

The Drift of Attention Regimes in the Age of Digital Platforms: When Curiosity Was Taken Over by Reputation

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Abstract

The genealogy of contemporary attention regimes needs to mobilize a mediology to show how attentional infrastructures have been profoundly altered in two decades (from 2000 to 2020). If the regime of alertness has come to dominate the entire business model of digital platforms, it took some time to emerge. When web surfing, serendipity, blogs and peer to peer were the rule, curiosity had its place, at the price of a form of disorientation and a rather costly collective self-help effort. As soon as the commercial web took over from 1995 onwards, little by little, answering engines, recommendations, matching, streaming and virality gave us a comfortable immunity to any risk of unexpected encounters or “friction,” even though advertising was gaining in power to intrude. But it is no longer a question of curiosity but of reputation, based on a visibility, a reactivity (high-frequency engagement) that the platforms encourage us to feed. The political economy of our attention has thus evolved in terms of the balance between regimes of attention (loyalty, projection, alertness, immersion) as the technical and economic infrastructure has itself evolved towards the unshared dominance of platforms. Both result in deeply undermining the desiring energy of curiosity.

Keywords: mediology, attention regimes, reputation, platforms, internet genealogy, predation

Introduction

Do you remember a time when Google was a search engine and not an answering engine? Do you remember a time when photo apps were opportunities to marvel at the artistic findings of strangers, not a display of filter management expertise by a few well-known influencers? Do you remember a time when you had to surf through catalogues of products or music assembled in an improbable way and not follow the recommendations of an algorithm that knows better than you what you want? Do you remember a time when we had to surf to take advantage of the effects of serendipity to find an unpublished article and not accept the arbitrary insertions of an algorithm in our discussion threads, through stories, reels that impose themselves on our attention?

All of this sounds like nostalgic boomer’s reactions where “everything was better yesteryear” and therefore does not deserve a moment’s attention. However, the genealogy of this shift in our attentional architectures is worth tracing because it helps us understand why we feel disoriented in a digital world under the sway of a few platforms. Not that social and cognitive activities on the web have become difficult, on the contrary: they have become too easy, without friction, because they are pushed towards our eyes before we have even shown the slightest desire, the slightest curiosity. Curiosity is indeed one of the versions of desire and its most creative version, the one that does not believe in the predefined object of desire that often happens to be pure repetition. With curiosity, desire opens up, revives itself, accepts to get lost, to fail because at the turn of the road, the hope of a miracle of the encounter is always there, always re-enacted. And what is desire if not the hope of a miracle of the encounter, *tugkanon*, as Oury (1978) put it? But the encounter, in our experience of digital financial capitalism, has become encapsulated in matching,

recommendation and ranking algorithms, all of which exploit our traces of the past to transform the future into repetition and not into becoming (Deleuze and Guattari 1980). Reputation has taken the place of curiosity, just as demand stifles desire, for it is the expectations of others and the image of the supposed expectations of others that make the law. It is the extension of the realm of fake that is encouraged for all protagonists. But this general diagnosis deserves a more serious empirical verification and a comparative mediology of two very different eras.

The Four Moments of a Drift

Indeed, the “internet” and more precisely “the web” has undergone considerable change since Berners-Lee and Caillau invented it in 1990. And contrary to the technicist vision of a fatal progress to which “we must adapt” (Stiegler 2019), the different versions of the digital have been marked above all by successive changes in economic models. Two markers of change must be highlighted. In 1996, the Clinton administration transferred the management of the Internet from the NSF (public service for the management of scientific activities) to telecommunications operators reconverted into (or associated with) Internet Service Providers (ISP). This is moment 1 of the monetisation of a communication and knowledge infrastructure which, it should be remembered, was previously of public status. Before that, companies had their own networks, not the Internet, and even their own applications accessible only via specific subscriptions (AOL, CompuServe, etc.). This moment of 1996 has been identified by Lawrence Lessig (1999) as the trigger for technical architecture choices that are now all oriented towards commercial imperatives.

Moment 3 is that of the monetisation of social networks in particular, which occurred in 2008-2009, under the impetus of Sherry Sandberg, who moved from Google to Facebook to install the same targeted advertising model, and also of Susan Wojcicki (from Google to YouTube, itself owned by Google). The extraordinary revenues generated by these business models based on the capture of attention and the resale of traces for advertising purposes can be seen as the tipping point (Gladwell 2002) of the platforms’ dominance and the change of attentional regime for the public.

Between these two eras, however, there was a moment 2, a phase known as web 2.0, which allowed us to move away from the previous models of the web of content dissemination to give rise to so-called collaborative services and social networks (all of which will become applications when the smartphone is marketed by Apple from 2007). It could be said that curiosity had still found its way to insist despite the commercialization of the web. I was able to organise a first forum on the cooperative Internet in 1998 in Rennes, with a number of services based on cooperation, sometimes translated into distributed architecture (P2P) and Open Source, but not necessarily. Wikipedia was the best demonstration of the fruitfulness of these distributed and collaborative models. But this interlude could only generate exceptions, as investors put the power of their mimetic desire to work by rushing to buy the values of the platforms with a virtual guarantee of return on investment, given the attractiveness of these assets.

Beware, however, that the advertising windfall now seems less guaranteed as the effects of Cambridge Analytica have damaged the reputation of Facebook first, but then of all the platforms. The current moment (nbr 4) is made of regulation by States and in particular by the European Union (Digital Service Act and Digital Market Act) and also made of attempts to disengage from dependence on advertising revenue, for Google with the planned end of cookies and with

Facebook preparing its metaverse as the OS platform for 5G. But this return to regulation is long overdue and has thoroughly destroyed any attempt to promote a technical architecture of curiosity. The intervention of AI in all the services now offered by these platforms further aggravates the collapse of desire, since it is enough to fill in a prompt for content (text or image) to be produced as the equivalent of a work, an intention, a desire. Open AI, the misnamed for-profit company, an expert in viral marketing with ChatGPT and Dall-E, has thus forced the market and the public's attention by its power move, by its action. Here, no curiosity but a programmed reaction to a marketing operation that allows everyone to test anything and everything without delay... And without a project! Only the mimetic temptation not to let oneself be outdated and to accept badly designed products with uncertain and dangerous consequences, in order to wear out a new toy as quickly as possible. Not all AIs are of this kind, of course, and most of them deserve a more detailed mediological examination. But the era of the extended fake is getting more and more established, not only for reasons of propaganda or war, commercial or otherwise, but for the enjoyment of mimetic confinement.

Search Engines that Now Provide Answers

So let's go back to the pre-commercial age of the web in the 90s and check how curiosity was amplified, by sketching a mediological genealogy of the search engine, blogs and social networks. The search engine was not supposed to become the preferential solution, since before Google, a battle between search engines and directories took place, which the Yahoo directory lost to Alta Vista, for example, well before the arrival of Google. The directory, which can be explored in a tree-like fashion, is not the most creative method, since all knowledge is organised in a well-structured ontology, which has led to the misleading reproduction of the library metaphor for thinking about the web. And this ontology is decided by the managers of the directory and by all those involved in classification according to a division of labour not far from the Digital Labor of gig work (Casilli 2019).

This allows me to point out here that the past was by no means a perfect time in terms of curiosity, but the choice remained open nonetheless, and when Google appeared, free of charge, rather academic and not yet commercial (it will only become so in 2002), we thought we were finally living in an era of informational abundance and smart connectivity, since hypertext links were enough to make relationships appear and trigger serendipity. This principle of random association and unexpected discovery had its heyday, when our surfing and surveying (Ghitalla, Boullier et al. 2003), which we called "outer-reading" and which was sometimes very time-consuming, allowed us to let ourselves be carried along by the wave of links. Now who could say that? Because all our seemingly free surfing activities are now tracked. And this past is reinjected by the algorithms to predict our own expectations in a probabilization of our future behaviours. The platform positions content that we seem to have encountered by chance or by our search, when in fact it has been deliberately calculated according to our probabilities of reaction and engagement (the engagement score becoming more critical than the number of views or exposures). The curiosity of surfing has been hacked into a "programmed serendipity," i.e. without chance but with probability. Content passes through us much more than we encounter content, it spreads because it is now pushed. Our calculated past pre-empts our future. The traces of our past curiosities now precede us in order to keep us in programmed attentional tracks.

The operation was amplified once Google, having taken a non-market dominant position, tested monetisation with Adwords, which proved to be a golden goose for the firm, and a hard drug for brands. It went to the point of pushing brands to optimise their chances of attracting attention by using techniques known as SEO (Search Engine Optimizers), which do not optimise anything for the curiosity of the user but only for the brands that want to take advantage of the technique of cookies, of these markers of traces, which make any pathway produce traces and therefore potentially amplify repetition. The propagation of traces and their permanent calculation constitute a formidable device for quantifying our behaviour, which could generate a reflexivity on the manufacture of the social in its propagations dimension (Boullier 2023), but this knowledge is captured and exploited by the platforms alone for advertising purposes.

Publish for Yourself or Publish for Buzz: from CMS to Twitter

Another dimension of the web in the 1990s was the emergence of blogs. This expressive dimension (Allard 2014), enabled by increasingly easy publishing tools, really took off in the late 1990s when the web was no longer reserved for academics. Content Management Systems (CMS) publishers further reduced the cost of entry (Benkler 2006). Publishing without coding had become a radical move from WYSIWYG with Apple in the late 1970s, but when the HTML tagging system of the web took hold, for a time it was necessary to return to even basic coding. From 2000 onwards, however, CMSs made it possible to do away with this programming work, even if it was reduced to the design of a web page, and to see directly what is published and correct it immediately. This reduction in the cost of entry into the work of publication is a constant in the evolution of networked digital technology and represented a remarkable tool for creativity which, moreover, made it possible to test several versions on the fly, to show curiosity about the effects of this or that modification. Wordpress was only really available in 2004 and has also resisted commoditisation to continue to offer constant developments in publishing comfort.

Is this a linear evolution? In reality, this apparent constant progress has just been broken by the introduction of generative AI (including the famous ChatGPT commercial stunt) which pushes the withdrawal of knowledge and techniques a little further into a black box: all it takes is a prompt to almost immediately produce an almost final product in image processing or text generation. What was a gain in usability, through the avoidance of code and through the offer of exploration thus permitted, is then transformed into THE answer, of which the beneficiary (how can we name him anyway because he is neither creator, nor author, nor programmer, but only originator) knows neither the ins and outs.

From the point of view of this mediological genealogy that I am undertaking here, the label “microblogging” attributed to Twitter at its inception is a rather clever conceptual diversion. For what do 140 characters have in common with a blog as it was conceived around 2000? Personal expression, certainly, but the principle is now based more on the catchphrase that was already used in the media or in promotions, advertising or electoral campaigns, which were also called slogans. However, a radical innovation was nestled in an already existing envelope, the blog, which was valued as representing the best of the Internet in terms of participation, contribution, freedom of expression, creativity, etc. In reality, the radical change was only achieved when Twitter managed to monetise its platform by placing programmatic advertisements, only from 2009 onwards and with much less success than Facebook or YouTube.

But the 2010s allowed Twitter to achieve considerable weight in public life. From a user experience point of view, some people, including professionals, may still consider that Twitter amplifies their curiosity by allowing them to be on constant watch. This regime of attention, however, the alert, is overwhelming all others and at a totally unprecedented high frequency. This change in collective rhythm is the real innovation of Twitter, and by extension of the entire media sphere, but it has nothing to do with curiosity since content is pushed opaquely before our eyeballs, with alerts and notifications that are sure to chop up our attention. Proliferation and high frequency engender a submersion of attention, where the intention of curiosity, even if not oriented and open, is reduced to a concern for selection.

This selection work is not, however, central to curiosity, which willingly accepts being guided by a novel, unconventional, unexpected signal. In the Twitter experience, all those who publish must learn to generate the unexpected, the shocking, because that is what the algorithms will spot to push them further. Thus, Vosoughi et al. (2018) have shown that the novelty score is the most accurate measure of the chances of propagating fake news, not whether it is true or false. Making people howl with laughter or indignation thus becomes a mission for community managers who want to keep their audience on the edge of their seats. It is true that some organisations turn Twitter into an official information channel, but they lose all the viral potential of the platform. As we can see, the Twitter experience, between proliferation that leads to submersion and provocation that leads to staggering, is hardly a reinforcement of curiosity; it is above all an abusive confiscation of this natural search for novelty.

Contributing Together in Wikis or Delegating to Generative AI

In terms of publication, the appearance of wikis in 1995 was an important moment, which was fully in line with the distributed and collaborative philosophy of the web. The exercise was often creative, but also often messy and difficult to master when a large number of contributions were combined. But Wikipedia was able to tackle these difficulties head on and equip their collaborative encyclopaedia project with real control, discussion and validation procedures to the point of becoming an institution. To the point of becoming, without doubt, the masterpiece of the non-market and collaborative Internet, which gives an idea of what it could have been if it had not been captured and hijacked by financial capitalism. It is a remarkable case of the emergence of an institution through progressive adjustments and multiple contributions (and not through a vertical act or a heroic gesture) that creates the conditions for curiosity (Cardon and Levrel 2009). This attentional and political paradox is worth noting. Wikipedia in fact creates a vault (Citton 2019, 100) that shelters attacks and noise, and thus makes possible a quiet curiosity so well represented by the infinite links one can browse, with the “see also” (Boullier and Crepel 2017), or by the histories one can take back to make the archaeology of a page, often resulting from long discussions.

This history is not lost, the explorations, the hesitations, the controversies that are the trace of a collective curiosity at work, can again be explored. Curiosity is no longer simply a matter of flitting around, jumping from one alert triggered by a signal to another, but of deepening and anchoring in references that have been built, discussed and validated progressively. The exploration of time and genealogy is one of the most passionate curiosities on the networks and this curiosity helps reflexivity like no other. However, the claim of response engines and now generative AIs like

ChatGPT is to erase all references, all genealogy of notions, to never allow time for this exploration since the (supposedly) right answer is already there, without any historical depth, and directly exploitable. From genealogical exploration to immediate extractivism, this is undoubtedly what is lost in contemporary systems. But let us not forget that the battle is not yet lost, since Wikipedia remains the reference and even the source of training for these AIs, which need to rest on a ground truth (Jaton 2021).

The predation of attention and the contemporary media hype are largely created by social networking platforms. But a few elements of genealogy allow us to recall the vitality and curiosity that could emerge there, before advertising algorithms organised the whole capture of attention. Thus, *delicio.us*, created in 2003, allowed bookmarks to be shared in the early 2000s. This sharing was more an alternative to the dominant orientation of Google searches than a social network as such. But the principle was based on sharing, in the quasi-political sense of the term, the findings of our respective curiosities. I had announced in an article published in *Libération* on January 5th 2000 that the future of the Internet laid in subjectivity, community and proximity, and not in universalism based on a supposed universal ontology. At the time, Tim Berners-Lee was talking about a web 3.0 that would discipline links by forcing them to be part of a unique ontology, whereas I was highlighting the potential of folksonomies:

The search for universality of the “ontologies” that organise these universes of meanings is doomed to failure. There is no interpretation independent of other interpretations: any data is already the result of a formatting made by others, changing and debatable. The relevance of a piece of information depends not on its validity “in itself,” but on the relationship between the reference universes of successive interpreters (a chain of betrayals and translations, of course, but this is precisely the added value of this chain itself). It is therefore the traces of these interpretations that must be deposited in (or on) the document and indexed.

This is what Delicious tried to do a few years later by basing the social connection between members on bookmarks, which can be navigated thanks to shared tags. These tags are part of a folksonomy (Boullier and Crépel 2009), an emerging categorisation, which can also be found in hashtags but which has become standardised as a function of popularity.

The social network that really marked a generation was Myspace, created in 2003, more in the form of a music blog, but where sharing was a very motivating principle. The subjective indexing of content was explicit and allowed many artists to emerge, which later, after the end of Napster, led to the attractiveness of many legal platforms for sharing music content. The idea of designing one’s own personal space was a form of metaphor for what everyone expects on a social network or personal website (and was still present in the construction activities offered on a metaverse like Second Life, launched in 2003 (Lucas 2013; Boelstorff 2008)). At that time, we thought we could inhabit the digital, in a form quite similar to what I call the *habitèle* (Boullier 2014). To inhabit certainly means to create an envelope, and undoubtedly to reduce curiosity, but it is above all to create a vault which allows one to orientate oneself and to filter through all the solicitations which cross the membrane. This immune system (Sloterdijk 2016) cannot be open to all winds or all propagations. And yet this is how social networks have evolved, once they have been monetised, since no account holder can really set up his/her page and his world, since s/he must, for commercial reasons, be subjected to unexpected but also unsolicited offers, which make it possible

to make him/her react and to collect traces of his/her commitment that can be resold. The absence of borders, which could be experienced as a rare opportunity, with considerable social potential for curiosity, was turned into so many opportunities for predation by the monetised social network platforms. Curiosity presupposes intention, and sometimes even projection, another regime of attention, when one deliberately explores a question, a semantic universe. On contemporary advertising-oriented platforms, no intention is required, nor any effort, and they are user-friendly to the point of triggering your desires in spite of you, of feeding you, or even force-feeding you, with all the content that they know is relevant to you, better than you. This force-feeding requires the absence of filters, boundaries, envelopes. And strangely enough, the libertarian collectives of the early days of the internet continue to defend this philosophy, believing that all borders, all regulation and all filtering would be a hindrance to curiosity and enjoyment (“to enjoy without hindrance,” as they used to say in May 68). But this fiction has been turned inside out, like the manoeuvre of a dealer who offers enjoyment at every moment through the unlimited exploration of the substances that he exclusively provides, in full knowledge of the dose that should be offered.

Sharing Content or Pushing Content

Offers of content in the form of databases existed before the web and were privately accessible via IRC or UseNet. But here again, simplicity of use appeared with Napster, launched in June 1999, the prototype of services based on a peer-to-peer architecture. Curiosity thus became equipped with a platform where each machine could make its content available to others and make it possible to download, track by track and no longer by album, this forced sale that the majors had managed to install. Granularity, volume and the distributed model are in fact criteria present in all the advances of the digital network that amplify curiosity. The shock was brutal in the music industry since the rights holders were totally bypassed and the attacks by the RIAA (the American music industry federation) began as early as December 1999, to the point of leading Napster to withdraw its offer in 2001. The main error lay in the maintenance of a central server of resource addresses that was easy to track down and dismantle for firms that wanted to maintain these enclosures of immaterial goods (Moulier Boutang 2011). But the idea had germinated and other P2P architectures avoided these flaws, such as *e-mule*, distributed and sustainable, and then *BitTorrent*. In this new variation, the requirement to immediately re-share everything that is downloaded makes it easy to make available a large number of seeds, sources, and therefore to obtain an extremely fast block download speed, which made it possible to move on to the exchange of much larger film files. However, this result comes at the cost of reducing the number of highly requested contents, which further reinforces the blockbuster or hits effect.

As we can see, an *a priori* virtuous architecture such as the distributed architecture, depending on the parameters chosen, can have an effect of reducing curiosity in favour of standardisation by focusing on leading content, when the general public’s attention has already been formatted towards this offer. From this point of view, the platforms Spotify or Deezer can have contradictory effects. They offer access to such a wide variety of music that curious exploration can take place with the instant availability that was sought by the application developers from the start. But the effect of framing towards hits and blockbusters is also amplified, by the standard offer but also with the help of personalised playlists, which encourage the attention regime of loyalty made up of habits and no longer of choice or chance. The synchronisation of an entire audience with the most

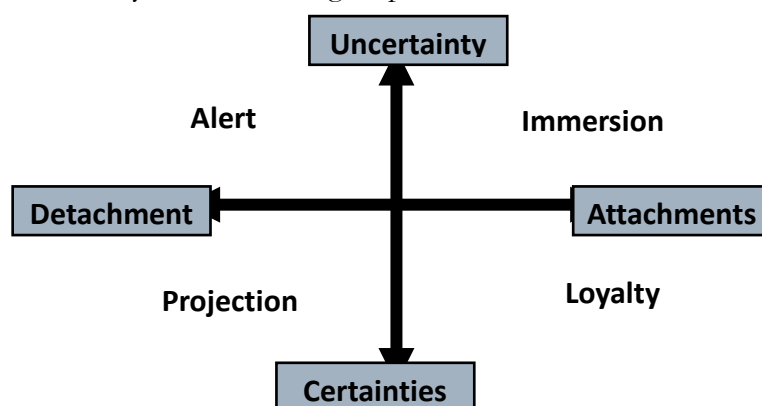
popular items thus leads to a collapse of curiosity, to the benefit of rituals, of these habits which are also part of our regulation of our attention regimes. However, recommendation algorithms go further than these habits, they are the prototype of mechanisms for capturing attention through reputation: “others have liked, you should like” (the item-to-item collaborative-filtering model of Amazon). This matching based on similarities further amplifies the effects of contagion on the basis of popularity. It is certainly possible to ask to be surprised, to have proposals that are a little out of the mainstream or hits, but it is then necessary to enter into a process of assisted curiosity that is extremely voluntary and dependent on the settings of the databases.

The success of the platforms in capturing our attention and predicting our individual preferences is undeniable, however, and our consent, albeit uninformed, is demonstrated every day by our frequentation of these sites. The design of the interfaces deliberately encourages the reduction of curiosity since it is the algorithms that place videos or chain them together on YouTube or TikTok, or that define our news feeds on social networks. The satisfaction obtained by this force-feeding that short-circuits the decision in a frictionless transaction is in fact the dream of any pure market model, where the curiosity of desires would already be pre-formatted by the powerful injunction of offers that transform desires into demands. The apparent cooperation between stakeholders is totally asymmetrical since it is based on extensive knowledge of the habits and preferences of these individuals reorganised into profiles and attributes that are correlated in an opaque but seemingly efficient way.

In reality, however, there is no guarantee that these offers will be appropriate, but that is no longer the issue. For “the medium is the message,” too. The fact of being connected, of accepting the programming of one’s desires into commercially formatted demands, of remaining as if flabbergasted by the infinite scrolling of solicitations constitutes the message, independently of the types of content that are disseminated, as Mc Luhan already said about the ritual collective connection to the television news.

Regimes of Attention Adrift

When I proposed the analysis of the economy of attention in terms of attention regimes in 2006, I clearly indicated that all regimes were potentially amplified by the digital, thus following in the footsteps of Elisabeth Einsenstein’s work (2005) on the printing press revolution. However, I noted that some were more amplified than others, namely alertness and immersion, for better or worse. In my mediological diagnosis (Boullier 2019), the drift applies in fact to all regimes of attention and constitutes a variation in plural dimensions of the collapse of curiosity effect produced by commercial digital platforms.



the curiosity of investors not by one's own qualities but by comparison and by producing expectations and promises of return on investment, sometimes within a minute, in the day-to-day market, transformed into High Frequency Trading. It is in this respect that the attention regime of alert was mainly mobilised and technically equipped by finance, just as the regime of fidelity was disqualified because it led to the creation of fixed assets and liquidity defects. Here we are far from the consumer society, unless we are at the stage of intensive consumption of signs that Baudrillard (1994) had imagined.

The second feature of this drift of attention regimes lies in the voluntary contribution, just like servitude, to the production of these signs which are the extension of the domain of the fake, as I argued elsewhere (Boullier 2020). It is no longer a question of consuming, but of producing and producing oneself as a sign-object of consumption and above all of reputation in order to attract all investors (Feher 2018). Everyone, and researchers are there too, must calculate their curiosities in order to attract the curiosities of others. Any Youtuber or Instagrammer knows how to do this, and researchers do it too, with an eye on their h-index, or at least they are required to do so for the glory of their institution and their nation.

Conclusion

Curiosity is not just a state of mind... located in the mind. It requires some external devices and institutions to support it and these are able to frame and stimulate this drive into some specific directions more than others. We were aware that audience management relied on the predation of attention, during the mass media era that spent a lot of money to capture the eyeballs. But in the 90's, the internet distributed architecture and the web openness seemed to offer a relief from these manipulative powers, since anybody could become the source of new opportunities of encounters. This dream evaporated at the moment the commercial model of the web became predominant. There are still some limited areas of preserved joy of contribution where curiosity can illuminate one day or one short moment of exploration/discovery. But the exploitation of curiosity under the forms of reputation and high-speed connectivity remains invasive and every month a new proposal of dubious substances for our curiosity arises on the buzz market (metaverse, ChatGPT, TikTok during the last months of 2022 and the beginning of 2023). How to escape the capture of our limited time of attention, even though we know that there is no chance to let our curiosity live when being attracted into this maelstrom? This is a call for rescuing curiosity, at least in its digital form!

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