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The Sirens' Call:
Have you lost control of your attention?

"... Whoever draws too close,
... and catches the Sirens' voices in the air...
The high thrilling song of the Sirens will transfix him..." [1]

Is it possible to be too ***present-to-the-present***?

Or, phrased another way, is it possible to be so absorbed by a "present," a "now," so soaked with the sirens' song of data-data-data, that you've become distracted and missed the actual "present" in which your life unfolds? Have you become like the person absent-mindedly scrolling Instagram reels of autumn scenes and failing to attend to the autumnal blaze just outside their window?

Have you, like our Instagram scroller, lost control over what you "attend" to?

A cottage industry of media commentators has sprung up arguing that "Yes, we have indeed lost control of our attention." A simple internet search on "attention crisis" generated 21,800 results featuring articles titled "The Attention Crisis: A Wake-Up Guide," "The Attention Crisis Is Just a Distraction," "The Attention Crisis: Why We Can't Focus," and "The Film Students Who Can No Longer Sit Through Films."

Chris Hayes agrees.

And he doesn't think it's an accident.

Why?

Host of MSNBC's "All In with Chris Hayes," Hayes' new book *The Sirens' Call: How Attention Became the World's Most Endangered Resource* argues that "attention" has quietly become the defining scarce resource of modern life and that a handful of immensely profitable systems have been built to mine it. [1] Rather than treating distraction as a personal failure (weak willpower and/or poor time management), Hayes frames the problem as an economic and political transformation. He asserts that we now live in the "attention age" in which massive, for-profit companies compete to capture and monetize the focus of millions, and in the process reshapes culture and democracy. [2]

Hayes uses the Sirens from Homer's *Odyssey,* whose irresistibly tempting song pulls sailors to their doom, as an organizing metaphor. For Hayes, 21st-century sirens are not mythical singers, but high-tech environments like our smartphones and their apps, update feeds, dinging notifications, and the incentive structures behind them designed to compel our attention. He acknowledges that mediated grabs for our attention are as old as Socrates' complaint that the invention of

writing ruins people's memories down to more recent complaints about newspapers then magazines then radio then TV draining people's attention.

What Hayes says has changed in our time is that temptation has been industrialized. The sirens now beckon us at all hours of the day and night, dinging their alerts. Literally as I was typing that sentence, a notification popped up on my screen from my computer security app telling me about additional benefits it can provide for a price.

Unlike many of the articles my quick internet search discovered, Hayes' book doesn't simply encourage us to be more disciplined in our media consumption. Instead, he offers a deep analysis about how the new digital environment arose and why the struggle to break its hold feels so imbalanced. He doesn't think it's a fair fight. Pitted against the average person is an attention industry seeking profits by using big data and experimentation to continuously refine their offerings to sharpen the allure of whatever snares our notice. Whenever you hit that "Like" or "Share" button, you're telling whatever app you're using to give you more. In doing so, you've begun to cede control of your attention to the app's algorithm.

Hayes shapes his analysis around six key concepts: 1) attention as a scarce resource; 2) the industrialization of temptation (the Sirens Metaphor); 3) the three forms of attention; 4) attention as power; 5) alienation from one's own attention; and 6) the attention crisis is a structural problem requiring collective action.

In building his argument that attention has become a scarce resource, Hayes uses Nobel Prize winning economist Herbert Simon's justly famous 1971 lecture "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World" in "which Simon argued that attention was the key to understanding the information age." [3] Hayes quotes Simon's core insight:

> In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it. [4]

In short, attention is a zero-sum game; if you are attending to "X" (not the social media platform formerly known as Twitter, per say, but "X" as "something in general") then you cannot attend to "A, B, C, or anything else" that might be important to you. Thus, your attention becomes a scarce resource. And scarcity determines value, making your attention valuable for whomever or whatever can attract and hold it.

After the internet's initial rich promise of a world where information would be plentiful, leading to an increase in cultural wisdom (in hindsight, a mind-foggingly naïve premise, but that's an idea for another day), internet entrepreneurs pivoted. Needing to generate income to convert their paper value into actual financial value, search firms like Google and apps like Facebook turned to advertising as their path to economic success.

What could they possibly sell to potential advertisers?

Your attention.

What is "attention?"

Using a cocktail party as a brilliant example, Hayes explains that attention comes in three flavors: voluntary, involuntary, and social. In the cocktail party setting, if you're mannerly and want other people to reciprocate your attention, you focus your attention on the person or people with whom you are chatting "*suppressing* everything other than what you're focused on." [6] Beyond social settings, artists, athletes, and anyone seeking to master a task understands this willful blindness, this intense focus on the subject or task at hand. That's called voluntary attention because you choose where you focus it.

Since, on the other hand, as a survival mechanism we humans subconsciously and continuously monitor our environment for threats and opportunities, involuntary attention occurs when something outside our focus suddenly breaks it. As in Hayes' cocktail party example when a waiter drops a tray of glasses whose crashing sound instantly pulls our attention to it. More pointedly, when we hear our name mentioned by someone in the group standing just next to us, we involuntarily turn to it, note it, and want to understand what was said.

It turns out that humans are exquisitely tuned to hearing their own names.

Why?

That “why” leads to the third form of attention – social attention. Social attention is something we desire; we want others to notice and approve of us. It is the fourth human motivation in Maslow’s hierarchy. After ensuring our survival and gaining acceptance into a group, humans want to be valued. Anything that promises to enhance our sense of self-worth or, conversely, threatens it, immediately grabs our attention. In short, as far as capturing our attention, either praising or threatening us does the trick.

Understanding the nature of attention, the challenge for internet marketers seeking to sell your attention to advertisers becomes how to attract it. Which turned out to be comparatively easy. What things do people find most interesting? Conflict, sex, food, gossip about other people, and anything that seems to affirm their self-worth – in particular, the sound of their own name. That led to the second challenge – how to hold your attention.

It turns out that there are two approaches to that. First, tell a story like the old-time magazine serials in which each chapter ends on a cliffhanger, bringing you back for the next. In the current world, that is like the “Breaking News” trailers scrolling across the bottom of your TV screen. But that’s cumbersome, and it didn’t take long for the new lords of attention-harvesting to figure out that attention can be broken down into in ever smaller bits like the slot machine image Hayes uses so well in which the never-ending unreeling of new stimulants as you swipe up or across your tablet or phone’s screen become a self-sustaining attention magnet. In the end, the user stops seeking “information” as such and becomes rapt in an endless scrolling exercise.

As a result, you’ve lost control of your attention and ceded it to the app’s algorithm. We’ve all experienced this phenomenon of going down a YouTube, or Instagram, or pick-your-app rabbit hole. I admit my own vulnerability. I am apt to follow a thread of cooking demonstrations, old movie clips, or YouTube videos of Borscht Belt comics until I somehow recapture my own attention and ask myself, “Whoa, what are you doing here?”

The result is that our attention has been captured by an attention industry designed specifically to capture it and sell it to interested others. In our time, the largest corporations are not manufacturers or even information companies, but finance and attention companies – Apple, Microsoft, Meta (owner of Facebook

and Instagram), Alphabet (owner of Google which also owns You Tube). [5] These companies are the Sirens of our time – constantly tempting us with endless distractions fracturing our attention spans so that now, even at elite colleges, faculty complain about students who can't read entire books but only excerpts, and film students who can't watch an entire movie without their attention wandering off, captured by the latest ding on their smartphone.

At this point Hayes himself pivots from describing the phenomenon to why it's important. Hayes understands that whoever holds our attention controls our attention. Controlling our attention enables them to control what we think about, care about, and treat as real or urgent. We have not only ceded to our internet overlords our attention, Hayes points out we have also ceded to them the ability to define our reality because whatever dominates attention defines both our personal and our public reality.

This, as Hayes takes great pains to explain, has enormous political consequences. Remember, the heart of drama is conflict, and humans love drama – who is right, who will win, what will happen. Like those glasses crashing to the floor, what attracts attention is the loud flash and bang, the outrage of an argument. He who first grabs the crowds notice seizes control of what the crowd "attends" to. The more outrageous and aggressive the accusation, the more attention it garners. If a political actor loudly and repeatedly claims that an election was stolen from him, he seizes control of the public reality.

Why?

Two reasons. First, the flamboyance and the inherent conflict of the accusation draw our attention just like those crashing glasses. Constantly repeating the claim only intensifies the attention it draws, swallowing any attempts to counter it.

Why?

Because it is extremely difficult and tedious (the exact opposite of dramatic) to prove a negative, i.e., that the election was not stolen. No matter how many cases the pro-theft faction loses, they do not claim public attention because reading legal briefs is tedious and lacks all the drama of the original accusation's spectacle.

This has immense implications for democracy because democracy depends upon shared, sustained attention, which the attention economy systematically

undermines. Those legal briefs might be absolutely correct, but they may lack the flash and bang of mediated conflict – they lack the excitement of the slot machine version of news: short, staccato sound bits of dramatic energy.

Humans want to see conflict; they, as a rule, do not want to engage in philosophical analysis. It's the phenomenon that explains why Fox News flourishes, and C-SPAN and other thoughtful sources come limping after.

Because in our internet, mediated reality the power between the attention gatherers and the people is so out of balance, Hayes thinks personal coping strategies are insufficient. He argues that the commodification of attention, like the commodification of labor in the 19th century, requires collective protection. It is the least convincing section of the book because his proposals for public action do not seem sufficient to meet the current problem.

Regardless, Hayes' ***The Sirens' Call*** is an extremely valuable read for his identification and analysis of the problem of our attention-challenged era. Its essential takeaways are that attention is the central scarce resource of modern life. Why? Because in an information-saturated world, attention, not information, is the binding constraint on our ability to think and decide for ourselves about how we shape our culture and our politics. This single insight explains why media, platforms, politics, and even social life reorganize themselves around capturing our attention in short bursts rather than in deliberate, in-depth attempts to understand the truth behind those mediated bursts of shouts and images.

How? His second key takeaway is that attention has been systematically extracted by engineered systems resulting in modern environments designed to seize attention automatically, bypassing deliberation and exploiting human cognitive limits. In his view, temptation has been industrialized. The Sirens are no longer occasional; they are optimized and everywhere. Attention capture is not accidental—it is the business model.

It is why news shows focus on images and not substance. It is why the current outrage over a president posting to a social media account pictures of a former president's and his wife's heads pasted on the bodies of two apes commands both the airwaves and the internet while thoughtful, in-depth attempts to grasp the horror of such vile behavior on the part of a sitting president and the racist assumptions of both he and his followers languish. Why? They lack the snap, crackle, and pop of the images. In an attention-challenged world, like those

students who can't read entire books anymore, it is the snap, crackle, and pop of scrolling images that captures attention.

Why is this important?

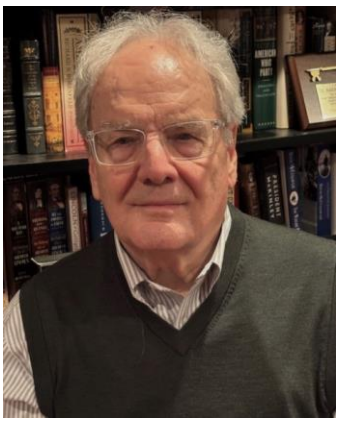
Hayes asserts that attention is political power, and democracy depends on protecting it because whoever controls attention controls agendas, priorities, and public reality. As a result, attention has become a political resource, and its extraction endangers democratic self-government. Why? Because democracy requires sustained, shared attention to common problems. An attention economy optimized for fragmentation, outrage, and engagement systematically undermines those conditions.

Hayes' ***The Sirens' Call*** is a siren in its own right – not a mythical creature luring you to destruction, but, to paraphrase Thomas Jefferson, "a fire bell – a siren – in the night" alerting us to the danger of our hypermediated, attention fractured reality.

Photo Credits

End Notes

1. Homer, **The Odyssey**, tr. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. 272-273.
2. Whitney, Jake, *"Can He Please Get Your Attention?"* at **The Progressive Magazine** available at Can He Please Get Your Attention? - Progressive.org accessed February 2, 2026.
3. Hayes, Chris. **The Siren's Call: How Attention Became the World's Most Endangered Resource.** (New York: Penguin Press, 2025), p. 164.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 13.
6. Ibid., p. 30.



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