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Designing Envelopes for Attention Policies

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Abstract

Starting from the idea of various regimes of attention means considering the variety of the dimensions of attention as a prerequisite to understand these processes. Too often, models are based on an essentialist vision of attention and not a pluralistic one, despite the works of cognitive science scholars (for instance, «priming» has been well defined). Too often and quite recently, «attention» obtains a status of principle which converts all situations around itself, about the new value that is created through these economic processes (as Goldhaber mentioned in his pioneering papers following the traces of Simon). The paper accounts for these economical views of attention and then for the philosophical one before getting back to a more detailed empirical analysis of these regimes of attention, from urban settings to digital platforms and videogames.

Keywords :

attention economy, loyalty, alert, immersion, immunity, regimes of attention.

Index :

Envelope, attention economy, priming, immersion, projection, alert, loyalty, intensity, duration, immunity, irreversibility, videogames.

Let us sum up briefly some of the economic issues related to attention. The introduction of attention as a key concept highlighted the scarcity in digital economy against the supporters of the abundance of information, which I consider an abusive paradigm shift. Information does not have any relevance nor value when it is not captured or received by people who are supposed to save some time of attention to perceive at least the signal, or the message. And the public cannot extend its duration of attention ahead of the 24 hours humans live, although multitasking may become largely spread among younger generations.

However, while supporting the importance of attention in the understanding of economic processes, I would not buy the extension of “attention” as a principle for calculating a new general equivalent or for reducing the whole economy to a “cognitive capitalism” (as Moulner (2007) asserts). This approach undermines and misses the key feature of our capitalism: its transformation into a financial capitalism where brands are leading the world and capturing all attention but the one of investors first, since the value of the firms became largely dependent on its success on the stock exchange.

It is not a mere coincidence that attention becomes an issue only when the economy becomes a financial economy. However, we must recognize that Herbert Simon (1971) mentioned attention as a key feature of economy well before these times when he demonstrated the role played by asymmetries of information for decisions that must be made in a uncertain environment. Finance itself must generate attention of a new type, with high frequency reactions in HFT (High Frequency Trading), where speculation can be processed at high speed. Financial economy has proliferated as a self-referential economy (Orléan, 1999, 2011), based on opinion, that is to say about handling and manipulating the expectations of others, including their attention.

This short focus on the economic stakes of attention intended to explain why attention became an area of interest for the brands and the financial economy before it became academically attractive. When getting deeper into these issues, it appears clearly that there are many diverse attention regimes competing for the «eyeballs» as one used to say in TV audience metrics, and one must account precisely for the forms, the properties and the mediations involved.

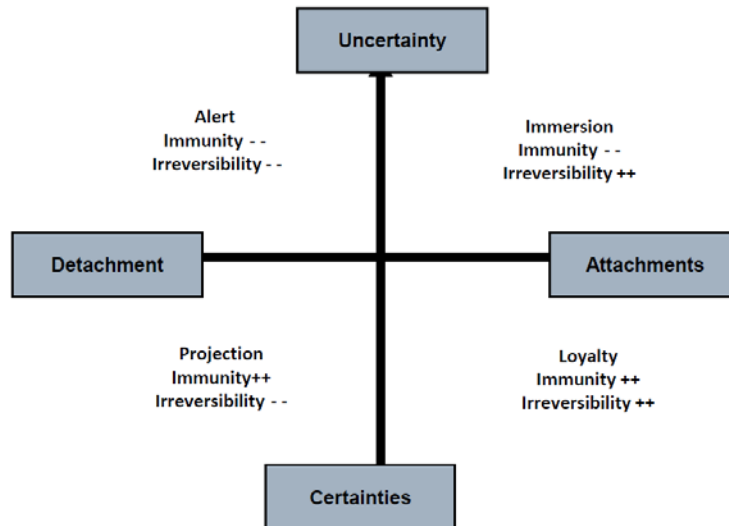
Attention philosophy: globes and foams

A philosophical approach is required about these regimes of attention especially when we want to label them as envelopes. Peter Sloterdijk (2011) described historical phases of envelopes in his masterful trilogy on spheres. After studying bubbles and therefore microspheres that we experience during intrauterine life, he focuses on the globes, which is our ability to round our world and integrate each other and to shape the world to our image in an assimilation process. This is the phenomenon of the “canopy”: Sloterdijk tells the story of sailors in the times of the great discoveries who settled beds with canopies on their vessels, a canopy reproducing the sky and the stars of their region of origin. This will exactly correspond to what I call the “projection” mode of attention in which all local signals are overwhelmed by our own categories projected over a foreign world.

Sloterdijk considers that we have experienced three globes. Our ability to produce a total container in which we, western humans, are in control, this modern storytelling, is behind us and outdated. We lost the global world within which we were supposed to experience life, although we go on speaking of “globalization”. The world of the XXIst century is closer to what Sloterdijk states in his third volume, the times of “foam”, times for multifocal multiperspectivist and multilevel deployment. It means a very different type of envelope from the one we experienced in a local/ global world. This new envelope, foam, is made of various cells that are interacting and in which we can move from one world to another, a switching capacity that is embedded ... in our very smart phone!

The compass of attention regimes

These two backgrounds, economical and philosophical, must be kept in mind in order to understand the stakes of our regimes of attention, as envelopes. Let us reconstruct the mediations that make up these regimes of attention and their specific envelopes by designing a compass of the various regimes.



The theoretical framework of the compass (Boullier 2003) is derived from the work of Isabelle Stengers (2010), which takes into account uncertainty as constitutive of scientific activity, but also of all contemporary human activities. It also originates in the work of Bruno Latour (2005) and shows how our attachment to our cosmos, which is ordinary in traditional societies, has been broken down by the modernist project. This modernist project organised our detachment from the world in favour of the overreaching activity of science. All combinations are still possible, and political choices always offer many and various degrees of attachment and uncertainty. Some of these choices favour detachment rather than attachments, as does the modernist project that has oriented all its action towards detachment from traditions, with the aid of all-powerful science and technology. Others favour uncertainty, and accept to live with it as an opposition to other policies that seek to maintain or to recover certainties.

With the crossing of these axes, 4 elementary policies appear, which apply to all "issues". For indeed this framework is only of interest on condition that it is adapted on a case-by-case basis to each individual problem, or each "issue". It forces an identification of all the positions, even those which are sometimes hardly expressed, in order to bring to the fore possible choices that may have been overlooked or crushed by the obviousness of others. It is therefore, first and foremost, a heuristic tool and not a system for comprehensive classification and storage. Each of the policies merits an in-depth exploration each time because internal op-

positions of the same type may be detected, according to a fractal scheme that is potentially infinite.

Loyalty

Loyalty seems at first sight far away from the scope of attention policies, despite the fact that it is the most common way of maintaining the attention that has been captured previously. It refers to a long history, closer to tradition and religion, for instance the worshipers or the believers whose attention is captured on the long term: the twentieth century, however, showed that one could stick to fidelity without resorting to religion. Mass media manage to grasp eyeballs and to provoke the same effect of loyalty to a channel, to TV stars or to a brand through a continuous «massage», as Mc Luhan put it in the 60's. A very well controlled policy of envelopes is therefore created by encapsulating everyday life in a web of messages that enhances “re-call”, “re-cognition”, repetition and imitation. Schneider and Schiffrin (1977) talked about «automatic attention» as a traditional process whose main property is duration as Ribot (1889) established in his seminal research on attention. Loyalty policies allow attention to turn into habit, within some “containers”, the technical features of a familiar space that maintain the body, such as the couch (potato) or the urban place. Ceremonies are of that kind, even non religious ones, with a frequency that creates expectations and re-enacts previous experiences but should never offer surprises. This ability of media, institutions and urban settings to create liveable and durable interiors is well described by Sloterdijk's concept of spheres and is well accounted for in the concept of vaults designed by Y. Citton (2014). In Sloterdijk's terms, the challenge is to produce immunity, the opposite of communication (munus in both cases). What is transported through these carefully designed envelopes according to Tarde are beliefs that we inherit. Therefore repetition is the key word for loyalties and fidelities. Repetition favours the “already known” as in the case of canopies : attention goes first to the clues of recognition, to the saliencies that are familiar. The cognitive cost is very low. TV programs and TV series are expert in producing this fidelity on the long term. But CRM (Consumer Relationship Management systems) are devices that create a kind of envelope for the client, since any action can be traced down and analysed so that it provokes a commercial offer, a clue of personalized attention from the service. Rituals and liturgy are the key mediations that produce this kind of « hypnotic » state of attention as Gabriel Tarde said (2001). But commercial devices are expert at increasing loyalty amid sluggish or too cautious consumption. Companies must keep the client they earned rather than look for new ones, which are much more expensive to capture. Commercial loyalty programs are designed to produce protected interiors, cognitive environments that maintain habits and prevent the invasion attempts of other brands, as well as other political parties, other religions, other people, etc. since the same brand-style management is extended to any type of activity.

Alertness

Alertness is different and opposed to loyalty in the compass and yet they both hold each other through some kind of tension. Alertness generates a climate of stress

(Sloterdijk 2011), which is a driving force to produce another type of envelope. The notifications on our smartphones are the perfect example of that invasion of alerts, and the smart watch manages to design the best connection with the body, which puts the user in a permanent state of alert. This creates a climate, an envelope, of both concern and safety by the only fact of having at hand the device that maintains awareness, « in case of ».

Cognitive psychology labels it as “priming”, since it is what comes in front of what already captures attention. Because one must not forget that attention does not emerge in a virgin land, it always conflicts with existing stimulations or habits, in this case with inheritance. The « neighbourhood » causes encounters that will disrupt « inheritances » (Boullier, 2010), this is why we always refer to these two major channels of influence, even in attention issues. The lasting effects of time on attention in the loyalty regime are attacked by the ephemeral effects of space available through neighbourhood opportunities as any advertiser is well aware when placing billboards in cities. Alertness and awareness of stimulations from the environment create conflicts with habits, or at least « hesitation » as Tarde said. Advertising in public spaces is an example of how much our envelope is targeted while we are out of our shells, of our homes.

In this case, the qualities of the “containers” (technical ones) will not be the decisive ones but those of the “contenants” (or attractive contents), a distinction I developed in my research on crowds and urban audiences and which parallels the one of Winnicott on holding and handling (Boullier 2010). The properties of specific attractors are required to capture attention and to motivate an extraction of the subject from the safe and familiar container. The alert system manages to make some features salient, to produce them as perceptual incentives that will prime over the traditional perception. Alertness requires permanent events to produce contenants that capture the minds and not only the bodies that habits are used to keep loyal. The specific qualities of these attractors must succeed in making a dent into the immunity built by loyalty. Thus, the design of a web page can be tested with eye-tracking systems to understand what attracts the gaze, a larger number of eye fixations and saccades. Experts know that in the Western printed press, for instance, the part at the top right of the page attracts more gaze and thus attention. For web sites, it is the centre of the screen that first catches the eye fixations. Positioning on the page or on the screen becomes a feature that produces saliency. This semiotic envelope must be built carefully. But it is a rather paradoxical envelope since it produces tension with fidelity and looks for breaches in the previous traditional envelope. However, as soon as the attention is captured by the saliency of the new offer (a brand, a slogan), it may tend to turn into loyalty or be countered by other competitive attractors : the intensity of the alert is required to break the habit and the hypnosis produced by previous attachments.

Alertness/ loyalty

This opposition between loyalty and alertness works on many levels and may even become a complementarity. Sloterdijk said that a liveable climate requires a tension in the “internal chamber” that is provided by this stress, in order to avoid depression. We could also call it boredom, what citizens try to escape more than

anything, because of repetition and lack of appeal, and it leads to claiming the right to shop on Sundays! Loyalty as well as alertness rely heavily on the time parameter, and thus the duration, among the qualities of attention already identified by T. Ribot. The ability to establish some kind of irreversibility is part of any marketing strategy and is what loyalty is designed for. While alertness emphasizes the instant capture, since it looks for producing breaches in the envelope, even if that moment does not last. This instant appeal looks for reactions such as impulsive purchasing behaviour, or repetitive changes in the TV channel (zapping effect), or frequent withdrawal from the flow of face-to-face speech just to check why one's phone has been vibrating. However, the other basic dimension of attention, intensity, is also required for alertness. Attention cannot be captured in by the messages of alert if they were not intense enough to break into a closed envelope of attention that therefore could have well survived at a low level of intensity.

Projection/ immersion

But this time-based framework missed the dimension of the topology of actants, that is to say a spatial dimension, the one that connects the attention catcher and the caught one. Projection and immersion are designed to account for these regimes of attention that rely on this asymmetry. Both terms are opposed regarding the source of the uptake. In the projection regime, the actant occupies an overhanging position and encompass the whole world around his vision, his model, his referents by bending the world to his pre-set image. This was the logic of reproduction of his inheritance used during the colonization period but still very well alive. In the regime of immersion, on the contrary, the actant is caught and accepts to get caught, lowering his immune barrier : he accepts to be affected by the world as it is, this neighbouring world (not the one he inherits), imposed or chosen, as it is in videogames.

Projection

Projection is well known because it is the modern one, made of planning and relying on devices that allow the capture of attention around a "program", focusing on the "project" (projection) to turn the mind towards the future (a promise), avoiding any influence and any feedback from environments and even by making the environments bend to this project. This a powerful regime one can find in any technical power that has the ability to focus attention by coordinating everybody and everything around a single point of view as did the perspective, a new kind of perceptive envelope built in the Fifteenth century, cantered from the gaze of the viewer (Panofsky 1991). By definition, the projection regime is holistic, and proposes a single world and a universalist view of this world (universal means unique in this sense and is opposed to pluriverse). All geomatics techniques are often used to serve these visions even though they also allow changes in points of view. The drone effect (Chamayou 2013) makes the projection regime very effective in transforming any place into a sub-division of the pilot's territory, and allowing him to apply the law or the war rules of his own country without noticing the target or the legal government of the country under attack. Projection is a military term but drone policies generate a new regime of attention where the specificity of

the local environment is neglected in favour of the goal of the drone. This mode of surveillance, which is basically an attention process, should avoid the risk of immersion which was the older tradition of spying where moles were totally assimilated to their targeted country or organization : this shift towards a drone policy is a culturally significant one for surveillance. The envelope of the projection regime encapsulates all the features of the surrounding world but maintains the subject unaffected, protected by his overhanging position or his/her perspectivist position.

Immersion

Immersion is more complicated to account for because it is much more diverse, which means at the same time that it is gaining such a momentum that it is becoming the major grid of perception and of attention, as the tremendous success of the videogame industry demonstrates. In order to experience immersion, the lowest degree of immunity is required, the topological position relies on the lowering of borders to accept external influences a priori while still being able to create a new interior. Desires of immersion mean “to be had”, “to be caught” (passive mode) while the projection inspires the desire “to have” (which are, according to Tarde, both much better definitions of social entities, because “having” is intrinsically relational unlike “being”).

Immersion can take many forms, however, historically, not always successful ones. The critical role of video games must be emphasized in mobilizing both attention schemes, alert (and stress) and loyalty (intensity and duration at their maximum) in order to finally achieve a unique experience of immersion, in most cases. The peculiarity of the device lies in its ability to produce a kind of a bubble, a complete cosmos that captures every sense. For instance, we showed (Boullier and Lohard 2010) in a quality assessment of video games that the sound was decisive for the quality of immersion. Sloterdijk (2004) referred to it as “Phonotope”. All the more powerful is the effect since it is invisible and one can hardly close the ears unlike the eyes. The devices that produce these immersive envelopes are numerous. Immersion proposed by cinema is not the one of the video game nor the one of the web and nor the one of the TV which was never so immersive, as Barthes (1984) said, because of topographical properties of the built space: projection from the front, no darkness, small screen, etc.. Technical properties of containers play a role in building total or partial envelopes, long or short-term, individualized or collective, with infinite variations in the degree of sharing.

Beyond gaming, the whole web becomes immersive, that is to say when a feeling of continuity, of capture can be sustained despite the apparent disjointed envelope and the permanent alteration of immunity. Indeed, the immersion of the twenty-first century is no longer universal but pluriversal: it allows passage from one world to another easily, as is done by staying on the same platform and switching between musical worlds, sometimes totally different or by letting one be surprised by new proposals. The platform captures all the benefit of this obligatory passage of attention. Similarly, social networks platforms capture from us a considerable attention time while allowing us to switch between social worlds. This is a perfect illustration of what I call “habitéle” (Boullier, 2013), which is well beyond a “personal data ecosystem”. It is a new digital envelope that we carry with us perma-

nently and is mainly encapsulated in the smartphone, in which all access rights, all attachments, all affiliations, all transactional and provisional identities are stored and inhabited. From this point of view, the immersion of the XXI century looks exactly like what Sloterdijk (2004) refers to as foam, made of co-fragility, which allows extremely precise elective communities to constitute an envelope totally deterritorialized from the linguistic or national perspective. But the strategic importance of platforms in this capture of attention becomes crucial because it is they who recompose affinities in their territorial coverage. Today's empires, those who build attention "dispositifs" that immerse us, produce precisely non holistic immersive environments, but fragmented or fragmentable ones, which allow to "become within" while moving between several worlds. The platform effect is so powerful precisely because it builds an envelope in which we feel comfortable although our data and our attention are captured and sold!

Conclusions

No civilization can escape the design of its habitat, but no one can either let the minds of the members live in open mental space. This is why the design of attention can be so easily connected to habitat, because it requires a concern about how humans share some common vibrations (Boullier, 2015). Designing envelopes that provoke loyalty differs from emphasizing alertness and stress, as much as offering more or less opportunities of projection than of immersion. Political government should address this issue as well as traditional areas of concern of states and parties. However, it is quite clear that these policies of attention have been confiscated by brands in the last 30 years and the proliferation of media and information displace the balance of the regimes of attention towards the alertness state of mind. Twitter as such may take a large part of the responsibility, at least for the only invention of the Retweet button in 2011. There were no debates nor deliberations about these choices, it is as always an ex post analysis. The sooner we can understand that our envelopes are being affected and that this means the ways we share our world, the better chances of regulating these regimes of attention we have.

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