in an alien way of life—one that was deeply hostile to their religious beliefs and values. The Amish believe in working together, fostering strong communal bonds, living a simple and self-sufficient life, and refusing any technological mediation of their relationship to the earth and to the labor essential for subsistence. Stating the Court’s majority opinion, Chief Justice Warren Burger wrote that Amish children who attended public schools remote from their own communities faced “a hydraulic insistence on conformity to majoritarian standards.” The Court found

that this “hydraulic” pressure imposed an undue burden on the free exercise of religion, partly because it interfered with parents’ efforts to pass along their religious convictions and way of life to their children.¹⁴

If the picture I have offered of consumerist proselytism is roughly on target, then almost all of us bear a burden very similar to the one the Supreme Court thought the Amish should not have to bear. Almost all of us are at least mildly estranged from the best-amplified and most attention-grabbing symbolic speech through which the culture shapes its own future by sculpting the souls of its offspring. In a sense, we all share the lot of besieged cultural minorities—a truly unprecedented condition that can be explained only by the embedding of acculturation within the unguided dynamics of the market.