



**Sunday Review** | OPINION

# The Cost of Paying Attention

By MATTHEW B. CRAWFORD MARCH 7, 2015

A FEW years ago, in a supermarket, I swiped my bank card to pay for groceries. I watched the little screen, waiting for its prompts. During the intervals between swiping my card, confirming the amount and entering my PIN, I was shown advertisements. Clearly some genius had realized that a person in this situation is a captive audience.

Attention is a resource; a person has only so much of it. And yet we've auctioned off more and more of our public space to private commercial interests, with their constant demands on us to look at the products on display or simply absorb some bit of corporate messaging. Lately, our self-appointed disrupters have opened up a new frontier of capitalism, complete with its own frontier ethic: to boldly dig up and monetize every bit of private head space by appropriating our collective attention. In the process, we've sacrificed silence — the condition of not being addressed. And just as clean air makes it possible to breathe, silence makes it possible to think.

What if we saw attention in the same way that we saw air or water, as a valuable resource that we hold in common? Perhaps, if we could envision an “attentional commons,” then we could figure out how to protect it.

The sad state of this commons is on display everywhere; consider the experience of being in an airport. I have found I have to be careful when going through airport security, because the trays that you place your items in for X-ray screening are now papered with advertisements, and it's very easy to miss a lipstick-size flash memory stick against a picture of fanned-out L'Oréal lipstick colors.

I am already in a state of low-level panic about departure times, possible gate changes and any number of other contingencies. This fresh demand for vigilance, lest I lose the PowerPoint slide show I will be presenting in a few hours, feels like a straightforward conflict between me and L'Oréal.

Somehow L'Oréal has the Transportation Security Administration on its side. Who made the decision to pimp out the security trays with these advertisements? We travelers have no clue, so we search instead for a diagnosis of ourselves: Why am I so angry?

Making my way through O'Hare International Airport, I am not feeling especially receptive to the endlessly recurring message from the Lincoln Financial Group, applied to the moving handrail on the escalator: You're In Charge®.

Settled in at my departure gate with an hour to kill, I shift in my seat and try to avert my gaze from the chattering of CNN, but find that the fields of view that haven't been claimed for commerce are getting fewer and narrower. Of course, you can seal yourself off by putting on noise-canceling headphones, staring at a smartphone or opening a novel. But what is lost is the public space that is required for sociability, the kind that depends on people not being self-enclosed.

An airport lounge once felt rich with possibilities for spontaneous encounters. Even if we did not converse, our attention was free to alight upon one another and linger, or not. We encountered another person, even if in silence. Such encounters are always ambiguous, and their need for interpretation gives rise to a train of imaginings, often erotic. This is what makes cities exciting.

The benefits of silence are off the books. They are not measured in the gross domestic product, yet the availability of silence surely contributes to creativity and innovation. They do not show up explicitly in social statistics such as level of educational achievement, yet one consumes a great deal of silence in the course of becoming educated.

If clean air and water were no longer the rule, the economic toll would be enormous. This is easy to grasp, and that is why we have regulations to protect

these common resources. We recognize their importance and their fragility. We also recognize that absent robust regulations, air and water will be used by some in ways that make them unusable for others.

A notable feature of many formerly Communist countries is the apparent absence, or impotence, of any notion of a common good. Self-serving party apparatchiks have been replaced by (or become) quasi-free market gangsters. Many citizens of these countries live in the environmental degradation that results when economic development is left to such interests, with no countervailing force of public-spiritedness. We in the liberal societies of the West find ourselves headed toward a similar condition with regard to the resource of attention, because we do not yet understand it to be a resource.

Or do we? Silence is now offered as a luxury good. In the business-class lounge at Charles de Gaulle Airport, I heard only the occasional tinkling of a spoon against china. I saw no advertisements on the walls. This silence, more than any other feature, is what makes it feel genuinely luxurious. When you step inside and the automatic doors whoosh shut behind you, the difference is nearly tactile, like slipping out of haircloth into satin. Your brow unfurrows, your neck muscles relax; after 20 minutes you no longer feel exhausted.

Outside, in the peon section, is the usual airport cacophony. Because we have allowed our attention to be monetized, if you want yours back you're going to have to pay for it.

As the attentional commons is appropriated, one solution, for those who have the means, is to leave it behind for private clubs like the business-class lounge. Considering that it is those in the business lounge who make the decisions that determine the character of the peon section, we may start to see these things in a political light.

To engage in inventive thinking during those idle hours spent at an airport requires silence. But other people's minds, over in the peon section, can be treated as a resource — a standing reserve of purchasing power to be steered according to the innovative marketing schemes hatched by those enjoying silence in the business lounge. When some people treat the minds of others as a resource, this is not “creating wealth” — it is a transfer.

There are many causes for the increasing concentration of wealth in a shrinking elite, but let us throw one more into the mix: the ever more aggressive appropriations of the attentional commons that we have allowed to take place.

I think we need to sharpen the conceptually murky right to privacy by supplementing it with a right not to be addressed. This would apply not, of course, to those who address me face to face as individuals, but to those who never show their faces, and treat my mind as a resource to be harvested.

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