



The economy of attention

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Abstract

This article outlines a theory of the economy of attention constituting the logic of the mass media in contemporary social life, focusing on celebrity as the key manifestation of the accumulation of attention-capital. I explain how the mass media exchange information and entertainment for attention, which is in turn monetised via advertising. The field of celebrity is a 'vanity fair' functioning as a stock exchange of attention-capital – measured in circulation and viewing figures, ratings, likes, visits and so on – a form of capital that earns interest and generates additional income for those in its proximity. Overall, I argue that we are living in an era of 'mental capitalism' in which the relations of production themselves have inverted the relationship between the material and mental worlds, so that the realm of ideas is now the driving economic force. The article concludes by outlining the shape of a new, quaternary sector of the economy, characterised by de-materialisation and virtualisation, and raises the question of whether a focus on new forms of virtual and ideational value might possibly improve the sustainability of the world we live in, if the struggle for attention replaces the struggle for material goods.

Keywords

attention, attention capital, celebrity, mass media, mental capitalism

What is more pleasant than the benevolent notice other people take of us, what is more agreeable than their compassionate empathy? What is more inspiring than addressing ears flushed with excitement, what is more captivating than exercising our own power of fascination? What is more thrilling than an entire auditorium of expectant eyes, what is more overwhelming than applause surging up to us? What, ultimately, equals the enchantment sparked off by the delighted attention we receive from those by whom we are ourselves enchanted? – The attention of others is the most irresistible of drugs. To receive it outshines receiving any other kind of income. This is why glory surpasses power, and why wealth is overshadowed by celebrity.

This is also why it is becoming popular in our affluent society to rank income in attention above money. When rising numbers of people are able to afford the insignia of material wealth, then the desire for distinction will create a demand for attributes which are more selective than a high money income. In accordance with the law of the socialisation of former luxury goods, such attributes will be found among the privileges of a still-recognisable elite. The undisputed common denominator of contemporary

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élites is celebrity. And celebrity is precisely the status of being a major earner of attention. When material wealth has become inflationary, then, according to the laws governing the expansion of human desires and aspiration, the socialisation of this still-élite status is imminent.

I hear the objection that the socialisation of celebrity is impossible, since this is a contradiction in terms. Celebrity is an essentially distinguishing quality. Unlike material wealth, celebrity cannot become a mass phenomenon. And yet: never has there been so much celebrity as today; never has there been such fuss about familiar faces. Today, celebrities are not only those who are on their way to the summits of fame and power. The prerequisite is no longer high birth, the gift of talent or the great deed. Today one becomes a celebrity through a standardised career. The first step is no more and no less than somehow finding one's way into the media. Since media presence is the initial requirement, it is best to make one's appearance in the form of a photograph or, best of all, on television. The career has passed its first hurdle when the impression one gives is commented upon in public, when one's appearance is talked about. Here a mechanism is set in motion which is necessary if the ascent is to be successful. For, the new entrant must in turn benefit the medium, he or she must promise to increase its circulation figures or TV ratings.

Media, celebrity and attention income

Circulation figures and audience ratings are measures of the attention drawn by a medium as a medium. They also measure its financial success, and the financial motive could, by itself, be sufficient to indirectly promote the celebrity of everything which increases the medium's attractiveness. However, one would miss the point if one were to limit one's view to the pecuniary aspect. A medium's financial success in turn depends on its marketability as an advertising space. The offer of advertising space is an offer to attract attention via a service rendered. It is the effectiveness of this service which is measured with circulation figures and audience ratings. This is why the income in attention ranks above financial success, also with respect to the medium itself; and this is also why everything increasing the medium's attention income will be promoted, published, cultivated by it. Everything which is promoted, published and cultivated by the media is, by definition, celebrity.

And, lo and behold, what is best for a medium's attention income? Very simply: as much celebrity as possible. People enjoy nothing more than looking at faces shining with publicity. Nothing increases circulation more than as much gossip as possible about the world of the stars. Nothing increases viewing figures more than the commotion around the stars themselves. This is why gossip columns are beginning to appear among serious commentaries and features; why, too, the tabloid press finds it worthwhile to report on surveys identifying the most frequently cited researchers. This is why, too, prime-time family television hours are absolutely packed with celebrities. It is why prima-donnas promote Rolex and soccer idols recommend Budweiser – already, television and publishing programs without well-known faces are beginning to be regarded as élitist.

Nothing seems to attract attention more than the accumulation of attention income, nothing seems to stimulate the media more than this kind of capital, nothing appears to animate advertising space with a stronger power of attraction than the displayed wealth of earned attention. The media would have to invent celebrity if it did not exist already;

they would have to create their candidates out of nothing if they were not already available for recruitment. Celebrities are needed *en masse* if one wants to make the attraction of attention a mass business. The solution to the riddle of the miraculous increase in celebrity lies in the media's ability to collect and deliver the critical quantities needed to run the gathering of attention as a mass business.

The media are by no means just shunting yards of information. They are a system of channels supplying information in order to extract attention. A television appearance means much more than just the dissemination of information. It makes it possible technically to multiply one's personal presence with the aim of transmitting one's reproductions into people's living-rooms, to collect donated attention. The media's power of producing celebrities is only limited by the suggestive capacity of this collection service.

It was only gradually that the media acquired this power. The mechanical reproduction of the written word, of sound and images was just the technological starting point. It was also not the demand for information as such which made the media great. What made them great and ensures their continued growth is the ingenious business idea of offering people information in order to capture their attention. Without the attention income which publication promises, the publishing trade would not even have developed in any significant way. If only material certain of commercial success had been published in books and periodicals, today's literary scene would look different from the way it does now. Just the fact that authors reckon in the currency of attention explains their willingness to toil for the best expression of an idea in return for starvation wages. The ingeniousness of the publishing trade's business idea lies in splitting up the returns in terms of financial and attention currency. The production conditions of our literary culture are such that the publisher gets the money and the author gets the attention. If, in addition, the publisher acquires reputation and the author wealth, this – in economic terms – is surplus profit: it is not necessary to keep the system going.

It is exactly this mixed calculation which lies behind the transition from publishing organ to mass medium. A mass medium cannot be delicate in its choice of means for capturing attention. The author working for attention wages cannot avoid being particular in this respect: only attention earned for something one personally identifies with counts as personal income. This is why the desire for attention is so closely linked with that for self-fulfilment. However, what furthers self-fulfilment rarely gets the masses going. One will only move them by closely observing what the general public wants to read, listen to, or watch. Their desire for sensation must be satisfied, catchy tunes have to be put on the air, pictures have to be touched up to catch the eye. Production for this elaborated taste also requires creative minds. But it requires those who are willing to serve a foreign cause, and it is this willingness which has to be addressed with money.

Compromise thus earns its income. One can make a good living from the salaries paid by the entertainment industry. Journalism also feeds its people. The attention incomes earned in show business and entertainment are also considerable. However, in those fields they are clearly proportionate to the respective money incomes. And the attention generated by an appearance in a film, on radio or television, or in the press, is always also partly directed towards the respective medium as an institution or brand. For, just as attentive and financial remuneration has to be combined in order to assemble masses of people in front of printed pages or screens, the respective medium

itself must attract both money and attention if it is to reach the masses reliably. The newspaper has to be read because it exists; one must watch television because television exists. Put more succinctly: pages and screens have to become a separate, naturally perceived stratum of social reality. They have to compete with the unmediated view of reality. They have to impose themselves as fixed items in attention budgets. They will only do so if the medium in question reliably presents what people want to see.

If the offering is to people's liking, if enough money and attention are spent on keeping people in line, then the medium also acquires an additional quality for those appearing in it. Guaranteed circulation figures and ratings create a fund of anticipated attention which suppliers have at their unlimited disposal. Control of the TV channels means being able to re-let a mass of expended attention. Those offering space in printed media or transmission time become able to elevate somebody to celebrity in the same way as, historically, successful conquerors could elevate somebody to the nobility by conferring fiefs. They are the only group in society able to freely dispose of the most highly valued resource. And, like emperors and kings, they can increase their own fame by sending out their followers, thus endowed, on further conquests for the respective medium.

However, as commercial enterprises, the media also have the opportunity to turn the attention they capture into hard cash. They can rent out their territory as advertising space. Indeed, through this commercial activity they can gradually make themselves independent of the sale of information that is broadcast to catch the eye. The most modern mass medium, private television, finances itself exclusively by selling the service of capturing attention for anything whatsoever. The fact that this service also assists the celebrities it has itself ennobled, simply shines more light on another facet of this business concept.

Brilliant business concepts are seldom equally beneficial for all sides. The attention which the media re-let is unilaterally donated by the people sitting in front of pages or screens. People pay with their attention to the supplier in return for discovering what they like. The relationship between the attention invested by suppliers and that collected in return is strictly asymmetrical. Suppliers disseminate information in the form of technical reproductions, while consumers pay with live attention for each copy. Only through this asymmetry is it possible to collect such a mass of donated attention, which is what makes a medium attractive for those appearing in it, and which permits the media their lavishness in conferring the modern aristocracy of celebrity.

An inevitable consequence of this asymmetric exchange is the social redistribution of attention incomes. The media make one stratum wealthier and exploit another. Not that exchanging information for attention is unfair in principle. But if the attraction service is organised on an industrial scale, then the social disparity between those rich and those poor in received attention increases inadvertently. One may speak of outright exploitation when television addiction becomes epidemic.

To be sure, the redistribution effect of media consumption does not act upon an originally equal distribution. It reinforces an existing disparity. Just as old as humanity itself – no, much older – are individual differences in the talent for capturing the attention of others. There have always been shining and celebrated figures who effortlessly engaged everybody's senses and hearts. And there have always been the forgotten, overlooked ones who sacrificed their self-esteem to attract just one glance. Natural differences in talent have also always been intermingled with social privileges

or disadvantages. In order not to attribute too much to the media, one must acknowledge that something like the capitalisation of attention income existed long before the media came into being.

Vanity fairs – the stock exchange of attention

Of course, the attention one earns cannot be saved and invested in the same way as money income. However, there is an additional mode of accumulation not available for money. The fine distinction between money and attention income lies in the fact that in the case of the latter, it is not irrelevant from whom it emanates. We evaluate the attention we capture not only according to the duration and concentration of its expenditure, but also according to our own esteem for the person from whom we receive it. Attention coming from people we admire is most precious; it is valuable coming from those we esteem; it counts little coming from people towards whom we are indifferent; and attention may even assume a negative value coming from people we despise or fear. This additional mode of accumulation thus makes use of the fact that our esteem for another person depends to no small degree on the attention income this person receives from third parties. The dependence of personal esteem on income is familiar enough in the case of money. But a high attention income also increases a person's charm. If that person is liked by everyone, if he or she is well known or even famous, then there must be something special about him or her. Whatever the reasons for this person's general recognition, the attention that I personally receive from him or her reflects, to a certain extent, this person's fascination for all the others.

The social crediting of somebody's earned attention to his or her prestige constitutes the original accumulation of attention-capital. This is the first form of social reinforcement of the naturally uneven income opportunities. It happens in the sphere of social perception, but still remains, as it were, at the level of social instinct. It does not yet require any institutional shape or cultural encoding. Probably, this was already taking place among wolf packs or troops of apes.¹ Nevertheless, it was the starting point for the self-reinforcement of celebrity in the media that we experience today.

If the attention I attract is not only credited to me personally, but is also registered by others, and if the attention I pay to others is valued in proportion to the amount of attention earned by me, then an accounting system is set in motion which quotes something like the social share price of individual attention. What is important, then, is not only how much attention one receives from how many people, but also from whom one receives it – or, more precisely, with whom one is seen. The reflection of somebody's attentive wealth thus becomes a source of income for oneself. Mere proximity to celebrity makes a little celebrity.

It is in this secondary market that social ambition thrives. It is this stock exchange of attention-capital that gives precise meaning to the expression 'vanity fair'. However, social ambition should not be regarded simply as the struggle for recognition. And vanity is more than a healthy appetite for being noticed. Ambition is the hustle for a better position. The megalomania of thinking oneself endowed with superior talent is not yet being ambitious. Ambition grabs any small opportunity, and opportunities arise abundantly in the heat generated by large amounts of capital. Diverting it to one's own enterprise does not require authentic brilliance, but only a touch of mercantile mentality. One may work one's way up in the economy of attention just by persistently keeping at the heels of those who are better off, just by being constantly seen in their

vicinity. And if those at the summit are unreachable, there is the lower nobility just below the high aristocracy.

Ambitious social risers take their clues from what is 'next best'. They utilise small differences in the share price of attention grabbed from above, to immediately sell their own attention more dearly to equals or not-yet equals. And if, additionally, their vanity is great, there will be side benefits which, given a little goodwill, can be extrapolated into windfall profits. Vanity, as observed above, is more than merely a strong appetite for the attention of others. It encompasses an inclination for prettifying calculations that convert received attention into self-esteem. It is, first, not choosy about attention's 'where from' and 'what for', but, second, it is quick to take shortcuts from the path running via third parties that is normally prescribed for crediting income to a person's renown. Vanity has little regard for social control. It prefers to engage in self-deception, even more so since that is not always distinguishable from self-fulfilling prophecy. If one succeeds in making others take one's self-overestimation for real esteem, then what we have is actually not a case of self-deception, but one of successful speculation. And this business always speculative.

Quotations of the share price of attention are not only influenced by a person's current attention income, they also incorporate anticipated future attention income. The observed trend gets extrapolated. Those who are on the rise receive a bonus, those who are going down suffer an extra cut. This is the sphere of promotion by cheerleaders and annihilation by rumour, something not absent from any vanity fair. Hired applause has paved the way for many a career; ridicule in the press has extinguished more than just straw fires. However, as shady as the details of the speculation business may be, larger volumes of capital cannot avoid going public.

The official quotation of the share price of personal capital is a person's presence in the media. Circulation figures and ratings document in black and white the income of the presented persons. A person's presence in a medium, calculated in terms of duration or space of presentation, measures the investment made by the respective medium. The volume invested corresponds to the expected amount of attractive power which this person will contribute to the medium. The relationship between the anticipated amount and successful attraction is, in economic terms, nothing but the relationship between the price of a company's shares and its operating results. Since it is the anticipated amount of attention which determines a person's presence in a medium, the media themselves are not only platforms for the mass business in attention, they also act as exchanges assessing the value of capital denominated in this currency. On the other hand, elbowing for a place in the media is not just a matter of the considerable immediate returns, but also one of stimulating the share price of one's attention.

It is instructive that there are extreme cases in the media scene demonstrating what it means if only one of the two functions described above comes into play. Thus, a simple transfer of medially collected attention takes place when letters to the editor are printed, anniversaries are announced on radio, or when individuals from the audience are presented in quiz shows. In those cases, a few people will experience receiving everybody's attention, but that will make little difference to their personal prestige. The attention they get will generally not be the starting capital for any later career. Being presented just makes them experience very briefly how it feels when everybody is watching you.

There is also the other extreme case, where share prices are stimulated without anybody noticing. To this category belongs the boom in founding new academic journals whose sole purpose it is to create a forum for the founder and a small circle of collaborators which will allow them to expand their publications lists. A publications list measures somebody's presence in academic discussion, which is why it is tempting to have personal control over access to such a forum (and why, accordingly, prestigious journals prohibit it). Since, however, the vanity outlets are proliferating to such an extent that in any case nobody is reading the stuff anymore, it has also become common practice to publish the same contribution with slight variations under a variety of titles. And since it is also the case that nobody checks publication lists for their substance any more, it would be more than strange if with such help many an ass did not obtain a professorship.

These examples show *ex negativo* how closely related the wholesale and the stock exchange functions normally are. However, they also show that in the attention economy, like the real economy, fake deals and black markets thrive. This does not make the economy as a whole any less real. Bluffing reaches its limits in the ability of the whole to keep functioning. In this sense the economy of attention is even very typical. It largely organises and stabilises itself. And its naturalness is so profound that few have taken intellectual note of its extensive and firmly established existence.

This intellectual ignorance is remarkable to the extent that development comprising the immaterial component of the economic process has already reached the zenith of its full industrialisation. It not only looks back on an ancient pre-history, it also has a long industrial history. The economy of attention was pre-industrial as long as publication technologies were either of the handicraft type, or correspondingly had not yet permeated the entire economy. However, the economy of attention had already reached its early industrial phase when the first, relatively simple information and communication technologies developed. The analogue technology of printing, radio broadcasting and sound-film gathered, for the first time, critical amounts of anonymously donated attention, turning the cult of the stars into a mass phenomenon. It was then that the business of attraction became professionalised, that deliberate eye-capturing became an industry in the form of advertising. We may speak of a phase of full industrialisation after the advent of the new digital techniques. With electronic media, the second – that is, the representation of reality created specially to attract attention – begins to compete with the first, unmediated perception. During this last phase, most of the freely available, that is, *consuming* attention passes through the media; what emerges is popularisation, that is, the mass production of celebrity. During this phase there are also first indications that attention income is beginning to outrank money income.

Mental capitalism

At this point, one wonders how our archaic emotional life has managed to come to terms with this industrial superpower. We allow the media quite naturally to dispose of the major portion of our most precious good, indeed we even enjoy devoting our attention to the spectacle. At last there is not only bread, there are also circuses in abundance. To be sure, there are most glaring contrasts between what those people in there and what we in front of them are receiving. The medium not only inflates differences, it also neutralises them. It diverts feelings of objection or reservation away

from persons on to itself, the medium. Somehow it happens that we extend interest, liking and fascination to the persons performing, but we direct our rejection, objection, or indignation at the medium. Instead of being annoyed about the discrepancy between a person's celebrity and the substance of their presentation, we call the television stupid. The objectivity of the medium has such overwhelming power over human comparisons, that it would seem ridiculous to react with feelings of envy or jealousy to the unjust distribution of attention. In the media the supra-personal rules of distribution practically become a completely anonymous mechanism, of which all of us are part, with a method of accounting that inadvertently assumes the effectiveness of an automated payment system.

What we have is mental capitalism. To all appearances, we seem to have a nearly perfect reflection of the material base in our mental superstructure. It is a great pity that the old reflection theory is so completely dead that it can no longer enjoy this fact. However, imagine how the old warriors would rub their eyes if they saw what has happened to the old relationship between base and superstructure! According to materialist doctrine, the mental superstructure is merely a dependent reflex of the conditions of material production. The theory claimed to have put the idealist world view, which had been standing on its head, back on its feet. But what are those relationships doing now? They are standing on their head themselves. The idea-economy has taken the lead, and it was very much the relations of production that brought about the reversal. The media are a big industry by no means only because of the volume of attention turnover.

The media's supply keeps growing. What is thus expanding is not just their contribution to the national product, and their attention turnover. What is expanding is the aspect of reality produced specially to attract attention. For quite some time it has been unclear whether the reality extracted from pages and screens is dominant over directly perceived reality. What is clear is that a major part of socially perceived reality is highly synthetic, as it is especially produced for use in the struggle for attention.

Naturally people know that much of what the media present to them is pre-structured and fiction-permeated. It is simply naive to believe that fact and fiction can so easily be distinguished. For attentive beings like us, only that which holds our attention is real. This in turn does not mean that everything we imagine or think of is real for us. We are very well able to distinguish between perception, recollection and imagination. But we are not so easily able to prevent some recollection acting like a real event, or to prevent an idea from exerting real power. Anybody in love knows about the unruliness of imaginative processes, any jealous person knows about the relentlessness of recollections. It is at the level of such phenomena that the media are poaching attention.

There is nothing more real than images which stick in the mind. Nothing exerts greater power over us than that which forces us to take attentive note. Everything to which we involuntarily pay attention, has an involuntary effect on us. And everything that captures our attention is real to a higher degree than the background. To be sure, there is little in the media which sticks in the mind. Luckily, there is no obligation to pay attention, either. But there is enough which attracts, which caters to laziness, which may be absorbed on the side. And everything in which attention gets entangled becomes, primarily, real in a subjective sense.

The compulsion to address a large audience, indeed to keep a whole television nation in front of the screen, shapes and forms. Everything appearing in the media must

undergo a highly professional process of styling and testing. This process means that a new process of producing reality is forming, quite comparable to the role played by factories when they first arose. It is true that the new process only produces semblances. However, semblance and substance are not distinguishable from each other because the latter can be physically touched. Through old habit we have come to consider the haptic, firm, in a generally perceivable sense public world, as actual reality, and to consider the world of transmitted images and published views as a phantom world of semblance. Often enough we overlook that immediate reality is not what we perceive as an assembly of touchable, solid things, but that which attention forms out of the stimuli activating our senses. Everything appearing beyond this elementary stratum of perceivability has invariably been selected and actively shaped.

Media presentation shifts some of this subjective constitution of reality to the outside. The technique employed is to detach the pattern of stimuli from compact materiality. Technological progress in media presentation consists of detaching those patterns of stimuli with increasing perfection, so that they can be manipulated independently of the originals with increasing ease. The technology of this detachment process is what the new factories of reality are operating with. It is logical that at the end of this development stands the abandonment of the detour via material reality and the direct production of virtual reality.

In order to defend the belief in the superiority of the material, one might argue that immaterial capitalism and excursions to virtual worlds are just phenomena of consumption and leisure. In the sphere of production, material processes still dominate. In the creation of value added the media are only one sector among others. Indeed, material production has never been as extensive as today, not only regarding its economic value but also with respect to the ecological costs involved. It has become so enormous that it overburdens the regenerative potential of ecological resources in a disastrous way. Denying the preponderance of the material aspect of economic life amounts to playing down this catastrophic danger.

The first objection is wrong, the second one leads in the wrong direction. As powerful as the material economy's growth may have been in absolute terms, equally strong – and at the same pace – has been the drop in the relative share of manual labour in the production of added value. It is one of the most significant economic changes of this century that the service of rendering attention has overtaken all other production factors in economic importance. At the same time, it has become the leading basic principle of economic rationality that the turnover of materials and energy must be reduced. The sheer magnitude of material turnover does not point to any sort of superiority, but is a sign that the current material economy cannot continue in its present form.

The pecuniary expression of the productivity of service-rendering attention is the share of mental labour in the production of value added. In all developed societies, it surpasses that of physical labour. However, mental labour differs from physical labour both in that it employs attention instead of physical energy and mental instead of physical capital. Mental labour presupposes education. Education basically means investing attention in oneself. Its simplest economic measure is the amount of time invested in educational activities by a pupil and a teacher which incorporates interest accrued from 'human capital'.

The aim of education is the acquisition and application of knowledge. Knowledge is reified attention that has crystallised from its live creative state and is, in that sense,

also capitalised attention. Only that part of knowledge which is accessible to the general public is public capital. Its analogue on the material side is the public capital of infrastructure.

The emergence of the quaternary sector of the economy

It would, therefore, be completely wrong to think that the capitalisation of attention is limited to the phenomenon of celebrity. This view would be as erroneous as thinking that only received attention is scarce and expensive. This is the case, but it is also true of one's own self-generated attentive energy. That energy can be accumulated through investment in oneself. A higher income attained through education may also be considered as a kind of dividend. But in this case, it is the investment of one's attention in oneself which is the important aspect. However, education is also a kind of capitalisation of other persons' attention, if one thinks of the teachers' contributions.

In economic terms, the decisive question in discussing the capitalisation of attention is the way in which total mental labour is divided up between its direct productive application and its reinvestment in the production and transmission of knowledge. The long-term optimisation of this ratio has become the central condition for keeping a national economy at the top in international comparisons. The optimal rate of mental capital formation has greater weight than the rate of real capital investment. It is also more important than physical resources, regardless of even excellent endowment with them.

The tendency of de-materialisation has for quite some time taken hold of the economic process as a whole. It also reaches back into history. Its origins go back to the period when the service sector began to expand to the detriment of the manufacturing and extraction industries. Tertiary services – like negotiation, administration, sales, consulting – are goods in the shape of attention paid. They used to be classified as non-productive by the economists of former times because they did not produce anything material, nothing which filled one's stomach. It was the drastic lightening of the burden of physical labour by machines and the increasing need for organisation in the production and distribution of goods which demonstrated that the service of rendering attention was not only a productive contribution, but was in fact pivotal to the realisation of economic rationality.

The growth of the tertiary sector was nourished both by the mechanisation of physical labour and by growing welfare. Mechanisation shifts human labour to activities like planning and supervision as well as to the marketing of the steadily increasing minimum turnover. Welfare makes demand for goods more selective and ties it more closely to the complementary demand for presentation and advice. The growing complexity of both leads to higher requirements regarding the organisation of circuits of information and decision.

This organisation remained untouched by mechanisation until the advent of a new kind of technology. The mechanical unburdening and substitution of labour in this sphere became, however, more urgent the higher the general level of wages, and especially with the rising share of highly qualified mental labour. Mental labour is unusually expensive – because of the education dividend. What was needed, therefore, was the introduction of some technology that would unburden mental labour and replace its more mechanical components. This came with information technology. Computers replace attentive by electrical energy. They imitate mental labour in that,

inter alia, they move information instead of heavy matter. With their introduction, de-materialisation has shifted from the object of labour to the instrument employed. This does not mean that the mind, or indeed attention, has leapt across to the machines. It does mean, however, that a potential is forming which eventually may contribute to replacing the material economy on a larger scale. Information is also the selected pattern of stimuli from which we construct – that is, perceive – our haptic, firm world. It is infinitely easier and more energy-saving to change such patterns, to move them around, shape them, knead them, assemble them and send them round the world instead of their material original. However, the perception we construct from those manipulated stimuli is virtual reality. If the information-processing capacity in human attention moves over to machines, this means that it is not only developments in the media that are drifting towards the colonisation of virtual space. The drive towards virtualisation emanates just as much from economic pressures to substitute increasingly expensive labour power, as from an ecological need to reduce the materials and energy balances.

De-materialisation and virtualisation have also become common concepts in production. The importance of occupations in the information sector suggests the emergence of a new, quarternary sector of the economy. In any case, the predominance of the material seems to be crumbling throughout the entire spectrum of the economic process. The transformation as a whole goes much further than is suggested by the term ‘information society’. Information is the still-physical aspect of the trans-physical economy of attention. Attention is far more than just the ready supply of information-processing capacity. Attention is the essence of being conscious in the sense of both self-assured existence and alert presence of mind. Attention is the medium in which everything must be represented that is to become real for us as experiencing creatures. Attentive beings are the centre of their own individual worlds. This world exists as often as there are conscious beings ‘there’ at its centre.

Attentiveness as such is more than, and of ontologically higher order than anything appearing to or in it. Dedicated attentiveness imparts dignity to the person receiving the attention. This alone makes receiving somebody’s benevolent attention a most highly valued good for self-attentive beings. Receiving alert attentiveness means entering another world. No attentive being has direct access to the world of another being’s attention. By receiving another being’s attention, however, the receiver becomes represented in that other being’s world. And it is one’s representation in the other being’s consciousness which makes the desire to be noticed so irresistible. It is not just that vanity cannot get enough of this. All of us are in the throes of the question how we appear to others. We simply cannot bear not playing any role in the other being’s consciousness. The human soul begins to suffer as soon as it does not play the leading role in another soul. It is permanently maimed and ends in bitterness that arises if it does not receive a generous minimum income of attentiveness. And it is its highest bliss to bathe in caring attention. Applause may, of course, sometimes come from the wrong side, and it may sometimes be the wrong side which is noticed. But if caring attentiveness comes from people whom we esteem, and if we receive it for qualities of which we are proud, there can hardly ever be too much of it.

Thus the modern cult around one’s own attractiveness did not need to be invented. Also, the observation that people enjoying material prosperity venerate nothing so much as their own magnetic hold on other people’s attention is not surprising. New and astonishing is just the fervour with which professional business sense devours these

liberated mental energies. It is only the display of the power wielded by the sphere of media-channelled attention that is shocking in the discovery of this new economy. However, too critical a view of the present cultural condition might overlook the fact that the replacement of money as life's 'reserve currency' entails the opportunity for what might be a life-saving shift in values. We have known for some time – and know it well enough – that every day we hesitate to withdraw from the battle of material production which we are waging against nature, and indeed our own nature, will heap deplorable misery on future generations. However, full knowledge and the guiltiest conscience have so far only moved dwindling minorities to change their ways. It is quite simply illusory to expect that the necessary reorientation of economic activity will be brought about by mass abstinence. If the way out of materialism is not found in abstinence, then it must be sought in hedonism itself. Within hedonism, I see no other emergency exit but that of self-activated de-materialisation of the economic process and the imminent transformation of values concerning different kinds of income.

Is the economy of attention thus an already practically experienced preliminary stage of future ecologically sustainable lifestyles? Could the transformation of economic competition into a more vigorous struggle for attention ultimately be the 'cunning of reason' which will save us? Are we perhaps – unwittingly and without wanting it – on the right track? We should not take looking for answers to these questions too lightly.

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Note

1. See Stephen Walker, *Animal Thought* (London: Routledge 1983).