

Why Is It So Hard to Believe in 2019?

Phillip Johnston
CCEN Adult Education (Winter 2019)

WEEK TWO:

We Are Overwhelmed By Information

Introduction: Our informational Tetris game

When we are conscious of losing control of the game, we feel *overwhelmed*.

When we are not conscious of losing control of the game, we are *distracted*.

Big idea: As our distractibility goes up, our capacity for other-centered love goes down. The more distracted we are, the more our love is turned away from the people and places around us and toward the things that distract us. Our distractions don't simply prevent us from loving God and other people — they actually shape the things we love instead.

I. What *is* love?

A. A description

Love is the guiding force of every person's life. Our love is the fuel of our action, drawing us like a magnet toward what we most desire.

The thinking rider and the desiring elephant — your love is your elephant, taking you toward what you most desire, often in spite of what your rider thinks. (See Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided By Politics and Religion*.)

B. A definition

II. Love's innovative enemies

A. The attention merchants

An attention merchant is someone who offers you something for a low cost (or for free) in order to harvest your attention and sell it to someone else.

The winning strategy from the beginning has been to seek out time and spaces previously walled off from commercial exploitation, gathering up chunks and then slivers of our unharvested awareness.

Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Struggle to Get Inside Our Heads*, 6

We must shift America from a needs to a desire culture. People must be trained to desire — to want new things even before the old have been entirely consumed. We must shape a new mentality in America. Man's desires must overshadow his need.

Paul Mazur, CEO of Leman Brothers, 1927

B. The attention economy

In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a death of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.

Herbert Simon, "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World"

C. Attention plantations

There's a deep misalignment between the goals we have for ourselves and the goals our technologies have for us.

James Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*, 9

III. Paying attention to what we're paying attention to

A. How is what I'm paying attention to shaping the *quantity* of my love for God and neighbor?

God built in us the ability to pay attention to what we pay attention to, which creates space for us to hear him; and out of this flows abundant life—testing and approving God's good, pleasing, and whole will. Goodness, pleasure, wholeness—they all begin with paying attention to what we are paying attention to.

Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul*, 60

B. How is what I'm paying attention to shaping the *quality* of my love for God and neighbor?

Conclusion: What do we pay when we pay attention?

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- PODCAST: **"Cal Newport has an answer for digital burnout"**, *The Ezra Klein Show*, 1/14/2019. You can also check out Newport's new book *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* (in stores this week).
- VIDEO: **"It's not you. Phones are designed to be addicting"**, Vox Explainer, <https://youtu.be/NUMa0QkPzns>.
- ARTICLE: **"You Are the Product"** by John Lanchester, *London Review of Books*, August 2017. An article-length introduction to how tech companies harvest attention. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v39/n16/john-lanchester/you-are-the-product>
- BOOK: ***Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*** by James Williams. A former Google ad man recounts how the attention economy obscures the Spotlight, the Starlight, and the Daylight of our attention. (Available in print or for free online: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108453004>.)
- LITTLE BOOKS: For practical solutions re: preserving your attention in our information-saturated time, check out these short volumes.
 - For individuals: ***How to Break Up with Your Phone: The 30-Day Plan to Take Back Your Life*** by Catherine Price. Includes not only a diagnosis of the problem, but a practical 30-day technology triage.
 - For families: ***The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place*** by Andy Crouch. Not a book of potentially legalistic, negative rules for sheltering our homes from tech, but one that encourages positive commitments like "We want to create more than we consume. So we fill the center of our home with things that reward skill and active engagement."