

A Roundtable on COVID-19 and The Attention Economy

By [D. Graham Burnett](#), [Carlos Montemayor](#), [Gabriella Warren-Smith](#), [Josefina Massot](#),
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“Attention” has come to the fore in the last decade as a matter of pressing critical significance – with particular concern centering on how new economies and technologies are transforming our attentional regimes. But the historically unprecedented pandemic of COVID-19 has, over the last months, generated radically new attentional conditions: new kinds of screen time; new forms of social mediation; new intensifications of both isolation and solidarity. What is happening? What can be done?

D. Graham Burnett, a professor of the History of Science at Princeton University, works on the history of attention. Since the onset of the pandemic lockdown, he has convened a weekly Zoom gathering to think about problems of attention and our unprecedented moment. This roundtable discussion emerged from those sessions. It was conducted remotely, in the third week of May – too early to reckon with the dramatic events that have galvanized the United States (and reverberated globally) in the wake of the monstrous killing of George Floyd. The contributors have added a short afterword that briefly addresses these remarkable developments.

The participants are: Carlos Montemayor, a San Francisco-based philosopher; Catherine Hansen, a Tokyo-and-Beirut-based scholar of literature; and Josefina Massot, a Buenos Aires-based editor and translator. The initial questions were formulated by the London-based independent curator and cultural producer Gabriella Warren-Smith.

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COLLECTIVE ATTENTION

For the first time since WWII, humans are connected globally by a crisis that requires us to work together. Even as we experience many of the same drastic changes, we are all fixated on the subject of coronavirus. Its impending presence has dominated our conversations, thoughts, and sleepless nights – unifying our attentional focus as we all adapt to this new way of life. How is attention shifting as we move towards collective forms of behaviour and thinking?

CARLOS MONTEMAYOR: I think the COVID crisis potentially offers a certain kind of “boredom” that can be used to promote joint attentive experiences of an aesthetic, collective kind. This effort will depend on a unique kind of openness to novelty in a reconfigured environment, outside our “comfort zones.” The sudden refocus of our attention on the pandemic, imposed by necessity and fear, will hopefully initiate a larger conversation about the urgent need to foster our attentional capacities in less demanding and dangerous times — we mustn’t forget whatever lessons we learn now. For one thing, the entire planet has been suddenly reminded that humans have very similar basic needs.

D. GRAHAM BURNETT: I see what you are saying, Carlos, but I think we do have to underline that, for people in the grip of illness, or in the throes of terror as they attend to loved ones, face financial ruin, or worry about infection, “boredom” may not be near-at-hand. So we have to think, too, about fear. And about the way that fear is a heightener — of attention, for sure. Nothing focuses the mind like death, and the fear of death — there is something basic and deep and fundamental that ties attention and suffering.

CATHERINE HANSEN: My sense is that, while this crisis may be, in a way, “universal,” our experience of the things we attend to is not: there are as many inner experiences of an object or story as there are people. But the whole purpose of collective conversation is to make those experiences congruent — to calibrate them. Techniques for the communal expression and calibration of inner events have existed as long as humans have, perhaps starting with the oral epics recited around fires at cave mouths; works of art also have a “calibrating” effect. Which brings me to the current pandemic: while we’re all scared and sad in our own ways, and therefore tend to communicate on totally different wavelengths, we’re all scared and sad about the same thing. The COVID crisis (like any other) has collectively calibrated our inner attentional events.

JOSEFINA MASSOT: I’m going to have to differ here... the COVID crisis has perhaps fostered a sense of “emotional” communion, but I don’t think that solidarity is being realized on a practical (and ultimately, “attentional”) level. In other words, I don’t think we’re all discovering similar basic needs, experiencing the same drastic changes, or adapting to the same new way of life — and consequently, we’re not really moving toward more collective forms of behaviour and thinking.

It mostly boils down to class: the socioeconomic gap has grown massively as a result of the pandemic, and this has spawned (or exacerbated) an *attentional* gap. Embedded in the word “attention” (from the Latin *attendere*) is the act of waiting, and we’re all being asked to “wait” till this blows over. Thing is, only the relatively wealthy can afford that; the less privileged must scramble more than ever to make ends meet, and they must do so immediately. As a result, attentional states vary along class lines. The well-off have time to spare, and excess supply breeds boredom, and boredom breeds distraction. The underprivileged can only think about survival, triggering a kind of hyper-focused anxiety. These opposite attentional states are equally deficient because they’re extreme: the

former is too promiscuous; the latter, too narrow. In this, I suppose I want to push on what you said, Graham, about fear focusing or heightening attention — this may be true to an extent, but the reality is, fear can also devalue, even obliterate, attention.

CH: It's good that you bring up socioeconomic and attentional disparity, because I've been asking myself for whom, or on whose behalf, we're thinking about these questions. Could it be that this pandemic moment is showing us that the sensibilities and sensitivities that (arguably) unite us are available and familiar to some of us simply because of the self-time and solitude we may be (or have been) fortunate to possess? In that sense, I think the collective calibration of experience through attention should be guided by empathy, an attentive care to the needs of others — especially those who are not rich in privilege (and opportunity, and community) and in the types of leisured interiority or leisured distraction that this affords us.

JM: I couldn't agree more. In order to bring what I call distraction and hyperfocused anxiety closer to the "golden mean" of true attention, the rich should direct their presently scattered attentional capacities toward the less fortunate, which will in turn allow the latter to (potentially, partially) expand their attentional scope to include non-urgent matters. That would be a kind of calibration, as you put it — an attentional redistribution to match an equally necessary economic one.

CM: And I think another ethical, collective attentional shift might involve not just people but the world at large: an openness and generosity to our surroundings, the attentive care of other species, of the environment. If there's one message I've been consistently hearing it's that nature is now "recovering" — that we are, in a sense, the virus, and that this is an opportunity to change our ways. To be honest, I feel that this kind of message might be guided by fear, grief, and anxious boredom; that it may not come from a genuine reorientation of attention, but rather, from confusion. Still, maybe even misguided reorientation is better than business as usual!

DGB: I think here of Simon Weil's theologically-inflected emphasis on an "ethic" of attention, as when she writes, affectingly: "The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing." She thought it so rare as to consider it a "miracle" — even as she placed this kind of attention at the absolute foundation of our moral obligations to each other.

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SELF-ATTENTION

In a world that never stops, finding "time to yourself" can feel like a kind of luxury product. But suddenly we are immersed in a new timezone of continuous self-time, giving one, perhaps, the unusual chance to develop personal skills, contemplate, and

stretch one's creativity. Attention has become self-directed, physically and emotionally determined by one's inner environment. How might new models of the self emerge, in these times of great isolation?

CM: Attention has been increasingly trained to multitask, and it has therefore been stripped of its autonomy. The new COVID timezone should allow for the recovery of our *personal* time, which should in turn facilitate the recovery of healthy, autonomous attention. Unfortunately, self-attention of the kind created by the pandemic is a source of fatigue and fear, because it is marching in lockstep with social media, the 24/7 news cycle, and various commercial interests. What we need is a genuine reorientation of attention that radically departs from entertainment, social fear and anxiety, and the incessant self-oriented performances for popularity in social media. A healthy kind of self-attention would ignore these sources of anxiety as much as possible; only in this way will it be genuinely self-directed.

JM: Frankly, I'm concerned that a more selfish model of the self will emerge for those of us who do have ample time to self-reflect in isolation (because again, not everyone does: the underprivileged don't, and the same goes for parents of young children, doctors, etc.). At any rate, this selfish model would sprout not just from isolation but from fear of the other — after all, we've been told, anyone can carry this deadly virus, anyone is a potential threat, everyone must be avoided. Selfishness is currently viewed as an act of generosity ("shun others, save lives"), and I worry that we might normalize it in the long term.

CH: Someone who's on a personal or public "front line" right now, or in a position of sudden precarity, could probably ask themselves: "What can we discover about ourselves when we stop doing (or can't do) the things we usually do?" And someone who's luckier could ask the same question. And then, for different purposes, in different contexts, these two, lucky and unlucky, could both ask: "What can we then *do* with what we have discovered about ourselves? What can we do for others?" I think that's the key to avoiding a selfish model of the self.

JM: Absolutely, and you've just made me think of a more optimistic model: one based more heavily on being than doing, which is of course so antithetical to Western society. Then again, the pandemic has given many of us a pass to just sort of "be" while we wait. You ask, *What can we discover about ourselves when we stop doing (or can't do) the things we usually do?*, and maybe this is the lesson: we're not (just) what we do, but also what we are. Yes, the godly *I am who I am* is equal parts tautological and tired, but tautologies are true by necessity and clichés almost always are by experience. Whatever "doing" remains must aspire to serve others; otherwise, we're back to selfishness under a prettier guise.

DGB: The language of attention is very interesting here. One of the most powerful historical arguments that has been made about the discourse of “attention” is exactly that it arises in its distinctively modern form (marked by intense concern about the balance of attention and distraction in our individual and social lives) in the period that sees the breakdown of the “classic” subject. This is Jonathan Crary’s point in *Suspensions of Perception*: intense attention discourse arises as part of an effort to reconstitute some kind of unitary subject in the wake of a set of destabilizing transformations (e.g., the discovery that the eye and the mind are not at all “camera obscura”-like devices, but rather oozy and distributed and unreliable systems). In the context of mounting evidence that there was/is no privileged or sovereign “locus” where personhood can be shown to reside, the language of “attention” provides a way to re-articulate that volitional, agential, coherent nucleus of subjectivity. At least in principle. It does not work, of course. But we inherit this language – language that closely ties “attention” to the core of “being.” The question now is: how can we use that language effectively, in a time of genuine crisis? A crisis of the subject in a conceptual sense – and a crisis of the subject in a material, embodied sense too?

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IN-ATTENTION

Historically, various technologies have been feared for their dangerous effects on the mind and the body – on one’s ability to think and reflect. In COVID-19 we are presented with a unique situation; online engagement has soared as we have become increasingly dependent on this form of connection with the outside world; the boundaries between work and pleasure have in many cases broken down as living rooms become offices, and time at home becomes one seamless unbroken “engagement.” As our ability to focus on clear, defined tasks weakens, and the planning of future activities can feel actually futile, how does our sense of direction change, and how does attention become more divided?

CM: A kind of “monastic” or ritualised set of attentional routines, engaging our aesthetic and moral capacities, should replace the typical epistemic and preference-maximising capacities exploited by work and online media. This would facilitate a genuine *reorientation* of attention, one aimed towards autonomy, which would eliminate the type of “unbroken engagement” you speak of. In-attention (or attentional inhibition) can then be a *virtue* of reorientation rather than a vice of boredom or anxiety. The trauma and social fear that will follow the COVID crisis will present an opportunity to expand on these efforts, healing not only the economy and social anxiety but attention itself.

DGB: I am also sympathetic to new kinds of cenobitic-monastic “ritual” as part of a program of *resistance*: resistance to the immediate crisis of the pandemic, but also

resistance to the ongoing crisis of the “fracking” of the human attentional capacity by the deranging dynamics of hypercapitalism. My utopian hopes ride on the rise of different kinds of intentional communities, formally committed to disciplines of non-monetizable attention, and working to develop new ways of indexing those commitments. I believe the arts play, at least potentially, a key role here. An artist like On Kawara, for instance, or Tehching Hsieh — these artists generated new ways of “bodying-forth” inhabited time, alone and with others. Artists and interventionists working now (I think of everyone from Thomas Hirschorn to Miriam Lefkowitz or Jonathan Van Dyke) are working in the same space. I myself have a strong interest in the so-called “Order of the Third Bird,” a collective which can also be understood to operate in this zone.

JM: Classic spatiotemporal boundaries have, indeed, broken down: without the ability to focus on the present or plan for the future, time has become almost boundless. The same goes for space, perhaps paradoxically: we’re confined at home, but technology has largely bridged the gap between the physical and the virtual, and the latter knows no limits. I’m not sure attention has become more divided as a result of this, but I do think that its sense of direction has changed. Just as our will freezes in the face of infinite choice (if an endless number of forces tug at an object from every direction, the object won’t move), our attention freezes when faced with spatiotemporal infinity. Instead of division, then, it might experience something like stasis. But perhaps this is a good thing: having nowhere to go, it may well choose to turn toward itself. In this sense, the “in” could be interpreted not as a lack or negation or inhibition but as an inward motion – in-attention as meta-attention. This might allow attention to heal itself, too, as Carlos puts it; it may be one of the “monastic” or ritualised attentional routines he proposes.

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MEDIATED ATTENTION

Cognitive neuroscientists claim that the human brain has an innate drive for information, and that this drive ebbs and flows under conditions of boredom and anxiety. Enclosed in our homes, we access most of our information through the mediation of networked technologies. News sites, social media, and online communication platforms have become pillars of social interaction and part of minute-to-minute routines. Our digital devices literally get hot as we continuously find ourselves repeatedly “checking on the world.” Will our reliance on these technologies change our relationship with information, and how does its transmission through the screen affect our ways of processing what comes at us?

CM: Our relationship with information will absolutely change — *it is changing*. As mentioned, the human brain has powerful capacities for empathetic, uninterested attention, but commercialised social media, smartphones, computers, etc., are exploiting our reward systems and epistemic information maximisation capacities more than ever.

We must turn our attention away from these addictive cognitive mediators, or we will miss out on any lessons afforded by attentional reorientation during the pandemic.

JM: It's interesting that you bring up "addictive mediators," because I think this technological ramp-up will exacerbate Internet addiction. There are several diagnostic [criteria](#) for it, but the pandemic will impact at least three. First, we'll use the Internet more than ever as a way of relieving a particular dysphoric mood (specifically, anxiety), since it's our main source of data and subsequent relief regarding present danger. Second, and relatedly, we'll tend to be more anxious than before when *not* using the Internet. Third, we'll stay online for longer, since we currently have more time and less attentional capacity than ever, which means we're likely streaming shows/browsing news/engaging in social media and other attentionally undemanding activities at unprecedented rates. The longer the pandemic lasts, the more these traits will be reinforced. And of course, addiction directly affects attention, because (back to my first answer) it simultaneously leads to distraction and hyperfocused anxiety: it makes us both scatterbrained *and* obsessed with our drug of choice.

CM: Yes, addiction could exacerbate the mental enfeeblement produced by fake news, constant TikTok and Instagram gratification, quasi-sadistic anonymous bullying on Twitter, and various forms of attentional distortion under the grip of fear, social competition, the erosion of rational standards for communication, and so on. We risk not only mental enfeeblement, but also the degradation of our capacities to attend to aesthetic and moral value.

DGB: I feel like some of the work that the "[Friends of Attention](#)" have done together as a collective speaks exactly to this issue. I think, for instance, of the "[Twelve Theses on Attention](#)", which surface an intense (and perhaps counter-intuitive) commitment to freedom of attention lying, essentially, in the "freedom-to-be-bound" by the attentional path laid by another. Shades here of Iris Murdoch's reading of Simone Weil in *The Sovereignty of Good*. But also a concern with linking an Arendtian idea of "world-making" to the idea of resistance to what Tim Wu calls the "Attention Merchants." Without this, freedom of attention would seem to be nothing more than vulnerability to continuous solicitation. This is very much the diagnosis of James Williams, in his disturbing *Stand Out of Our Light*.

JM: I agree that the degradation of our capacities to attend is exactly what is at issue. As to whether technological mediation will impact how we process information, my answer is also yes. Potentially good news first: since every media outlet is basically tackling the same issue, we have a historically large representative sample from which to pick, compare, and contrast our sources. This gives us a unique chance to hone our attentional and critical thinking skills, perhaps learning to more effectively tell fake news from fact. That probably won't happen, though, and something much more dire might: watching the crisis unfold through our screens may lead to not just social but emotional distancing from the actual victims. I fear that we may come to view their horror as a kind of

spectacle — and a banal one at that, since many platforms are casually intermingling grim updates from the latest epicenters with listicles on how to Feng Shui our bedrooms to ward off COVID-induced cabin fever or some such thing. When the petty and the tragic get neighboring online real estate, they invite a dangerous kind of attentional dissonance.

CH: Once again, if I may, I'll answer with a series of hopefully fruitful questions: How, in this time of crisis, are we making ourselves more susceptible to distraction and spectacle? Making ourselves into people who *need* those things? How can we prevent that devolved state from persisting afterward? What techniques of the self can we deploy? Which ones have, in this time of crisis, become newly available, and can be remembered for later?

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ECONOMIZED ATTENTION

Over these weeks and months unprecedented numbers of people around the world have been at home 24/7. In the US and Europe, online consumption has drastically increased, providing tech companies with increasing levels of information about users' online habits and activity. This personal data ultimately helps companies target users' attention, to maximise time spent on their product, and the number of ads viewed. As our daily routines become more similar, do we become more predictable and unified in our behaviour, and therefore more targetable?

CM: Yes, exactly: more marketable, more predictable, and more addicted to commercial exploitation and solicitation. Our interests need to reorient themselves; we must rekindle the old attentional routines that have allowed the human brain to cooperate on a large scale, based on empathy rather than market value — to paint the walls of caves rather than consume products while looking at a screen without pause. We still have these attentional capacities, but we do not let them flourish because of the 24/7 economy of attention we have created. We need a new environment for our attention to flourish outside standard online commercial venues.

JM: We're definitely providing tech companies with increasing levels of information about our online habits, which are also quite similar at the moment because we're paying attention to the same thing and making many of the same related purchases (food, meds, masks, etc.). I wonder, though, if all this information will help companies in the long- or even mid-term, when lockdowns ease up and our habits become less predictable again. Given that the pandemic is a social/psychological/economic anomaly, the data gathered during this period might be much less valuable in just a few months' time. A comfort of sorts, though perhaps I'm being naive... At any rate, to riff off Carlos, we do need an environment that lets us rebel against the economy of attention, and I think many of us

may have found it: for those who can, staying home 24/7 has suddenly granted us the privacy and time to develop new hobbies or rediscover old pleasures, unbeknownst to the rest of the physical and virtual world. Let's then turn our attention to things within the home and self — things that *can't* be digitally tracked and monetised: let's read a book we already own, play with our kids, or walk to the corner store for cake mix (gloved, masked, alone, and prodigally distanced from others, of course). Let's secretly paint the walls of our caves, if you will. In times of necessary mass submission, we need local, private revolutions.

DGB: But with an eye, of course, on systemic change. In a democracy, one can hardly hope to have a politics that is better than the people. It's in this framework, I think, that the "private" in the deep sense you invoke here is inextricable from the *civic*. A concept of the "Attention Economy" that took this seriously — that would be a way forward.

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AFTERWORD

(Collectively Authored)

How extraordinary, in these last three weeks, to have seen one crisis of historic proportions (the pandemic) substantially overtaken by another (the sweeping rage and grief that has gripped the United States in the wake of George Floyd's murder). Systematic racism and police brutality are issues that both subtend and transcend the language of the "Attention Economy." Radical change is needed. Our roundtable was about other matters, which suddenly feel, for all their urgency, less immediately urgent, given what is happening around us in the streets of New York City, and Oakland, and across the country. That said, in rereading our discussion (in preparation for its publication), we decided not to make revisions, not to try to "update" it. The piece as it stands reflects thinking about COVID-19 and attention on the cusp of the irruption of the 2020 Black Lives Matter demonstrations. Did the forms of intensified media synchrony and social isolation that we discuss contribute to the intensity of the spasm of collective anger that met the circulation of digital images of Floyd's death (and others' too)? It seems likely. And is that anger a manifestation, among other things, of the profound and untenable forms of economic and social injustice to which we return again and again in our discussion? To be sure. What we need now is attention where it belongs: on change.