


The Commodification of Attention: Revisiting the Harms of the Attention Economy

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Original Article</p> <p>Main Object: Humanities & Social Sciences, Philosophy</p> <p>Received: 06 May 2025 Revised: 02 June 2025 Accepted: 02 June 2025 Published online: 02 July 2025</p> <p>Keywords: attention economy, attention merchants, coercive paternalism, commodity, moral limits of markets.</p>	<p>Background: The economy wrongly commodifies attention. The commodification is morally objectionable because our attention is not properly subject to market forces.</p> <p>Aims: A crucial aim of this article is to broaden the debate about the attention economy.</p> <p>Methodology: Conceptual analysis of the attention economy, the right to attention, and the influence of market forces on commodities.</p> <p>Discussion: In the first section, I survey the conventional approach to the attention economy, which treats the ethical problems here as instances of questions about the moral limits of markets. I agree that this approach is justified, but I aim to broaden the debate by focusing on whether attention should be commodified at all. In the second section, I argue that attention is not properly subject to market forces. In the third section, I argue that subjecting attention to market forces leads, predictably, to the development and use of technology that violates the right to attention. In the fourth section, I argue that coercive paternalism offers the correct response to these problems and that two other solutions—the reliance on nudges and the reliance on social antibodies—are inferior.</p> <p>Conclusion: The attention economy is a rights-violating and noxious market. Its wrongful commodification of attention produces a market that does not respect the boundaries between commercialized and non-commercialized spaces.</p>
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1. Introduction

The attention economy, roughly, is the sprawling market in which people's attention is bought and sold. At the heart of the attention economy is the commodification of attention. The goal of this article is to argue that this commodification is morally objectionable because our attention is not properly subject to market forces. Our attention is a scarce and limited resource, and that scarcity gives rise to fierce competition between rival commercial actors. This competition leads to the invasion of important non-commercial spaces and the development of attention-grabbing stimuli that undermine our ability to plan our lives.

A crucial aim of this article is to broaden the debate about the attention economy. There is a tendency among ethicists to treat the failures of the attention economy as instances of the problem of the *moral limits of markets*. As I maintain in the first section, I agree with this approach: it is appropriate to wonder whether this market crosses important lines, just as markets for selling sex and organs might. However, I maintain that this approach to the attention economy is too narrow because there is the further question of whether attention itself is properly subject to market forces. Conceptual analysis of the attention economy, the right to attention, and the influence of market forces on commodities.

The second section surveys the conventional approach to the attention economy. I shall describe the transactions that characterize the attention economy more fully at the start of this section, and I shall use the term 'attention merchant' to refer to the commercial actors in these transactions. In the third section, I argue that it is wrong to commodify attention because attention is not properly subject to market forces. In the fourth section, I follow recent thinkers who defend the existence of the right to attention, and I argue that subjecting attention to market forces leads, predictably, to the development and use of technology that flagrantly violates this right. In the fifth section, I argue that coercive paternalism is the correct response to these problems, and I argue that two other possible solutions — the reliance on nudges and the reliance on social antibodies — are inferior.

2. The moral limits of markets

The attention economy is characterized by two kinds of transactions.¹ The first kind of transaction features consumers giving owners of sites, apps, or forms of media their attention in return for some service. The second kind of transaction features the owners of these things, whom I call attention merchants, auctioning off the attention of consumers to advertisers. For instance, I access YouTube videos without paying any fee, but I give YouTube's owners my attention in exchange for this access. The attention merchants can then auction off my attention, and the attention of others, to advertisers. The business model involves finding a way to increase the attention that I give to YouTube, as well

1. I am indebted to Castro and Pham 2020: 2 for this description.

as getting me to disclose as much information about myself as possible, not just to show me videos that I am more likely to like, but also to show me advertisements that I am more likely to engage with. As the attention merchants can predict more accurately what I will engage with, the more money that they can charge advertisers for my attention, because I am more likely to become a customer of whatever is being advertised.

One persuasive argument concerning the attention economy is that it is *noxious*. What this means is that it in some way violates the *moral limits of markets*. This approach to markets was pioneered by Debra Satz (2010); according to this approach, a market is noxious if it satisfies two criteria. These criteria are that it engenders harmful outcomes and that it reflects weakened agency. Clinton Castro and Adam Pham (2020) argue that the attention economy satisfies both criteria. It produces harmful outcomes to individuals to the extent that it leads to mental illnesses and loneliness through, for instance, excessive and unhealthy social-media use. It also produces harmful outcomes to society by facilitating echo chambers and polarization. It reflects weakened agency by developing addictions and habits that undermine our status as rational agents.

That summary is a bit of a whirlwind tour through some important pieces of research in the ethics of social media that we can rely on to make this case. This brief summary obscures some complications, such as arguments that echo chambers are not entirely or always bad.¹ For the most part, though, there is a consensus that at least some phenomena that could be cited to justify the belief that the attention economy satisfies both criteria exist.² While there might be reasonable disagreement about *which* such phenomena exist, it seems right to grant the point to Castro and Pham (2020), and by and large, I agree with this approach to the attention economy.

However, by turning the problem of the attention economy into the problem of the moral limits of markets, we take a rather narrow view of it. It is a legitimate view, but there is space for another approach that reaches a similar conclusion differently. When we view this problem as one of the moral limits of markets, we consider the attention economy the same way that we might consider the markets involving drugs, guns, sex, votes in a democracy, and so on. Really, we are asking, as Castro and Pham (2020) acknowledge, whether some kind of regulation is justified or unjustified.³

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1. For instance, Campbell (2023) argues that echo chambers are in some respects and cases good.
 2. For arguments about social-media addictions, see Bhargava and Velazquez (2021), and Alter (2017). For arguments about polarization, see Sunstein (2017). For arguments about echo chambers, see Parsell (2008), and Nguyen (2020).
 3. See, for instance, Castro and Pham (2020: 11): “this market, however, is not one that we need to live with in its current form. As we have shown, our analysis sheds some light on the proper regulatory response. We could treat new media as we have treated other harmful, addictive products: we could inform users of its effects and limit children’s access to it.”

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That is an important question to ask, but another important question is whether attention is properly treated as a commodity.

3. The commodification of attention

It is not obvious that attention is the sort of thing that ought to be commodified at all. I am inspired by Elizabeth Anderson's (1990) approach to commercial surrogacy in the field of medical ethics. She opposes commercial surrogacy because, among other things, it treats children as commodities, when they are not properly treated as such. In her view, which I adopt here in this article, to properly treat something as a commodity is to "claim that the norms of the market are appropriate for regulating its production, exchange, and enjoyment. To the extent that moral principles or ethical ideals preclude the application of market norms to a good, we may say that the good is not a (proper) commodity" (Anderson, 1990: 71-72). I maintain that the attention economy improperly treats our attention as a commodity. Market norms are not the sort of thing that ought to govern the exchange of attention. I do not dispute the approach to the attention economy that considers it from the point of view of the moral limits of markets, but I aim to *add* to our moral thinking about this industry by approaching it differently.

Here is an illustration of what happens when we commodify attention. School districts throughout the United States have realized that one of their most important assets is the attention of the students that they have. A prominent example is the Twin Rivers school district in California. That is why the school district, in search of much-needed funds, sold corporate access to the students. The students paid nothing. The school district paid nothing. The school district was told that it would receive hundreds of thousands of dollars in return for allowing such companies as McDonald's and Coca-Cola to advertise in its schools. In other school districts, this has involved report cards that featured the McDonald's logo, with sufficiently good grades giving coupons to bright students; it has also involved corporate sponsors buying screens that populate hallways, playing advertisements with school announcements.¹

This is not the attention economy that we recognize from various social-media sites, but it is the same industry. It is the industry that sees human attention as an asset. The search for this resource—namely, attention—leads businesses to a peculiar kind of *invasion* or encroachment. Consider an image provided by Robert Nozick (2013) in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. He imagines that around each of us there is a kind of boundary or line, and when people behave immorally with

1. Wu (2016: 4) explains the rationale well: "Establishing a warm association with Coca-Cola or McDonald's at an early age can yield payoffs that last a lifetime—or, in the lingo, 'drive purchase decisions and build brand awareness.' That in essence is what EFP [that is, Education Funding Partners, which was the firm that brokers such deals] offered its clients: 'an unparalleled system for engagement in the K-12 market'—a chance to mold the consumers of the future."

respect to us, they are said to cross that boundary.¹ We can assess whether an action is right or wrong by consulting whether it has crossed this boundary. According to Nozick's image, the boundaries in question might be our rights, property, or something else. I am not using Nozick's image to assess whether any given action is right or wrong but to capture an intuition about the attention economy and such practices as opening up corporate advertisement in schools: a sense that some space is being invaded. Nowadays, we are accustomed to seeing advertisements for corporations in our homes on various screens, in our workplaces, in our commutes, and in virtually every social setting. University students in the Western world are accustomed to having corporations advertise on campus. The attention economy pushes corporations into every aspect of our lives. What the corporations want in exchange for the money that they are spending on school districts is the opportunity to compete for the students' attention: not just with each other, but with everything else that students think about. This is a crucial feature of the attention economy that we ought to consider: *It invades every space that it can.*

One reason why it is inappropriate for human attention to be governed by market norms is that the competition encouraged by these norms ultimately produces a kind of race to the bottom. If small invasions are tolerable, larger invasions might not be, and market norms will produce larger invasions. This problem is compounded by the fact that novelty is particularly effective at capturing our attention, and even if some advertisement or strategy works now, we will eventually become disenchanted with it.² Consequently, there are at least two pressures pushing market actors towards claiming more and more of our attention: general forces of competition, and the need to advertise more or risk the de-sensitization of consumers to some strategy.

I want to emphasize the concern about competition. This concern highlights one way in which attention is not properly treated as a commodity. Competition is a market force that should not govern here. In contrast, there are many markets in which competition is desirable. For instance, competition among restaurants can reliably improve the quality of service because each restaurant has an incentive to one-up the other restaurants. In this case, the services provided by restaurants are properly commodified: we *want* them to be subject to market influences

1. e.g., Nozick (2013: 57) says: "a line (or hyper-plane) circumscribes an area in moral space around an individual. Locke holds that this line is determined by an individual's natural rights, which limit the actions of others. Non-Lockeans view other considerations as setting the position and contour of the line. In any case the following question arises: are others forbidden to perform actions that transgress the boundary or encroach upon the circumscribed area, or are they permitted to perform such actions provided that they compensate the person whose boundary has been crossed?"

2. My phrasing here deliberately alludes to Wu's (2016) term, 'the disenchantment effect', which describes what I am referring to.

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and norms. However, in the attention economy, competition produces a deluge of independent actors invading our physical, mental, and online lives. For this reason, it is misleading to focus on a single business practice of one company. For instance, it would be misleading to focus on the way that Amazon sends me an email when they are advertising a sale on a product that their algorithms predicted that I would like. Instead, we need to attend to the fact that, every day, countless companies send me emails; I get advertisements as notifications on my phone from companies; I see advertisements before, after, and during YouTube videos; I hear advertisements on each podcast I listen to; and so on. Even when I am not directly being advertised to, countless apps and sites are nudging me to spend more time on their platforms in order that they can *then* sell me something or simply improve the value of their own advertising spaces in the eyes of the people to whom they aim to auction off my attention.

The sheer volume of these practices is a result of competition. Each company is vying for my (limited and scarce) attention, with the result that they do not want to let anyone else get the advantage.¹ Accordingly, if some other company is advertising by email or on podcasts, so must my company. Moreover, the fact that attention-grabbing strategies eventually get stale requires that each space be opened up to further and novel opportunities for getting consumers' attention. So, it is no mystery why YouTube had to place advertisements before, during, and after videos, instead of merely before videos. The old way of placing advertisements only before videos was getting stale, and market forces pressured the owners to open up new ways of grabbing attention.

The competition that we have in mind here is not only between corporations. This is a result of a unique feature of the attention economy: since the corporations do not compete with each other for our dollars but for our attention, their competition is of a different nature than other market competitions. This is because the relationship that we have in most market relationships is that of buyer and seller; in other words, we are in the transaction as a full-fledged member. That is not the case here: our attention is the resource that *someone else* is selling to another party. Consequently, companies are vying for our attention not just with each other but with other parts of being human, such as sleep, time with our romantic partners, and so on. Reed Hastings, the chief executive officer of Netflix, had a shrewd understanding of this fact when he said that Netflix's primary competition was not with other streaming services but with sleep: "you know, think about it, when you watch a show from Netflix and you get addicted to it, you stay up late at night. We're competing with sleep, on the margin. And so, it's a very large pool of time."² This is another way of getting at the point I

1. The opportunity cost of attending to any particular thing is high: if I am watching a video on YouTube, I cannot at the same time be watching something on Netflix.

2. See, Sulleyman (2017).

mentioned earlier about invasions or encroachments: the nature of the attention economy is such that it will invade every aspect of our lives, and subjecting attention to market pressures ensures that outcome.

One important danger here can be illustrated by making an analogy with privacy. Philosophers have developed an important and influential theory of respecting privacy online called the *contextual-integrity* (CI) model of privacy.¹ The chief idea of the CI model, put simply, is that respecting privacy requires us to respect the integrity of a certain context. For instance, it is appropriate for my doctor to share my medical information with the radiologist before an important radiology exam. However, it would be inappropriate for the doctor to gossip about my marriage. Also, it is not as if the doctor has clearance to share my medical information with just anyone: he or she cannot tell strangers about my medical condition. What is appropriate to share varies from context to context. The CI model says insightful things about the difficulty of respecting privacy online because social-media sites blur the lines between different kinds of contexts. When I post on Instagram, I might be speaking to my family, friends, prospective employers, mortal nemeses, former lovers, and strangers all at once. Perhaps even a journalist will include my post in an article, and millions of people might see it divorced from its original context on Instagram. In conclusion, social-media sites have undermined the contextual integrity that is crucial to respect for privacy.

This provides us with an important analogy for understanding what the commodification of attention does. In the attention economy, every moment of our day becomes an opportunity to get our attention in order that attention merchants can auction it off. How lucrative Facebook's advertisement space is depends on how many people it can get to look at it for how long and how well-tailored the advertisements are to people, such that they are more likely to click on the advertisements. Accordingly, Meta has to compete with every other attention merchant to make us open the Facebook app and engage with it. This means that the time we spend at work, at school, in church, on our way home, with our friends or romantic partners, in the bathroom, in bed, and more, becomes time for which every attention merchant is competing for our attention. Therefore, there is *no respect* for what we might call the distinction between *commercialized* and *non-commercialized* parts of our lives. Every part of our lives becomes an opportunity for an attention merchant to win our attention so that they can auction it off.

Surely, there is nothing wrong in principle with someone advertising to us. However, there is an important difference between advertising to us in a mall or before a movie, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, setting up an entire market for attention that is built on the idea of attention merchants needing to advertise to us in our bathroom, in educational settings, and so on. However, these *invasions* of

1. See, Grodzinsky & Tavani (2010), and Hull et al. (2011).

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commercialized practices into non-commercialized spaces are *necessary* features of the attention economy because one important market force, which is competition, pushes each attention merchant to do this. This is true especially because our attention is a scarce resource. Leaving the time, we spend asleep untouched would be like leaving some oil in the Earth when you knew exactly where it was, how to get it, and how much money you could sell it for. The result is the homogenization of important parts of our lives as the attention economy blends them and causes boundaries between them to blur.

4. The right to attention

Furthermore, our attention is something we have a right to. We are morally entitled to have control over our attention. As we shall see below, this does not mean that all distractions are morally objectionable, but the sorts of attention-grabbing strategies that attention merchants deploy *are* wrong.

In recent years, philosophers have gravitated towards the idea that there exists a right to attention (e.g., Tran, 2015; Puri, 2021; Chomanski, 2023). They have generated different arguments for this conclusion. For instance, Bartłomiej Chomanski (2023) has argued that the right to attention follows from the right to mental integrity. This right amounts to a right to be free from interference with our minds, just in the same way that people have a right to be free from interference with our bodies. In fact, Chomanski argues that the right to mental integrity is justified alongside the right to *bodily integrity*: to the extent that, and for the same reason that, it is wrong to interfere with another person's body, it is wrong to interfere with another person's mind. Anuj Puri (2021) argued that our individual autonomy protects our attention from intrusive and addictive technologies. Jasper Tran (2015) treats our attention as something that we own and, therefore, have a right to on the grounds that we are entitled to things that we own; he thinks of this as a property right. We can read Chomanski's argument the same way because the rights to mental and bodily integrity might be plausibly seen as following from the fact that we *own* our mind and body.

Such are the major extant arguments for the right to attention. I maintain that there is an important point that should be added here, one to which I think Chomanski (2023), Tran (2015), and Puri (2021) would be friendly.¹ Recognition of the right to attention is a fundamental part of respecting people's consent. This is because attention is a necessary condition of giving our consent. I am taking for granted that attention merchants almost never get our *informed* consent because we are so often kept in the dark about whom our attention is being sold to, for what price, at what conditions, and so on. In a medical context, it would be inexcusable if a surgeon failed to get our informed consent but

1. Tran (2015) especially would be sympathetic to this idea, since this is the exact sort of autonomy- and consent-based reasoning that he engages in.

settled for our uninformed consent. In this digital context, perhaps it is also inexcusable. However, there is a deeper problem: the business practices of the attention economy undermine our ability to even give our *uninformed* consent.

This is because we need to *attend* to something before we can give our consent to it. Consent is a part of our capacity for self-determination. I consider possible life plans in accordance with my goals, select one, and authorize other people to act on me when doing so fits with my life plan. This authorization is consent. Consent, therefore, acts as a kind of moral permission to be acted upon; it transforms what would otherwise be stealing into borrowing and what would otherwise be assault into an acceptable tackle on a football field. If attention merchants undermine my ability to even *attend* to possible life plans, then they have surely undermined my ability to consent. The attention economy gives each attention merchant a powerful incentive to do this because the competition that merchants are subject to pushes them to compete for *every single* ounce of this scarce, limited resource, namely, our attention. The time during which someone might deliberate on possible life plans is time during which he or she *could* be attending to something in the attention economy.

In practice, attention merchants deploy *supernormal stimuli* to make this happen. The concept of a supernormal stimulus comes from evolutionary psychology: psychologists argued that we evolved to respond to certain stimuli but that we can now find ourselves confronted by exaggerated stimuli that take advantage of our evolved responses, and these exaggerated stimuli are much harder for us to overcome than their normal counterparts.¹ These exaggerated stimuli are called ‘supernormal stimuli’. For instance, perhaps we evolved to respond to fatty foods with a certain amount of desire and hunger; the fatty food is a normal stimulus. However, perhaps now we can produce fatty foods very easily, and we can make them *super* fatty with more sugar and sodium than could ever occur together in nature. *This* stimulus is *supernormal* because it takes advantage of our evolved responses to some nutrients by presenting us with something that is far beyond what our responses evolved for. Attention merchants do this sort of thing all the time, by playing, for instance, on colors and sounds that are designed to grab our attention. They also rely on our being normally stimulated by novelty and then present us with apps that we can refresh for virtually endless amounts of novelty. The results include habits so

1. e.g., Barrett (2010: 3) says: “The essence of the supernormal stimulus is that the exaggerated imitation can exert a stronger pull than the real thing [... and] animals encounter supernormal stimuli mostly when experimenters build them. We humans can produce our own [...and] our instincts arose to call our attention to rare necessities; now we let them dictate the manufacture of useless attention-grabbers.”

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thoroughly ingrained in us that some researchers have argued they reflect addictions.¹

Note that the development and use of supernormal stimuli are exactly what we would expect in light of the arguments in the previous section. Since attention merchants are locked in a fierce competition for a scarce resource, they have to develop impressive and new attention-grabbing techniques. Each has an incentive to discover which, say, form of notification most effectively grabs a user's attention. Once it is clear which form of notification does that, each has an incentive to adopt that technology immediately and then compete when it comes to other attention-grabbing technology. It is no surprise that their competition leads to the development of stimuli that far outstrip what our responses evolved for.

The concept of a supernormal stimulus anticipates a possible objection to the right to attention. One might wonder whether the right to attention implies that it is *always* wrong to distract someone or grab someone's attention. However, it is wrong to do so when one is distracting someone by means of a supernormal stimulus, not by means of some normal stimulus. The distinction is that normal stimuli are consistent with our easily ignoring the distraction. However, a supernormal stimulus is harder to ignore because it takes advantage of some of our normal, evolved cognitive apparatuses because it deliberately places them in situations that they did not evolve to handle.

Supernormal stimuli undermine our ability to consent and to form life plans by distracting us in ways that are hard to ignore. The attention economy is such that the development and use of such stimuli are predictable when market forces govern the treatment of attention. There might be cases in which such stimuli are acceptable because of some feature of the context. Malls and casinos, notoriously, are set up with lighting and sounds that are designed to disorient the consumer. The problem with the attention economy is that the fierce competition between attention merchants means that these practices follow us in every space we enter, because every moment of our lives is an opportunity to be distracted for their financial gain.

5. Solutions

In this section, I shall argue that the moral problems posed by the commodification of attention warrant a *coercive-paternalist* response. There are two alternatives worth exploring, as well. First, there is the solution presented by libertarian paternalists. Castro and Pham (2020: 9ff), for instance, suggest that we should label social-media platforms in ways that are akin to the labels that we put on cigarette packages. The labels tell us that smoking is bad for us. Castro and Pham approached the attention economy principally from the point of view of the *moral limits of markets* and argued that, in many ways, the attention economy

1. See, Bhargava & Velazquez (2021); and Alter (2017).

is bad for us and for our society. Cigarettes are bad for us, too. With that in mind, they developed a regulatory framework that nudges consumers away from social-media usage that was based on the way that people are nudged away from smoking cigarettes.

This is characteristic of libertarian paternalism because of its reliance on nudges. When a libertarian paternalist wants to promote a certain outcome, they change the context in which a choice is made. The context is called ‘the choice architecture’, and the change to the choice architecture is called a ‘nudge’. Nudges are meant to be influences on people’s decisions that are so gentle that they cannot be considered coercive.¹ A clear example of a nudge: when people are designing a grocery store, they will put the candy bars at the check-out aisle so that customers have to spend time around them. This makes it more likely that people will buy candy bars, even though the customers are not being coerced to buy them. Similarly, we could imagine a cafeteria where the most expensive foods are placed at eye level; we are being nudged towards buying them.

When philosophers discuss nudges on social-media platforms, they often mention the way that, for instance, Instagram nudges us to return to the app by means of notifications (e.g., Campbell, 2022: 96). Informing people about something, such as by telling them that someone has commented on a recent post, counts as a nudge. In reality, the most effective nudges are never *purely* informative. They have been designed in a way that attracts our attention, which is unsurprising in light of the way that our attention has been commodified. For example, Facebook features *red* notifications, instead of *blue* notifications, because red has been shown to grab people’s attention more.² Along similar lines, when we look at cigarette boxes, we find not the mere statement ‘this product might cause lung cancer’ but also many pictures of cancerous lungs. These pictures are meant to be more effective at nudging people away from cigarettes.

At the start of this section, I said that I was going to defend *coercive-paternalist* responses to the commodification of attention, not libertarian paternalism. However, in principle, I have no decisive *moral* objections to nudging. Certainly, some philosophers have discussed such objections. Most recently, for instance, David Enoch (2024) has argued that nudging violates the nudged person’s autonomy. In fact, many laypeople have strong intuitions, investigated by psychologists, that nudging is manipulative.³ If nudging turns out to be manipulative

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1. Libertarian paternalism is most often associated with Sunstein and Thaler (2003), and Sunstein (2012).
 2. See, Campbell (2022: 96) for a philosophical discussion. For more on this decision by Meta: there is testimony from Tristan Harris, who was a whistle-blower who revealed some of the ethical problems he perceived with Facebook’s attempts to grab our attention (See, Lewis, 2017).
 3. See, Campbell (2022: 100ff), for a discussion of the evidence; For the psychological evidence itself, See, Tannenbaum et al. (2017).

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and insufficiently respectful of autonomy, then that spells doom for the libertarian paternalist's attempt to use nudging to resolve moral problems with the attention economy. However, it is not obvious that nudging *is* manipulative or bad.¹ While the jury is still out on this question, let us make this point: *even if* nudging were completely unobjectionable in theory, it *still* should not be our preferred response to the commodification of attention.

Simply put, the libertarian paternalist's response does not address the entire problem. To the extent that the problem with the attention economy is the commodification of attention, nudging people away from, say, social-media platforms does not address the problem. Castro and Pham (2020) recommend nudges because they conceive of the problem differently. They can reasonably recommend nudges because they believe the attention economy is bad in a way analogous to the market for cigarettes: just as cigarettes are bad, smartphones and social-media usage are bad, and so the response to one can be used as the response to the other. I in no way take issue with their claim that the attention economy is a noxious market. However, even if people are being nudged away from social-media sites, *something is still being commodified when it should not be treated as a commodity at all*. Nudges do nothing to remedy *this* problem. Imagine if we all agreed that bodily organs should not be commodified because they are not properly subject to market forces. Now imagine if someone said that we should nudge people away from selling their organs. Our reply might be this: "In principle, there might be nothing wrong with such nudges, but, surely, they do not address the entire problem; so, something else ought to be done to address the improper commodification of organs." This is how I think we should respond to the libertarian paternalist's solution.

Before I discuss coercive paternalism, there is one other response that should be considered: the reliance on so-called *social antibodies*.² Social antibodies are practices that develop spontaneously, without any top-down coordination, to help fight off undesirable behaviors, which we might call *social contagions*. For instance, society has developed a taboo that discourages the consumption of alcohol in the morning except in specific circumstances. It is not illegal to do so, nor does anyone in particular enforce this taboo with obvious or discernible punishments. Yet, it is a taboo that exists, and it appears to discourage some people from engaging in this behavior. Those who rely on this approach say that society will develop social antibodies to ward off some behaviors associated with the attention economy and that society

1. See, Sunstein (2012; 2015), and Campbell (2022) for defenses of nudging from these objections. However, some of the new anti-nudging research, such as by Enoch (2024), is just too new to have been fully litigated by defenders of libertarian paternalism so far.

2. Eyal (2019) is the most prominent champion of this view.

will do so without any specific top-down interventions. In other words, the problem will take care of itself.

There might be some reasons for optimism here. Perhaps in ten years, it will be common for professors to see students put their phones in their bags at the start of class, lest they be thought of as rude. Maybe parents will band together to ensure that their young children will not receive smartphones, and doing so as a group will mean that none of their children feel social pressure to get on social-media sites. These are social antibodies that might come into existence.

However, I think that we should reject relying on social antibodies. First, they suffer from the same problem as nudges. They simply do not offer a full-throated defense of our rights. At best, social antibodies might make it less likely that some people will engage in the self-destructive-yet-good-for-business behaviors that characterize the attention economy. Second, it is not obvious that they would work in this case. Social antibodies that protect against some forms of alcohol consumption might enjoy a high success rate because alcohol does not change quickly or often. In contrast, the attention economy changes quickly and often. If the rate of change slows down, social antibodies might have a chance. However, five or ten years ago, the social-media landscape was very different from what it is today, and another five or ten years might change much. There is no reason to think that social antibodies could keep up. Moreover, consider that social antibodies might, in fact, speed up changes: if a social antibody arises to protect against some forms of exploitative commodification, then the relevant attention merchants now have an incentive to develop ways *around* that social antibody. This is why the argument I made earlier concerning the attention economy's tendency to become a *race to the bottom* matters so much. The attention economy ultimately has to break through every possible boundary.

For these reasons, we should prefer what might be called a *coercive-paternalist* response. This sort of approach relies on *intervening* in the attention economy, unlike the social-antibody approach, but its interventions should be coercive, not libertarian, unlike the approach that relied on nudging. Coercive paternalism is common in other kinds of applied ethics, but it is almost never discussed in the ethics of social media. For instance, Sarah Conly (2013a; 2013b) is probably the most prominent defender of coercive paternalism in healthcare settings.

The use of coercive interventions, which would most likely take the form of legislation ending certain features of the attention economy, could be justified on several different grounds. There are consequentialist arguments that justify coercion on the grounds that it would promote good outcomes for people who are otherwise harmed by the attention economy. There are deontological justifications that stress the importance of protecting rights. More to the point, the use of coercion to shut down parts of the attention economy is justified on

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simple precedent or analogy alone. We intervene in all sorts of markets all the time using coercion. Pointing to precedent is helpful because it gets at what I suspect is the reason why philosophers are hesitant to adopt coercive paternalism in the ethics of social media and why they prefer, say, nudging instead. Using coercion to end an important part of 21st-century life in developed countries seems like a drastic step. Precedents might remind us that this step is not so drastic.

First, I should clarify that I do not mean that we should use legislation to get rid of social-media platforms. There will have to be changes on the back end that will most likely affect the user experience, but the attention economy is not the same thing as the technologies that it facilitates and uses. The underlying business model ought to be disrupted by coercion, but Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X, and so on, can continue to exist. The user experience on social-media apps is just a way of getting the attention of users; the experience is separable from the business model. Without the attention economy, these sites might have to start charging users a monthly fee or create a paid, premium option that could subsidize the inferior version of the platform that non-paying users can access for free.

Second, the appeal to precedent might be more powerful, at least rhetorically, than simple consequentialist or deontological appeals. We already ban markets for organs, votes in a democracy, sex, some drugs, and so on. There are spirited debates about whether to ban the market for at least some firearms in the United States. Reasonable people might disagree about whether the bans in all these cases are justified; however, I doubt that anyone would support the existence of a market for nuclear weapons. There is no principled reason why we should shy away from the use of coercion to end a market. People who agree with the arguments in the previous sections of this article should endorse the coercive paternalist's response to the attention economy.

There might be some lingering resistance. For instance, one might think that there is no putting the genie back in the bottle. In other words, since the attention economy is here, it cannot be made to go away. However, some countries have ended markets that were quite large. Consider the prevalence of gun-buyback programs in some countries. Brazil and the United Kingdom, for instance, have had *multiple* such programs. It is possible to intervene coercively in already-extant markets. Furthermore, it is not obvious why we would want to tolerate the attention economy anyway. We use coercion to prevent people from selling their organs; however, some poor people might *benefit* from the opportunity to sell their organs. In contrast, if we allow the attention economy to exist, there is no reason to think that anyone will experience life-saving benefits. At best, some users will have fun, and many corporate leaders will enjoy record profits from commodifying something that should not be commodified. The downsides are the problems cataloged earlier in this article. *Plus*, users who enjoy social-media platforms, and businesses that rely on them, can still enjoy them

after the attention economy is disrupted. There just might be, as I said earlier, some changes to the underlying business model.

6. Conclusion

The attention economy is a rights-violating and noxious market. Its wrongful commodification of attention produces a market that does not respect the boundaries between commercialized and non-commercialized spaces. Everywhere becomes a space in which we can be advertised to, and the fierce competition for our attention, a scarce resource, creates a race to reach us more and more effectively. The fact that we have a *right* to our attention compounds the moral problems here. For these reasons, and due to the poverty of the two most prominent competing solutions, I recommend coercive paternalism as a solution: the government should get rid of the attention economy and force attention merchants to use a different business model.

Conflict of interest

The author declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations

The author has completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

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