Understand the attention economy

As a UX designer, the product you create will constantly compete for users' attention. If users are paying attention to one thing, like a notification on their mobile phone, it means they're ignoring something else. There are only 24 hours in a day, so users have to be selective about how they spend that time! This battle over users' attention is referred to as the **attention economy**.

The term attention economy originated with psychologist and Nobel Laureate Herbert A. Simon, who believed that there are limits on what humans can think about and do at one time. Many scientists believe that humans aren't very good multitaskers; technology should help users, not distract them. The more distracted a person is, the less likely they are to complete a task well.

The clash between attention and distraction is why UX designers need to consider how the products they design will affect a person's behavior. Simon once said, "A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention." In your role as a new UX designer, it's important that technology improves the lives of your users and doesn't harm them. Designers need to make sure they don't design their products in a way that encourages addictive behaviors that could negatively affect users' lives.

The concept of the attention economy also explains how interacting with technology may cause depression or anxiety for some. For example, a user may feel sad when they don't hear or see new notifications on their phone, or they may experience the fear of missing out (also known as FOMO) if they don't continually refresh their social media feed or check their messages. Even seemingly small details, like the colors used and the volume of notifications, can be distracting to users or cause them to feel anxious.

Technology makes many things faster and easier, but it shouldn't control people's lives. Recently, companies have started to understand the psychological impact of technology and are updating their designs to help users stay away from the pitfalls of the attention economy. For example, at Google, the Digital Wellbeing toolkit ⬀ helps users better manage how they use their phones and the amount of time spent on them.

Apple also updated their apps so that they don't send notifications while users are driving. It's human nature to want to check your messages as soon as you receive a notification, but implementing this feature helps keep users safe. This is just one example of how design can become more ethical and considerate.

It's a good idea to think about the attention economy as you begin working as a UX designer. Here are some best practices for you to consider to help you avoid bad design decisions:

- **Avoid deceptive patterns.** Be honest with users. Think about your purpose for design and how your own values align with the design.

- **Think about goals and metrics.** Understand your company's business goals and key performance indicators. Pay attention to how these business goals might contradict or align with your users' goals.

- **Share good design practices with the people you work with.** Understand your position of power as a UX designer. You have the ability to influence the decision-making process for good and make sure that the right design choices are being made.

The idea of attention economy has become increasingly important to the discussion of how design can positively and negatively affect users. The more we respect users' time, attention, and experiences, the easier it will be to keep the focus of design on people, their needs, and the ways they can enjoy technology.

If you want to learn more about the attention economy, check out this article from the Nielsen Norman Group ⬀ or this article from the Berkeley Economic Review ⬀.

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