

# In the Infinite Loop

By Giulia Bernardi  
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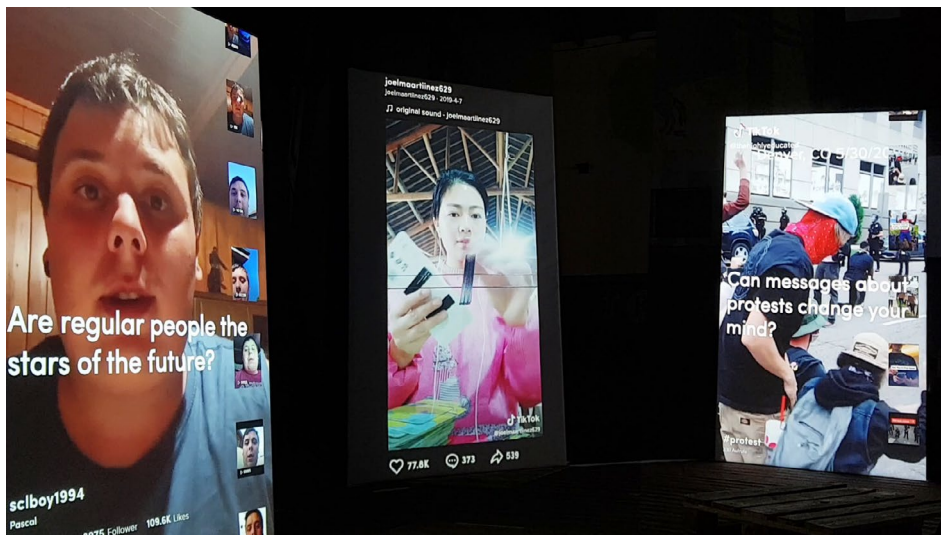
Social networking services cost nothing at first sight. However, they trade on our clicks, likes and shares: in a word, on our attention. How can we avoid being sucked in? A conversation with Safa Ghnaim from Tactical Tech.



Before we are properly awake, our hand reaches for the smartphone and starts scrolling through the morning's social media feed. Although there is no smartphone to be seen in this image, the gesture is easy to decode. Artist Aram Bartholl's work examines our use of social media. In *Isolated on White* he makes use of a typical stock photograph – a pre-produced picture of the kind that may be used in advertising, for example. Image: Aram Bartholl, *Isolated on White*, 2019, digital print on canvas, 140 × 150 cm, © Aram Bartholl, Courtesy of Roehrs & Boetsch and the artist

Let's attempt a thought experiment: it's early in the morning and you're still in bed. You summon up the energy to reach for your smartphone to finally shut off the piercing sound of the alarm clock. You rub the sleep from your eyes and because you already have the phone in your hand, you scroll through your Instagram feed. Which of us is not familiar with this scenario?

On average we spend three hours a day on our smartphones, with more than half the interactions lasting less than two minutes. The upshot is that we often reach for our phones out of habit without being consciously aware of it.[1] Social networking services play a major role here. According to the JAMES study, 98 per cent of adolescents aged between 12 and 19 are registered on at least one platform (Instagram, Snapchat or TikTok, for example).[2] This begs the question of how Instagram and Co manage to keep our eyes glued to the screen without us even noticing the time passing or the way digital life impacts our mental health on a day-to-day basis? What part do images play in this?

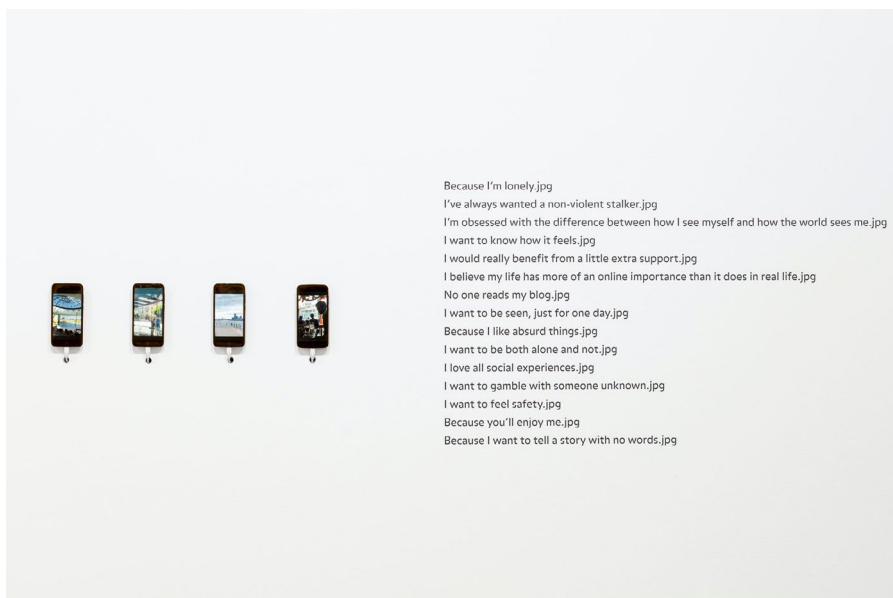


In the installation *Unfiltered*, artist Marc Lee deals with the deluge of information that we are now swamped with on social media. Millions of people share and watch short videos or slideshows on TikTok, one of the most popular apps around. Lee's work questions the role and value that these images have in society: 'Can messages about protests change your mind?' This is one of the texts that appears in the installation inserted above the short videos, encouraging viewers to reflect on the issue of social responsibility. Image: Marc Lee, *Unfiltered – TikTok and the Emerging Face of Culture*, 2020–, web-based multichannel installation, variable size, *Window of the World*, installation view at Reithalle St. Moritz, 2020, © Marc Lee

The new features being incorporated into the apps we use is changing our relationship with photography. Nowadays, when we take a picture with our smartphone, we're not necessarily out to capture a particular moment – the focus is more on communicating with other users. The networked image is shared and liked and keeps circulating as a result. And the more it circulates, the more attention it receives. These days this can be measured, with the value of an image determined by the currency that is now banked as clicks, likes and shares.

Social networking sites like Instagram and TikTok are designed so as to maximise the incentive to stay and interact on the site: notifications constantly flash up to say that our friends have posted a new story or that our own post has been liked. The more time we spend on these platforms, the more data we provide to tech companies like Google, Apple and Facebook. Every time we click on something or post a like, we reveal more about our interests, relationships and habits. Apple and Co can use this data to place carefully personalised advertisements – i.e. ads that have been explicitly tailored to appeal to us. They sell the space for these ads to companies, who advertise their products there and as a result earn revenue from us as users.

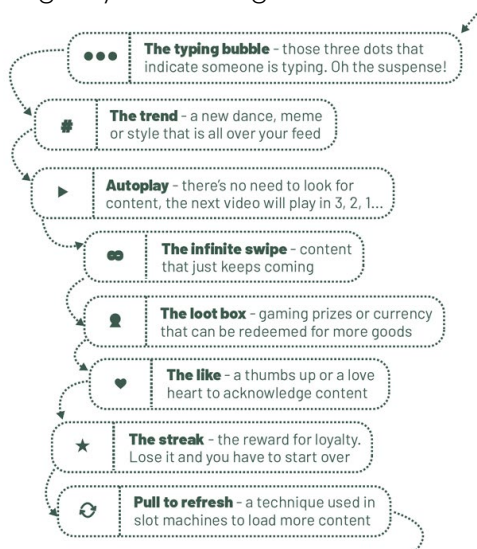
Influencer marketing provides further evidence that clicks have developed into the new currency: social media sites have helped this form of marketing to evolve into a new strategic tool in brand communication. The more reach influencers have, the more often they are approached by companies to promote their products. This can be via 'tap tags', which can be put on a picture on Instagram and spark user interest. With one click, users are directed straight to the profiles of companies who want to acquire them as customers. This example shows that the price we pay for these supposedly free platforms is levied in the form of our attention and our data. There is nothing new about a business model focused on attention. The term 'attention economy' emerged over 20 years ago – before social media began to play havoc with our everyday lives in the noughties. Even at that time, attention was regarded as being in short supply and was thus a sought-after commodity, given that the amount of input we receive often exceeds our individual capacity to process it.[3]



Social networking services can induce us to strive for the attention of other users. This is the theme that artist Lauren Lee McCarthy focuses on in her performance *Follower*, which centres on digital ‘following’ transposed into physical space. The service made use of an app that allowed participants to book someone to follow them around for a day. Here you can see people’s answers to the question ‘Why do you want to be followed?’ Image: Lauren Lee McCarthy, *Follower*, 2016–, SITUATION #128, SITUATIONS/Follower, installation view at Fotomuseum Winterthur, 2018 © Philipp Ottendörfer, Courtesy of the artist

Based on the logic of the attention economy we are not only enticed into becoming consumers but also required to become producers in its interests. If you are active online, you need to share pictures regularly if you are to remain visible to other users – and grab their attention. As a result, people spend a great deal of time promoting themselves and this activity also turns into a leisure pursuit.[4]

The question we now face is this: How can we reclaim our attention? How can we prevent it from being instrumentalised by tech companies? We’ll find out more about this from Safa Ghnaim. She is associate programme director and project lead with Tactical Tech, an organisation that studies the effects of technology on society and develops strategies to support a balanced, sustainable approach to it (see <https://tacticaltech.org/>). Safa is responsible for the Data Detox Kit, a miscellany of tips and instructions designed to help us improve our digital habits, including ways of dealing with our own data and fake news on the internet.[5]



The *Data Detox Kit* helps users deal with their own data so as to improve their sense of well-being. Simple graphics and suggestions are provided to assist people in identifying the design tricks specifically used in the apps to attract their attention. Image detail: ‘How to Survive a Break-Up...with Your Phone’, *Data Detox Kit*, Tactical Tech, 2021; source:

[https://cdn.ttc.io/s/datadetoxkit.org/youth/Data-Detox-x-Youth\\_EN.pdf](https://cdn.ttc.io/s/datadetoxkit.org/youth/Data-Detox-x-Youth_EN.pdf)

### **Safa, what interests you about the discussion around the attention economy?**

What I find most compelling about the so-called attention economy, and what motivates me to work hard in the area of digital and media literacy, is the fact that our phones are designed to grab our attention. Truly every facet and feature – from the notifications to button placements, colours and sizes – every light flicker, buzz and beep has been carefully crafted by teams of developers, designers and psychologists in order to keep us hooked and coming back for more. But when I have discussions with *Data Detox Kit* readers, they tend to blame themselves or express guilt for their tech habits, when the truth is that we are responding to technology in the exact way it is intended to affect us.

### **How does the attention economy influence our gaze and the way we look at images?**

What first comes to my mind is how the attention economy trains us. When we're trained to watch 5-second clips of videos, for example, what happens when we try to concentrate on something longer and deeper that is more complex or engaging? Even a documentary video may become harder for us to focus on without touching our phones or otherwise multi-tasking. I don't have answers, but I wonder in the long term how that may affect us – or, more importantly, young people, whose brains are still developing.



Social networking has accustomed us to ephemeral content. Does this change the way we see images? Indre Urbonaite used eye-tracking software to record the eye movements of viewers as they looked, for example, at a picture of a flamingo walking in water. In this way, the artist references the companies that use this particular software to analyse our behaviour for advertising purposes. Image: Indre Urbonaite, *Flamingos, Moonrise and the Slippers*, 2018, SITUATION #157, SITUATIONS/To look is to labor, installation view at Fotomuseum Winterthur, 2018 © Philipp Ottendörfer, Courtesy of the artist

### **What are the negative consequences for our psychological or even physical well-being?**

There are numerous reports about the negative consequences of the attention economy. Most recently, *The Wall Street Journal* released an investigative reporting series called [The Facebook Files](#), and one of the reports was called 'Facebook knows Instagram is toxic for teen girls, company documents show', drawing on information from whistle-blower Frances Haugen. The reality is that the platforms themselves, along with mental health experts, advocacy groups, and other specialists, have conducted large-scale studies and know the negative consequences of these tools. Whether it be people associating the like counter with their self-worth, beauty filters warping people's sense of reality or the similarity between the gesture required to refresh a page on a touchscreen and the action of using a slot machine (pull and release), we are beyond the point of speculation and have concrete research to back up these claims.





Tech companies like Facebook make a profit off our attention and are prepared to tolerate hate speech and misinformation that may put their users in danger – something that Frances Haugen, a former Facebook employee, has spoken about. In this interview with CBS News, she talks about how the company is aware of the devastating consequences of the algorithm but is unwilling to take a financial hit to make it safer, refusing to risk users spending less time online and consequently clicking on fewer ads. Screenshot tweet: 60 Minutes, *Facebook whistleblower talks Facebook algorithms*, Twitter, 04.10.2021; source: <https://twitter.com/60Minutes/status/14444810664502079491>

**Can we find a way to interact with the world without succumbing to the attention economy all the time? Are there ways to tackle or even change this system?**

Yes. It requires mindfulness and practice, just like any other habit we build. Recently, I've gotten myself out of rabbit holes by turning off notifications, removing apps from the home screen of my phone (to reduce temptation) and uninstalling some apps altogether when that's not enough (sometimes for 3–6 weeks at a time, sometimes permanently). But one key is to consider what I am getting in that app and whether there's another way I can fulfil that need. For example, if my whole social life is on Instagram, suddenly deleting the app may just isolate me from my social circle, and nobody wants that! Try setting up a system so that you first communicate your wishes to your friends, then move your priority conversations to a private chat app (like Signal or Wire): over time, you may then lose your reliance on Instagram to meet all your social needs. Feeling guilty isn't helpful, but looking realistically at what we get from these apps is.



Nadja Buttendorf makes ironic (mis)use of the smartphone as a kind of 'high-tech self-care'. In her tutorial *#HotPhones – high-tech self-care* the phone is transformed from an object that exhausts us both physically and psychologically into a wellness tool that provides warmth and relaxation and helps to recharge our batteries. Detox done differently! Image: Nadja Buttendorf, *#HotPhones – high-tech self-care*, 2018, tutorial/workshop, *Direct Contact*, installation view at D21 Kunstraum Leipzig, 2018 © Nadja Buttendorf

## **Through social media we follow other people, but we are being simultaneously surveilled by companies. What's your view of surveillance as part of the attention economy?**

Although some of the threats are similar, individual threats will vary depending on who we are and where we live, our passports, our names, the colour of our skin, and the contexts in which we navigate the internet. We see it all the time: information being harvested from social media or insecure chat apps and being used to influence us via these same platforms or affecting our very real offline lives: loan applications, healthcare coverage, political elections, how difficult it is for us to cross borders. And we're not just talking about extremes here: groups who engage in digital listening also pay attention to subtle details – such as how many exclamation marks you use, whether you like or share angry or sad messages – and generally try to determine what makes you, or people like you, tick.

## **How would you like social media platforms to change when you think about the future?**

I want social media platforms to recognise their responsibility and take concrete steps to consult with civil society, human rights organisations, psychologists and developmental specialists, not only to understand the real problems that their tech is magnifying within societies but also find actionable ways to move forward for the greater good. The current business model isn't working for humanity. I could list the exact changes I'd like to see as a technology user, but I think what's more important is a more systemic meta-level review of advertisements, algorithms and facial recognition systems, to name a few. It's not only about how they are intended to be used but also how they are actually used in the world and are actively harming people and whole societies. But don't take my word on it, there are so many experts and researchers exploring and exposing these issues, it is absolutely no secret. The ball is in their court.

## **If social media platforms need to change, then why is it useful to have a critical understanding of what the attention economy is?**

Knowledge is power: when you have even a basic understanding of the attention economy, this information may encourage you to make different decisions. For example, if you find yourself falling down YouTube or Instagram rabbit holes, just knowing it's not your fault and that they're designed to keep your attention can help you react differently. Perhaps you'll turn off notifications, give yourself a time limit on the apps or uninstall them from your phone completely. You can better navigate and make adjustments that you find suitable for your needs and values.

### References

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[4] Jenny Odell, 'Can We Slow Down Time in the Age of TikTok?', *New York Times*, 31 August 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/31/opinion/sunday/students-time.html>

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