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DIGITAL ATTENTION ECONOMY: CONCEPT, PHENOMENON, AND HISTORY IN PLATFORM STUDIES

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Extended abstract:

The concept of the attention economy has been increasingly mobilized in internet studies to explain a range of phenomena within the sociotechnical and communicational dynamics of digital platforms. In disinformation studies, for instance, the notion helps to analyze communication strategies that steer public debate toward false information, generating informational chaos and deepening political polarization (Empoli, 2020; Cesarino, 2022). In research on digital influencers (Karhawi, 2022; Author, 2021; Duffy; Pooley, 2019), analyses of visibility capitalization processes, engagement techniques, and intersubjective exchanges of attention among users demonstrate how this concept can be fertile for reflections on digital labor and online influence. Meanwhile, critical algorithm studies have shown how algorithmic mediation establishes "new conditions through which visibility is constructed online" (Bucher, 2020, P. 82; Bruno, 2013), thereby defining what is visible and invisible on digital platforms. Additionally, in discussions on digital rights (European Data Protection Board, 2022), the use of deceptive design patterns (Alter, 2017; Williams, 2018) raises critical concerns regarding the exploitation of cognitive and perceptual vulnerabilities to divert users' attention for the benefit of technology companies.

All these approaches underscore the relevance of the attention economy concept for understanding the sociotechnical dynamics of digital platforms and their intersections with political, economic, cultural, and subjective dimensions. As digital technologies become increasingly embedded in everyday life and the volume of informational flows expands exponentially, grasping the new dimensions of the attention economy has become central to explaining the impact of digital platforms on contemporary societies.

One hypothesis to explain the centrality of this concept lies in the expansion and consolidation of platform business models based on maximizing user engagement, data extraction, and artificial intelligence that monetize attention through advertising while offering services free of charge to users. However, selling audience attention in exchange for advertising revenue is not exclusive to digital platforms. Business models

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based on the commercialization of attention have existed since the 19th century across other mass media, such as newspapers, radio, and television (Wu, 2016; Crary, 2013; 2014).

Thus, while the theoretical structuring of the attention economy as a concept began in 1969 with Herbert Simon and was further developed by other scholars in the mid-1990s in discussions on new technologies (Citton, 2016), its operationalization as a phenomenon predates the emergence of digital technologies and platforms. Scholars such as Jonathan Crary (2013) and Tim Wu (2016) identify attention as an economic issue that is intrinsic to modernity, having emerged in Western societies in the mid-19th century. The rise of urban life, industrialization, the consolidation of consumer culture, and the advent of mass media during this period led to debates on the effects of sensory hyperstimulation (Singer, 2004) and the perceptual shock (Benjamin, 2012) generated by what was then a new regime of modern visibility. In this regard, Crary (2014) argues that an ongoing crisis of attention had already constituted a crucial aspect of modernity.

There is no doubt that, since then, the level of sensory stimulation and the volume of available information have grown exponentially with the advent of the internet, participatory platform logic, and algorithmic mediation in information distribution. However, our hypothesis is that these transformations are not merely quantitative —i.e., an increase in the number of stimuli competing for our attention—but also qualitative, as the ways in which attention is instrumentalized and valued have also changed, alongside their effects on subjectivity.

In this sense, the formation of an attention economy is not a new phenomenon, but it certainly takes on new contours and power-knowledge dynamics in the digital era. What are the ruptures between the functioning of the attention economy today and that of the 19th and 20th centuries? From a Foucauldian genealogical perspective (Foucault, 1979; 1988; 2010), this study aims to analyze contemporary attention economy processes, exploring the nuances between the concept, phenomenon, and history within the framework of critical platform studies (Dijck, Poell & De Waal, 2018; Poell, Nieborg & Van Dijck, 2020; Bucher, 2012). Foucault's genealogical methodology is particularly relevant for investigating the attention economy, as it provides a historical perspective on the ruptures and displacements within the power, knowledge, and subjectivity dynamics that underlie the economic valorization of attention today. Rather than seeking a justificatory origin or an ultimate purpose for historical facts, the genealogical method, as developed by Foucault (1979) based on Nietzsche's work, aims to reveal the historically contingent and arbitrary nature of present phenomena.

Thus, by starting from a contemporary problem —characterizing the specificities of the attention economy concept in the digital context—we will examine its history to identify key shifts in its processes. Through a literature review of the attention economy concept and critical studies on algorithms and platforms, we propose defining the concept of the "digital attention economy" to situate its historical singularities. By digital attention economy, we refer to the commercial and subjective disputes over attention in an environment of informational excess, where attention is instrumentalized as a scarce, limited, and highly valuable resource, serving as one of the pillars of the sociotechnical

dynamics of datafication (Mejias & Couldry, 2019), algorithmization (Bucher, 2018), and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2020). Furthermore, we argue that to understand the emergence and development of the attention economy from the 19th century through the 20th century, it is necessary to examine the historical alliances between advertising and psychology, as well as their applied methods across different mass communication media (Author, 2022). For this stage, we conducted research using the Adam Matthew Digital (AMD) primary source archive, which provides a vast collection of archival materials on market research and consumer motivation studies in 20th-century American business.

In our genealogy, we highlight three major ruptures in the functioning of the attention economy from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century: 1. Technologies of attention management: A shift from a centralized, unidirectional media-based management model of mass media to an algorithmic management model, which is distributed, claims to be ultra-personalized, and predictive; 2. The political economy of attention merchants (WU, 2016): A geopolitical shift from advertising practices centered on Madison Avenue to those based on digital advertising platforms (Srnicsek, 2017) and datafication processes in Silicon Valley; 3. The attentional regime: A transition from a continuous attention crisis of the modern consumer-subject (Crary, 2013) to a state of permanent crisis characterized by a hyper-fragmented, screen-addicted user-subject.

Through this genealogical approach, we emphasize that the ruptures in the attention economy introduced by digital platforms are not merely technological but also involve new relationships between science, the market, and society, as well as the formation of new regimes of power, knowledge, and subjectivity. In this way, our goal is to contribute to platform studies by offering a theoretical and historical perspective on the attention economy, highlighting its specificities in the present.

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