

LITTLE BOOK *of* WONDERS

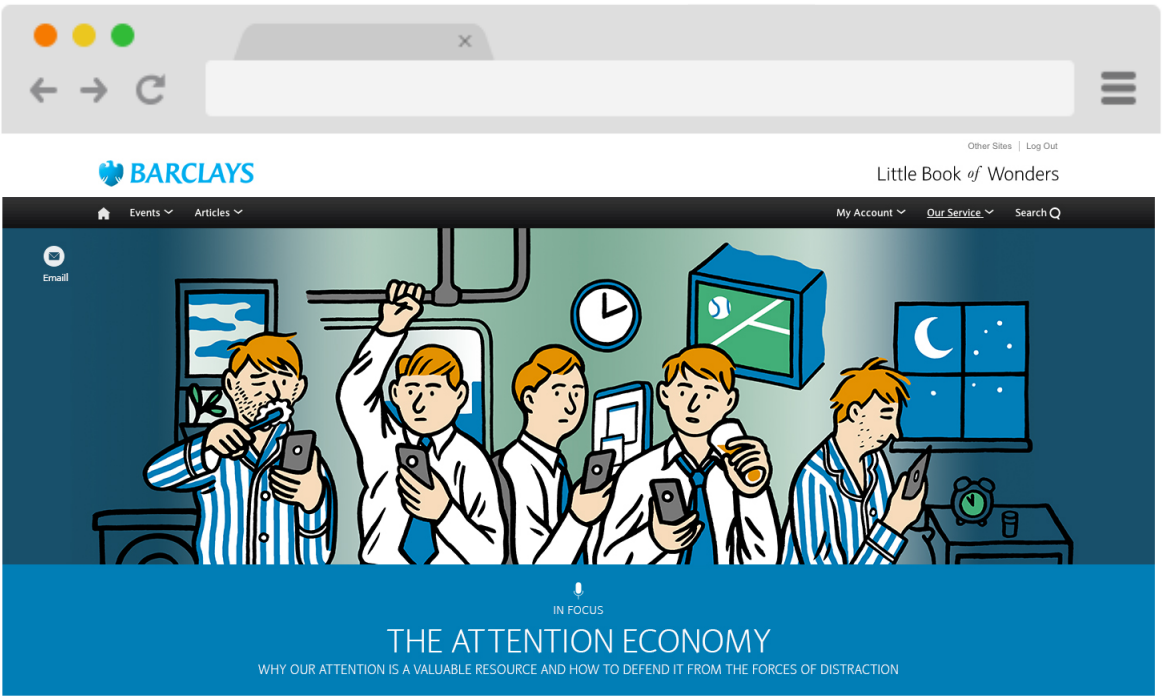
ATTENTION ECONOMY

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THE ECONOMIST GROUP | INTELLIGENT LIFE, CONTENT SOLUTIONS



Technology is driving us to distraction and our attention is being bought and sold. But as neuroscience is making clear, we only have so much attention to give and should use it wisely

The Punkt MP 01 phone, launching this September, does what a mobile phone used to do; not much at all. It can make and take calls and texts but that's pretty much it. No e-mails, maps, internet searching, touch screen, Instagramming, tweeting, not even a camera for selfies.

The MP 01 though is no cheap, disposable 'burner'; retailing at £249, it is being pitched at the premium end of the market. The phone's real selling point, given it does so little, is the chance to step back in time, to rediscover a place where unavailability wasn't the rarest luxury. As Punkt founder Petter Nebby told Wallpaper* magazine: "It wasn't that bloody long ago. And it was bloody nice".

Whether anyone will actually buy into this nostalgia-driven self-restraint is another question. It's hard to imagine that we are going to pack all the smartphone's tricks back in the box. But the MP 01 is plugging into a growing concern that our smart devices are part of a larger siege of our time and attention; and that we are less, well, smart as result.

The Smartphone, of course, isn't primarily a phone at all. It's a hugely powerful, pocket-sized personal computer. It's functions grow more multiple and various every day. It has whipped up a vast and sophisticated economy, generating huge stock market valuations and occasionally even profits. It's further development is exercising some of the finest minds on the planet. And it is deliberately driving us to distraction and beyond.

The smart phone time suck, the amount of time and attention we give to our mobile devices, is truly shocking. According to Deloitte's Mobile Consumer 2014 report, more than two in three UK adults have a smartphone. About a third of us look at our phone within five minutes of waking up and half within 15 minutes. And those numbers will have almost certainly increased by now. Other figures suggest that the average time spent on mobile devices since 2012 has increased by 200 per cent. Just think about the amount of "seeing, reading, downloading, syncing, sending, submitting, posting, pinning, sharing, uploading, updating, commenting, tagging, rating, liking, loving, upvoting, starring, favoriting, bookmarking, plus-oneing, or re-anythinging", as American comedian and author Baratunde Thurston lists it, you can do in anyone day.

The idea of the digital detox is nothing new, first sold as forced cold turkey from your 'crackberry' (remember them? And visit digitaldetox.org if you think you need one). What is new perhaps is the idea that this technology, and we know have to include tablets and ever lighter laptops, might not be the great enabler after all. And that constant connectivity does not make us more productive; quite the opposite, it just makes us more distracted.

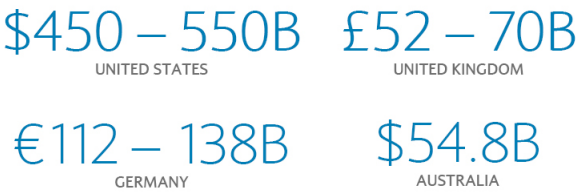
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How many of us now treasure the weekends because the e-mail deluge slows? And we can actually get a bit of work done. Or the delights of the long-haul flight where the only distraction is your choice of movies and main course. Where you can actually watch that film that everyone keeps talking about or read a book, uninterrupted. Soon though even that sacred airspace will be connected and there will be no escape. There will be nowhere were we aren't distracted.

COST OF DISENGAGEMENT



Source: 2013 State of the Global Workplace Report, Gallup

Figuring out ways to capture and hold people's attention is the centre of contemporary capitalism.



In his new book, *The World Beyond Your Head*, the American academic, author and motorcycle mechanic, Matthew Crawford, insists that "distraction is a kind of obesity of the mind". His larger point though is that our attention is the engine of the modern economy. And it is being snatched at from all angles. Even if you summon the resolve to pocket your smart phone.

Crawford notes that there is little space, public or private, great or small, from ATMs to hotel keys, that is not used for advertising. All this above and beyond other information being pumped or zapped at us at anyone time. "I realised how pervasive this has become, these little appropriations of attention," Crawford told *The Guardian* earlier this year. "Figuring out ways to capture and hold people's attention is the centre of contemporary capitalism. There is this invisible and ubiquitous grabbing at something that's the most intimate thing you have, because it determines what's present to your consciousness. It makes it impossible to think or rehearse a remembered conversation, and you can't chat with a stranger because we all try to close ourselves off from this grating condition of being addressed all the time."

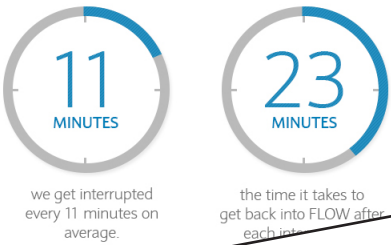
Advertising, of course, has always been in our attention business. Crawford's point though is that the claims on our attention are now so many, various and clamorous that we are approaching a kind of functional shut down.

The virtual world is just as loud and cluttered. And in many ways we brought it in ourselves. The internet and the app-osphere are largely free to use because our attention is being sliced up, parcelled and sold. We traded our attention for free stuff. And the result is that almost no information is available to us that isn't bundled with competing - flashing, carefully targeted, cookie-driven, browsing history-aware - commercial lures. This is a kind of smart bomb distraction.

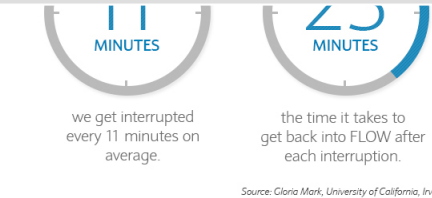
It's true that newspapers, magazines and commercial television have always, to some degree, worked on this model, but there was a greater sense of control with those dusty analog media. And they weren't environmental as modern media and messaging seems to be. They weren't everywhere.

Crawford's argument though isn't with honest commerce, it is with the environmental information overload that is stealing our attention, personally and professionally.

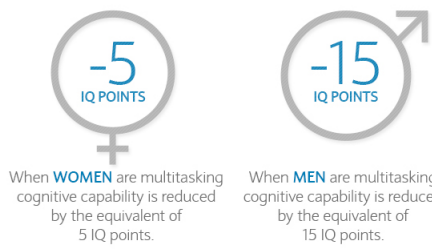
THE CONSEQUENCES OF DISTRACTION



ATTENTION ECONOMY ARTICLE VISUAL DESIGN OPTION 1 (CONTINUED)



MULTITASKING EFFETS ON I.Q.



And the more mentally tired you are, the more prone to lapses in concentration and distraction you are. (And so the first thing to attend to in a day is not e-mails or to-do list and scheduling adjustments but the work that requires focus and your fullest attention.)

The problem is that we are very distractable. And all the time. Neuroscience suggests that our pre-frontal cortices – which is where we do most of our professional useful thinking – and the more primal limbic systems are hard-wired for distraction. The new and the novel reward us with a dopamine rush (this effect is at the heart of ‘retail therapy’ too). And once we are distracted we get ever more distracted, our mental self-control loosens its already shaky grip.

And we are caught in a double-bind. The very act of resisting distraction is itself mentally draining. Office designers are increasingly recognising this and offering distraction-free cocoon like spaces where people can escape to achieve ‘flow’, the higher state of creative consciousness, or at least concentration.

Anthropology also has suggestions about why we have such limited capacity for heads-down focus. Back when we were hunger gatherers and still working toward our apex predator qualifications, the most distractable survived. Those who picked up disturbances in their peripheral vision could survive the Sabre Toothed Tiger who came to tea. But this evolutionary advantage has left us terribly susceptible to visual distraction, predatory or otherwise. John Medina, a developmental molecular biologist at Washington State University makes the obvious but profoundly important point: “We don’t pay attention to boring things”. Or to put it another way, we are ever alert to the unexpected, or the potential for the unexpected. All of which makes it just about impossible to resist that bouncing e-mail icon at the bottom of your screen - however tedious the e-mail you end up reading - or the carefully targeted ad flashing in the corner of your browser.

Ironically, our capacity for distraction is also there to stop up draining our good attention and executive thinking time in one go. After all, logical thinking and effective decision making might be required at any time, day or night. We can then think about good distraction and bad distraction. A ten minute walk is good recharging distraction, a frustrating thirty minutes waiting for that ‘twenty child stars who aged horribly’ list to load is bad distraction. And if we are easily distracted animals, we are also social animals. Which means it’s also just about impossible to ignore people moving around us. Which makes modern office life something of a trial.

And all of this distraction comes at a time when we are being asked to process more information than ever before. And to sift distractions from the stuff that you genuinely need and want to attend to.

The psychiatrist Edward M. Hallowell talks about “attention deficit trait” and says: “Never in human history has the human brain been asked to track so many data points.” David Rock, a performance management consultant and author of *Your Brain at Work* has talked about an “epidemic of overwhelm”, the sheer informational daily dump that we are now being asked to process (and bring on ourselves). “In the average morning download of e-mails,” he writes, “many people have to process in half an hour what your brain probably needs a day or two to process at the right kind of pace.”

Another great myth that neuroscientists are dispelling is the idea that we can cope with all these demands on our attention by multi-tasking. Turns out that we can do no such thing, only mono-task in rapid succession, which is not the same thing at all and can lead to all manner of mental fatigue, mistakes and mayhem. We can walk and talk and walk and chew gum because they require different channels of the brain, but that’s about it. As Stephen Fry has put it, no one in human history has read two books at the same time.

He has chilling stories of slot machines engineered to be so distracting and addictive that players can’t pull themselves away to deal with the body’s basic functional demands.



messaging seems to be. They weren’t everywhere.

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Returning to air travel, Crawford, whose last book was the surprise best seller *The Case for Working With Your Hands*, also notes that the only space in an airport free from this clamour of information, commercial or otherwise, is the first class lounge. Silence, calm, lack of distraction has become a luxury. More than that, it is a creative necessity. “The people in there value their silence very highly” he has said. “If you’re in that lounge you can use the time to think creative, playful thoughts. Attention is a resource, convertible into actual money.”

And of course you can use your lounge time to play with your smartphone. But next time you are in an airport lounge, take a look around and smart phone use will almost certainly be at a minimum. The smart phone is a distraction from other distractions. It is distraction central.

All of this clamour and clutter, on-screen or off, matters because we have smaller reserves of useful attention than you might think. Advances in neuroscience and cognitive psychology are giving us a better understanding of the evolutionary basis of distraction; and that good quality attention is, on a daily basis, a finite resource and not to be wasted.

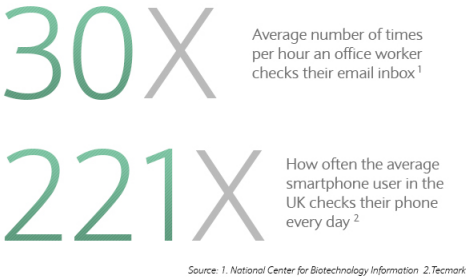
The idea many of us hold that we could be so much more productive if we could just focus for 10 hours at a stretch turns out to be, for better or worse, a fallacy. Our brains can only manage four or five hours of sustained and concentrated mental effort a day, at best, before serious brain fatigue sets in. The harder we work, the more we concentrate, the more oxygen and glucose the brain guzzles through, just like any muscle.



DISTRACTION IN THE WORKPLACE



WHY WE'RE SO DISTRACTED



We live in a state of what the writer Linda Stone called “continuous partial attention”. “We want to effectively scan for opportunity and optimise the best opportunities, activities and contacts, in any given moment,” Stone writes. But, she says, this is a state of mental high alert, a constant crisis mode. And it makes for a particularly fraught and tiring relationship with the world. The ‘Mindfulness’ movement is one attempt to focus our attention in a healthier way.

Of course, as Crawford makes clear, this better understanding of distraction is being applied in the most cynical ways. He has chilling stories of slot machines engineered to be so distracting and addictive that players can’t pull themselves away to deal with the body’s basic functional demands.

“We increasingly encounter the world through these representations that are addressed to us, often with manipulative intent: video games, pornography, gambling apps on your phone,” he says. “These experiences are so exquisitely attuned to our appetites that they can swamp your ordinary way of being in the world. Just as food engineers have figured out how to make food hyper-palatable by manipulating fat, salt and sugar, similarly the media has become expert at making irresistible mental stimuli.”

So what to do? Noah Baumbach’s Gen X-meets-Gen Y hipster comedy *While We’re Young* suggests that it is the older generation who have embedded new technology into their lives while their younger counterparts are embracing the analogue and disconnecting (see the vinyl revival and type writer fetishism). In one scene Gen X couple (Ben Stiller and Naomi Watts) are having lunch with Gen Y couple (hipster icon Adam Driver and Amanda Seyfried) and trying to remember a word. Marzipan, it turns out. Stiller and Watts immediately lurch for their phones, on the table during lunch, obviously, when Driver stops them with: “Let’s just not know”.

It’s an acute observation about digital dependency and the loss of individual, personal memory and the gain of a collective, external memory. (Driver it turns out, is a bit of a jerk, but that’s by-the-by). And maybe a demographic seemingly obsessed with craft beer and artisanal everything will reject digital distraction, reclaim its attention and put it to good use. But anyone who has sat on the tube during rush hour and witnessed what the historian Simon Schama calls the ‘look-down’ generation transfixed by their screens will question that assumption.

FEED GRID AND LIST VIEW (DESKTOP)

