

The Commodification of Attention: Digital Algorithms, Quotidian Identity, and Social Mobilization in Contemporary India

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed human attention into a valuable economic resource. Digital platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and X employ algorithmic systems to capture, retain, and monetize user engagement, significantly influencing identity formation and social mobilization in contemporary India. This study examines the commodification of attention through a **historical methodology**, using both **primary data** (digital platforms, policy documents, and public campaigns) and **secondary data** (books, journal articles, government reports, and institutional publications). It argues that while algorithmic platforms have expanded information access and civic participation, they have also intensified surveillance, behavioural manipulation, and political polarization, necessitating ethical governance and greater digital literacy.

Keywords : Attention Economy; Digital Algorithms; Platform Capitalism; Quotidian Identity; Social Mobilization; Surveillance Capitalism; Contemporary India.

Introduction

"A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention." — **Herbert A. Simon (1971)**

Herbert Simon's observation, made more than five decades ago, has become increasingly relevant in the contemporary digital landscape. The twenty-first century is characterized not by a scarcity of information but by an unprecedented abundance of it. Every second, millions of videos are viewed, messages exchanged, and social media posts uploaded across digital platforms. Amid this overwhelming information environment, **human attention has emerged as the most valuable and contested resource**, giving rise to what scholars now describe as the *attention economy*.

India exemplifies the rise of the attention economy, with over **900 million internet users** and one of the world's largest smartphone populations. The expansion of affordable mobile internet, particularly after **Reliance Jio's launch in 2016**, has transformed communication, commerce, education, and political participation. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Facebook now shape not only entertainment but also public opinion and electoral discourse. Unlike traditional media, these platforms use algorithms to collect behavioural data, personalize content, and maximize user engagement. In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019), **Shoshana Zuboff** argues that digital corporations convert human experiences into behavioural data for commercial profit. Similarly, **Tim Wu**, in *The Attention Merchants* (2016), describes attention as a commodity fiercely contested by digital corporations. This study examines how algorithmic systems shape identity, influence social mobilization, and simultaneously expand democratic participation while raising concerns over surveillance, misinformation, behavioural manipulation, and digital inequality.

Meaning and Concept of the Attention Economy

The Attention Economy is an idea that was first talked about by Herbert A. Simon, a very smart man who won a Nobel prize back in 1971. He said that when there is a lot of information around peoples attention becomes very important and hard to get.

Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck took this idea further in their book *The Attention Economy*, which was published in 2001. They said that attention is like a resource that companies want to get from people because people can only focus on a few things at a time.

Nowadays with the internet and social media the Attention Economy is not about managing information it is also about making money from what people do online. Tim Wu wrote a book called *The Attention Merchants* in 2016, where he explained how websites and apps use algorithms to keep people looking at their screens and clicking on ads. Shoshana Zuboff also wrote a book, called *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* in 2019, where she said that when people are online they are creating data that companies can use to make money.

In India today the Attention Economy is affecting things, like politics and what people buy and even how people think about themselves and interact with each other. Every time someone clicks on something or searches, for something it creates data, which makes the Attention Economy very powerful and important. The Attention Economy is making attention into something that is very valuable like a commodity that can be bought and sold.

Theoretical Framework

The Concept of the Attention Economy

This study is based on four ideas that work together. Herbert Simons idea of the Attention Economy says that attention is a resource in a world with a lot of information. This is why digital platforms try to get users to engage with them. Shoshana Zuboffs book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* says that platforms make money by collecting data on what users do and using it to predict what they will do next. Nick Srniceks *Platform Capitalism* says that digital platforms are like systems that make money by collecting user data. José van Dijck, Thomas Poell and Martijn de Waals book, *The Platform Society* explains how platforms affect how people interact with each other form their identities and participate in democracy. It also provides a framework for understanding how attention is used to make money in India today.

The Digital World in India Today

India has become one of the digital societies in the world. This is because of the growth of the internet, affordable smartphones and cheap mobile data. When Reliance Jio was launched in 2016 it made connectivity much faster changing how people communicate do business learn and participate in politics. According to DataReportal India now has over 900 million internet users and than 500 million social media users making it one of the biggest digital markets in the world. Platforms like YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook and X are now a part of daily life. Government initiatives like Digital India, BharatNet and digital payment systems have also helped more people get online. At the time algorithms that use artificial intelligence to recommend content based on user behavior are becoming more common. As José van Dijck says, digital platforms are now like systems that shape how people communicate form public opinion and participate in civic life. As a result algorithms have become very powerful in controlling what information people see. They are changing Indias social, cultural and political landscape.

The Value of Human Attention

The feature of the digital economy today is that human attention has become a product that can be bought and sold. Unlike industries that make physical goods digital platforms make money by keeping users engaged for as long as possible. Every time a user clicks, scrolls, pauses, likes, comments or shares something it creates data that can be used to sell targeted advertising and predict user behavior. Tim Wu says in his book, *The Attention Merchants* that companies no longer just compete for customers money but for their attention. Digital platforms use techniques to keep users engaged, such as infinite scrolling, autoplay videos, personalized notifications and algorithmic recommendations. These features are designed to make users spend time on the platform and to make it hard for them to stop.

This is not about advertising. Shoshana Zuboff talks about the concept of surplus which refers to the large amounts of personal data that are collected from users daily online activities. This data is analyzed using intelligence to predict what users will do next recommend content and influence their decisions. So users are. The producers of this data and the products that are being sold in the digital advertising market.

India is a place for this economic model to work. The country has a population, cheap internet and a growing creator economy, which means that attention can be directly turned into money. Influencers, digital marketers, political consultants, news organizations and e-commerce companies are all competing in the marketplace, where what gets seen is determined by how much users engage with it not by how good it is.

The effects of this go beyond economics. When attention becomes a product people are shown content that is designed to get a reaction than to inform them. Outrage, controversy and fear often get attention because they make people interact more. As a result digital platforms are shaping not the economy but also how people see the world. The Attention Economy is changing the way people think and behave. It is having a big impact, on India.

Digital Algorithms and Quotidian Identity

The way companies sell our attention has an impact on how we see ourselves interact with others and find our place in the world. Digital algorithms do not just suggest things to us they actually help shape what we want how we live, what we think about politics and who we are friends with.

Nowadays we show who we are on the internet and being seen by others is a kind of status symbol. Social media platforms reward us for posting things that get a lot of likes and comments so we change what we do to fit what the algorithms like. This means that who we are is based on how we act and the data we give to the internet.

We. Share almost everything we do. What we eat, where we travel, what we study, how we exercise or what causes we care about. With the people we think are watching us online.

José van Dijck wrote in *The Platform Society* that the way social media platforms are built changes how we interact with each other by using algorithms to decide what we see. Of being free to be ourselves the algorithms choose what to show us and some people get more attention than others. Being visible is not fair it is decided by the algorithms.

A study called "They Have My Kundli" found that people in India think the algorithms on Instagram know a lot about them like what they like and how they feel. People trust the suggestions they get. They also worry about being watched and losing their privacy. This shows that people know their online identities are always being watched and used to sell things.

Algorithms also make it so we only see things that we already agree with which makes us stronger in our beliefs. We do not get to see other viewpoints. This affects what we think about politics, religion what we buy and our culture. For people getting likes and followers on the internet is a big part of how they feel about themselves and how others see them so their identity is tied to what happens online.

So in India today who we are is not about our family, school or community it is also about how we act online where the algorithms decide what is important and being popular is more important, than being real.

Social Mobilization in Contemporary India

While digital algorithms commercialize attention, they also possess significant capacity to facilitate **social mobilization**. Social media platforms have transformed how citizens organize collective action, disseminate information, and participate in public discourse. Movements that once depended upon physical networks now rapidly emerge through hashtags, livestreams, viral videos, and online communities.

India has witnessed numerous examples of digitally mediated mobilization. The **Anti-CAA protests (2019–20)**, the **Farmers' Movement (2020–21)**, nationwide COVID-19 relief initiatives, and various environmental campaigns extensively utilized social media platforms to coordinate activities, circulate information, mobilize volunteers, and attract international attention. Digital platforms lowered barriers to participation, enabling geographically dispersed individuals to contribute to collective causes in real time.

However, algorithmic amplification is inherently selective. In *Twitter and Tear Gas* (2017), **Zeynep Tufekci** argues that while social media accelerates mobilization, it also creates vulnerabilities through misinformation, performative activism, and dependence upon platform algorithms. Content achieving high engagement is often amplified irrespective of its factual accuracy, enabling misinformation and emotionally charged narratives to spread rapidly.

The 2026 study **Politics in the Era of the Attention Economy and Platformisation** further demonstrates that political communication in India increasingly operates within an attention-driven ecosystem where visibility depends upon algorithmic engagement rather than democratic deliberation. Political parties,

influencers, and advocacy organizations strategically employ short-form videos, meme culture, emotional narratives, and personalized messaging to maximize algorithmic reach.

Simultaneously, algorithmic recommendation systems contribute to political polarization by reinforcing ideological communities and reducing exposure to dissenting viewpoints. The circulation of misinformation through encrypted messaging platforms such as WhatsApp has further complicated democratic discourse, raising concerns regarding electoral integrity, communal tensions, and public trust.

Government Initiatives and Regulatory Framework

Utilizations of social media can be monetized through the use of advertising and algorithms to create brand awareness. However, social media goes beyond its monetary reach by allowing individuals to spread awareness and create social movements through multi-layered social participation. With the help of online communities, a message that creates a call to action can be rapid and far-reaching, unlike more traditional social movements that require physical networking, which can be more time-consuming.

The Indian government has seen a large number of digitally driven social movements or protests initiated through social media. The social media protests that followed the laws created by the Citizen Amendment Act (2019-2020,) the protesting Indian farmers (2020-2021,) the pandemic protests taking place in all of India, and environmental protests, all, to a large extent, used social media to gain volunteers, and most notably, gain attention on a global scale. These digital communications made activism easily participatory to the global community, and gave traditional barriers to social movement participation a means to be virtually removed.

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While this shows a downside of digital technology, there is also a positive side. Digital networks are excellent tools for participation. They are being used by marginalized groups, independent journalists, grassroots movements, and local community networks. These networks highlight the importance of activism in areas like the environment, gender justice, disaster relief, and civil rights, which are often overlooked by mainstream media.

Digital networks have a dual nature; they can be easily manipulated but also highly participatory. They serve as powerful tools for commercialization. Understanding this dual quality is crucial for assessing how India's attention economy will impact democracy.

Government Initiatives and Regulatory Framework

The Government of India has implemented multiple programs to promote digital inclusion and accountable platforms, and to counter challenges and exploit opportunities of the digital age. For instance, the Digital India Programme (2015) was introduced to help increase the reach of the internet and e-governance with projects such as BharatNet, PM-WANI, and the IndiaAI Mission to close the digital divide and increase AI. To help with the protection of one's personal data, the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act of 2023 was introduced, which provides a legal framework to data collection, give information to and gain the consent of individuals, and provides personal data protections. Furthermore, the Information technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) rules, 2021 outlined more responsibilities social media platforms are to take to address misinformation, harmful/inappropriate content, and user grievances. To go along with and complement all of these, digital literacy programs like the National Digital Literacy Mission, provide citizens with skills to better identify misinformation, safeguard privacy, and partake in healthy and responsible practices within the rapidly evolving, algorithm-driven digital world.

Challenges

Alongside the various benefits that the attention economy may provide, several difficulties that must be addressed arise from it. First, the lack of transparency means users will never know how a platform selects and

orders the content that users see. Second, engagement-driven algorithms will select content that is sensational and will propagate false information. Consequently, there will be more instances of social unrest and political polarizations. Third, the intentional design of certain features to be infinitely engaging, such as infinite scrolls and autoplay, has caused mental health issues in youths. Fourth, the attention economy has created a surveillance economy that tracks users and sells their data. Finally, the digital divide coupled with algorithmic bias will exacerbate existing inequalities as certain communities are further excluded, thus defeating the goal of participative democracy within the digital economy in India.

Suggestions

Addressing the challenges of the attention economy requires collaborative efforts from governments, technology companies, educational institutions, and civil society. Firstly, algorithmic transparency should be enhanced by requiring platforms to disclose how recommendation systems and data collection practices function. Secondly, digital literacy should be integrated into educational curricula to help citizens critically evaluate online information and recognize misinformation. Thirdly, independent regulatory mechanisms should audit AI systems to ensure fairness, accountability, and ethical compliance. Fourthly, platforms should adopt ethical design practices that prioritize user well-being over engagement. Finally, expanding multilingual digital literacy programmes and improving rural internet connectivity will ensure equitable digital participation and foster a more informed, and responsible digital society.

"The ultimate freedom is the freedom to think for ourselves." — Noam Chomsky

The commodification of attention represents one of the defining transformations of the digital age. In contemporary India, digital algorithms have evolved beyond technological tools that influence identity formation and consumer behaviour. By converting human attention into a commercial asset, platform corporations have fundamentally reshaped the relationship between individuals, markets, and democratic institutions.

As India advances towards becoming one of the world's leading digital economies, the challenge is no longer merely expanding internet access but ensuring that digital technologies strengthen rather than undermine democratic values. Effective governance will require transparent regulatory frameworks, ethical artificial intelligence and active public participation. Ultimately, safeguarding human attention is not solely a technological concern but a democratic imperative. Preserving citizens' autonomy over what they think, consume, and believe will determine whether the digital future serves public welfare or merely commercial interests.

Conclusion

"The ultimate freedom is the freedom to think for ourselves." Noam Chomsky

The commodification of attention is one of the key changes of the digital age. In modern India, digital algorithms have grown into major social and economic forces that affect how people form their identities, how they behave as consumers, how political communication occurs, and how collective action is organized. By turning human attention into a marketable asset, platform companies have significantly changed the relationship between individuals, markets, and democratic institutions.

This study, which draws on the ideas of Herbert Simon, Shoshana Zuboff, Nick Srnicek, and José van Dijck, shows that algorithms create new chances for accessing information, participating in civic life, and driving economic innovation. At the same time, they create new forms of surveillance, manipulation, division, and digital inequality. The historical development of the attention economy shows that technological advancements have always shifted the balance of power. Today's algorithmic systems further this shift by functioning continuously, invisibly, and on a scale we have never seen before.

As India moves toward becoming one of the world's top digital economies, the focus is not just on increasing internet access. It's about making sure that digital technologies support democratic values rather than weaken them. Good governance will need clear regulatory standards, ethical artificial intelligence, strong privacy protections, improved digital literacy, and active public engagement. Ultimately, protecting human attention matters not just from a technological standpoint but as a matter of democratic importance. How well we maintain citizens' control over their thoughts, consumption, and beliefs will shape whether the digital future benefits public welfare or just serves commercial interests.

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