

# Afterword: Shifting the Terms of the Debate

Science, Technology, & Human Values

I-6

© The Author(s) 2021

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/01622439211059563

[journals.sagepub.com/home/sth](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/sth)



**Natasha D. Schüll<sup>1</sup>** 

## Abstract

The afterword discusses how this special issue's articles work from different angles to unsettle the precepts of “attentional sovereignty” — the socially, politically, and economically valorized virtue that anchors most discussions over attention in its contemporary technological predicament. Whether the attentional sovereign appears in its liberal humanist or its neoliberal behavioral economic guise, sovereignty is valorized and considered under threat. By revealing the contemporary and historical backstories to our investment in this notion, these articles shift the terms of the debate around the attention crisis and clear space for thinking anew about the possibilities and limits of attention today.

## Keywords

attention, politics, power, governance, neoliberalism, consumer sovereignty

The introduction to this special issue well delineates the terms of the “digital attention crisis” (Pedersen, Albris, and Seaver 2021; Seaver

---

<sup>1</sup>Media, Culture, and Communication, New York University, New York, NY, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Natasha D. Schüll, Media, Culture, and Communication, New York University, 239 greene st., New York, NY 10003, USA.

Email: [natasha.schull@nyu.edu](mailto:natasha.schull@nyu.edu)

2019) that much of the Western world believes itself to be in. Cultural critics, journalists, and politicians alike point to the ways that myriad new technologies—chief among them mobile telephony, email and texting, social media, streaming entertainment, and smartphone apps—have sought to monetize our attention by attracting it, hooking it, and holding it. A social consensus has formed: although digital technologies might extend human communicational range, expand experiential horizons, and afford new modes of self-expression, their intensified temporalities and relentless demands for sensory and cognitive engagement pull us into coercive loops of escape and self-forgetting and exhaust our capacity to resist. At stake are a reduced human agency, an increased manipulation of human psyches and behaviors, and a threat to human dignity and the capacity for self-governance.

The specter of “attentional serfdom” (Williams 2018) has spurred investment in what Seaver (2019), an organizer of the conference panel that sparked this special issue, terms “attentional sovereignty” (Burkeman 2015), the power “to decide what to attend to and when.” The attentional sovereign, whom Seaver proposes we call *Homo attentus*, is a “standard liberal Enlightenment humanist subject” who is alive and well in the “tech humanist” (Tarnoff and Weigel 2018) backlash to the attention economy. Here, I’d like to draw out the deeply economic register of attentional sovereignty, understood as a specific function of “consumer sovereignty,” the economics-derived formula for individual comportment at the heart of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is “a political rationality that figures citizens exhaustively as rational economic actors in every sphere of life,” writes Brown (2006, 294)—as “always, only, and everywhere *homo oeconomicus*” (p. 30). If early liberal thinking invested citizens with the inviolable rights of individual sovereignty such as bodily integrity, self-ownership, self-determination, and human dignity, the rise of neoliberal thinking places highest value on individual preferences and the agency of marketplace choice. The regime of “everyday liberalism” (Mirowski 2013) reduces all forms of experience—tastes, habits, values, and beliefs—to market preferences; there is a collapsing of citizen into economic subject.

Coined in 1931 by the classic liberal economist William Harold Hutt (1940), consumer sovereignty refers to “the controlling power exercised by free individuals, in choosing between ends, over the custodians of the community’s resources” (p. 66), by which he meant the power that individuals had, in a free market society, to determine what goods and services were produced and what they cost. As the idea was taken up and elaborated by neoliberal thinkers such as Hutt’s mentor, Friedrich Hayek, consumer

sovereignty is not simply an *ideal* of consumer behavior reflected in collective, market-shaping behavior but, rather, something *actual* and attainable by individuals. In neoliberalism, the quasi-mystical force of Adam Smith's invisible hand as a democratic expression of aggregate citizen preference gave way to the vesting of discrete consumers with the power to rule over their own preferences, desires, and choices as "self-controlling selves" (Rose 1999) who possess an innate capacity to act rationally—that is, to calculate choices and compete in the marketplace so as to maximize their life chances. Even behavioral economists whose work would seem to directly challenge this idea invest in the notion that within each of us lies the *potential* for self-sovereignty, however embattled in may be in the face of internal biases and tendencies and external persuasive forces that skew choices in seemingly irrational directions (Schüll and Zaloom 2011).

Attention, which has become "synonymous with willpower, perception, valorization, or care" (Pedersen, Albris, and Seaver 2021), is a flashpoint for the threat that digital devices pose to consumer sovereignty. Public discourse around attention is, by and large, a debate over how to best protect, strengthen, and promote this capacity—or whether we need to. Indeed, even those who argue that there is no attention crisis do so on the grounds that our sovereignty remains intact; that we are not, in fact, acting as serfs.

What if we were to have a conversation around attention today that did not reinscribe the entrenched opposition between sovereignty and serfdom? The articles in this special issue on Shifting Attention take us in that direction by revealing the contemporary and historical backstories to our investment in these notions, in effect shifting the terms of the debate.

Valasek, in the issue's first piece, shifts our understanding of "nudge," a key term in contemporary understandings of the persuasive forces exerted upon us by the attention economy. Underpinning the idea of nudge, he shows, are long-standing conceptual templates of the human subject as containing competing neural components, one set embodying the capacity for sovereignty and the other serfdom: executive versus instinctual, deliberate versus automatic, focused versus distracted, and civilized versus savage (see also Schüll and Zaloom 2011). This antagonistic, deeply racialized dynamic of mastery and servitude continues to undergird contemporary understandings of attention and the sovereignty of liberal subjects.

Semel brings us into the present via a firsthand account of ongoing experiments in machine "listening" for the detection of shifting mental states in individuals with psychiatric disorders. If Valasek's genealogy of nudge troubled attentional sovereignty by complicating our understanding

of executive self-control, Semel's ethnographic foray troubles attentional sovereignty by displacing human agency in projects of attentive care. The practice of "listening like a computer," she describes, entails occupying a "selectively attentive machinic subject position" (PG) so as to detect markers of psychic states that intentional human listening tends to miss. Inattention, typically counterposed against projects of care, here becomes a virtue.

Bruder further destabilizes the foundations of attentional sovereignty by focusing on a shift in cognitive-neuroscientific and machine-learning conceptualizations of rest and mind-wandering. Formerly regarded as states of nonsovereignty without value, they are now seen as reliably active phenomena during which the brain processes information so as to remediate cognitive overload and ensure resilience and flexibility. He gives the example of corporate recruitment of mindfulness techniques to "work fitness" programs. In effect, inattention is recast—and valorized—as "a form of subconscious information processing" (PG) rather than pathological introversion. Yet even as attentional sovereignty subsumes nondirective thinking and renders rest active, Bruder detects the replication of the sovereignty-serfdom opposition within the concept of mind-wandering itself, in that it is "considered a source of pathology if it cannot be controlled, but can be beneficial and productive if it is "goal-directed" (PG).

Jablonsky extends the conversation on attention's beneficial and pathological guises in her ethnographic examination of the design and use of meditation apps, mapping the muddy switchbacks that connect digital technologies of health to those of harm and showing how difficult it is to cleanly distinguish the two. "Ironically," she writes, "the very same advertisements that help Headspace and Calm garner attention for their companies capitalize on public concern about the negative effects of digital connection on attention and wellbeing" (PG). Attention-cultivating meditation apps also reward constant user engagement in the same manner as the more problematic, "addictive" devices whose effects they purport to remedy. In keeping with the media industry's long-standing attitude that human attention is "malleable, compulsive, and distracted," meditation apps promise that "digital 'addiction' can be shaped into a mindful form of attention." The idea that technology design can buttress self-control engages a different model of the consumer than that of the sovereign self whose full agency drives its desires and behavior.

Beattie's close examination of the well-being app *Space* likewise reveals persuasive technologists' aspirations to what we might call "sovereignty by design." In subtle distinction to the overtly manipulative design techniques

used to poach attention for profit, design techniques for protecting attention—or “defending cognitive liberty,” as one developer phrases it—seek to steer users at a distance by mobilizing, motivating, and nudging their behavior (introducing delays between stimulus and response to discourage habitual smartphone scrolling, for instance), addressing subjects who are more active than passive, more sovereign than serf. Yet the therapeutic goal of “fixing users” implicitly diminishes their capacity for self-directed ethical virtue; it is unclear whether the app is “predominantly shaping the user subject [ . . . ] or if users constitute themselves” (PG), bringing us full circle back to the ambiguous formula for “libertarian paternalism” behind the theory of nudge discussed in the issue’s first article.

While this rich dossier of articles loosens our hold on key terms of the contemporary debate over the attention crisis, they do not leave us empty handed. That is to say, their analyses are not conducted in the mode of gratuitous destabilization of attentional sovereignty but, rather, its productive dereification. By showing us the ambivalence, fissures, and tensions that riddle the conceptual infrastructure underlying the contemporary attention debate, they suggest that the “attentional regime” (Citton 2017) is not yet settled and clear space for thinking otherwise about the limits and possibilities of attention today.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **ORCID iD**

Natasha D. Schüll  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5608-8986>

### **References**

- Brown, Wendy. 2006. “American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-democratization.” *Political Theory* 34 (6): 690-714.
- Burkeman, Oliver. 2015. “Commercial Interests Exploit a Limited Resource on an Industrial Scale: Your Attention.” *The Guardian*, April 1. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/oliver-burkeman-column/2015/apr/01/commercial-interests-exploit-limited-resource-attention>

- Citton, Yves. 2017. *The Ecology of Attention*. Translated by B. Norman. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Hutt, William. 1940. "The Concept of Consumers' Sovereignty." *Economic Journal* 50 (197): 66-77.
- Mirowski, Philip. 2013. *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*. New York: Verso.
- Pedersen, M. A., K. Albris, and N. Seaver. 2021. "The Political Economy of Attention." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 50 (1): 309-25.
- Rose, Nikolas. 1999. *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Schüll, Natasha, and C. Zaloom. 2011. "The Shortsighted Brain: Neuroeconomics and the Governance of Choice in Time." *Social Studies of Science* 41 (4): 515-38.
- Seaver, Nick. 2019. "Homo Attentus: Technological Backlash and the Attentional Subject." Presented at the Society for Social Studies of Science Annual Meeting, New Orleans, LA.
- Tarnoff, Ben, and Moira Weigel. 2018. "Why Silicon Valley Can't Fix Itself." *The Guardian*, May 3. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/may/03/why-silicon-valley-cant-fix-itself-tech-humanism>
- Williams, James. 2018. *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

## Author Biography

**Natasha D. Schüll** is an associate professor in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication. Her 2012 book, *Addiction by Design*, examines the relationship between gambling addiction and casino industry design tactics, showing how architectural, atmospheric, and algorithmic-computational techniques are marshalled to suspend—and monetize—gamblers' attention. Her current book project, "Keeping Track," explores the rise of sensor-based, digital technologies of the self and the new modes of introspection, self-care, and self-regulation they offer.