How to Do Nothing

Resisting the Attention Economy

Jenny Odell

exclusive. Removal and contemplation were necessary to be able to see what was happening, but that same contemplation would always bring one back around to their responsibility to and in the world. For Merton, there was no question of whether or not to participate, only how:

> If I had no choice about the age in which I was to live, I nevertheless have a choice about the attitude I take and about the way and the extent of my participation in its living ongoing events. To choose the world is . . . an acceptance of a task and a vocation in the world, in history and in time. In my time, which is the present.[60]

This question—of *how* versus *whether*—has to do with the attention economy insofar as it offers a useful attitude toward despair, the very stuff the attention economy runs on. It also helps me distinguish what it is I really feel like running away from. I've already written that the "doing nothing" I propose is more than a weekend retreat. But that doesn't mean I propose a permanent retreat either. Understanding the impossibility of a once-and-for-all exit—for most of us, anyway—sets the stage for a different kind of retreat, or refusal-in-place, that I will elaborate on in the next chapter.

Here's what I want to escape. To me, one of the most troubling ways social media has been used in recent years is to foment waves of hysteria and fear, both by news media and by users themselves. Whipped into a permanent state of frenzy, people create and subject themselves to news cycles, complaining of anxiety at the same time that they check back ever more diligently. The logic of advertising and clicks dictates the media experience, which is exploitative by design. Media companies trying to keep up with each other create a kind of "arms race" of urgency that abuses our attention and leaves us no time to think. The result is something like the sleep-deprivation tactics the military uses on detainees, but on a

larger scale. The years 2017 and 2018 were when I heard so many people say, "It's just something new every day."

But the storm is co-created. After the election, I also saw many acquaintances jumping into the melee, pouring out long, emotional, and hastily written diatribes online that inevitably got a lot of attention. I'm no exception; my most-liked Facebook post of all time was an anti-Trump screed. In my opinion, this kind of hyper-accelerated expression on social media is not exactly helpful (not to mention the huge amount of value it produces for Facebook). It's not a form of communication driven by reflection and reason, but rather a reaction driven by fear and anger. Obviously these feelings are warranted, but their expression on social media so often feels like firecrackers setting off other firecrackers in a very small room that soon gets filled with smoke. Our aimless and desperate expressions on these platforms don't do much for us, but they are hugely lucrative for advertisers and social media companies, since what drives the machine is not the content of information but the rate of engagement. Meanwhile, media companies continue churning out deliberately incendiary takes, and we're so quickly outraged by their headlines that we can't even consider the option of not reading and sharing them.

In such a context, the need to periodically step away is more obvious than ever. Like the managerial employees who wandered away from their jobs, we *absolutely require* distance and time to be able to see the mechanisms we thoughtlessly submit to. More than that, as I've argued thus far, we need distance and time to be functional enough to do or think anything meaningful at all. William Deresiewicz warns of this in "Solitude and Leadership," a speech to an audience of college students in 2010. By spending too much time on social media and chained to the news cycle, he says, "[y]ou are marinating yourself in the conventional wisdom. In other people's reality: for others, not for yourself. You are creating a cacophony in which it is impossible to hear your own voice, whether it's yourself you're thinking about or anything else."[61]

IF ATTENTION AND will are so closely linked, then we have even more reason to worry about an entire economy and information ecosystem preying on our attention. In a post about ad blockers on the University of Oxford's "Practical Ethics" blog, the technology ethicist James Williams (of Time Well Spent) lays out the stakes:

> We experience the externalities of the attention economy in little drips, so we tend to describe them with words of mild bemusement like "annoying" or "distracting." But this is a grave misreading of their nature. In the short term, distractions can keep us from doing the things we want to do. In the longer term, however, they can accumulate and keep us from living the lives we want to live, or, even worse, undermine our capacities for reflection and self-regulation, making it harder, in the words of Harry Frankfurt, to "want what we want to want." Thus there are deep ethical implications lurking here for freedom, wellbeing, and even the integrity of the self.[22]

I first learned about James Williams from a recent Stanford master's thesis by Devangi Vivrekar, called "Persuasive Design Techniques in the Attention Economy: User Awareness, Theory, and Ethics." The thesis is mainly about how Vivrekar and her colleagues in the Human-Computer Interaction department designed and experimented with a system called Nudget. In an effort to make the user aware of persuasive design, Nudget used overlays to call out and describe several of the persuasive design elements in the Facebook interface as the user encountered them.[23]

But the thesis is also useful simply as a catalog of the many forms of persuasive design—the kinds that behavioral scientists have been studying in advertising since the mid-twentieth century. For

example, Vivrekar lists the strategies identified by researchers Marwell and Schmitt in 1967: "reward, punishment, positive expertise, negative expertise, liking/ingratiation, gifting/pre-giving, debt, aversive stimulation, moral appeal, positive self-feeling, negative self-feeling, positive altercasting, negative altercasting, positive esteem of others, and negative esteem of others." Vivrekar herself has study participants identify instances of persuasive design on the LinkedIn site and compiles a staggering list of 171 persuasive design techniques.[24] A few for example:

Screen #	#	Persuasive Vehicle	Method of Persuasion
1A	1	Notification badges on the horizontal toolbar for "notifications," "messages," and "network"	Makes you want to click and see new notifications (arouses curiosity)
1A	2	Red color of notification badges on the horizontal toolbar	Stands out / catches your attention / indicates urgency in order to redirect your clicks to other people's or companies' pages
1A	3	Number on the notification badges on the horizontal toolbar	Makes it feel like a to-do list and makes you want to get the number to 0 (arouses our "base desire for having order instead of chaos")
1A	4	Intermittent variable notifications	The delivery schedule of notifications is varied and intermittent, which keeps it changing and thus interesting
1A	5	Textual ad at the top: "Ready for a change . . ."	Tries to get you to click on that page by appearing organic and relevant

This detailed vocabulary of persuasion and eagle-eyed attentiveness to its many forms aligns with my interest in "knowing your enemy" when it comes to the attention economy. For example, one

could draw parallels between the Nudget system, which teaches users to see the ways in which they are being persuaded, and the Prejudice Lab, which shows participants how bias guides their behavior.

But as for the results of this accounting, Vivrekar and I come to very different conclusions. Indeed, I found a helpful articulation of my own argument for discipline in a section of hers titled "Counter-Arguments." She writes, "Proponents of the 'agency' side in the agency vs. structure debate claim that instead of focusing on the problem of how to make persuasion more ethical, we should focus on empowering people to have more self control" (that's me!). Vivrekar and the technology ethicists she cites, however, are less than optimistic about this approach:

> Portraying the problem as one in which we just need to be more mindful of our interaction with apps can be likened to saying we need to be more mindful of our behavior while interacting with the artificial intelligence algorithms that beat us at chess; equally sophisticated algorithms beat us at the attention game all the time.[25]

For Vivrekar, persuasion is a given, and the only thing we can do about it is redirect it:

> When we remember that hundreds of engineers and designers predict and plan for our every move on these platforms, it seems more justified to shift the focus of the discussion towards ethical persuasion.

This argument takes a few important things for granted. "Ethical persuasion" means persuading the user to do something that is good for them, using "harmonious designs that continuously empower us instead of distracting and frustrating us." Reading this, I can't help but ask: Empower me to do what? Good for me according to whom? And according to what standards? Happiness, productiv-

any apps from my phone, or anything like that. I stopped looking at my phone because I was looking at something else, something so absorbing that I couldn't turn away. That's the other thing that happens when you fall in love. Friends complain that you're not present or that you have your head in the clouds; companies dealing in the attention economy might say the same thing about me, with my head lost in the trees, the birds, even the weeds growing in the sidewalk.

If I had to give you an image of how I feel about the attention economy now, as opposed to in 2017, I'd ask you to imagine a tech conference. Like so many conferences, it would be in another city, perhaps another state. The subject of this conference would be persuasive design, with talks by the likes of the Time Well Spent people, about how horrible the attention economy is and how we can design our way around it and optimize our lives for something better. Initially I'd find these talks very interesting, and I would learn a lot about how I'm being manipulated by Facebook and Twitter. I would be shocked and angry. I would spend all day thinking about it.

But then, maybe on the second or third day, you would see me get up and go outside to get some fresh air. Then I'd wander a little bit farther, to the nearest park. Then—and I know this because it happens to me often—I'd hear a bird and go looking for it. If I found it, I would want to know what it was, and in order to look that up later I'd need to know not only what it looks like, but what it was doing, how it sounded, what it looked like when it flew . . . I'd have to look at the tree it was in.

I'd look at all the trees, at all the plants, trying to notice patterns. I would look at who was in the park and who wasn't. I would want to be able to explain these patterns. I would wonder who first lived in what is now this city, and who lived here afterward before they got pushed out too. I would ask what this park almost got turned into and who stopped that from happening, who I have to thank. I would try to get a sense of the shape of the land—where am I in

relation to the hills and the bodies of water? Really, these are all forms of the same question. They are ways of asking: Where and when am I, and how do I know that?

Before long, the conference would be over, and I would have missed most of it. A lot of things would have happened there that are important and useful. For my part, I wouldn't have much to show for my "time well spent"—no pithy lines to tweet, no new connections, no new followers. I might only tell one or two other people about my observations and the things I learned. Otherwise, I'd simply store them away, like seeds that might grow some other day if I'm lucky.

Seen from the point of view of forward-pressing, productive time, this behavior would appear delinquent. I'd look like a drop-out. But from the point of view of the place, I'd look like someone who was finally paying it attention. And from the point of view of myself, the person actually experiencing my life, and to whom I will ultimately answer when I die—I would know that I spent that day on Earth. In moments like this, even the question itself of the attention economy fades away. If you asked me to answer it, I might say—without lifting my eyes from the things growing and creeping along the ground—"I would prefer not to."