

# DEEP WORK IN THE ATTENTION ECONOMY



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**ICM 501**

**10/11/2020**



## Executive Summary

With the rise of technology, a new form of economy has developed. This new economy seeks not minerals or oil as a resource, but an individual's attention (Hepburn, 2014). With thousands of hours of content published each day, there is no way for a user to absorb all of it. Since we can't consume everything that is out there, we have to be selective of what we set our attention on. This is something we actively do on a daily basis, as our attention is constantly being challenged (Crawford 2014).

Companies are now using different methods to draw our attention to them. Silicon Valley has been the most successful in this economy, due to distracting smartphones and social media apps. While before we would shift our attention around what interests us, these apps and devices use algorithms and notifications to entice us to keep returning to their platforms and never leave. Once they have our attention, they can then use it to market to us.

To succeed in this new attention economy, we must develop new methods to gain back control from these platforms. Instead of scrolling online, learning to work deeply and finding a balance with social media are steps to regaining control.

# **The Problem**

In the new attention economy, our attention is being pulled between multiple forms of content at a time. From social media, smartphones, and more, our attention is at a limit of what it can handle. Thus, we are in a constant state of distraction and cannot focus our attention on the things that will benefit us in the long-term. As technology has become more engrained into our daily lives, we are all a victim of the attention economy. Whether it is constant notifications on our phones or the nagging feeling we are missing something important on social media, our attention is being diverted constantly (Mintzer, 2020). It also does not help that the creators of these smartphones and apps are competing with each other to be the one to hold our attention the most. If we do not address these issues, we will continue to lose our attention to these apps and services that only mean to make money off us.

## **How Silicon Valley Capitalizes on the Attention Economy**

Before we can begin, we must look into the attention economy and how it has grown into the force that it is today. When we usually think of economics, we think of supply of resources and the demand of the market for those resources. Demand rises when a supply for a resource is low, and when the supply is high the demand decreases. When compared to the attention economy, things are a lot different. Attention economics is a form of economics that focuses on an individual's attention as a resource (Pedrycz, 2013, p. 229). With the onslaught of different apps and services, increasingly these days everything is vying for our attention. From digital streaming services to social media, there is so much content being pushed to us at once now. Realistically, it is impossible to consume all the media that is out there. That is where our attention kicks in. What grabs our attention is what we focus on, and if it does not it goes by the wayside. If one wants to succeed in this new economy, they must be able to part the sea of information to what they want the market to see.

The best at taking advantage of the new attention economy are those in Silicon Valley. The creators of smartphones and social media apps are building their apps and devices to draw

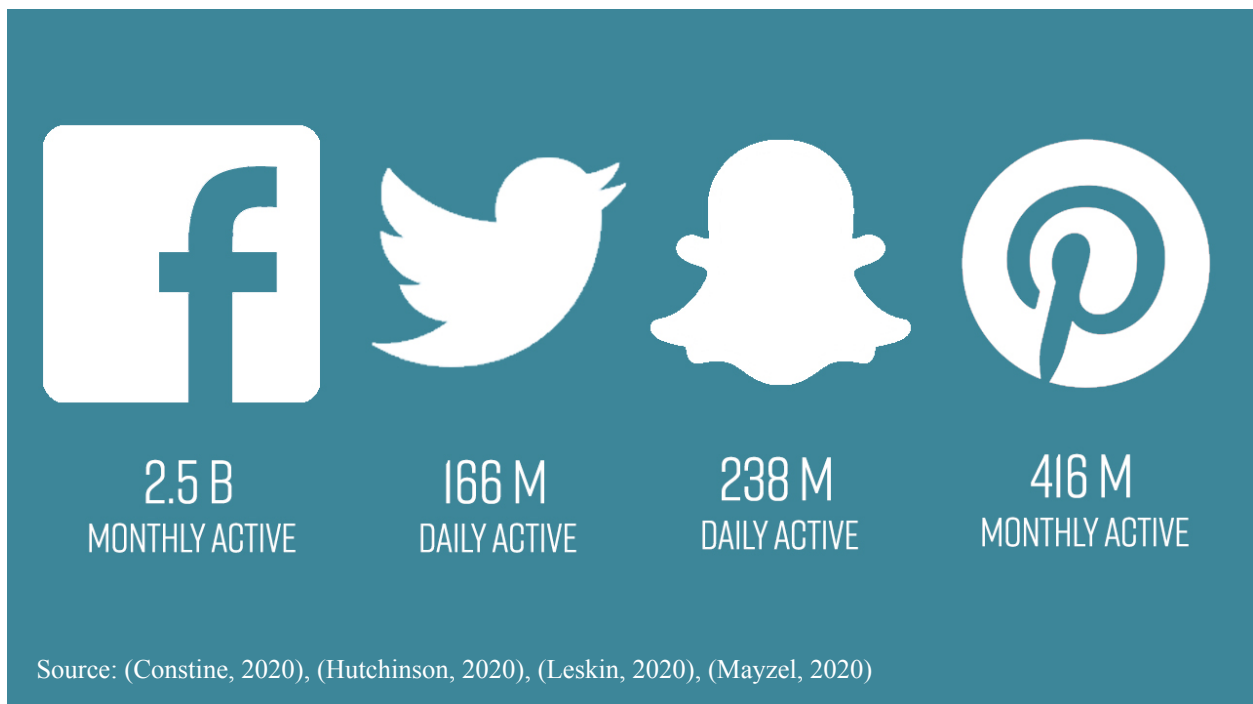
our attention, and keep it as long as possible. When these apps and devices were first released, it was in a limited capacity and intended for a small audience. The year 2004 brought the release of Facebook, but was only available for college students. In 2007 the first iPhone was released, but in a limited capacity compared to the monolith that the iPhone is today. As the years have gone by, these apps and devices have changed substantially to hold more of our attention.

This has not happened accidentally, but by deliberate choice. Brain hacking refers to the ways programmers are building these apps and devices to keep us hooked and coming back (Cooper, 2017). Through a variety of methods, including the need for likes on posts or the constant urge to see if someone has replied to a text, we feel the need keep coming back. By utilizing these tools to keep our attention, we do not divert our focus elsewhere. For the most part, these companies use their tools to keep our attention to market products and sell services (Manson 2020). Facebook does not make money directly from users, as their social media service is free for anyone to sign up for and use. How they profit is through the selling of ads to users from companies. Compared to a newspaper advertisement, that is for the most part general as to appeal to a wide audience, an ad on Facebook uses algorithms to market products specifically to the intended target audience (Haidt, Rose-Stockwell, 2019). Interested in comic books and liked a post about them on Instagram? Here's an ad for the Amazon-produced show *The Boys*, which you can watch free with an Amazon Prime subscription. Finding ways to grab our attention to sell us products is how they succeed. Once they get an individual into their system, it makes it easier to keep them there by providing a drip feed of new content.

These efforts have paid off immensely for these platforms. Currently, Facebook has increased to 1.79 billion daily users, and the monthly usage across the Facebook family of apps, including Instagram and WhatsApp increased 3.14 billion users. Revenue has also gone up for Facebook, now up to \$18.69 billion. While brain hacking and algorithms have helped to increase these numbers to where they are, the coronavirus pandemic also had a major influence on increased daily users (Newton 2020). While the lockdown was in place, instead of going out people were staying at home and going on Facebook. Facebook is not the only platform to have major user growth since the coronavirus pandemic. Twitter had a major increase in users coming

to the platform as well. The social media platform had an increase of 24% of daily active users (Wong, Skillings, 2020). While these platforms allow for easier access to information to keep you safe and healthy during the ongoing pandemic, there are also negative consequences. These new users that are checking into Facebook and Twitter are now being inundated with advertising on the platform. This is also a new group of people these platforms can use their algorithms on to build up their services.

These platforms have also grown immensely thanks to their mobile apps. Previously, users would access Facebook or Twitter through their desktop client. With the launch of smartphones, users could now login to their social media platforms from anywhere. Facebook then set up a ad system that tracks where you go online and what content you click on. They then can use algorithms to focus specific advertisements of interest right to you (Lanchester 2017). When it comes to the attention economy, Silicon Valley has capitalized on the technologies and abilities to take complete advantage of it. What we are still understanding is the effect these platforms will have on our mental state.



What makes it worse is the effect these platforms then have on our mental state. At the beginning social media and smartphones were put on a pedestal for connecting the world and

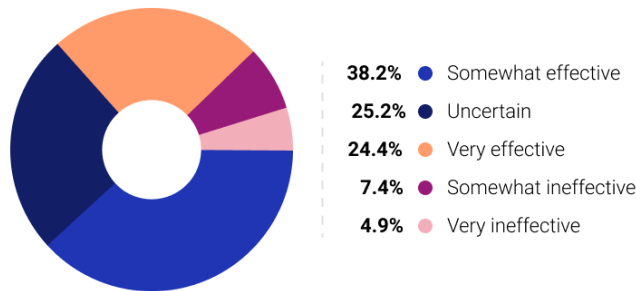
creating a global community. Now however, it could not be further from that. Smartphones have become such a necessary tool for this world that without one we are unable to fully interact with our surroundings. Without one it is like we are lost in the abyss, going downstream without a paddle (Greenfield, 2018). The constant need to keep scrolling has kept us stuck in the moment and not learning from past mistakes. Instead of learning from the past and trying to improve ourselves, we care more about the emotional and the breaking news of the week, the hour, and sometimes the minute (Lenti, 2017). The rise of social media has created filter bubbles online that make us angrier and more divided than ever. This has become even more of an issue with the coronavirus pandemic, and how digital platforms fuel xenophobic attacks on others (Harris, Kurasawa, 2020). While these platforms and devices were made with the best intentions, they are having a negative effect on us. Given these platform's abilities to command our attention is concerning, with what these negative effects will have on us in the longterm.

## **How Do We Fix This?**

The attention economy is not going anywhere. Given the ubiquity of these platforms, they are going to be with us for a very long time. There is one solution, and that is to take back control. Instead of being a passive participant in the attention economy, we must be an active members. One solution to do that, is to work deeply. Deep Work, a term coined by Cal Newport, which entails working in a distraction-free state that allows one to achieve more and improve oneself (Newport, 2016, p. 3). There are many ways to do deep work, but most importantly it involves removing distractions to focus and perform at a high-capacity. How the current attention economy is set up does not allow for something like Deep Work to flourish. Taking time to improve ourselves without distractions means we are not engaging with the system. If we do not engage with the system, we cannot become the targets of this type of product marketing.

Another solution that appears to be a simple one, but can seem dramatic; delete social media (Newport 2020). The removal of social media platforms from personal devices, eliminates a major influence on our attention and frees up more time for other interests. Instead

How effective has paid social media advertising been for your business?



State of Social Report / 2019  
buffer.com/state-of-social-2019



## Social Browsers are Brand-Engaged



54% of Social Browsers use social media to research products  
INDEX 1.44

% of Social Browsers who have done the following in the last month



Source GlobalWebIndex Q1 2018 Base 8,020 Social Browsers aged 16-64



of scrolling Instagram for an hour and coming out of not any better than before, an individual could read a book or engage with in a more stimulating activity. However, as easy as it sounds, deleting social media entirely is not possible for some. For many social media is not exclusively a personal activity, but a requirement in the modern workplace. Over 70% of businesses feel social media marketing is either very or somewhat effective for their business (Buffer, 2019). Social media also has a direct impact on the consumption of users. Over 50% of users research a product to buy on social media (Beer, 2018). Given the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, social media and smartphones help connect families and friends that are unable to meet in-person. Especially at our current state, complete removal from

Source: Above: (Buffer, 2019)  
Below: (Beer, 2018)

social media might be too much. However, taking step back from social media means removing a crucial tool used by many in the attention economy.

## **How This Benefits You**

If done correctly, breaking free of the attention economy has many benefits. Firstly, it will show how much more control we can have over the information presented to us. Instead of having advertisements and products shoved in front of your face 24/7, you have the power to reduce it down to only what you need. Once you have that, you can turn it off and divorce yourself from the madness online. As social media has grown into the monolith it is today, it is almost impossible to believe that there is a life outside of it. The only problem with that is that these Silicon Valley corporations do not want you to believe that notion, because once users feel like they have the power to turn off the faucet the money goes down the drain. Facebook may push its global connectivity idealism as it bettering the world, but what is most important is keeping the money train going.

Another benefit is the realization of how much time is used on these platforms and devices, and ways that time can be used beneficially. By working deeply, there is opportunity to grow your skillset both professionally and personally. In our current system, having a deep work mindset is one that can help excel you in the modern workplace. At a time when most people and business are focused on shallow work, like checking email, having the ability to focus and do more at a deeper level puts you in major focus. When the attention economy is focused on keeping you glued to the screen, the ability to disconnect and focus on a task will make you stand out.

## **Why You Should Care**

As discussed earlier, deleting social media can help reduce the ways companies vie for your attention and keep you hooked on their platforms. Going cold turkey though is not easy for many, as the urge to check in will still be there and it could be easy to crack. That is not entirely

your fault, as these platforms have been constructed and designed to make you want to check in and see what is happening. If you do not, you will be outside the bubble and not in the know. As a first step, there is one method to start removing yourself from social media.

What you can do is limit yourself with a social media cleanse. For one week, delete your most used social media of choice. Whether that is Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, remove it from your phone and sign out on your computer. For the next week, see what life is like without that app. With that app no longer grabbing your attention with bright notifications and pop-ups, what do you end up doing with your time. In addition, keep track of moments when you think of using the app. Why are you thinking about using it, and what are you using it for. Once the week is over, look back at how your life was like without it. If you were able to go without it, then maybe you can keep it deleted and move on. If there was still the feeling like you needed to check in, finding balance is most important. Instead of deleting it, try removing notifications or setting a timer limit on yourself. Make tiny choices to limit yourself, and do more with your free time than the endless scroll (Newport 2016, p. 203).

In addition to finding balance on social media or your phone, make Deep Work a priority in your life. Whether that is taking time every morning to focus on a task or removing distractions from your life, working deeply is now more than ever a priority to succeed in the attention economy. Our attention is being pulled at all times to vapid forms of entertainment, but shifting to a sense of Deep Work will improve yourself.

## **Conclusion**

Matthew Crawford, an author who has written considerable on the attention economy said, "Attention is a resource - a person has only so much of it." (Crawford, 2015). There is no way to engage with everything, as our attention diverts to what interests us. The issue stems when corporations use tactics to entice us artificially, and keep us trapped in their platform. They do not do this to improve us or spread information online. This is done to make money off our eyes through advertisements for businesses. We only have so much time on this Earth, and

we should use our attention on what is important. As much as Silicon Valley wants us to believe that these platforms are important, they only want to keep their control over us for financial gain. The truth is, we as the users have the power to say no. The attention economy is based on the individual's attention, it's time we start letting them know that.

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