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ATTENTION AND ITS CRISIS IN DIGITAL SOCIETY

Enrico Campo



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Attention and its Crisis in Digital Society

In the context of debates surrounding the effects of new technologies on our mental faculties, particularly the attention span, this volume addresses the notion of a deterioration of attention, and the related ideas of cognitive overload, an inability to concentrate, and attention deficit disorder. Through a new conceptualization of attention based not on individualistic or universalistic approaches, but centered instead on the cultural and social variability of cognitive processes and the multiplicity of forces and environments that encourage, stimulate, and inhibit certain cognitive mechanisms, the author rejects the idea of a degradation or crisis of attention and proposes an alternative vision of the problem of attention in contemporary societies. Placing cultural conventions, social norms, and ecological environments at the forefront of our understanding of individual and collective attention, *Attention and its Crisis in Digital Society* will appeal to scholars of sociology, psychology, and philosophy with interests in social theory, cognitive processes, and the criticisms often levelled at digital society and new technologies.

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Attention and its Crisis in Digital Society

Enrico Campo

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Introduction

“Our brain is under attack” is the alarm cry resonating from numerous sources. The recent Netflix docudrama *The Social Dilemma* is but one of the more recent examples. As its writer and director Jeff Orlowski clearly put it: “We did countless interviews with people really talking about our attention and a mindfulness crisis, just a cognition crisis, where we’re losing our ability to think deeply and critically because we are constantly being interrupted, just 24/7” (Breznican 2020). This docudrama is the expression of a generalized social concern for the effects that new technologies have on the neuronal configuration of our mental processes and particularly on attention. The underlying logic is, as we will see, common to many approaches: the “digital revolution” has undermined our ability to remain focused on a single task for a long period of time.¹ Numerous articles by the national and international press have sounded the alarm. Not only that, but a number of other disparate problems are now classified as disorders or deficits of attention. Widespread boredom and apathy, poor academic performance, difficulties in memorization, multitasking, dispersion, and poor productivity at work are all considered phenomena related to attention.

These concerns are well founded, but the aim of this book is to go beyond a simple contrast between attention and distraction to try to understand the role of digital technologies within the wider social system: to really understand the challenges we face we cannot limit ourselves to merely looking at the more or less direct effect that new devices have on the reconfiguration of our brains, we must also analyze the social organization of attention. The basic idea, which will be developed for further study, is that we never turn our attention to something in complete isolation but, in fact, are always in relation to something else and to others, and these relationships must be taken into consideration if we want to understand the changes induced by digital technologies: “rather than being presented as a generic human faculty that is supposedly given, attention is approached [...] as something that is *produced, learned, organized and reflected upon*” (Grandjean and Loute 2019, 13).

Our objective is to problematize the dominant approaches that address the problem solely from an individual point of view and in this brief

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introduction we will look at two of the key elements that structure many of the publications on the subject: the idea that an excess of stimuli necessarily leads to overload and the contrast between attention and distraction.

Both of these aspects are expressed, in their most extreme conceptualization, in the 2008 book by U.S. journalist Maggie Jackson (2008) notably titled *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming of the Dark Age*. This text, particularly effective in giving voice to a widespread fear, well summarizes and clearly expresses the worry that new media ultimately risk compromising our superior cognitive abilities (if they haven't done so already). It is probably appropriate to consider the author's suggested diagnosis "apocalyptic," to use the dichotomy made famous by Umberto Eco [1932–2016] (1994), and such an approach carries with it a large risk of falling into an explicit technological determinism. According to Jackson, we are heading toward a new Dark Age, which should be interpreted as the age of distraction. From this perspective, we are entering a phase of cultural decline and it is the erosion of attention itself that is the key to understanding this turning point bringing us closer to a new Dark Age.

Nicholas Carr's book, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (2010), on the other hand, presents a superior level of refinement than the aforementioned conceptual approach, but is driven by similar concerns. The text, published in over 25 countries, has been a great international success and was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2011. A slightly earlier article by Carr titled "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" perfectly expressed the anxieties the book was written to respond to: the Internet and, more generally, new media subject us to such sensory pressure that it is impossible to cultivate many of the skills traditionally associated with intelligence, such as reflection, rational thought, and an understanding of complex and difficult texts. Our cognitive processes seem destined to remain at the superficial level of *The Shallows*, which recalls the dimension to which we are supposedly condemned due both to our difficulty in concentrating for long periods of time on a single task as well as our need to perform a series of cyclical activities like checking our inbox, smartphone messages, or surfing the Internet or social networks. In order to understand the relationship between technological apparatuses and cognitive processes, Carr revisits the well-known approach of Marshall McLuhan [1911–1980]. The media are not considered merely vehicles of content, but influence the shape of mental processes. Carr (2010, 7) writes:

what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. Whether I'm online or not, my mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.

The issue of the two-way relationship between "intellectual technologies" and cognitive processes is certainly not new and is not exclusively linked to

digital technology. In this sense, Carr does well to recall the considerations of Friedrich Nietzsche [1844–1900] regarding the mutations that occurred in his method of writing and thinking following the use (albeit for a short period of time) of the Malling-Hansen Writing Ball typewriter.² The great novelty that the Internet and new media introduce concerns the possibility of always being connected in real time and the ease of accessing engaging sensory stimulation; factors which affect our neuronal plasticity. Based on a long and detailed review of the results offered by neuroscience, the author argues that the synaptic organization that makes lasting concentration possible is progressively being replaced in favor of the search for ever-greater stimulation. His brain, writes Carr (2010, 16), “was hungry. It was demanding to be fed the way the Net fed it – and the more it was fed, the hungrier it became. [...] I missed my old brain.”

The “old brain” that Carr (2010, 10) refers to is that trained and formed by reading books, at the basis of the “the linear, literary mind [that] has been at the center of art, science, and society.” Although the author acknowledges that new technologies have undoubtedly facilitated access to a quantity of information and experiences unimaginable until recently, he believes we are ultimately “alienating” that which is most authentic to us: “the tools of the mind amplify and in turn numb the most intimate, the most human, of our natural capacities – those for reason, perception, memory, emotion” (Carr 2010, 211). There does not then seem to be any advantage in this new development of cognitive processes since, on the basis of the research he reviewed, the ability to understand texts is considerably reduced even when these, instead of being presented according to the linear canon of traditional paper printing, are structured following the hypertext model. The greater richness of hypertext, and of current web pages that combine text with images and videos in particular, increases both the overall cognitive load as well as the ability to be distracted, so that reading performance is strongly compromised.

This reasoning might even seem convincing but as we proceed along our path we will see how the situation is indeed much more complex than that. Let’s begin with the idea of an excess of information and the related overload. It is in fact quite consistent with our daily experience that as the number of things I pay attention to increases the quality of my attention decreases. For instance, it is certainly true that I can drive, listen to the radio, and reply to messages at the same time. As it is also probably true that I am not carrying out these tasks to the maximum of my potential and, if I am driving, such a situation could even prove fatal. Accordingly, those who argue that an excess of information reduces our ability to pay attention to a few stimuli in a focused manner are motivated by well-founded concerns.³ The problem, however, consists in the possibility of identifying our limits and determining when the “excess” occurs, that is, in determining the amount of information that we can actually manage. Carr’s passage just above and his nostalgia for the “old brain” exemplify how concerns

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about overload are often made on the basis of an idyllic and idealized past in which information was more easily managed because it was present in much smaller quantities. Yet, we are not the first to feel overloaded and it must be conceded that considerations of the same tenor can be found in many other historical periods and even in ancient times, where the possibility of accessing information was certainly much less than today (North 2011).⁴ Moreover, upon further reflection, we are generally always in a situation of “excess,” in the sense that there are always a large number of stimuli in our perceptual field to which we can potentially direct our attention, but which in fact we exclude. The perception of excess is thus a relative measure that does not simply depend upon the amount of information circulating in the system, but also on our ability to manage it, and so cannot be measured in absolute terms. The way in which information is managed therefore becomes relevant: overload cannot simply be thought of in individual terms, we must also focus on collective mechanisms for managing this overload which “is rooted in both technological and social constraints and it is only the simultaneous existence of these constraints that generates [it]” (Roda 2019, 13). In this regard, Ann Blair (2010) demonstrated how the sensation of an excess of information prompted Renaissance humanists and seventeenth-century philosophers to develop useful tools for organizing it: universal bibliographies that collected information on all published books, indexes that allowed them to consult a book without reading it in its entirety, encyclopedias that brought knowledge together in summarized form. Even if we take them for granted today, these tools were specifically invented to support and better manage the increase in information. It is also important to consider that, for most of the history of the press, the practice of reading only pertained to literate elites (Eisenstein 1983). We must at least relativize then the epochal significance of a possible “eclipse” of the linear mind since the activity of reading printed books has never been the dominant form of media consumption.

To discuss cognitive overload due to an excess of information without historically contextualizing it and without looking at the social mechanisms of managing this overload is therefore a limited approach, and leads us to read the “crisis of attention” in terms of single individuals (and thus risks individualizing a social problem). Another possible error made by catastrophic perspectives is the idealization of focal attention, defined by its opposition to distraction. It would seem that those who foresee the coming of an era of distraction consider the latter to be the opposite of attention. However, this dichotomy is not so clear-cut; defining attention and distraction may seem trivial but, as we will see in the following chapter, it is an extremely complex task. We can anticipate here that attention is necessary in order to select stimuli, filter them, and modulate their reception. Distraction, in the same sense, can be understood in many ways, but reading it as the opposite of attention proves rather unfruitful (Sztulman and Zabunyan 2021). Indeed, if we exclude some limited phenomena, however

interesting they may be, we are in fact always attentive to something, perhaps at different levels of our personality.

The normative dimension of distraction is evident: I call myself distracted or am accused of such when I am not directing my attention to what I *should*. I am concentrated in the direction of an object, when I should turn my attention toward something else. In this sense, “distraction” is not the opposite of attention (I am paying attention to something else) and cannot be synonymous with superficial or “divided” attention. But not only: consider that, due to this normative component, distraction can also have an emancipatory value. To the extent that I am not attentive toward what I *should* be attentive to, I might discover a new object, a new visual angle; I might discover that I don’t necessarily have to be attentive to the object that is normatively imposed on my attention. Those who don’t pay attention as we expect them to can actualize hidden possibilities.

Théodule Ribot [1839–1916], one of the pioneers of the psychology of attention, clearly explicated – negatively – the strictly normative nature of distraction. In his *Psychology of Attention* in the chapter dedicated to “pathological states of attention,” and despite his rejection of the opposition between attention and distraction, he identifies among attentional diseases a distinctive form of person whose intelligence is unable to fix itself on something in a stable manner, and remains in a “state of perpetual mobility” typical of hysterics, “women, and children” (Ribot 1889, 115).⁵ It is an interesting list, because it also seems to refer to categories of people that do not share the hegemonic “systems of relevance.” Eviatar Zerubavel (2015) – whose works we will discuss in detail later on – mentions a child at the zoo who was “distracted” in the sense that he paid no attention to the animals. In the episode described it seems that what attracted the child’s attention were not the exotic, unfamiliar animals, which were socially considered to be interesting, but the bars of the cages. There is no need to dwell on other examples of this type, but it is important to underline that what we consider relevant and worthy of attracting our attention is the result of social conventions and that the so-called state of distraction can lead us to question those same conventions we would otherwise take for granted.

Consequently, since it is incorrect to surreptitiously contrast attention and distraction, it is equally wrong to think of our own time as the era of distraction. We have seen in fact that “distraction” is a normative concept; it must always then be specified what one is distracted from. Consider traffic accidents caused by the use of smartphones which would seem to be on the rise. We could say that a driver is distracted from the task of driving, while at the same time is attentive to their phone, and could therefore be attentive to their family and interpersonal relationships (talking to their partner, children, or friends) or to work (responding to an urgent email for example) and so on. In short, the driver may have been attentive to many things, among which the task of driving. In general, rather than reading this era as the epoch of distraction, perhaps we should investigate the hypothesis of

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Paul North (2011): that ours is the age of attention. But at this point we must understand what attention is. As we will see in the next chapter, it is even possible to argue that attention does not exist.

Notes

- 1 A highly criticized report of research conducted by Microsoft Canada contended that the average duration of our attention on a single object is plummeting: while it was twelve seconds in 2000, by 2013 it was eight, a second less than the attention span of a goldfish (Microsoft Canada 2015; Patino 2019).
- 2 On this topic see Kittler (2010, 200–214).
- 3 This feeling of excess is likely to be much more pressing in some spheres of life than in others. The academic world is certainly one of these, for example, and national and international policies based on a “publish or perish” logic do little but fuel this sentiment (though it is obviously not the only negative consequence). The natural outcome of this situation is that, given the limited attention available, the products of academia, for the most part, are normally left unread: a “Readerless Republic of Letters,” to borrow Citton’s (2013) expression, in which many articles and books are made to be written (and not read). See also the dated, but interesting, article by Hamilton (1990).
- 4 Consider, for example, the statement by Charles Tiphaigne de la Roche [1722–1774], eighteenth-century author, who asked himself: “how to break through the crowd” and “how to attract attention,” now that “everyone has started writing and it is easier to find an author than a reader” (in Citton 2017, 12).
- 5 When the English edition is not explicitly mentioned, all translations are by the author.

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1 Does Attention Exist?

1.1 In Search of a Definition

A first, almost obligatory step for anyone wanting to study attention consists in trying to define it in order to delimit the field of investigation. The preliminary question to ask has a vague metaphysical flavor: *what is attention?* Philosophers and, above all, psychologists have tried to provide an answer to this question but, as we will see in the following pages, finding a clear and unanimous definition of “attention” is anything but simple. In fact, the debate on attention during the long history of psychology has also been a debate on what is meant by “attention” and on what its main functions and mechanisms are. The metaphors used to tackle these problems are numerous and, due to the difficulty of finding a common solution, the existence of attention as an autonomous process has been questioned several times (Johnston and Dark 1986; Allport 1993; Pashler 1998; Fernandez-Duque and Johnson 1999; Anderson 2011; Wu 2014). In this chapter, we will outline some salient features and then discuss the semantic autonomy of the concept, particularly in relation to that of consciousness.

Very often, studies dedicated to attention begin their investigation with its definition by William James [1842–1910] found in his *Principles of Psychology*:

Everyone knows what attention is. 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.

(James 1890, 403–4)

This definition is particularly useful for several reasons. First, it provides an initial delimitation of the field of study as focus and concentration on certain stimuli, which also implies the exclusion of others present. Attention would thus seem to be the invariably limited ability to make a selection between different stimuli, both internal and external, to which we could potentially direct it.

In fact, the concepts of selection and the limitation of attentional resources are among the most used for the study and definition of attention and immediately render its functioning intelligible: since our cognitive resources are not infinite, it is necessary to deploy them on a finite number of objects in order to process them adequately. As we will see in the next chapter, this first delimitation of the field, though seemingly simple, actually conceals several pitfalls: the same concept of “selection” can assume different valences depending on the context in which it is used. Moreover, selection alone does not do justice to the wide variety of mechanisms that guide attention, and it is no coincidence that to this James also added the idea of “concentration.” There is not only a quantitative dimension, so to speak – the selection of stimuli – but also a qualitative aspect concerning how they are processed. It is clear, for example, that when we read a book we are able to exclude many internal and external stimuli thanks to attention, but it is also true that we have more difficulty concentrating if we are tired and we may even read a page and be unable to recall anything we just read. In this case, attention also seems to imply an effort that allows us to better focus our mental energies on a specific task.

This example also helps clarify a fundamental aspect that underlies our study: “Attention is not of one kind, so rather than searching for a single definition, we need to consider attention as having a number of different varieties” (Styles 2006, 3). That is, it is multifaceted, has different varieties, and can be broken down into many mental operations. As such, despite the fact that everyone knows what attention is – in that common sense gives us a clear enough idea what attention is for the purposes of everyday life – there is no agreement among scholars on a precise definition of attention and on the mechanisms that regulate its functioning. Thus, there seems to be a contradiction those seeking to analyze attention must continuously face: though its functioning and its definition appear self-evident, it is an extremely difficult category to circumscribe at the same time. As soon as the study of attention is deepened, what seemed to be a unitary construct begins to crumble. This is why Harold Pashler has proposed overturning the Jamesian assumption and beginning from the opposite position: it is preferable to assume “instead that no one knows what attention is, and that there may not even be an ‘it’ there to be known about (although of course there might be)” (Pashler 1998, 1).

A question we must ask then concerns the semantic autonomy of the term “attention.” It could in fact be that attention does not exist as a process with its own autonomy and that we use this word to indicate some phenomena that are scarcely related to each other. In this case, it would probably be preferable to abandon this term in favor of others.

1.2 One Word, Many Processes

The multifaceted nature of attention is also expressed in the varied use we make of it in daily life: the same term is applied in the most disparate situations and in reference to heterogeneous mental operations. Let’s imagine

an everyday scenario to illustrate how the concept is made use of in our common sense understanding: Peter and Paula stroll down a busy street in the city center until, at a certain moment, Peter abruptly interrupts the conversation and points toward a building about 30 m away and invites Paula to turn her attention toward a vase behind which a very colorful parrot is hidden.¹ Paula directs her gaze in the direction indicated, but is unable to immediately find the vase. After a few seconds, with Peter's help, Paula is able to identify the precise area in which to focus her gaze. Both then focus their attention in the same direction, waiting for the parrot to make its appearance, but suddenly the sound of flapping wings attracts their attention: a dove has taken flight from a balcony next to the one they were watching. Realizing they had the wrong target, the two return their gaze toward the vase. The parrot finally takes flight as well and our friends can follow its movement with their eyes.

How many aspects of attention did we refer to in this short, imagined scenario which would probably only last a few seconds? We used the term attention often, but were we always referring to the same cognitive process? Or perhaps the term attention is ambiguous? Let's try to answer these questions by breaking down the process analytically, in order to focus on different aspects.

- 1 Peter and Paula are engaged in a conversation, so their attention is directed toward this coordinated action (and not toward what people around them are saying or the noise of the street, for example).
- 2 Peter's attention is attracted *automatically* (i.e., without the specific volition of Peter) by something that, for some reason, stands out in his field of vision (the colored parrot which is unusual, unexpected, and unfamiliar in an urban context).
- 3 Peter tells Paula to turn her attention to an object (the vase) which is near the thing that attracted his attention (the parrot).
- 4 Paula voluntarily directs her attention to the area indicated by Peter, but at first is unable to identify the vase.
- 5 Thanks to Peter's help, Paula identifies the vase, focuses her attention in that direction, and waits for the parrot to appear.
- 6 At this point, however, a noise distracts the two friends: a dove takes flight from a nearby balcony. Their attention is then automatically drawn to the dove.
- 7 Paula and Peter redirect their attention toward the original target (the vase) until they are finally able to follow the flying parrot with their gaze.

As is apparent in this breakdown, we continued using the word "attention" but referred to different, though connected, processes. For example, with regard to the first point, attention stands out as the ability to *select* a preferential stimulus (the conversation) to the detriment of others; thus the

concept of attention appears above all as the ability to exclude certain stimuli. But not only, because our friends, during their conversation, are able to coordinate each other's attentional processes in an orchestrated way.

A very different mechanism is at work in the second point: here something seems to have a sort of magnetic power capable of breaking the very exclusion mechanism we just referred to. Or, to give another example, look at the fifth point we've identified in which a process different from the others seems to be active, through which attention seems to improve or strengthen the perception of a stimulus with respect to the task to be completed (the search for the parrot).

This example clearly demonstrates how one of the greatest difficulties that is systematically encountered in defining attention concerns the pervasiveness and transversality it has in our cognitive activity: substantially every practical and theoretical process is attentionally guided and modulated. Yet, it is precisely from this initial difficulty that we can attempt to further specify our field of research. Unlike other mental activities, attention does not have its own specific product but transversely concerns all the other dimensions of our cognitive life: although attention does not have an exclusive object, it intervenes in some way in the other functions, regulating and modulating their functioning. According to Natalie Depraz, it is precisely this concept of modulation that best renders the wide variety of attentional processes without mutilating their richness. For the French philosopher, Husserlian phenomenology, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience all converge in considering attention as an "embodied modulator" (Depraz 2004, 14) that is present in every mental activity:

Modulate means to vary, inflect, or adapt to different cases or contexts. In music the term "modulation" has a precise meaning: it is the variation of accent, pitch, or intensity of a sound at the moment of its emission; in biology it is the living being as a whole that can be considered a process of modulation and this marks its identification in its metastable form [...]. This physical, sonic, and biological interpretation of the process of modulation recalls our approach to attention as an original dimension of consciousness: it is a factor of organic orientation and an indication of intentional acts; it accompanies and accentuates them and causes them to mutate.

(Depraz 2014, 170)

Depraz is saying that the ontological status of objects changes in relation to the degree of attention we give them. Think of our example: if the parrot had not attracted Peter's attention, it would have remained in the extreme periphery of his field of vision, completely ignored – and therefore in fact, from Peter's point of view, the parrot would never have existed.

Attention is therefore transversal, in the sense that it is situated at the intersection of different cognitive activities, "is not monolithic, but involves