

Opinion

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Fight the Powerful Forces Stealing Our Attention

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Members of the Friends of Attention collective.

THE lament is as old as education itself: *The students aren't paying attention.* But today, the problem of flighty or fragmented attention has reached truly catastrophic proportions. High school and college teachers overwhelmingly report that students' capacity for sustained or deep attention has sharply decreased, significantly impeding the forms of study — reading, looking at art, round-table discussions — once deemed central to the liberal arts.

By some measures you are lucky these days to get 47 seconds of focused attention on a discrete task. “Middlemarch” is tough sledding on that timeline. So are most forms of human interaction out of which meaningful life, collective action and political engagement are made.

We are witnessing the dark side of our new technological lives, whose extractive profit models amount to the systematic fracking of human beings: pumping vast quantities of high-pressure media content into our faces to force up a spume of the vaporous and intimate stuff called attention, which now trades on the open market. Increasingly powerful systems seek to ensure that our attention is never truly ours.

In the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution enabled harrowing new forms of exploitation and human misery. Yet through new forms of activity such as trade unions and labor organizing, working people pushed back against the “satanic mills” that compromised their humanity and pressed money out of their blood and bones.

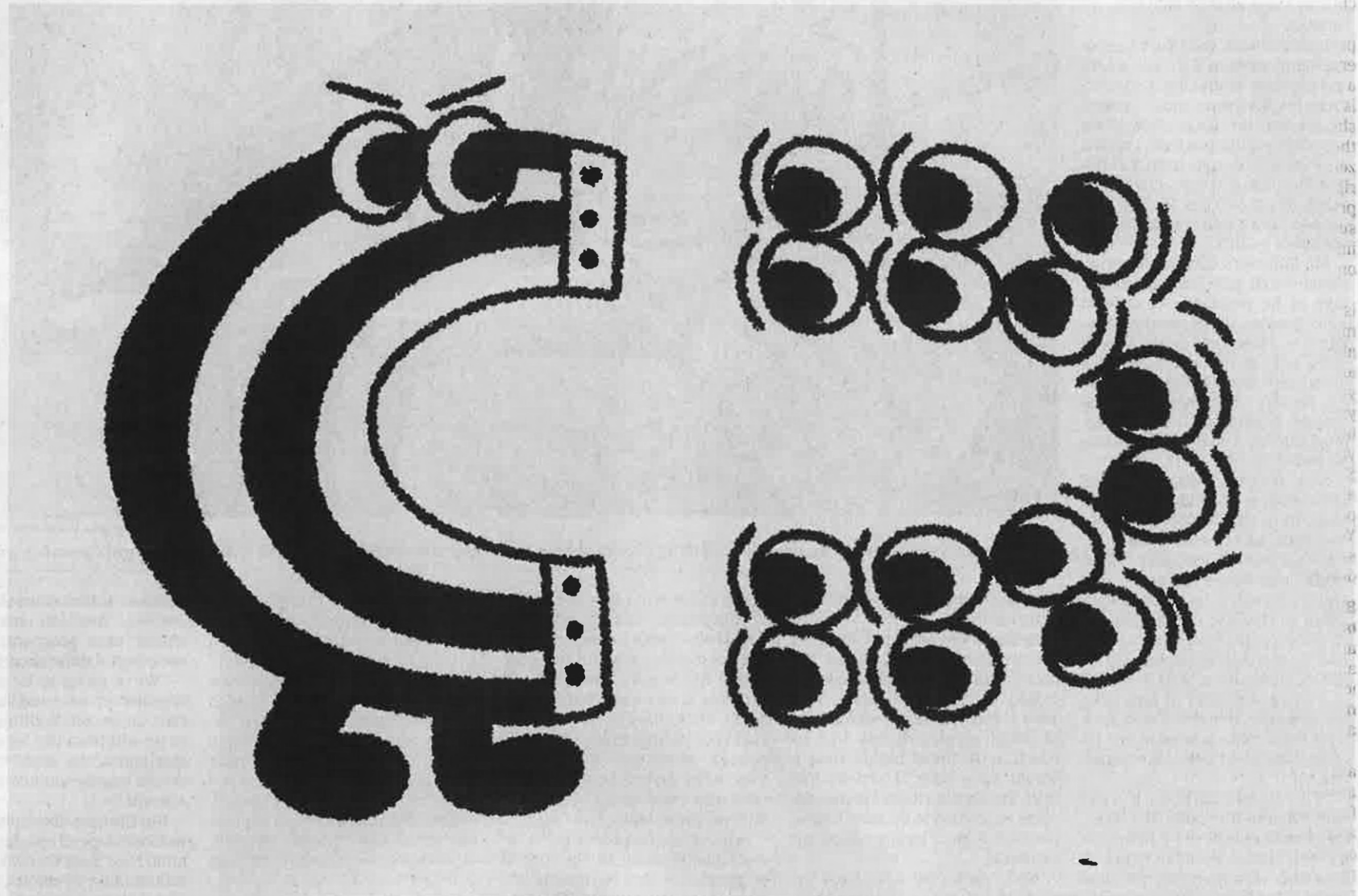
The moment has come for a new and parallel revolution against the dishonest expropriation of value from you and me and, most visibly of all, our children. We need a new kind of resistance, equal to the little satanic mills that live in our pockets.

This is going to require attention to attention, and dedicated spaces to learn (or relearn) the powers of this precious faculty. Spaces where we can give our focus to objects and language and other people, and thereby fashion ourselves in relation to a common world. If you think that this sounds like school, you're right: This revolution starts in our classrooms.

We must flip the script on teachers' perennial complaint. Instead of fretting that students' flagging attention doesn't serve education, we must make attention itself the *thing being taught*.

The implications of such a shift are vast. For two centuries, champions of liberal democracy have agreed that individual and collective freedom requires literacy. But as once-familiar calls for an informed citizenry give way to fears of informational saturation and perpetual distraction, literacy becomes less urgent than attentivity, the capacity for attention. What democracy most needs now is an attentive citizenry — human beings capable of looking up from their screens, together.

Around the world, informal coalitions of educators, activists and artists are conducting grass-roots experiments to try to make that possible — from the writer Jenny Odell to the philosopher James Williams, from the Center for Humane Technology, a large project to investigate the ethics of tech, to the intimate art events of the Slow Reading Club. Call it attention activism.



HARRY WRIGHT

Technology is fracking our minds to distraction.

We three are members of one such community, the Strother School of Radical Attention. Working in classrooms as well as museums, public libraries and universities, we have heard from thousands of people across the country and beyond about their struggles to give themselves to the world, and to others, in the ways they want. They are describing the damage that attention-fracking does, violence that the philosopher Miranda Fricker calls “epistemic injustice.”

The curriculum we have developed takes on a challenge that so many of us face: how to create, beyond the confines of our personalized digital universes, something resembling a shared world.

It starts with experience, both individual and collective, with a focus on students' self-conscious and self-aware experiences of reading, observing, reflecting and problem-solving. Consider a simple exercise known as “Attention in Place,” inspired by the work of the experimental writer Georges Perec. For his short work, “An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris,” Mr. Perec sat at a corner cafe in his beloved city and over three days recorded everything he saw, with particular attention to the supposedly mundane (what he called “infra-ordinary”) events that might under normal circumstances have gone unnoticed.

In our much shorter exercise, after reading an excerpt from Mr. Perec's work, participants head out into the neighborhood and spend 30 minutes jotting down their observations of absolutely whatever unfolds in the world around them. Upon returning to the group, we sit in a circle and read one line

each, consecutively, from these newfound observations.

Sounds so simple! But the results are very close to miraculous: A common ground is rediscovered in the weave of collective attention. What I saw, you heard; the breeze that you felt passed my corner as well. A joint song of place unfolds, and with it a giddy, collective sense that the world is ours. The first-person plural becomes real, and the dynamics of attention are revealed as the choreography of our individual beings in shared time and space.

Deep questions ensue: How do language and identity structure what we are capable of seeing and knowing? How do we change the world when we perceive it differently, and work to articulate those perceptions? What are the political implications of a world we do (and do not) share in fundamental ways? In no time it becomes clear that attention — giving it and getting it — constitutes social life.

Subjects like these are usually consigned to rarefied university seminars. But we have seen these discussions arise in city parks, in E.S.L. classrooms, in public libraries and in after-school mental health programs, as participants speak from the authority of their own experience, guided by a commitment to themselves as a sensitive attentional instrument.

This new paradigm of attention education demands that we dig in on the magic of this instrument, and that we build coalitions of everyone who uses it. That means teachers and students, but also welders, surfers, anyone who does anything with care and im-

mersive commitment, anyone who treasures true attention.

Small groups of humans turning off their phones and paying attention for half an hour in their local park is obviously not, in itself, the revolution that will bring the attention frackers to their knees. But it offers a model we can build on, of people coming together to decide (and dispute!) how the world is, and how we think it ought to be. That is the practice of freedom — the essence of democracy — and the high purpose of education itself.

Our attention is born free but is, increasingly, everywhere in chains. Can our systems of liberal education rise to this challenge? The Harvard political philosopher Danielle Allen recently wrote: “I have a hunch that if we are to put this problem of attention at the center of what we are asking the humanities to do right now, we might find a huge appetite for the work of the humanities. We might change the dynamics we see on college campuses and in other contexts, where the practice of the humanities seems to be slipping away.”

All those who have given their attention to as supposedly arcane a topic as ancient Greek will know that the word “crisis” derives from a word that can mean “to decide.” And that is precisely what's before us: a decision about what ends, exactly, the liberal arts will serve in the 21st century. No form of education can solve all our problems at a stroke. But attention education can produce a new generation of citizens who are equipped to take on those problems conscientiously and with care.