

Blood Attention: Today's Attention Economy

OSU CS391 Writing Assignment III
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FOREWORD

This essay is an opinion piece. As a past, present and future victim of the attention economy, I will be presenting an opinion against this aforementioned economy. That is to say, I believe this is an unethical use of technology, at least in the way it is currently being used.

The title is a play on the term Blood Diamonds, which are diamonds that are extracted in poorer regions of the world at immense cost in terms of human suffering. This I find idealizes my viewpoint on the attention economy - content providers and advertising companies are extracting our attention, but at great societal and human costs. For the sake of keeping this paper as brief as possible, I will be examining the demographic of the male college/high school (teenage) student. This is because I fit that demographic, so what I discuss and find will be directly applicable to my life. Conversely, the opinions I share are those that I harbor, as a member of this class.

To properly examine the upsides and downsides of this technology, I will use Social Contract Theory as an ethical lens to guide me to a conclusion.

AN UNETHICAL ECONOMY

For the purposes of this paper, the Attention Economy will be defined to be the usage of various methods (from algorithms to images to sentiments) to capture and retain the attention of the viewer, a marketing method (essentially), based on the assumption that attention is a scarce resource [1, 5]. Given this definition already, the title of this paper may make more sense. Rather than people being treated as entities by this system, people are mined for their

attention, as companies engaged in this economy regard more attention as more income [1, 2, 5].

To provide a bit of background on this issue, most people will spend over 5-6 years on social media in their lifetime [6, 7], not including TV time, of which we will accumulate an average of over 8 years watching [7]. These numbers only describe a symptom of the attention economy. The benefactors (or leaders) of this economy are engaged in widespread tracking of browsing history and patterns across many sites (that may not be their own) [9] in order to deliver content or ads that are more targeted to the user, increasing the amount of time someone might spend on the platform. Further, content providers will organize or construct their sites in a fashion that takes advantage of the viewers - pulling down to 'refresh' a feed emulates the same chemical releases in the brain as pulling a slot machine lever [9, 10]. Data is presented in a manner designed to maximize user attention retention on the site [5]. These mechanisms extend to (often) AI powered algorithms that display the most addicting content to the user in order to increase watch time, or attention [11-15].

To properly analyze this massive and highly complex industry through the lens of Virtue Ethics, I will discuss the key decision to this issue, which is the question "should we consider human attention a resource, and extract it using the most powerful algorithmic tools known to man?". This decision will be referred to as D1 henceforth.

Lastly in terms of preparation, we need to define Virtue Ethics, and the virtuous properties. Virtue Ethics emphasizes, as is made evident by the name, the virtues of the decision maker [3]. Specifically, an action taken is only deemed morally 'right' if said action is one that a virtuous person would take in the

same scenario [4]. This virtuous person has a couple key attributes that we will examine for each decision. These attributes are **prudence**, **justice**, **fortitude** or **bravery** and **temperance** [17].

VIRTUE ETHICS APPLICATION

When it comes to D1, the perfectly ethical person would almost certainly find this unethical when considered in the light of their attributes. Starting at the top of the list of attributes for the virtuous being, is the affirmation of D1 something that a prudent person would make? No, it is not, as prudence would decree that the person making the decision must know or at least contemplate the consequences of their actions before they make them. As evidenced by the way that content providers and advertising companies have built their services [5, 9, 10, 11-15], this virtuous individual would have no doubt considered this as a possible ramification of the decision to count attention as a resource and extract it with AI algorithms. Therefore, the virtuous person would have not made decision D1 for this reason. Theoretically, this ‘violation’ of one virtuous characteristic is enough to consider D1 unethical. I’ll consider the rest of the attributes to attempt to make a point about the magnitude of the unethicity of D1. The second attribute to be considered is justice. Here as well, the ethical person would find that D1 is not ethical. Justice, the pursuit or attainment of what is just or fair is in direct opposition with the attention economy and D1. This is not an ethical decision as it would count human attention as a resource, considering the humans as a means to an end, and not attempt to seek what is fair, rather what is most profitable. Next up is the attribute of fortitude - this attribute details courage in the face of adversity, and is not directly applicable to this scenario. Neither is bravery. The last attribute of the virtuous person is temperance. Temperance concerns the person’s ability to be moderated in action, thought and feeling [16]. Choosing to make D1 would demonstrate lacking temperance, for many

similar reasons as those that make D1 unethical with relation to the attribute of prudence. Temperance includes moderation of action. Affirmation of D1 does not represent any form of moderation - as demonstrated by the addictive-by-design algorithms used [9-15]. These algorithms and methods represented by the affirmation of D1 show a complete lack of restraint (lack of temperance) as there are hardly any limits placed on how aggressively these companies target your attention. For example, in a talk at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Yuval Harari describes these efforts as approaching hacking of the body, brain and life [17], while Tristan Harris describes the lengths that companies have gone to by making the analogy of a “supercomputer pointed at your brain” [18]. Therefore, the affirmation of D1 represents total lack of restraint of action, and thus lack of temperance. Considering this, all the applicable attributes of the virtuous person decree that D1 is indeed an unethical choice.

CONCLUSION

The path that our current media providers (Google, Instagram, YouTube, ...) have chosen is an affirmation of D1. This is unethical according to Virtue Ethics, but even in this society, it seems that society cares little. Even with such powerful speeches as those of Yuval Harari and Tristan Harris, the majority of society collectively mutters “that’s a great idea”, and promptly returns to feeding the algorithm - I’m no exception. How do we fix this? How do we return the power over our attention to ourselves? How can we learn again to interact with one another when we are becoming trained by the algorithm not to? These are all questions that the current generation will face, and I fear complacency will take us to a world of antisocial addicted media consumption - that’s not a society I want to live in.

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