

## HYBRID TIME AS A CRITICAL NEW VARIABLE IN MEDIA CONSUMPTION – CONTEXT OF THE ATTENTION ECONOMY

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### ABSTRACT

The article aims to draw attention to the growing importance of the time variable in media consumption research in a situation of a specific oversupply of content concerning consumer expectations. One of the new phenomena in media consumption is the parallel use of multiple media and content at the same time (multitasking). The traditional division of daily time into working, home, and free time is losing importance, and media consumption occurs in hybrid time. The article reviews the literature on selected research and the concept of media consumption time and the attention economy. The report highlights the need for an in-depth study on the impact of hybrid media consumption on the work environment and private life.

**Keywords:** media consumption, attention economy, multitasking, hybrid time of media consumption, media research

We are now witnessing a growing role of time in the study of media consumption. Traditionally, time was present in readership studies, in TV and radio use, but in the analogue days it was not an essential factor. Readership studies were usually focused on socio-demographics, attitudes, opinions, consumption habits; respondents were asked to state their time spent on reading and their reading habits and questions on when reading took place through the day were rarely asked. The same was true of early radiometric and telemetric studies which tracked channels used by participants, assessment of their quality or consumer satisfaction. These were

later correlated with audience socio-demographics. In the early studies diaries were used in which respondents self-assessed their activities. This was the main source of information on audience preferences and choices.

Researchers who analysed time use and the temporal structure of activities soon grasped that the traditional division of the day into work time, leisure time and time of obligations (including sleep) is not adequate in explaining the daily temporal order of human activities. When media-related activities were reported in work or leisure time, the total computed activity time surpassed 24 hours per day, which suggested that it is necessary to verify simple classifications and look for hitherto unclassifiable temporal frameworks of multitasking. The concept of Harvey's *hypercode* (Harvey 1978, 1984) uses multi-dimensional representations of combinations of simple activities (such as making phone calls during TV watching combined with childcare). The idea of hypercode was embraced by many scholars, who proposed to analyse co-existence of various activities, resulting in analysis of co-existence of activities known as '*proprograms*' or a histogram proportional to its base. According to this idea the horizontal plane depicts all elementary activities of the day (in minutes) while the vertical one shows the commitment of time on the primary activity performed concurrently with other activities (Gershuny 2009). Such a ranking clearly shows which activities are both primary and exclusive, requiring total commitment of attention and which are secondary, jointly consumed with other activities. For example, in studies from the 1970s remunerated work called for total time commitment while media use could be combined with other activities throughout the day. This is worth remembering as it proves that concurrent multitasking activities are not merely an outcome of the Internet era.

Further progress in measuring media consumption was made with more advances in telemetrics, which allowed for remote retrieval of increasingly accurate data on TV and radio consumption. Research on methods of audience measurement is nearly as old as the media themselves as the first device was invented at MIT in the late 1930s. Known under the name of *Audimeter*, it could register which radio stations were tuned in and for how long. Since that time huge progress was made in audience measurement and even more precise data could be gathered (see: Maryńczak 2000). Despite their growing precision with regard to audio-visual media, they failed to provide information on how radio and television were actually used. While in this case it was soon realised that radio use was an ambient, background activity accompanying other activities, this was not obvious in the case of television, the consumption of which involved both sound and images, thus requiring a more focused attention of the audience. In an experimental study of 1994 A.C. Nielsen used the "Passive People Meter System" to record the image of consumers present in the TV-equipped room. This method not only verified the actual number of people present in the room, but also tracked their behaviour. The results of such study were stunning, since only about 30% of those in the room were focused on watching, for 40% this was a secondary (background) activity accompanying eating or reading, while one in five would talk or look after the children, one in ten would be sleeping

(Baron 1995). However, this study could not be replicated as it encroached heavily on the privacy of its participants.

Broadcasters seemed not interested in such precise observations, because they pointed to lower effectiveness of advertising, which was contrary to their business interests.

The development of media consumption measurement technologies was not done for cognitive reasons like enhancing our knowledge on media reception, but it was driven by expectations of a competitive market. Both at the intramedia and intermedia competition levels there was a sharp struggle for advertising revenue. For those who invested in advertising what counted was effectiveness, as expressed in the ability to draw the attention and time of media audiences. Media consumption indicators were thus at the heart of assessing this effectiveness, which in turn influenced the planning of advertising budgets and allocation of funds for advertising. Most progress was made in the area of telemetrics as TV had a leading role in advertising spending. Contemporary telemetric systems measure every second spent and transmit audience data in real time (i.e., within the time of actual broadcasting of a given programme).

Print media would assess their situation by circulation (physical volume) sold and by self-declared readership reports. Time spent on reading was not a crucial variable here. Such print media reporting was continued right to the Internet era and its new analytics. Expansion of the Internet posed a challenge to this line of thinking about media consumption. All media became digital and accessible through the Web. Since every activity on the Web leaves a digital footprint, automatic monitoring of the users can be performed. Nevertheless, the most elementary variable which can be observed, and which acts as the common denominator of all media activity is time allocated for various forms of media consumption.

### *Time in Internet Studies*

Use of the Internet has become universal, albeit not in all regions of the world. At the end of August 2020 Internet users constituted nearly 60% of the world population (4 663 million users vs 7 809 million world population) (see: Worldmeter, 2020). Even though this expansion is not universal, new users are added every day and the growth trend is steady. Over 80% of Internet users are involved in social media, generating huge amounts of data which are incessantly recorded and analyzed (Ali 2020).

The volume and rate of growth in digital data is unprecedented in the history of mankind. On the verge of the 21st century it was rated that only one quarter of available information was in digital form, by 2013 (nearly a decade later, analogue information was at a constant level while the digital one reached the level of 1200 Exabytes (1 Exabyte is the equivalent of 1bn gigabytes), with the share of analogue information rated at only 2% (Mayer-Schonberger, Cukier 2014). In 2020 every human was generating 1.7 MB of data within one second (Big Data Statistics for 2020).

Big data has substantially changed the significance of data, which became a marketable commodity. Its value is largely determined not so much by their present usage, but by their potential future use. In the digital world information is not used up, as in the process of consumption in the material world, but can be reused many times and has so called ‘optional value’ dependent on its nearly unlimited usability (Mayer-Schönberger, Cukier 2014).

Table 1. One minute in internet media (selected examples) 2020

Application, Web page	No. of users per month (in millions)	No. of activities per minute	Description
Facebook	2 603	150 000 147 000	Sharing information Photos
WhatsApp	2 000	41 666 667	Sharing information
YouTube	2 000	500	Hours of video
Instagram	1 082	347 222 138 889	Posts Business profiles
TikTok	800	2 704	Installations of the app
Reddit	430	479 452	Active users
Twitter	326	319	New users
LinkedIn	310	69 444	Job applicants
Netflix	167	404 444	Hours of streaming
Spotify	286 (130 premium)	28	New songs

Source: Own compilation based on “Data Never Sleeps 8.0”

In the official financial reports such as those made for the stock market (NASDAQ) there appeared new measures of users’ economic activity, which are used as a gauge of performance for many internet companies. In particular these included: daily active users (DAUs), estimated at 1.79bn users in mid-2020, monthly activity of users (MAUs) now at 2.70bn or family monthly activity of users (FMAUs) rated at 3.11bn in mid-2020 (Facebook Reports Second Quarter 2020 Results 2020).

Under pressure from the growing volume of digital data and content available on the Web, there was a growing need to profile data to match specific needs of internet companies.

This can be derived from a long-term process of using media to allocate potential users’ time. To this day, this preoccupation with capturing potential audiences’ time and attention is crucial in innovators’ and entrepreneurs’ willingness to undertake risks in their quest for audiences. The tendency to place media and advertising messages in time frames which coincided with other human activities still continues to be the logic of the media industry. Billboards posted along roads (not to understate the role of traditional posters) appeared in the first half of the 19th century, with 1835 and 1850 being crucial dates for the industry (OAAA.org). Car radio accompanying commuting to work and other destinations appears in 1930, shortly after radio broadcasting became popular (Berkowitz 2010). Mobile phones are not

just a recent invention, ever since telephony was invented innovators sought ways to use it for mobile communication, with breakthrough dates in this area being 1908, 1940 and 1973 (History of Mobile Phones 2020). Tablets which took on many functions of the computer appeared 8 years after the first laptop (Laptop Computer History 2020) and it was enhanced with mobile communication capacity by 1989 (Tablet History 2020). Progress in harnessing time continued to be unstoppable when smartphones appeared and acquired many functions of a computer, thus introducing their use into time traditionally reserved for work and other obligations (History and Evolution of Smartphones 2020). The next step in placing media in every moment of human life seems to be intelligent clothing and accessories, such as garments fitted with microchips, smart watches and jewellery. A question arises: what's next? In this context we can evoke E. Musk's idea of inserting chips into human bodies.

From the perspective of time, these inventions have an impact on the way humans live and structure their daily activities. They allow one to disseminate and receive information and (more frequently) entertainment at any convenient time and place.

It took the media industry a while to seed the opportunity to use new (hitherto unavailable, with no commercial potential) slots of time for media consumption. As time went by, this monetization was applied not only to media content, but their actual use. The traditional business model of the media meant that content was offered to the users for a fee, which is supplemented by advertising revenues. This model was backed by traditional research on readership and audiences, which offered information on many key factors essential for potential advertisers.

Time has become a single universal and fundamental measure (common denominator) of all forms of media consumption, embracing and synthesizing many dimensions of media use and consumer preferences, as demonstrated by their decisions to allocate their time and attention. Time has also become an aggregate of behaviour on the Web. Thus, the revolutionary changes which took place in media and communication gave credibility to H. Simon's visionary claim (formulated in late 1960s.) that:

the wealth of information means a death 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... (Simon 1969).

## *The Attention Economy*

Before discussing the relation between the attention economy and hybrid time, it is necessary to look at the concept and definition of attention. The formal psychological definition of attention involves “a selective focus on some of the stimuli that we are currently perceiving while ignoring other stimuli from the environment”. Thus, attention is focused on something at the expense of something else, that’s perhaps why we often tend to use the expression “pay attention,” suggesting that attention is limited and valuable. When we “pay” attention to one thing, we tie up our mental resources and less attention is available to spend elsewhere. Theories of human attention all agree that it is limited in its capacity. H.Simon described attention as a “bottleneck” in human thought (Simon 1994). This idea remains valid since limitations of this attention are crucial both to the society and to businesses, with attention being regarded as one of the most valuable resources of the digital age.

One way to get around this bottleneck is multitasking (or running several activities in parallel), but research shows that people can’t attend fully to multiple things simultaneously. Many have their phone at hand when watching television, but when they redirect their attention to (for example) a social media stream, they will miss some of what happened in the TV show.

There is convincing evidence coming from a number of sources and areas that this valuable source has been depleted by an oversupply of information. The issue of attention is by its nature interdisciplinary, with the bulk of ongoing research done in economics, psychology and media studies. In reaction to this, average human attention spans are dropping throughout the population and people are finding it increasingly difficult to concentrate, which is bad news not only to advertisers and the media, but to the whole Internet as well. Project Gutenberg has made more than 53,000 books freely accessible online. If you read a book a day, it will take you 145 years to get through a library that size. If you prefer video, 400 h are uploaded to YouTube every minute. The challenge today is not to find something to read or information to pay attention to; it is to find the time to read or look at the material at your disposal (Goldhaber 1997). In 2015 Microsoft conducted a study on human attention span, defined as the ability to concentrate on something over a certain amount of time. The claim made by this study (which consisted of surveying 200 people and administering EEG scans to 112 volunteers in Canada) was widely quoted and became a contemporary urban myth about human attention. Microsoft theorized that the changes were a result of the brain’s ability to adapt and change itself over time and a weaker attention span may be a side effect of evolving to a mobile Internet. According to this study, the average attention span for the respondents and volunteers was just eight seconds, down from twelve seconds back in 2000. This human attention span of 8 seconds was 1 second shorter than that of an average goldfish.

This fuelled fears about the destructive impact of Internet consumption on the human (and especially children’s) brain. Abstraction made of the fact that identical claims were made about television some 70 years earlier, the hype around these

8 seconds continued. From a purely methodological perspective, any generalizations from these non-representative 200 surveys and 112 volunteers (all of whom came from Canada) cannot be generalized with respect to all human attention. Data coming from a 2014 UK study shows that the average British media consumer has a much longer average attention span of 14 minutes. Nevertheless, according to this data, while watching television the average adult loses concentration (usually to look at a mobile device) after just seven minutes:

**Table 2. Full attention time before distracted by kind of activity**

Activity	Time of full attention before distraction in minutes
Average British attention focus	14
Listening to someone who is gossiping about a complete stranger	6
Watching television	7
Finance related meetings or conversations	7
Talking to mother-in-law	7
Call with a client or customers	7
Listening to chatty colleagues <sup>1</sup>	9
Phone calls to family members	9
Driving	10
Being in a meeting	13
Watching a film	24
In a social engagement	29

Source: Stacey Stothard, Corporate Communications, Empathy & Sustainability at Skipton Building Society, Loughborough University, UK, 2014

When it comes to why people self-declare to lose focus, 26 per cent say it is because they're so busy multi-tasking, while 18 per cent haven't got time to waste.

What the data from this study shows is that the human attention span is highly flexible and contextual. To stress this point further, contemporarily we seem to be observing a whole range of attitudes towards managing our attention as the amount of time available to us is fixed and cannot be expanded. Even though various temporal strategies are devised and practiced by today's consumers to increase time available for activities (front-loading, multitasking, binge-watching, time compression), the global daily time frame of 24 hours cannot be stretched.

While the idea of our attention span being shorter than that of goldfish has rapidly spread throughout minds of the people, another conclusion from the Microsoft study regrettably has not achieved as much public attention. Microsoft study concludes with the idea that using digital devices has caused an improvement

<sup>1</sup> This drops to 6 minutes if the colleague's voice is 'boring'.

in our multi-tasking skills. In today’s world this leaves the gate wide open for further speculation about rapid expansion of hybrid time and hybrid forms of activity practically inexistent in the industrial era.

These attention deficits had serious implications for business communication. As the online reader spends about 70 seconds a day, while the average amount of time spent reading the physical newspaper is about 25 minutes a day, the advertisers are willing to pay more for their share of readers’ attention during that 25 minutes of offline reading than during the 70 seconds of online reading. As an example, the number of brand interactions that it used to take for a customer to feel comfortable doing business with a brand was 3 to 5 times in the 1970s. It moved to 12 times around 2000, and as of 2013, the number was 28 or more times. Those statistics became quickly antiquated, as just a few years later a study was conducted in which it was found that it took 900 interactions to instill confidence in a particular brand in the mind of a consumer. Also, the consumers shunned a higher level of concentration of attention, requiring more pages and words to be read.

**Table 3. Page views by time viewed and number of words (Internet Browsing Statistics taken from 59,573-page views)**

Activity	% of respondents
% of page views that last less than 4 seconds*	17
% of page views that lasted more than 10 minutes*	4
% of words read on web pages with 111 words or less*	49
% of users who spend only 4.4 seconds more for each additional 100 words	28

Source: National Center for Biotechnology Information, U.S. National Library of Medicine, The Associated Press, 2014

Given that 7% of the interviewed sample of the NCBI 2014 study sometime forget about their own birthdays and that the average number of times per hour office workers check their email inbox is 30 and that the average length watched of a single internet video is only 2.7 minutes, it is not surprising that shortening attention span is also visible in short time bursts allocated to viewing Internet pages and preference for pages with very few words, requiring little attention:

Abundance of information seems to narrow our collective attention span. This is compounded by the fact that many users are young and attention span and (in general) ability to concentrate is growing with age:



Table 4. Attention Span by Age

Age	Average concentration span (in min)
4	8 – 20
5	10 – 25
6	12 – 30
7	14 – 35
8	16 – 40
9	18 – 45
10	20 – 50
11	22 – 55
12	24 – 60

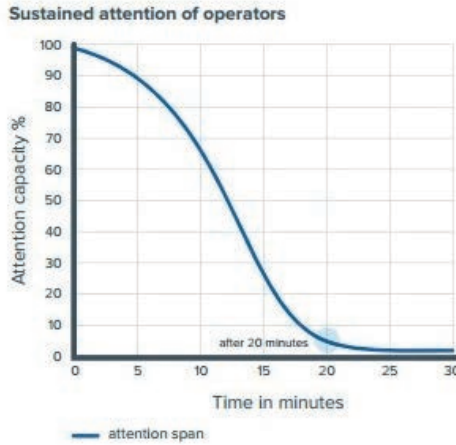
Source: TeachStarter.com

### *The Economics of Human Attention*

To quote Simon again: “A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention”. His contention is that most technology systems are focused on providing as much information as possible without taking into consideration the (limited, non-expandable) human attention span. These systems provide a surplus of information to people, without making an effort to filter them, eliminate irrelevant information and serve only items of interest (Simon 1994).

This has a number of implications for occupations well beyond the media and reception of advertising (Qualman 2011). For example, in an era where much of our security is dependent on remote monitoring by cameras, we see evidence that their operators’ attention is dropping rapidly after 20 minutes of attention-paying work:

Figure 1. Sustained attention of operators



Source: <https://www.dashdoor.com/resource-center/technical-articles/enhancing-human-attention-span-with-hd-analytics/>; accessed: 6.11.2020

Even though research of attention spans confirms the general tendency of their shortening, we can state that the rate of this process is much varied and contextual, depending on the form in which content is offered to the consumers:

Table 5. Average customer engagement time by activity (2020)

Form of activity	Average engagement time (in min)
Ecommerce	2
Video clip	3
Blog	6
Podcasts	15–18
TED talks	over 18

Source: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-october-global-statshot>; accessed 7.11.2020

This is confirmed independently by recent statistics on allocation of consumers’ time across the media. Allocation of time in this case can be regarded as a rough measure of consumers’ attention (in economics there’s a formal assumption that choices are a measure of ‘revealed preferences’). With overall growth in the amount of time devoted to all forms of media consumption, we see that contemporary media consumers manage to devise ways of stretching their attention a little. However, this was done by shifting media consumption into areas requiring relatively less attention (as presented earlier in Table 4 above).

Table 6. Time spent on media consumption 2020

Media/platform	Daily time (min)
Internet	415
Social media	149
Watching TV	209
Listening to music (streaming)	94

Source: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-october-global-statshot>, accessed Nov.7, 2020

Even in the area of traditional media, consumers' attention seems to successfully deal with the oversupply of choices. According to Nielsen's annual "Television Audience" report, American households get an average of 118.6 channels of television but watched only 16 (Digital Consumer Survey 2019).

In research leading to the 2018 "State of Attention Report" it was found that 59 percent of business professionals feel they can give a piece of content their undivided attention more so today than they could just one year ago. Also, nearly half (49 percent) of respondents said they are more selective about the content they now consume as compared to one year ago (State of Attention Report 2018).

### *Strategies for Coping with Attention Deficit*

Today the dynamics of the attention economy pushes companies to draw users in to spend more and more time on apps and sites. Designers who create sites and apps understand that their products compete for the limited resource of users' attention in a highly competitive market (Webster 2014). As a reaction to this, some users are adapting their behaviour by taking conscious and deliberate actions to limit their time online. This can be done by setting a software-assisted limit on time spent online, uninstalling certain applications, or use of parental controls.

Users also learn to manage their attention by developing what is called *banner blindness* (tendency to ignore advertisements when placed in the right rail or at the top of the page). Users have also coped with the assault of multiple notifications on mobile devices by learning to ignore many of them (Pernice 2018).

This is countered by automatically playing videos and unskippable advertisements, which are universally hated by the users (Fessenden 2017). As major social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat are all testing augmented-reality advertisements, these ads may soon become even more immersive in the race for users' attention. Some companies will also continue to produce habit-forming designs that entice users to dedicate more of their attention. This is not likely to change in the foreseeable future as advertising will fund some free content, apps will compete for new users' attention, and people will still only have so much attention to dedicate. While the basic choice in this area remains the designers' choice between balancing business needs (such as the need for new subscribers, advertising revenue, and profit) with respect for the best long-term interests of their users,

in our opinion, a much more likely future scenario is in the expansion of hybrid time, which will allow the re-allocation of attention from other time slots in life (such as work, sleep, obligations). This process is already visible in the blurring of boundaries between work and leisure, between private and professional life, between education and entertainment, between production and consumption (as in user-generated content). While the spill-over of work into our private time is already beginning to be fairly well documented and researched (Mark, Gudith, Klocke 2008), another manifestation of hybrid time – the spilling of private and leisure time into work still waits for further empirical research.

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## STRESZCZENIE

### **Czas hybrydowy jako ważna zmienna w konsumpcji mediów – kontekst gospodarki uwagi**

Celem artykułu jest zwrócenie uwagi na rosnące znaczenie zmiennej czasu w badaniach konsumpcji mediów, w sytuacji swoistej nadpodaży zawartości w stosunku do oczekiwań konsumentów. Jednym z nowych zjawisk w konsumpcji mediów jest równoległe korzystanie z wielu mediów i zawartości w tym samym czasie (*multitasking*). Tradycyjny podział czasu dobowego na czas pracy, zajęć domowych i czas wolny traci na znaczeniu, a konsumpcja mediów odbywa się w czasie hybrydowym. Artykuł zawiera przegląd literatury dotyczącej wybranych badań i koncepcji czasu konsumpcji mediów oraz gospodarki uwagi. Artykuł podkreśla potrzebę pogłębionych badań nad wpływem hybrydowej konsumpcji mediów na środowisko pracy i życie prywatne.

**Słowa kluczowe:** konsumpcja mediów, gospodarka uwagi, wielozadaniowość, czas hybrydowy konsumpcji mediów, badania mediów

