

ATTENTION DEFICIT: ALIENATION IN PLATFORM CAPITALISM

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is a socio-philosophical analysis of attention deficit phenomenon, which is being detected at the intersection of several subject areas (psychiatry, theory of journalism, economics). The main methodological instrument of the study is a Marxist principle of alienation. Alienation of attention, which, on the one hand, is being understood as a process of producing attention as a commodity, and on the other one – as the process of producing a person as a user of the platform, provides the methodological basis, necessary for a holistic view of the phenomenon. The main differences of attention alienation from alienation of labor and desire are considered within the paper. The possibility of a modern form of alienation is associated primarily with the emergence of the new forms of capital – platforms, providing infrastructure for the interaction of other users and aimed at collection and procession of large amounts of data. The main aspects of attention management: game, content sharing and design have been distinguished within the paper. The main consequences of alienation of attention for the structure of the individual and society have been spelled out. The effects of the spread of gaming techniques of attention management and content distribution techniques specific to social networks have been considered. It being is suggested that there is a correlation between the spread of ADHD diagnosis and the spread of attention management technologies, and, as well, between the distribution of attention management technology and the ‘renaissance’ of social in the social theory.

Keywords: alienation of attention, digital capitalism, platform capitalism, social networks, attention deficit.

Introduction

Attention deficit is originally a medical term for a specific behavioral disorder. Within the confines of psychiatry, attention deficit is a low ability to concentrate while communicating or completing tasks. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in modern medicine is being classified as a nervous system disease (ICD-11 2019). Bernard Steigler (Steigler 2006) and Geert Lovink (Lovink 2012) consider the influence of the modern society to be the cause of the spread of ADHD symptoms. Such a politicization of the attention deficit discourse refers to Nick Srnicek’s program book, Platform Capitalism (Srnicek 2017).

The place of attention deficit in modern capitalism is considered thoroughly within such a research field as an ‘attention economy’. This term is commonly ascribed to Michael Goldhaber (Goldhaber 1997). Herbert Frank is also considered to be one of the founders of the direction. The latter believes that the

main sign of the modern economy is a merger of money and attention, their mutual expression through one another (Franck 1999). Ethan Zuckerman writes about the collapse of the hopes of the “globalists” and relates it, among other things, to the limitation of our attention (Zuckerman 2013). Attempts to consider the problem of attention deficit from the perspective of journalism theory have been made in the works of the Russian specialists V.V. Dekalov (Dekalov 2017) and Biryukov V.A. (Birjukov 2016).

Therefore, there are a number of attempts made to problematize the phenomenon of attention deficit from the viewpoint of particular sciences – economics, medicine, design, marketing, and journalism. These approaches to the problem are heterogeneous not only in terms of method, but also in terms of the subject: not infrequently, the notions ‘attention deficit’ and ‘attention’ imply different phenomena.

Three different concepts might be distinguished, which are denoted by the term ‘attention deficit’. In medicine and psychology the said terms imply a low ability for arbitrary concentration of attention and abstraction. For the theory of media, ‘attention economy’ is a set of approaches and techniques for retaining someone else’s attention that are used, for instance, by marketers (visual website design, sales funnel, etc.). For Goldhaber and Franck, ‘attention deficit’ is an irregular distribution of audience and recognition. Here, attention is understood as a special social capital that can be accumulated, leased and sold, and which is measured in the number of views, followers and social influence in general.

Despite the urgent need for a general analysis, there is still no philosophical or socio-philosophical approach to this problem, although attempts of coming up with such a generalization are being made by particular sciences: economics (Franck 1999) (Goldhaber 1997) and psychology (Kahneman 1973).

Alienation of Attention and Alienation of Desire

Bernard Stiegler is one of those scholars, who are trying to comprehensively approach the problem of attention deficit. For him, ADHD is not only a personality disorder or mental disorder, but also a symptom of a ‘disorder’, existing in society. B. Stiegler attributes the spread of ADHD with intoxication by consumption, depreciation of values and atrophy of the ability to desire.

In a hyper-industrial society, ‘any value must be fully quantifiable, in other words, any value is doomed to complete depreciation’ (Stiegler 2006). Total calculation of cost for any object of consumption destroys its value and, in turn, the agent, who attaches value to a particular thing through desire. Being unable to desire and to focus his own attention, a person becomes unable to communicate and socialize.

B. Stiegler applies Marxist understanding of the alienation of labor (from product, from activity, from the generic nature of a human being) to desire. Following Freud and Lacan, he understands desire as a factor constituting a person as a subject. The internal logic of this alienation can be represented

through three levels (similar to the alienation of labor in Marxist theory): alienation from objects of desire, from the ability to desire and the 'generic' nature of a person as a willing being.¹

Not only does hyper industrial society possess the industry of goods production, but also the industry of desires or needs production. The industrially produced values, that is, the objects of desire, are a kind of fetish, since the process of their production is hidden from the agents of desire. Therefore values and objects of desire are alienated – this is the first level of alienation.

Since values are alienated and do not belong directly to agents, the very ability to desire – a wish as a special process, turns out to be alienated as well: I delegate my ability to desire to someone or something else (consultant, television, etc.). This is the second level. And, finally, a person is alienated from his 'generic nature.' She desires, but not herself and not for herself. If in Marxist theory the alienation of labor produces the worker as a commodity, then according to Stiegler, the alienation of desire produces consumer demand, that is, namely, it produces a consumer as a measurable economic quantity.

B. Stiegler connects the spreading of ADHD with the inability to desire. In our opinion, this provision is not enough justified. Despite the fact that B. Stiegler's implementation of the principle of alienation extends his analysis to all three aspects of the concept of 'attention deficit' in question – ability, technique, and capital; it is desire, but not attention he refers to. Accordingly, the three aspects mentioned above are: first – the ability to desire, to want, to feel the need for something, etc.; second – techniques and approaches for the creation of desires and needs, which are described quite thoroughly both by critics of the consumer society and by applied sales manuals; third – desire capital, that is, the actual quantity of sales or consumer demand. In our opinion, the deficit of desire does not automatically transfer into a deficit of attention. In the medical aspect, deficit of desire will be expressed more through apathy and depression than through weakening of attention concentration and hyperactivity.

It is the symptoms of depression (the loss of meaning, purpose and desire) that are attributed to the consumer society by the classics of this concept: the 'mass' of J. Baudrillard, the 'automatons' of E. Fromm, the 'society of the spectacle' by G. Debord, etc. The example drawn by B. Stiegler himself also illustrates depression rather than ADHD: the Cartier couple, who tried to poison their children and commit suicide, from the point of view of B. Stiegler, took this step because of the despair and dislike that inevitably arise when intoxication by consumption. They wanted to shield their children from this despair (Stiegler 2006). Symptoms of desire deficiency – passivity and isolation are almost opposite to attention deficit symptoms – weakening of concentration and hyperactivity.

¹ This question of the production of values, symbolic value and needs is discussed in detail, for example, by J. Baudrillard, criticizing the concept of natural needs of Marx. You can also turn to the analysis of the alienation of the ability of desire from Deleuze and Guattari in the *Anti-Oedipus*.

Nevertheless, the idea of applying the scheme of analysis of alienated labor to desire can be fruitful while studying attention deficit. If we extend the logic of Stiegler's 'hyper-industrialization' to the phenomenon of attention deficit, we can obtain the concept of 'attention industry'. The difference between the attention industry and the desire industry will be represented through the emergence of other techniques and methods of constructing the subjectivity of participants in social relations. Alienated or industrialized labor produces workers as goods, alienated desire produces consumers, alienated attention, in turn, produces users. Moreover, the following forms of alienation do not abolish the previous ones: the same participant of social relations can act either as a worker, or a consumer, or a user.

Platform Capitalism as an Industry of Attention

Thus, attention deficit might be represented as the next form of exploitation and alienation of a human being, which is inherent to contemporary high-tech capitalism. However, the concept of capitalism in general and modern capitalism in particular also needs to be defined. Within the framework of the given paper, we define it as 'platform capitalism' in the understanding of Nick Srnicek (Srnicek 2017).

'Platform capitalism' is characterized by the emergence of platforms as fundamentally new forms of capital. N. Srnicek calls platforms a special type of firms that can effectively monopolize, extract, analyze and use the growing volumes of recorded data (Srnicek 2017). Platforms are also intermediaries for other economic agents: these are digital infrastructures that allow two or more groups to interact (Srnicek 2017). But, due to its digital nature, platforms have the ability to record the slightest movements and transactions within themselves; that is, to produce data. Being accumulated in sufficient quantities, these data become capital and begin generating income. They can be used to gain a competitive advantage, attract advertisers, or modify the platform itself. This is, namely, the principle of operation of the 'gang of four' (GAFA – Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple) keeps to.

Access to the platform for users is always provided free of charge, or at a wittingly underestimated price, since the main source of income is the extraction and use of users' data. Therefore, the platform is designed to be as attractive and comfortable for using as possible. Apart from attracting users, the platform always has to deal with the task of retaining them. Therefore, they use attention management technologies. The main difference between modern attention management technologies is the focus on data collection.

Users only produce data if they perform certain actions: clicks, views, and so on. Accordingly, the goal of attention management technologies is to make the user watch, click and swipe by all possible means which we will thoroughly consider below.

Thus, the contradiction between medical (low ability to arbitrary concentration) and economic (limitation of attention as an economic resource) understanding of deficit might be overcome in the notion 'alienation of attention'. At the same time, such alienation is fulfilled in the conditions of modern capitalism, which we refer to as 'platform capitalism'. Alienation of attention is a consequence of the use of attention management technologies by platforms. Unlike narrative or ideology, which also deal with audience's attention, modern attention management technologies do not have the task of inciting action or thought. They also differ from the 'reality show', detailed by J. Baudrillard, because they have no task to arouse desires and emotions in us. Their main task is to instigate the users to perform actions on the platform (clicks, views, etc.), for what it is sufficient to simply keep their attention.

In our opinion, attention management on digital platforms has three clear directions: *game, content sharing, architecture or platform design*.

For example, various online tests always contain an element of the game: we have a problem, we are provided with a number solutions and at the end, we gain a certain result. At the same time, data collection is practically not hidden; we may even see some results of their processing. Almost every platform uses gaming techniques: Google allows us jumping over cactus for a dinosaur, social networks give points for filling in data about ourselves, Tinder is entirely built like roulette, etc. The main principle of any game as an attention management technology is a reward system, when for a certain combination of actions we are promised a reward in the form of points, a beautiful picture with jingle or any other attribute of the winner. These efforts taken by platform developers are aimed at one goal: to retain the users' attention, to further encourage them to produce data.

Another way to make us click the mouse is to share content. After the advent of WEB 2.0 Internet resources, everyone gained access to the global audience. From the passive mass consumer, the layman turned into the author of the content. This blurring of the boundaries between production and consumption of content was earlier interpreted in the direction of consumption (for example, by J. Baudrillard): a television show is when the mass looks at itself (Baudrillard 1994). Nowadays not only does the mass watch, but also records itself. The principle of content 'sharing' lies at the heart of social networks, video hosting and similar platforms: 'Tell your friends what is new with you', 'Learn what's new with your friends!', "Do not forget to assess and leave a comment!". Passivity and inter-passivity transforms into activity and inter-activity.

By platform design, we mean the very form of the platform, which is also aimed at retaining user's attention. Design is an interface that the user directly comes across with, that is, the external design of the platform, for example, the color and shape of the buttons, the design of the video sequence and so on. For example, Google spends a lot of resources on identifying the so-called 'color of money', the color of that cherished action button (Holsen 2009).

Despite the fact that a certain type of attention retention technologies is inherent to a particular type of platform; platforms normally try using the entire range of capabilities available. Social networks use gaming techniques, entertainment platforms, the media often offer to register and begin sharing content, and the design of all platforms is equally tailored to hold attention.

Thus, attention deficit can be considered as an industry of alienated attention, similar to alienated labor in Marxist theory or alienated desire in the theories of consumer society. With the alienation of labor, capital produces needs for public agents; its task is to create labor force, to induce people to work and activity as production of goods. With the alienation of desire, capital produces the needs of public agents; its task is to create consumer demand. In alienating attention, the task of capital is to produce users and hold their attention. The platform does not sell anything to users, but it sells users as data and audience. The platform does not produce anything, but collects data produced by us.

In all previous forms of alienation, the management of the attention of the others is also present in a hidden or an indirect form. So, for example, in order to induce the release of a product or to overthrow the political regime, it is necessary to attract public attention (design of posters and leaflets, slogans, manifestos, narratives, etc.), but attention alone is not enough – you need to encourage people to take particular actions. Attention is being alienated, but this happens indirectly during the alienation of labor. Also, with the alienation of desire, the final objective of the mechanisms of the consumer society (mass cinematography, reality shows, etc.) is to cause certain desire and perception in a person, resulting in consumption. The alienation of attention here occurs as a concomitant process. With the advent of platforms, it has become possible to capitalize on pure attention, without prompting production or consumption.

The theory of alienation, in our opinion, has an advantage over other theories and methods of analysis of attention deficit. For example, the theory of commodification of the audience, which D. Smythe creates (Smythe 1981), quite accurately describes the economic and technological processes, but overlooks the psychological or medical aspect of attention deficit. Also, the attention economy created by M. Goldhaber (Goldhaber 1997) and G. Franck (Franck 1999) ignores the consequences that occur with a person and her ability to concentrate when she commodifies attention. Understanding attention deficit as an alienation allows one to explain, on the one hand, the emergence and spread of such a medical diagnosis as ADHD, and on the other, the advent of the new forms of capital related to the distribution of users' attention.

Consequences of Alienation of Attention

The 'renaissance' of social, which we can observe in social theory today, owes to interactivity of social networking platforms. If in the second half of the 20th century, theorists considered 'de-realization' or 'de-composition' of society to be the main line in social philosophy, (Furs 2002, 16), today 'speculative realism' is

going from strength to strength. The main accusation among modern philosophers is the lack of 'reality' and 'actant nature' of objects.

The revival of the social is as well indicated by the radicalization and politicization of public space. Syrian conflict, American wall, struggle for the rights of the feminist movement and sexual minorities etc. We are not talking about the said phenomena themselves or about similar events had happened before, but rather about the way in which they are discussed in society and what political effect they produce. As we have written above, the modern 'mass' has ceased being a 'silent majority', social networks have found a way to turn passive consumers into active users (Lovink 2012). Political identity, of course, did not supplant consumer identity, but once again became one of the most important mechanisms of socialization and social life in general. Although, as Lovink observes, the question of whether 'friends' from FB can turn into 'comrades' remains open (Lovink 2012).

In his essays 'Treatise on Comment Culture', and 'Chronic Narcissus: Minimal Selfie Technology' he thoroughly analyzes in the mechanisms of the production of social in social networks. "... Desperate attempt to be heard, to achieve any impact..." (Lovink 2012) : this, according to Lovink, is the main goal of users of social networks. In the era of the alienation of labor, manufacturing was the function of social differences production, in the era of the alienation of desire consumption played this role, and, in turn, in the era of the alienation of attention, attention and influence perform this function. A new term – influencer has appeared nowadays for making reference to the elite. Status in society is presently determined neither by the number of material goods produced nor by the number of acquired ones, but by the number of likes and followers.

The aspiration to get as much attention as possible from the other users is as well reflected on the psychological level. However, the spread of ADHD, in our opinion, is associated not only with the constant pressure of social networks. The Internet design industry is as well not a leading factor when we talk about shaping the prerequisites for ADHD. In our opinion, the main cause of the ADHD epidemic is the spread of the attention-keeping gaming techniques we have considered above.

A fascination with computer games a decade ago had been stigmatized and considered by psychologists as an addiction with the aim to escape from a traumatic reality. Today, games are integrated into almost all types of communication and social practices: lending, retirement benefits, social networks, individual purchases, education, and so on. Everywhere we are asked to have an account, being motivated with balls and special status, etc.

Here we do not consider the game foundation of culture or the game family nature of a person, but game techniques for attention management. The main feature of these techniques is an externally posed task, the number of solutions for which is externally limited by special rules. And when solving this game problem, the participant achieves a special status of the winner, member of the

community, etc. In the framework of our study, such important components of the game as the plot, role, competition, etc. are not critical.

The crucial moment of the game as a technique for attention maintaining is the reward for a user. A player's reward is usually realized procedurally in the form of a demonstration of some bright event (fireworks, fanfares, colorful action scenes) or attributively through 'icons' next to the username, special clothing items of the player's 'avatar', 'ranks' and other distinctive attributes, emphasizing his special status.

It might seem that such techniques have been used for a quite long time and in almost the entire service sector: accumulative systems of discounts and bonuses, lotteries and sweepstakes, customer ranking (silver, gold, platinum), time-limited validity of an advertising campaign, etc. Also, similar techniques are used in labor or educational activities. However, only the emergence of platforms unleashed the full potential of gaming techniques. The ultimate goal of gaming attention management techniques is only the game process itself, since it is enough for the user to produce the data the platforms need.

The game tries to do everything so that the player does not have time to get bored. At the slightest difficulty in solving the problem, a tooltip helps us, highlighting the desired button, etc. In case of a long absence of the user on the platform, notifications and invitations are being sent to him, special return conditions are offered in the form of game bonuses, etc.

ADHD is a syndrome of a human being, who was brought up by platforms that use gaming attention management technologies. The main feature of the game is a limited set of solutions to the main conflict or problem; these solutions are always open and already offered to the player as ready-made ones. Also, the problem itself has always been posed from the outside by the organizer of the game. Accordingly, the skills of analyzing a situation, finding solutions and posing a problem for such a person are atrophied to a certain degree. In the absence of a reward system, to which a person became used to by playing games, his interest cannot be constant and arbitrary. The ability to self-focus is practically absent. Hyperactivity also stems from here, as a constant need for reward and approval, which a person has become accustomed to through gaming. This need for social recognition is being also fueled by social networks, as we discussed above.

An example of the action of ADHD is not a married couple trying to commit suicide and poison their children because despair and absence of love, but the generation of people who have spent last 10 of 15 years of their lives on various platforms for several hours a day. However, they cannot deal with any operation that requires more than two consecutive clicks on the 'unlit' buttons (e-mail, Excel, etc.).

The desire for recognition and attention has always been inherent to humanity (just think of Herostratus), but nowadays, attention retention has become an entire industry. Not only gamblers, but also victims of mass shootings

by students in schools, victims of many terrorist attacks, and those, who suffered from the participation in hazardous 'challenges' might be considered as its victims.

Conclusion

The main conclusion that is to be made as a result of the research carried out, is that attention can claim to be the central category of social philosophy. It can be represented as some superindividual active substance or fundamental human activity (by analogy with Hegel's 'Geist', Marx's 'Arbeit' and 'Wille' of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche), around the distribution and alienation of which social relations and man as the agent of these relations emerge.

It is noteworthy that the previous tradition tends to regard desire as such a category. This is, for example, the basic premise of Freudian Marxism, taken very broadly as a socio-philosophical mainstream. We have made an attempt to show the historical limitations of this approach and its inapplicability to certain phenomena of modern life (political populism, activism, ADHD and so on).

However, within the framework of the given paper we were interested not so much in metaphysics but in the consideration of historical-specific mechanisms of alienation of attention that are characteristic to the current stage of platform capitalism instead. We have tried to present the alienation of attention as a kind of industry characterized by special forms of social relations and human subjectivity. In our opinion, the basic technologies of social and human production nowadays are: content sharing, game and design of Internet platforms.

Initially, the article was conceived as an attempt to build a socio-philosophical justification for a number of concepts that have a common position about attention deficit (economics of attention, psychology of attention, attention management). Ontological and metaphysical justification of the category of attention may become a further direction for scientific research.

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Samson Liberman

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