

## The Attention Deficit

“This is a timely book on a pressing topic. Individually and collectively we face problems caused by the unintended consequences of digital connectivity, and Bhatt’s book brings helpful clarity to these issues.”

—Matthew J. Salganik, *Professor of Sociology, Princeton University*

Swati Bhatt

# The Attention Deficit

Unintended Consequences  
of Digital Connectivity

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Swati Bhatt  
Department of Economics  
Princeton University  
Princeton, NJ, USA

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*To Ishaan*

# Preface

And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
And enterprises of great pith and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry,  
And lose the name of action.  
—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

I write this book to explain why things are the way they are, why we live the lives we do and why we make certain choices in the face of rapid technological change. Why has the rhetoric about the rise of social media, privacy and tech behemoths escalated? Why is fear, mistrust and risk aversion on the rise? Why is entrepreneurship losing “the name of action,” as in the quote above?

Attention is a scarce resource and emergent demands for this resource create a deficit, much like a budget deficit. The unique approach to attention in my book is in defining this resource in terms of time. Balancing the hours available for attention against the hours demanded by a tsunami of content creates a time deficit, called the attention deficit. Humans have never before been so profoundly networked and exchanged such vast quantities of information. Ubiquitous connectivity and sharing have unleashed a torrent of information and created an extravagant demand for mental effort. The very process of filtering information is effortful, placing additional stress

on cognitive resources. At the same time, devices and algorithms map our preferences, generate predictions to optimize our lives, anaesthetizing and shrinking our available attention resources. Greater demand matched against a reduced supply of attention results in an attention deficit, which manifests as cognitive apathy or mental paralysis.

In the face of rapid technological change, a deficit of mental resources precludes adaptation. Adjusting to technological change is an effortful process since it requires reframing and rebalancing of lifestyles and world-views. In order to conserve scarce attention resources, there is resistance to change and a refusal to adapt in the event of change. This manifests as risk aversion. The principle thesis of this book is that fear, mistrust and risk aversion, driven by the attention deficit and cognitive apathy, have diminished creativity, entrepreneurship and risk-taking.

This book has grown out of courses on technology and markets that I have taught at Princeton over the past five years, and discussions with students both in class and outside. The intellectual energy brought by these young folks has invigorated and shaped my thinking. Their probing questions helped clarify my ideas and sharpen my message. I am deeply grateful to all.

In particular, David Kim, Caroline Lippman, Reed Malcionda, Elizabeth Petrov, Phoebe Rogers, Noah Schochet and Samantha Shapiro offered valuable feedback on early drafts, along with cherished conversations, inducing me to write lucidly yet simply.

Discussions with Bevin Benson, Brandon Callegari, Zachary Dinch, Trevor Forbes, Alex Ford, Abigail Gupta, Bryce Mbanefo, Pooja Parmar, Jamie Rosen, Elias Stern, Ayushi Sinha, Ryan Yao, Yan Zhang, Cameron Zeluck and Katie Zhou were not only beneficial but injected a touch of much appreciated levity. Fernanda Macias, as a graduate student assistant, was incredible in facilitating class discussions.

Term papers for classes revealed deep insights by the students. Joseph Flynn, for instance, wrote about the unforeseen consequences of Facebook's Free Basics program, which gave users in Africa and South-East Asia free access to services but also incited violence against the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and uprisings in the Amhara and Oromia regions in Ethiopia; John Colangelo talked about podcasts, adding to the content tsunami by enabling multitasking; Claire Collins investigated

how consumer preferences change when popular brands are associated with influencers on social media, pointing out that content derives from the person and not the brand; and Zachary Kuehm showed how technology is industrializing the production of music when the same set of people write songs for multiple artists.

The economics department at Princeton University has been my incredible home for the past 27 years, providing intellectual challenges in a secure open environment. My deepest gratitude is to Avinash Dixit, who taught me how to apply economic reasoning intelligently and wisely. He was my Ph.D. adviser, is now my lifelong friend and holds my highest regard.

Elizabeth Graber, my editor at Palgrave Macmillan, believed in my message and supported me with great equanimity throughout the process. Also at Palgrave Macmillan, Sophia Siegler's gentle reminders about the devil being in the details helped me polish my message. Barbara Radvany, Laura Sciarotta and Laura Hedden did graceful handholding at crucial and unexpected moments. Matthew Parker made the computer and networking logistics so much smoother.

Writing a book places challenges on one's family and mine was no different. But daily morning runs with my son, Ishaan, lightened the pace. As did planning and participating in my daughter Anjali's wedding as this book was going to press—we both agreed that the *best* need not be the enemy of the *good*. Ravin, my husband, developed the mental fortitude to see movies and attend music concerts unaccompanied, in solo mode, a process laced with much humor.

Princeton, NJ, USA

Swati Bhatt

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# Key Words

*Attention = Cognitive bandwidth hours = hours of mental effort, analogous to the range of frequencies available for data transmission on the Internet*

*Free will = Agency in initiating and managing decisions to achieve a desired outcome, measured as supply of attention or cognitive bandwidth hours. Usually fixed at normal waking hours or 16*

*Individual liberty = Freedom to execute actions to achieve desired outcomes*

*Attention deficit = excess demand for cognitive bandwidth hours relative to available hours*

*Digital content = information transmitted online*

*Internet = (shorthand for) Architecture and protocols of mobile and fixed digital information and communications technologies (ICT)*

*Information and communication markets = exchange of digital content for payment*

# Introduction

Information and communication technology has enabled connectivity on an unimagined scale. Acknowledging humans as social animals, economic activity promotes this socialization. Market transactions are based on optimism and trust, as individuals invest in the future by having children, by extending credit and accepting risk, and by building connections in the sincere expectation of this connectivity being reciprocated. However, in excess, connections compromise entrepreneurship and risk-taking.

Ubiquitous connectivity has four effects. The *first effect*, transparency in human interaction, is captured by the sharing model. Digital representation of information offers multiple avenues for sharing content. Human experience has been enhanced and enriched by the dense web of connections and the outpouring of shared digital content. Sharing personal information lights up the brain because there are benefits of group affirmation and inclusion when personality traits are shared; we derive self-esteem by comparisons with other groups and individuals.

However, this sharing and comparing leads to judgment. Negative judgments corrode self-esteem, leading to anxiety and depression. Paradoxically, active engagement with social connections creates a vacuum, a loss of self-esteem as connections inevitably lead to comparisons with other groups and individuals. Restoring esteem leads to even more connections, sharing and comparisons.

Therefore, the *second effect* is commercialization of sharing, leading to a tsunami of content. Loss of self-worth, driven by the first effect, encourages further connectivity and sharing, as buyers seek more comfort, more reassurance, via social media, paying with time and personal information. The process of connecting and sharing, of exchanging content digitally, has become a market by commodifying each additional connection in terms of time.

Friendships are valued in follower counts, with each count implying that a friend has devoted time to your social media page. A larger number of followers connote a greater amount of time spent on your Facebook page. When time and content are decoupled in asynchronous communication, as when response time or delay on messaging apps is carefully controlled by users, multiple connections can be managed simultaneously. High follower counts, suggesting reliability, translate into personal wealth as individuals become paid influencers on Twitter.

The outcome of this content tsunami is an attention deficit, the *third effect*. Consumption of content utilizes time and attention, such that the product is digital content and the payment is with time and data. Correspondingly, social media fulfill this demand for content with exuberance, both via user-generated content and via commercially curated content. Not only does processing this vast quantity of information utilize available hours of attention but the need to filter this exorbitant content further captures the mind, exacerbating the scarcity of attention.

In addition, when devices and algorithms map our preferences and make predictions guiding decision-making, mental effort becomes superfluous. Not needing to exercise the mind, available hours of attention shrink.

The confluence of increased demand for digital content and reduced supply of cognition due to algorithmic prediction capabilities results in an attention deficit. This scarcity manifests as cognitive apathy, a mental paralysis equivalent to systemic failure of computer networks.

Cognitive apathy impairs judgment and decision-making, leading to the *fourth effect*, mistrust, fear and diminished risk-taking. Reorienting worldviews and lifestyles amidst the swirling winds of technology-driven disruption demands judicious adaptation. It takes some effort to incorporate new ways of doing things and absorbing new ways of perceiving



the world. When mental resources are compromised, adjustment to change is resisted and risk avoidance is predominant as nostalgia and the familiarity of entrenched behavior take over. We observe declining entrepreneurship, innovation and imagination.

Recognizing human beings as social animals, the content tsunami powers two streams of consciousness—sharing and individual liberty. With the sharing frame of mind, there is transparency, trust, inclusion and cooperation. On the other hand, the individual liberty approach magnifies the personal factor, with its focus on the individual. The ensuing comparisons and judgments invoke notions of privacy. A conflict arises because risk-taking invokes trust, while privacy is modeled on risk fearing and mistrust. Anonymity, freedom to be and do, is needed *because* our imagination fears catastrophic outcomes. Despite the benefits of affirmation and group inclusion, connectivity elicits judgment, mistrust, fear, anxiety and depression. The digital revolution that brought us connectivity is exhibiting the unimagined consequences of tribal prejudice and isolation in echo chambers. Cognitive apathy follows, as there is no need to adapt to changing circumstances or different people. What started out as a voice for individual liberty can mutate into a loss of free will.

The past decade has seen a lengthening trail of technology criticism and warnings about the threats of commerce and machine persuasion compromising our free will. To be sure, the innovative medium that provides information can also be used to serve nefarious purposes. Inventions, including the technologies developed for splitting the atom, have multiple possible uses and one cannot blame the tool for threats issued by users of the tool. So also, digital communication technology is a tool for knowledge dissemination and we must partner with it as best as we can.

On the digital savannah, “we are all connected. ...Everything you see exists together in a great delicate balance” as Mufasa says in *The Lion King*, Disney’s 1994 epic. Preserving this balance of connectivity in a spirit of bold thinking is the way forward.