

You're Being Alienated From Your Own Attention

Every single aspect of human life is being reoriented around the pursuit of attention.

By [Chris Hayes](#) January 22, 2025, 9:36 AM ET

Illustration by Bryce Wymer

This article was featured in the One Story to Read Today newsletter. [Sign up for it](#)

[here.](#)

For more than a decade, I have hosted an hour-long cable TV show on MSNBC. When I got my own show, I imagined it as something akin to the experience of first-time car ownership. I could drive wherever I wanted to drive; although I would have to obey the law, I just had to figure out where I wanted to go, push the pedal, and go. I could cover whatever I thought was most important, whenever I wanted, for as long as I wanted.

I learned quickly, it doesn't work like that. A cable-news show is powered by attention. It has no internal combustion engine to make it go. Yes, you can cover whatever you desire, night after night, but if no one watches it, the show will be canceled. This is what almost happened to me.

After a lot of trial and error, I now view audience attention as something like the wind that powers a sailboat. It's a real phenomenon, independent of the boat, and you can successfully sail only if you harness it. You don't turn the boat into the wind, but you also don't simply allow the wind to set your course. You figure out where you want to go (in the case of my show, what you think is important for people to know), you identify which way the wind is blowing, and then, using your skills and the tools of the boat, you tack back and forth to manage to arrive at your destination using that wind power.

This experience has given me a certain perspective on how attention functions. Every moment of my work life revolves around answering the question of how we capture attention. And it just so happens that the constant pursuit of others' attention is no longer just for professionals like myself.

[Read: A 'radical' approach to reclaiming your attention](#)

Attention is a kind of resource: It has value, and if you can seize it, you seize that value. This has been true for a very long time. Charismatic leaders and demagogues, showmen, preachers, great salespeople, marketers, advertisers, and holy men and women who rallied disciples have all used the power of attention to accrue wealth and power. What has changed is attention's relative importance. Those who successfully extract it command fortunes, win elections, and topple regimes. The battle to control what we pay attention to at any given instant structures our inner life—who and what we listen to, how and when we are present to those we love—and our collective public lives: which pressing matters of social concern are debated and legislated, which are neglected; which deaths are loudly mourned, which are quietly forgotten. Every single aspect of human life across the broadest categories of human organization is being reoriented around the pursuit of attention. It is now the defining resource of our age.

The rearrangement of social and economic conditions around the pursuit of attention is a transformation as profound as the dawn of industrial capitalism and the creation of wage labor as the central form of human toil. Attention now exists as a commodity in the same way labor did in the early years of industrial capitalism. What had previously been regarded as human effort was converted into a commodity with a price. People had always "worked" in one way or another, but that work was not embedded in a complicated system that turned the work into a market good. This transition from "work" to "labor" was, for many, both punishing and strange. The worker, Karl Marx observed in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, "does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but

mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself."

This was the fundamental insight of Marx's theory of labor and alienation: that a social system had been erected to coercively extract something from people that had previously, in a deep sense, been theirs. Even today, those words feel fresh. The sense of dislocation and being outside oneself. The inability, even amid what is ostensibly boundless choice and freedom—*What do you want to watch tonight, babe?*—to "develop freely" our mental energy. The trapped quality of the worker caught in a system he did not construct and from which he cannot extricate himself.

The epochal shift of industrial capitalism required what Marx described as the commodification of labor. Labor—what we do with our body and mind, the product of our effort and exertion—is quite an alienating thing to have turned into a market commodity. The transmutation of what had always been "work" or "things humans did for specific purposes" into "labor" as a category of activity with a price required an entire transformation of the structure of society and the daily experience of human life.

Indeed, to extract labor from a person, you need to compensate them through wages, coerce them, or use violence—such as the overseer's whip—to force it out of them. All these methods have been used. But the extraction of our attention happens in a different way. People can be forced to work in all kinds of cruel and oppressive ways, but they cannot be forced to do it purely through the manipulation of their preconscious faculties. If someone puts a gun to your head and tells you to dig a ditch, you know you are being coerced. If someone fires a gun in the air, your attention will instantly shift to the sound even before

you can fully grasp what's happening.

This feature of attention—that it can be taken from us at a purely sensory level, before our conscious will even gets to weigh in—makes it a strange and powerful force. Attention is the stuff of consciousness itself, where we choose to place our mind's focus at any given moment. And yet it can always be wrenched *from* us seemingly against our will by the wail of the siren, the bark of a dog, or the flash of a prurient image on our phone. The more competitive an attention market it is, the more it will select for involuntary methods of capturing attention. Think of Times Square with its blinding lights, or a casino floor or a supermarket checkout counter. More and more, our entire lives have come to resemble those spaces.

Centering attention as a resource and understanding both its existential primacy and its increasing social, political, and economic domination is the key to understanding disparate aspects of 21st-century life. Attention comes prior to other aspects of speech and communication that we associate with power—persuasion, argumentation, information. Before you can persuade, you must capture attention: "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears!" Before you inform, insult, or seduce, you must make sure that your voice doesn't end up in the muted background static that is 99.9 percent of speech directed our way. Public discourse is now a war of all against all for attention. Commerce is a war for attention. Social life is a war for attention. Parenting is a war for attention. And we are all feeling battle weary.

The trajectory of Elon Musk is a perfect fable for the attention age. By the third decade of the 21st century, Musk was the richest man on Earth. He had every material and financial resource, enough to purchase anything that the totality of human history up until that point

could produce to be bought or owned by one man. And yet he was willing to trade it all for attention.

Not at first—for a good portion of his early career, Musk was relatively press shy. But then, like so many, he joined Twitter. He posted more and more, with greater degrees of pathetic desperation, until he made the most expensive impulse purchase in history, buying the platform for a wildly overvalued \$44 billion.

Perhaps having realized how much he had overpaid, Musk then tried to back out, but facing a lawsuit from Twitter and a potentially disastrous trial, he was all but forced to complete the sale. Although he made all kinds of high-minded noises about free speech and diversity of viewpoints, it became immediately clear from his incessant, compulsive posting and trolling that what he really wanted was to be Twitter's Main Character.

In becoming Twitter's Main Character, though, he boosted vile and false conspiracy theories about a savage attack on the husband of the House speaker, mocked the notion that a mass shooter with literal swastika tattoos could possibly be a white supremacist, and consistently boosted racist posts about the inherent criminality of Black people and degrading tweets about trans people.

This did succeed in getting Musk attention: He was always one of Twitter's top stories, and his antics even became a fixation of mainstream news coverage. But all of this was a bit much for many Twitter users. Crucially, advertisers began to pull back, and then flee en masse. By May 2023, seven months after Musk bought Twitter for \$44 billion, Fidelity Investments estimated the platform's total worth to be just \$15 billion. To most observers, this looked as though Musk had lit

nearly \$30 billion on fire, but he had used it to purchase something: the world's attention. It was more valuable to him than anything else.

When asked by a CNBC interviewer why he was constantly sending such tweets as "[George] Soros hates humanity," Musk—with a little extra pause for effect—said, "There's a scene in *The Princess Bride*—great movie—where he confronts the person who killed his father. And he says, 'Offer me money. Offer me power. I don't care' ... I'll say what I want to say, and if the consequence of that is losing money, then so be it." Although it was cloaked in principle, what Musk was really saying was *The attention is worth it to me. There is quite literally nothing I value more.*

But if Musk was sent on this trajectory through sheer broken need, carried along by compulsion, in his brokenness he stumbled on the simple truth that to control the attention of others is to exert power. His pursuit of Twitter might have started as a form of addiction, but it has transformed into a strategy. His obsession with attention cost him billions of dollars in the beginning, but it has now helped him elect a president, positioned him to influence government policy, and increased his fortune.

And in this, Musk is an extreme example, but he is by no means alone. What you can see throughout his generational cohort is the same thirsty, grasping desire for attention: Silicon Valley billionaires starting their own podcasts, like the hosts of *All In*, or posting compulsively, like the hedge-fund billionaire Bill Ackman. This age's new plutocrats are obsessed, for understandable reasons, with attention.

If attention is the substance of life, then the question of what we pay attention to is the question of what our lives will be. And here we come

to a foundational question that is far harder to answer than we might like it to be. What do we *want* to pay attention to? If we didn't have all the technologies and corporations vying for our attention, if our attention wasn't being commodified and extracted, what would we affirmatively choose to pay attention to?

You hear complaints about the gap between what we want to pay attention to and what we end up paying attention to all the time in the attention age. Someone ambitiously brings three new novels on vacation and comes back having read only a third of one of them because she was sucked into scrolling through Instagram. Reading is a particular focus of these complaints, I find. Everyone, including myself, complains that they can't read long books anymore. We have a sense that our preferences haven't changed—I still like to read—just our behavior. And the reason our behavior has changed is that someone has taken something from us. Someone has subtly, insidiously coerced us.

But maybe we have multiple selves who want different things—a self who wants to read, a self who wants to scroll. There's a tension here between different aspects of the self that can be hard to reconcile. We contend with what our superego wants (to go on vacation and read novels) and what our actual self does (scrolls through Instagram). As is so often the case, our revealed preferences are different from our stated ones. And who is to say what our real and true desire is?

So much of modern self-help is geared toward closing the gap between what we say we want and value and how we act. And here, in the instant-to-instant unfolding of our inner lives, we can imagine a similar project, at least at the individual level. The solution, to the extent that there is one, to alienation caused by this gap between what we pay

attention to and what we *want* to pay attention to is to begin with the question of what we actually want. If you had full power over your own attention, a kind of X-Men-style hyperfocus that could, at will, always be directed on whatever you chose, for as long as you chose, what would you do with this superpower?

I have to say that I think most people would offer a fairly similar set of answers. I would focus on my family and friends, my hobbies and interests, things that bring me joy, personal projects—whether taking photos, gardening, or building a deck—that give me satisfaction.

We are not required to suffer under the current form of attention capitalism forever, or even for that much longer. We can create alternative markets for attention, alternative institutions, and businesses that create models different from those that now dominate. We can also create noncommercial spaces where we can pay attention to one another, our hobbies, and our interests and communities without that attention being captured, bought, and sold. And there is yet another path forward that is more radical than these other approaches, one that fundamentally relies on people voluntarily creating new alternatives: We can regulate attention.

If we look back to the labor movements of the 19th century, they came to advocate for two particularly rudimentary and fundamental forms of regulation: a ban on child labor and limitations on total hours worked. Neither of these restrictions seemed obvious and commonsense at the time, at least not to the titans of industry and politicians who fought them. Moving governments toward these goals took a tremendous amount of political mobilization, agitation, and persuasion.

[Megan Garber: The great fracturing of American attention](#)

What if we viewed attention in similar terms? It's obviously not a perfect analogy, but a lot is similar. In the legal context, one of the biggest challenges is that attention is a difficult thing to regulate because in the United States it is so connected to, and difficult to sever from, speech. The First Amendment provides extremely strong speech protections, and any attempts to regulate attention—telling social-media companies how they can and can't operate, for instance—inevitably raise profound First Amendment questions. But there are ways to regulate attention that plausibly sidestep the speech question by simply imposing non-viewpoint-specific limitations that apply across the board.

There are already bills in state legislatures and in Congress that would create legal age minimums for social-media platforms. Although the details vary, as a general matter this seems obvious and sensible. We as a society can say that children's attention should not be sold and commodified in the aggressive and alienating fashion of current social-media networks. Just as 12-year-olds can't really consent to a wage contract, we could argue they can't really consent to the expropriation of their attention in the way that, say, Instagram exploits it.

But what about adults? What if we decided to apply the basic lessons of labor law to attention and simply impose limits on how much attention can be monetized from us? I am fully aware that heavy-handed regulation of attention markets, such as a cap on hours of use, would face steep political and legal opposition. But there's another way to view efforts to regulate the marketing of our attention.

One of the earliest slogans pushing the eight-hour workday was "Eight hours for work, eight hours for sleep, and eight hours for what we will." It feels as if more and more of that leisure time is now taken *from* us, not willed *by* us. Our control over the space of our mind, stolen. Are we

really spending the precious hours of our waking, nonworking lives doing “what we will”? Or has the conquering logic of the market penetrated our quietest, most intimate moments?

We don’t have to accept this. It does not need to be this way. We must use every tool and strategy imaginable to wrest back our will, to create a world in which we point our attention where we—the willful, conscious “we”—want it to go. A world where we can function and flourish as full human beings, as liberated souls, unlashd from the mast, our ears unplugged and open, listening to the lapping of the waves, making our way back home to the people we love, the sound of sirens safely in the distance.

This essay has been adapted from Chris Hayes’ new book, [The Sirens’ Call](#).

[The Sirens' Call: How Attention Became The World's Most Endangered Resource](#)

By Chris Hayes

When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.