

The Memo – Episode 2

The attention economy: are we all hooked?

— Germain :

Overland Park, an affluent suburb of Kansas City in the United States, is exactly what you would imagine. Big houses, tree-lined yards, vast manicured lawns... Streams and ponds where families can enjoy a weekend stroll. This is the city where a peculiar new movement has taken shape. Parents meet in the evenings at the library... For now, they are a group of about 100 activists... the movement is taking root and expanding. Their goal? To unglue their kids from their screens once and for all. And that's not something they can do on their own. No... "No one wants to be the parent of the only kid in school without a phone!"

The kids are hooked on screens! And that is cause for concern among these well-informed parents. The story comes to us from the New York Times. But what the article doesn't mention... is how many times a day the parents look at their phones...

[Jingle]

Hello Marine,

— Marine :

Hello Germain,

— Germain :

Welcome to the Memo! Today we are talking about the attention economy... a concept that first arose in the 1990s. Because in fact, our attention is the fuel of the digital economy. The more time we spend on apps and platforms, the more data we generate... and data is money!

But do we also run the risk of overheating with all this activity, Marine?

— Marine :

I don't think anyone will disagree with me here... we are less focused today... and more anxious... But what scientists want to know is just how deep these effects go. If technology has an impact on our cognitive abilities, in other words, if technology is changing our brains.

And the answer is mostly yes... The American website Vox surveyed ten specialists... A psychologist explains that browsing through several media at once... as we all do nowadays... has a direct impact on what we call our working memory. That's the short-term memory that allows us to learn new things.

— Germain :

Why is it so hard? Why can't we control ourselves?

— Marine :

We can do it... It's human nature. We know how to channel our thoughts and keep them from wandering off into tangents... but only up to a certain point. In the

magazine *Télérama* the philosopher and mechanic Matthew Crawford says that “Self-regulation, like attention, is a resource of which we have a finite amount. That’s why so many of us feel mentally exhausted.”

— Germain :

So peace and quiet is the ultimate luxury, then?

— Marine :

Yes, as you may have already noticed: boarding areas in airports are always loud and full of screens and advertisements. Luxury is the peace and quiet you can find in the lounges... Spaces where you can give your eyes – and your brain – a rest...

— Germain :

But when a notification pops up on my screen, why can’t I just ignore it?

— Marine :

It’s not that easy! As it turns out, it’s all about dopamine, which is the hormone that governs your body’s reward system. And it’s even the title of a mini-series by Arte... In a few videos, they explain how apps like Tinder, Instagram, YouTube or Candy Crush... produce exactly the same effect as drugs. What we want from these apps is the little thrill, the little reward, which we feel when we get a like or start watching a new video. That’s the attention economy. It’s an economic model. These apps are designed and developed so that we spend as much time on them as possible.

— Germain :

... so we know how to design addictive apps...

— Marine :

Yes, and one of the best minds on this topic is the anthropologist Natasha Schüll... She studied a concept she calls “addiction by design” in the slot machines found in casinos. And she breaks down part by part how these games work and manage to suck us in. In fact, they pull all the right strings inside of us, which are known as our cognitive biases.

— Germain :

And what effect does that have exactly?

— Marine :

It takes us right back to dopamine! Digital apps offer instant gratification, right at our fingertips. And so we get stuck in a loop, or enter a kind of trance or hypnosis. We completely forget about our physical existence.

There is even a new science that studies these mechanisms, which is called Captology. It even has a special chair at Stanford University.

— Germain :

OK, I get how it works with slot machines, but what about digital tools?

— Marine :

With digital, it can be even more effective! With AB testing for example, designers can test out two separate designs and see which one works the best... It can be a very powerful tool. Interface design experts refer to this as “dark patterns”. In fact, these are “rigged interfaces” that have been designed to please us so well that they influence everything we do.

— Germain :

And in fact, several former tech workers have started to speak out against it... Like Tristant Harris from Google...

— Marine :

That’s right, and he even talks with Natasha Schüll in a podcast called “Your Undivided Attention”. In the podcast, they explain that apps actually have the power to turn us into zombies... When we scroll mindlessly through a news feed, for example. As a result, they have both called on designers to exercise greater responsibility. And to create a new moral framework. The problem, of course, is that this would go completely against the current economic model for these apps! And for the moment, there is not a single rule or regulation governing app design.

— Germain :

So it would take nothing less than a radical transformation.

— Marine :

In the Guardian, the philosopher James Williams even says that “The liberation of human attention may be the defining moral and political struggle of our time”. In his view, what’s at stake is nothing less than “the freedom to navigate your life in the way you want...”

— Germain :

So is there anything being done to counter this trend?

— Marine :

In France, there is Yves Citton, who argues for an ecology of attention. You can read his work in Usbek and Rica or the CRNS journal. What he says is that with digital, we have adopted a single measurement of attention... in order to monetize it. But in reality, there are many different kinds of attention... Am I truly paying attention when I like a post on social media or scroll through my phone, for example?

— Germain :

So how can we measure attention in other ways?

— Marine :

The FING – or the foundation for the next-generation internet – offers several ways to break the cult of numbers: search engines could be used to show how each site

responds to a specific need... Video platforms could stop measuring “how many minutes have viewers spent watching videos?” and instead ask “Did we meet the need that brought them to us?”

In any case, Instagram, which is owned by Facebook, has already experimented with hiding the number of likes on each post... and it will soon make this the general rule. Their goal is to ease social pressure.

— Germain :

Thank you, Marine! Thank you all for your attention, and we're thrilled to have you as listeners. You can find all the sources used to create this episode in the description. Until next time for a new episode of the Memo!

Sources:

- New York Times – [The digital gap between rich and poor kids is not what we expected](#)
- Vox - [Is our constant use of digital technologies affecting our brain health? We asked 11 experts](#)
- Bank Underground – [Is the economy suffering from the crisis of attention ?](#)
- Télérama – [Comment le monde actuel a privatisé le silence](#)
- Arte - [Dopamine](#)
- The Guardian – [Social media copies gambling methods to create psychological cravings](#)
- Your undivided attention – [Should've stayed in Vegas](#)
- The Guardian – [Technology is driving us to distraction](#)
- Usbek et Rica – [L'attention à l'autre est le défi majeur de demain](#)
- Internet actu – [Rétro-design de l'attention : dépasser le temps](#)