

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

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Your Attention Please!

The attention economy has arrived, and profits are being made by hijacking your ability to focus while keeping you distracted, in a state of fear and compliant.

Have you ever wondered where the hours go when you have been looking at your screen? Have you questioned why you were so easily distracted while looking at your device? Welcome to the world of attention theft where your ability to focus is surreptitiously being harvested for profit. We normally use our attention to focus on what we need to do, and on what we want to do by processing information in our immediate environment while tuning out from other bits of information that may not be relevant to us at that very point in time. We use large amounts of time and energy to focus, which is being siphoned off by large IT corporations. They have recognised the value behind the power of attention. Over the past decade they have moved to transform people's attention into a new currency that drives their operations and feeds their profits. With this the 'attention economy' has been born and large IT companies are clamouring to capture our attention by employing all means possible to keep our gaze fixated on whatever they are beaming onto our screens. This has accelerated humanity's profound shift from experiencing material reality to a new reality that is mediated through images. We now live in a society that is based on spectacle where reality is presented to us as images on screens. As this shift in reality takes place, we need to ask ourselves whether the public are being trained to be docile spectators fixated on digital images organised and packaged by the wealthy and powerful one percent of society? How can the public take control of reality and forge the way forward for a better future for society?

Birth of the attention economy

With the spectacular circus that passes for the US Presidential election firmly behind us, we now have our own homegrown spectacle known as the federal election to endure. As we are forced to swim through the flotsam and jetsam of the major parties' political election campaigns, it is hardly surprising that 'keeping an eye on the ball' is becoming a very difficult act as the twists and turns of international politics are as hard as they are fast. One could be easily excused for feeling bewildered in the media frenzy that rapidly switches truth for fantasy on a daily basis. It seems that the ground beneath us is constantly moving, giving rise to a feeling of growing instability. This may be due to the contemporary world where

experts are easily dismissed, emotions are allowed to override evidence and facts are arbitrarily moulded to promote the dominant narrative.

Despite the jarring social and political shifts that we are experiencing, it is important to keep in mind that the global capitalist economy continues to bulldoze its way through all alternatives that arise in its ceaseless search for new markets. History demonstrates that capitalism has turned human labour into a commodity to be bought and sold. It enforced the market economy upon former European colonies in Africa, Asia, the Americas and beyond. It facilitated the transformation of western economies from centres of production into outposts of service and finance. Out of the climate emergency it has concocted the 'green economy' rendering forests, rivers and oceans into mere economic units to be traded to the highest bidder. Today it has pushed the frontiers of market capitalism to the human mind designating human attention as the latest commodity for exploitation.

Buried deep underneath the cacophony of headlines that floods the daily news feed was the birth of the 'attention economy.' Unannounced, the attention economy began by turning our ability to focus into the latest form of currency. The future is here, and profits are being generated by regularly hijacking your attention.

What is Attention?

Human attention is a form of (a) energy that requires (b) time, both of which are finite resources that big IT companies are desperately seeking to capture. Given that there are 12 months in a year, seven days in a week and 24 hours in a day, IT corporations know that each person's attention comes in limited quantities and their ability to engage our focus and capture it for long periods of time depends on the appeal of their platforms and content. Whether we look at a device, a digital advertisement or flick through the pages of the print media, the alluring presentation of each image and headline will determine the duration for which our gaze is captured constituting precious information and profit for large IT corporations. Hence, it is crucial for large IT corporations to catch our attention using whatever means they have, and then keep it for as long as possible.

Why now?

Through overt and covert means, large IT corporations have been amassing huge amounts of data on every one of us for at least two decades. Dubbed 'surveillance capitalism' big tech companies have been gathering the most intimate information about our shopping habits through to our unique keystrokes. Given the global nature of data collection, the power of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been employed to process colossal amounts of data and convert it into valuable information. This has given big tech companies a new product to trade on the open market. It has also delivered big tech companies with an unprecedented insight into how society works which ultimately translates into huge power and influence. This raises a vital question about the use and abuse of data by big tech companies, and whether this constitutes one of the greatest perils that the public faces?

With the emergence of surveillance capitalism and the power of AI, it is by no accident that the attention economy has come to be. The quest to solve the problem of the oversupply of data has been found along with capitalism's search to find a new market. We are living in an age where the new frontier for markets to exploit has landed on the human mind.

Hijacking your attention

Through the commodification of human attention, IT corporations have been focussed on developing sophisticated tools and techniques to attract and capture the public's attention. This is evidenced by the countless options we are faced with that demand our attention on a daily basis. TV serials, pod casts, social media trends, radio programs, influencers, newspaper articles, celebrity news, and a plethora of addictive digital platforms all vie for our attention. Aided by Big Tech's use of algorithms, it is easy for people to be distracted by the endless stream of addictive content, infotainment, the buzzing phone and the lure of having information at our fingertips. Such distractions are no accident, they have been designed to keep the public engaged for as long as possible and take full advantage of our brain's craving for stimulation.

The Spectacle

Big Tech's strategy to capture our attention has a double-barrelled approach. Firstly, it serves the purpose of generating colossal profits by capturing our attention on the various platforms that inundate our homes, offices and street scapes. Secondly, the wide network of media outlets helps to instil an alternative reality into the public's consciousness that is based on a carefully curated narrative. This latter aspect has created a fundamental shift in how the public experiences reality which in turn has significant ramifications on how we perceive power, our identity and our role as individuals in society.

The digital revolution aided by large IT corporations has fundamentally changed the way we experience 'reality'. What we do, see and experience is largely mediated by images beamed out of our screens and to a lesser extent what we see in print. We now create content by capturing what we experience as images on our mobile phones and then dutifully send them off to friends and family to experience as an image. The digital revolution has replaced face to face meetings with on-line meetings. In effect, our social relations are mediated through images moulds the way we interact with others and how we understand the world. The implication is that Big Tech giants and the media moguls who own the means of communication play a significant role in managing the world we experience by shaping the dominant narrative through our screens.

It is by no coincidence that the powerful and wealthy one percent eagerly seek to centralise the means of communication, thereby making it easier to control and manipulate the public's understanding of reality. Pronouncements that Big Tech and media oligarchs want to safeguard freedom of speech and democracy is pure fiction. When have oligarchs sought to protect democracy? Where the manufactured narrative is challenged, other means are employed to stifle alternative voices. Across the so-called 'free' and 'democratic' societies, there has been an ominous clampdown on freedom of expression. Protests have been suppressed, namely pro-Palestinian protests expressing opposition to the Israeli genocide taking place in Gaza. Whistle blowers highlighting institutional corruption and war crimes have been gagged and imprisoned. Independent journalists highlighting news and opinion contrary to the dominant narrative have been shut down through media bans imposed by mainstream media platforms. Under the guise of laws on hate speech, freedom of expression has been curtailed by governments when certain views do not align with the 'nation's values.' Our largest universities, once sites of progressive views and opinion have been turned into academic gulags where students and staff protesting against the slaughter of thousands of civilians in Gaza are being repressed. In effect, alternative views and independent voices are being silenced. The truth and complexity that current issues carry have been manipulated and repackaged into simple to understand doses of propaganda curated for public consumption. The society of spectacle is supplanting material reality in an effort to distract the public from vital issues that directly impact the majority. Issues of social and political impact are being replaced with a manufactured reality aimed at justifying the continuance of the status quo.

Attention theft

It is only in recent years that the insidious nature of the attention economy is being revealed through research and the irrefutable evidence that is on display within our communities. The detrimental impact of social media, platforms that inundate people with highly addictive and incendiary content are all designed to extract maximum attention that is treated as a commodity to be exploited by large IT corporations. Each beat of the attention economy's heart is powered by 'clicks' and 'shares.' The more we 'click' the faster our attention is transformed into currency surreptitiously stolen by Big Tech. Large tech corporations have learned that high quality journalism and breakthroughs in human endeavours do not necessarily engage the levels of attention they seek. Unfortunately, outrage, hate and violence are proving to be the more popular means used to capture our attention. PR companies and spin doctors have also cottoned on to what constitutes a good 'attention grabber.' Positive news stories and facts are being buried by fear, hate and violence; they are the key ingredients that effectively captures the public's emotions. Meanwhile, the mainstream media continues to peddle stories laced with fear, hate and

sensationalisation that helps to sustain the spectacle that passes for reality. Social media has created echo chambers that reinforce single issues and myopic views of the world. Influencers and podcasters do not promote healthy debate or dialogue. Their so-called online 'communities' simply deliver one-way communications to an isolated listener with a pair of headphones plugged into a device. Large IT corporations have been perfecting algorithms for over a decade, which are employed to matchmake people with content. This is an effective tactic to create a comfortable echo chamber where views and ideas are not challenged but reinforced. Digital platforms offer limited means by which views and opinions are exchanged leaving corporate interests ample room to curate content that supports the dominate narrative.

Imposing the dominant narrative

The past 12 months has clearly exposed the methods used by the one percent who own the means of communications to enforce the dominant narrative and reconfigure reality. The genocide in Gaza is a particular case in point. For over two and a half years a genocide in Gaza has been livestreamed onto our screens. The fact that the state of Israel has brought about the indiscriminate killing of tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children has caused little consternation amongst western nations who view Israel as a close ally. Western nations continue to supply munitions, intelligence, financial and logistical support to the Israeli Defence Force (IDF). Western democracies persist to have normal diplomatic and trade relations with Israel whilst the IDF targets hospitals, medical staff, aid workers and journalists in Gaza. To alter the public's sense of reality, the Australian mainstream media has been working overtime to distract the public's attention from the prolonged human catastrophe in Gaza. Instead of reporting the death and destruction meted out by the IDF to the Palestinians in Gaza and in the West Bank, the mainstream media has been omitting or downplaying the depravity of Israel's actions against Palestinian civilians. National outrage at Israel's active genocide on university campuses and in the streets of our capital cities have been subdued by private security firms and law enforcement authorities backed by the state and federal government clampdown. The corporate owned and government-controlled media unashamedly backed the merchants of death at last year's arms bazar held amid the active genocide in Gaza. The government-controlled and billionaire owned media portrayed protesters outside the arms convention as radical troublemakers turning the streets of Melbourne into a war zone and causing inconvenience to commuters and those business people attending the arms show. Since then, the mainstream media has sought to distract the public's attention from the active genocide by inundating the Australian public with headlines proclaiming a 'rise in anti-Semitism'. This new spectacle has been manufactured to capture the public's attention and create a narrative of hate and intolerance designed to overshadow the destruction and depravity being inflicted on

Palestinians in Gaza, and the spineless stance taken by the federal ALP and federal LNP opposition. The gravity of the human disaster facing Palestinians has largely been omitted from the mainstream media. Major issues such as violence against women and the struggle of our nation's indigenous people have all been lost on the corporate owned media and the government-controlled media's amplification of anti-Semitism. The alternative reality designed to distract the public's attention from the reality on the ground provides a further justification for Australia's weak-kneed approach to issues demanding an ethical and moral stance by the political and corporate elite.

The hypocrisy and double standards displayed by the major political parties has also been reconfigured to portray an alternative reality to the public. Both of the major political parties view the colonial apartheid state of Israel as a 'friend' of Australia which the federal government maintains close security and defence ties. Since the wholesale demolition of Gaza commenced, the Australian government has set aside ethical considerations and morality by settling on a timid approach to the state of Israel. Repeatedly, Australia abstained on critical UN resolutions calling for a cease fire in Gaza. The federal government has been mute on the attacks occurring in the West Bank by the IDF. Furthermore, the Australian mainstream media has been virtually silent on the federal opposition leader Peter Dutton's meeting last year with Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu, who was indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) as a war criminal. The mainstream media has been relatively mute on Attorney General Mark Dreyfus' trip to reinforce 'Australia's friendship with Israel is deep and enduring'. Meanwhile, the Australian mainstream media has been ramping-up its reporting on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and its leader President Putin which has overshadowed the scale of depravity meted out by the IDF against the Palestinian population.

The owners of the means of communications and their management of the public's understanding of world events and by extension, reality is stupefying. The use of IT platforms, TV, radio and digital media outlets are the tools by which the rich and powerful one percent gather fragments of reality and reconfigure images and omit content to present a revised version of a 'reality' for public consumption. As they emerge, the latest spectacle is designed to be the focal point for the public's attention which serves as a distraction from the deteriorating state of material reality. It is vital for the attention economy to monopolise all forms of communications so it may control the public's focus and justify the status quo.

Seeing through the smoke and mirrors

The one percent of society who own the means of production, distribution, communication and exchange understand that managing the public's perception of reality is no longer sustainable via TV stations, radio stations and newspapers. Put simply, these days are long gone. The mode of collective control employed by the rich and powerful one percent of society has become much more sophisticated and deeply entrenched across an array of institutions and organisations. The art of distraction and attention theft have been found to be highly effective tactics that are sustained through sensationalisation and creating a spectacle of certain events and issues. This approach helps to hijack the public's attention, and support the new attention economy that generates profits by capturing the public's gaze and mediating reality through a world based on images. The re-presentation of images and content by Big Tech and the mainstream media is the means by which the views and wishes of the one percent are presented to the public as reality. This new development has based its foundations on use and abuse of the public's personal data by large IT companies which opens great perils for societies across the globe. The unethical use of highly addictive content, IT platforms that promote hate and violence to generate 'clicks' to prolong and capture the public's attention for the purpose of monetizing our attention has been afforded insufficient concern given the detrimental impact it has on society's well-being and social cohesion. As IT corporations and mainstream media platforms vie for our attention, little oversight is being dedicated to the quality of the content provided, nor are ethical standards being set and maintained. Given such an environment, it is vital that the public does not lose sight of those issues that are important to fostering a vibrant and progressive society, and maintain an acute awareness of those spectacles that generate more 'clicks' through fear, hate and division.

Breaking from the stage managed society of the spectacle requires sharp critical thinking. However, critical thinking should not be limited to questioning events around you, but seeks to recognise opportunities to improve society through progressive changes. Critical thinking is about unpacking the way things are and asks 'how can they be instead?' Why do we have growing inequality and homelessness? Why do our governments prioritise defence spending over health and education? Why are we clamping down on public protests? How is it that the government continues to send financial and military supplies to nations engaged in conflicts that prolong the death and destruction of civilians? Why is it that our diplomats avoid using diplomacy to bring about peace?

Critical thinking is the antidote to operating on 'auto-pilot.' It is about actively analysing and criticising the daily news feed curated by the mainstream media. Thinking independently is vital to analysing and conceptualising information from a broad range of angles, so you may see the world from a broad standpoint, instead of the prescriptive perspective of the mainstream news owned by the rich and powerful one percent. Researching your own news

and seeking alternative views that break away from the intravenous news tube curated by Big Tech's algorithms is critical to understanding reality on the ground.

In essence, the dominant narrative that envelopes the public is not designed to make us thrive. The rules, beliefs and ideas that are funnelled into our consciousness from an early age are all designed to bury our potential and stymie our agency as citizens to seek a better society in a safe and peaceful world. Everyday poses an opportunity to look beyond the images on screens that beam out the dominant narrative and view reality for what it is on our streets, in our communities and across the oceans. By exercising critical thinking on a daily basis will you be able to see through the spectacle, and recognise what is possible, and what society deserves rather than the being fed fear, hate and division that speaks to scarcity and compliance. It is vital to employ critical thinking to see reality for what it is, and help inspire others to question the status quo and move beyond the limitations imposed on the public by the wealthy and powerful one percent.

Take the opportunity today and join PIBCI.

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