

# Attention sanctuaries: Social practice guidelines and emergent strategies in attention activism

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## Abstract

While scientific consensus on the nature and extent of the harms attributable to increased use of networked screen media remains elusive, widespread expressions of acute concern among first responders to the commodified attention crisis (teachers, therapists, caregivers) should not be overlooked. This paper reviews a series of emergent strategies of collective *attention activism*, rooted in social practices of community action, deliberation, and consensus-building, and aimed at the creation of novel sanctuaries for the cultivation of new shared norms and habits regarding digital devices. Evidence suggests that such *attention sanctuaries* (and the formalization of the conventions for convening such spaces) will play an increasingly important role in addressing/mitigating the public health and welfare dimensions of societal-scale digital platforms.

## KEYWORDS

addictive technologies, attention activism, attention economy, sanctuary spaces, human fracking, community agreements

## INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Surgeon General's 2023 advisor report, *Social Media and Youth Mental Health*, confirmed an informal consensus among parents and educators that the pervasive and near-constant use of networked, screen-based digital media presents serious and novel threats to the wellbeing of young people in the United States and beyond.<sup>a</sup> While the report recognizes important gaps in the scientific literature concerning the precise nature and extent of the dangers and is cautious about causal mechanisms, there can be little doubt that the last two decades have seen an unprecedented shift in the attentional ecology of Americans, both young and old.<sup>1</sup> The ubiquity of newly intimate cog-

nitive prosthetics (smartphones, tablets), the emergence of a rich and immersive world of social life in a fully virtual or simulacral space (social media, multiplayer games), and the intensive, technologically sophisticated, and heavily capitalized commodification of human attention in the attention economy (what has been described as "human fracking") have combined broadly to reconfigure the lived experience of human beings.<sup>2</sup> We are, it is widely acknowledged, in a watershed era in this regard, in that the norms of collective life are in rapid flux, with large and uncertain implications for public health and human welfare.

Societal and technological change at such a scale requires a multi-pronged response, involving major research initiatives across the social and natural sciences (anthropology, sociology, psychology, cognitive neuroscience, epidemiology, etc.). Improved empirical understanding of the dynamics of our situation must inform legal interventions and regulatory frameworks.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the emergence of best-practice codes of conduct among designers, programmers, and media professionals holds promise as a novel mode of ideal-driven expert change.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>a</sup> See also the American Psychological Association's 2023 *Health advisory on social media use in adolescence* (<https://www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/health-advisory-adolescent-social-media-use.pdf>) and the follow-on 2024 *Potential risks of content, features, and functions: A closer look at the science behind how social media affects youth* (<https://www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/psychological-science-behind-youth-social-media.pdf>).

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Educational institutions, too, will need to evolve new strategies for managing the challenges presented by the new sociotechnical environment and the students it engenders.<sup>5</sup> Multiple initiatives are already underway in all of these arenas, and many more are to be expected.

In a democracy, a major component of any beneficial, scalable action concerning the deleterious effects of societal-scale digital networks generally, and, more specifically the exploitative commodification of human attention that drives the current economics of this multitrillion dollar industry, will, of necessity, be the *widespread, grassroots, participatory engagement of civil society*. And this remains true, despite the demonstrable ways that the translation of a large portion of social and civil life onto digital platforms has been shown to have had significant negative effects on precisely these forms of collective action.<sup>6</sup> The issue is properly conceived as one of epistemic injustice, in that the enabling forms of knowledge production and participation are themselves at stake in the technologically intensive promulgation of extractive “intimacy prosthetics” in the attentional ecosystem of human beings.<sup>7</sup>

Confronting this acute/recursive challenge, and aiming to address a notable gap in the available literature on social media and public health, this paper (1) offers a report on the emergence of a notable movement of attention activists who are working to organize educated resistance to the purported harms of human-fracking; (2) outlines an active zone of intersection between these civil-society initiatives and the wider policy space in this area; and, finally, (3) provides a concrete model of how this kind of collective effort can generate actionable interventions with potentially important implications for the evolution of new norms and habits in key social spaces, including classrooms and domestic environments, in the form of sanctuary guidelines and the consensus-based procedures out of which they come.

## Attention activism: The state of the field

The origin of attention activism as an explicit coinage has not, to our knowledge, been precisely documented. But in the last decade, this terminology has been used with increasing frequency to designate a diverse cohort of affiliated persons and groups explicitly working to articulate and reflect modes of resistance to the undesirable effects of the attention economy.<sup>8</sup> Inspired by a prominent critical literature on addictive design, dark patterns, and the exploitative dimension of data extraction and surveillance capitalism, networks of academics, organizers, socially engaged artists, legal professionals, students, therapists, parents, meditation instructors, and other persons have begun to give institutional form to a distinctive movement.<sup>9</sup> Example programs would include the Time Well Spent organization (founded by Tristan Harris; now the Center for Humane Technology); Julie Scelfo’s MAMA (Mom’s Against Media Addiction); Jonathan Haidt’s Anxious Generation projects; the Center for Attention Studies at Kings College, London; the Good Attention initiative at the University of Oslo; the Ecology of Attending manifesto by an interdisciplinary network of scholars of Buddhism, currently centered in the Netherlands; and a

number of related or adjacent groups. It is possible to see in the ongoing growth of a wide range of mindfulness programs aimed at youth and adults another important tributary feeding a rising current of attention activists.

These are quite different organizations and undertakings, to be sure. Some, like the Oslo initiative, focus on grant-funded interdisciplinary academic research. Others, like MAMA, reflect activist coalition-building. A number of for-profit projects, like Sam Harris’s Waking Up app, can be understood to fit into the same broad ecosystem of efforts to push back against the deleterious effects of an extractive financialization of human attention. Many individual authors and thought leaders have contributed to the rising tide of critical discourse about the societal and individual challenges of the contemporary tech-mediated life of the attentional subject.<sup>10</sup>

Across the range of these different projects, unanimity as to the precise definition/nature of attention will not be found. Experimental psychologists and neuroscientists tend to adopt technical, functional accounts of attention as a feature of human cognition.<sup>11</sup> Philosophers have, in recent years, generally theorized attention in ways that stay relatively close to these empirical disciplines.<sup>12</sup> Historians and anthropologists have insisted upon cultural contingency and the contextual specificity of attentional practices.<sup>13</sup> A significant element of the current debates around human attention is precisely the contest over who gets to say what attention is. Is it best understood as an evolved set of behavioral characteristics of responsive organisms? Or does such a biological/behaviorist definition facilitate an instrumental relationship to this important feature of personhood? Can the historicity of human attentional habits provide critical insights at a time of disruptive change?<sup>14</sup>

We will bracket these important and interesting questions in this paper, as proper treatment of the issues would go well beyond the scope of the present contribution. What is relevant to note, however, is that the current vibrancy of these debates indexes the centrality of the issue of attention across a wide range of fields. As with the diversity of modes and programs within the emerging domain of attention activism, this vibrancy signals widespread, convergent concern. Synergies can be discerned already: academic research (on the ethics of attentional conduct) can stimulate activist experiments, and for-profit platforms can disseminate curricular innovations that emerge in the nonprofit sector.<sup>15</sup>

Social movement theory strongly suggests that, as in the case of forerunner episodes of sociocultural transformation (the environmental movement, antismoking campaigns), diverse coalitions will be an essential feature of impact-capable activism in this area.<sup>16</sup> Specific theories of change for such work range in complementary ways, but surely include the mainstay dynamics identified in an established literature: messaging frameworks, media influence, grassroots organizing, diffusion, group formation, and conventional advocacy.<sup>17</sup> Reframing the problems of the attention economy as problems of empowered solidarity and collective action, rather than as mere problems of self-management or individual psychology, stands at the heart of attention activism in its emergent form. We believe this represents an important direction for further development.

Exemplary, in this regard, in our view, is the work of a nonprofit project with which the present authors have affiliations. The Strother School of Radical Attention, based in Brooklyn, New York, is a relatively new teaching and learning institution that emerged out of the international coalition known as the Friends of Attention.<sup>18</sup> The latter group, representing perhaps 200 researchers, artists, and activists, took shape circa 2018 and has operated as a creative network of distributed collaboration, publishing several works, including the *Twelve Theses on Attention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), a manifesto that has been translated into 12 languages and served as the basis of a series of films.<sup>19</sup> The Friends, who operate outside of any direct university framework, but have ties within and beyond the academy, continue to meet regularly and convene an annual Politics of Attention workshop that has become a nexus of advocacy and coalition work—including the creation of the Strother School itself.

The Strother School explicitly organizes its programming around the cultivation of forms of attention resistant to commodification, and characterizes attention activism as the intersection of three formal programs of activity: (1) *consciousness-raising* around the issue of attention, by means of study; (2) *organizing* around the importance of human attention, by means of coalition-building and advocacy; and (3) the creation and promotion of *sanctuary* for the protection and cultivation of human attention beyond the reach of human fracking.<sup>20</sup> The Strother School offers classes for adults and youth that engage with the history, science, and practice of attention, while also hosting regular *attention labs*, which are open and free workshops aimed at drawing attention to attention in group settings using collective exercises, discussion, and presentations. At the same time, the School has also undertaken to spearhead the codification of a new body of age-appropriate curricular materials for high schools, centered on human attention, and the specific perils and opportunities of the present moment in this regard. A variety of street-level forms of experimental pedagogy as well as ongoing working groups for parents and other interested persons complete the current offerings of the Strother School, which, together with the Friends of Attention, represents a notable locus of formal and informed activism in the attention space.<sup>21</sup> While public health is not explicitly at the center of the discourse in these activities, human flourishing is. And the facilitators and teachers and other participants in this work explicitly engage with direct issues of attentional health (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder [ADHD], depression, social isolation) in all of this work.

## Attention activists in the policy space

There is increasingly widespread recognition that policy interventions aimed at the regulation and remediation of the adverse effects of societal-scale digital platforms are actively needed. Law, of course, is an integral element of any policy action. Legislation at the federal, state, and local levels is already underway in the United States, and a wide range of initiatives (many of them relating to data privacy) have already emerged in Europe and elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> In addition, large-scale tort litigation aimed at establishing responsibility for spe-

cific health harms is currently making its way through various courts in the United States and is likely to generate settlements that will affect major corporate actors in this space.<sup>23</sup> Already, the threat of such liabilities is modifying technical and design features as well as commercial strategies in the relevant industries. These direct legal (and associated regulatory) interventions will shape the national and international landscape in the years ahead, with important implications for the public health dimensions of our pervasively screen-based cultural/informational ecosystem.

Attention activists have worked in various ways for more than a decade to complement, support, and, in some cases, drive public policy in this important area. Films like *The Social Dilemma* and *Screenagers*, along with education initiatives tied to social and emotional learning, contemplative education, and mindfulness-based interventions programs, can all be understood to have contributed to growing awareness of the need for social action to confront attentional exploitation/harm. We take the work of our own coalition to be a notable model of such work, in that the Friends of Attention have consistently convened conversations that have directly engaged with the policy space. For instance, in 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Friends hosted an international online initiative composed of eight distinct working groups, laboring over months, to examine the immediate impacts of quarantine conditions on attentional health and wellbeing. White papers were prepared on topics ranging from “Reclaiming the Attention Commons” to “Sustainable Political Attention” to “Burnout and the Politics of Attention,” and more than 100 persons participated in 2 days of workshops.<sup>24</sup> Several publications emerged from this work, as did the social infrastructure of the first open, in-person attention labs to occur in New York City as the pandemic abated (in 2022)—the forerunner programs of the Strother School itself.<sup>25</sup> In addition, one of the 2020 working groups focused explicitly on the importance of attention sanctuaries, a notion taken up again by an overlapping cohort of scholars and activists in 2024 as part of a Friends of Attention workshop on Attention and Law—led by a notable legal and policy scholar working at the intersection of tech regulation and public health, Mihir Kshirsagar.<sup>26</sup> That weeklong intensive gathering centered on surveying the current legal landscape of societal-scale digital platforms, with an eye on identifying strategic opportunities for attention activism. It is with precisely this issue that the remainder of this paper will be concerned.

## The sanctuary guidelines project

How can attention activists best articulate the shifting policy dynamics in this significant arena? Education, advocacy, and the other tools of social-change activism will all be essential in an ongoing and general way. At the same time, tailored, scalable, grass-roots *interventions* will ultimately drive the necessary changes. In what follows, then, we propose to offer a concrete model of exactly this kind of work, by means of a case study: the codification and promotion of novel attention sanctuary guidelines, a special category of community agreement that centers on the explicit collective commitment to distinct forms of

attentional practice in particular settings (i.e., classrooms, workplaces, domestic settings).<sup>27</sup> In combination with wider legal and regulatory initiatives, these emergent, consensus-driven community sanctuary guidelines should play a major role in confronting the challenges of our rapidly changing sociotechnical environment.

What is an attention sanctuary?<sup>28</sup> We define this notion broadly, to encompass, at least in principle, a wide range of already existing spaces and places (libraries, churches, museums, school classrooms). At the same time, by explicitly foregrounding the importance of protecting and cultivating noncommodified human attention, the language of the attention sanctuary aims to recall these legacy spaces to a special feature of their current role as our society faces the disruptive effects of so-called surveillance capitalism, inadequately regulated data harvesting, and the addictive features of a screen-based attention economy. In addition to invoking the sanctuary nature of traditional spaces for individual and collective study, reflection, and intersubjective encounter, we further propose that formal social practices of *attention sanctuary creation/cultivation* will be a necessary feature of collective wellbeing in the years ahead. By explicitly and collaboratively engaging in conversation about attentional practices and commitments, and by achieving and promulgating shared norms for shared time and copresence, we can radically reshape what happens when we gather—and in doing so meaningfully mitigate some of the most prominent problems associated with the pervasively disruptive use of networked devices.<sup>29</sup>

Having experimented with the creation of an attention sanctuary at the Strother School in Brooklyn and having for several years engaged in grass-roots programming and inquiry around emergent strategies for community action, the Friends of Attention convened a formal Working Group in 2024 to codify what we take to be best practices for the cultivation of sanctuary spaces for human attention.<sup>30</sup> The initial drafts of that working group have now circulated through our wider network for advice and commentary and have undergone revision in that process. The resulting material, then, while best understood as provisional, is nevertheless the product of wide, authentic, and demanding civic engagement by a diverse community of activists, scholars, artists, students, and teachers—all of whom identify as attention activists and have committed significant time and energy to this kind of work.<sup>31</sup>

The next section presents these attention sanctuary guidelines, a document that emerged out of a diverse and participatory process of attention activism and that is intended to be used by communities that wish to establish their own sanctuary spaces. The exact procedures by which such a process can be undertaken will vary, as homes, classrooms, and civic activities (juries, school board meetings) each present unique environments and require distinctive patterns of leadership and consensus formation. But this document offers a point of departure for necessary conversations and a template for tailored community agreements that address the shared need for cooperative attentional commitments.<sup>b</sup>

<sup>b</sup> We will reserve for treatment in a separate publication a full discussion of our own experiences implementing this guideline procedure in different settings. In brief, however, it is worth saying that we have found the process of opening this difficult and important topic to collective scrutiny (in, e.g., college classrooms) provides invaluable insights, and directly affects community engagement and awareness. The sociologist Kristin Lawler has recently embarked

## Creating an attention sanctuary: The case study document

Attention is the foundation of how we see ourselves, each other, and the world. But new technologies and new ways of living have placed human attention under enormous pressure. If we are going to be well and do well together, when we gather we need to take care of our attention, which is itself a way of taking care. This document aims to help you and your community think and talk together about how you want to protect and cultivate your attentional environment, so that there is goodness in the time you share and goodness for the people who share it. This document will help you settle on some rules and habits and commitments that, if practiced consistently, will create what we call an attention sanctuary—a special time/space that nurtures human attention. The process of working toward such an objective is essential: a true attention sanctuary cannot be imposed, it has to be *created* and *maintained*.

### What is an attention sanctuary?

An attention sanctuary is both shelter and refuge, as well as playground and laboratory. It is a space that is actively and intentionally created *together* to nourish and build attentional capacities, and to promote the good things that come from using our attention with others. To best realize this kind of space, a sanctuary must foster two conditions: *freedom from* the forces poised to exploit and compromise our attention; and *freedom to* explore, experiment, and play with practices of attention. Sometimes creating an attention sanctuary involves removing obstacles (Do phones need to be on “airplane mode” during this gathering? Should we all close our laptops for the next hour?), but sometimes it involves *adding friction*, because we can lose each other, and what we care about, in the slipstream of passivity and easy-quick solutions (Should we make dinner together one night a week? Should we leave time to walk together, instead of driving?).

### How can attention sanctuaries be created?

An attention sanctuary requires *guidelines*—an agreement to share a set of practices around attention in a certain place or at certain times. These guidelines need to come out of your community, and they need to reflect real commitments that everyone is willing and able to make. Working on figuring out these guidelines is itself part of having a true attention sanctuary! Arriving at your guidelines involves five steps:

1. **Establish core attention values**—Collaborate! What does collective attention mean to you? What kinds of attention practices do you wish to cultivate in this space?

on a research project to undertake a formal study of the effects of applying these “Attention Sanctuary Guidelines” in classroom settings.

2. **Consider your sanctuary environment**—Collaborate! What is the purpose of your sanctuary? Where is it? How is it set up? What is included? How does it look? What makes it comfortable? Who cares for it?
3. **Consider attentional “freedom from”**—Conduct an attention audit: Observe what may be impeding attention (share your struggles!). Reflect: When did you achieve the kind of attentional experience/relation that felt good? Adjust: How can you reproduce that situation or experience more often?
4. **Consider attentional “freedom to”**—Collaborate! How do you want to welcome each other and guests? How do you want to “arrive” together? In what ways do you want to engage with each other? How can your sanctuary facilitate these aims?
5. **Draft your guidelines**—Collaborate! Have each person propose a rule or principle. Write these down, and discuss. Codify the way your attention sanctuary will work, and seek a consensus commitment. This may not be easy, but this, too, is the work of attention.<sup>c</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Societal-scale digital platforms present novel opportunities and challenges for human communities, and they do not affect all individuals or groups in the same way. On the contrary, a technological development of such scope is guaranteed to have an extremely wide and divergent series of impacts. In addition, the rapid rise of increasingly sophisticated artificial intelligence systems presents a host of novel potential risks and benefits, which both complement and, in some cases, appear to subtend (or even counter) aspects of current analyses of the sociotechnical situation. The enormous range and complexity of the issues demands close and creative scrutiny from policy advocates across the spectrum of expertise and perspectives—and considerations of public health and welfare must be paramount.

It has been the contention of this paper that, within this wide domain, a key area of focus must be heightened resistance to the largely unregulated practice of human fracking—the wholesale commodification of human attention within our screen-based communication/entertainment/labor ecosystem. Strong evidence suggests that data-driven algorithms promoting addictive feeds (a dynamic driven, ultimately, by the architecture of the attention economy) are contributing significantly to unprecedentedly high levels of screen-based

device usage in the United States and beyond—activity particularly notable among youth. These developments are correlated with troubling increases in youth mental health problems, as well as high levels of reported loneliness, alienation, and depression across various demographics. While a wholly satisfying causal analysis has not been offered, there are reasons for grave concern.

In this context, this paper has further argued that attention activism represents an important, forward-looking program of movement-oriented engagement, one with significant implications for policymakers. Pursuing this point, we have focused on the emergent strategy of attention sanctuaries, and offered a specific case study of one effort to codify a participatory procedure by which communities (particularly in schools) can surface the importance of collective attentional norms, and work to achieve shared guidelines by which to cultivate and care for their attention. At present, most school-based initiatives working to address the invidious aspects of screen culture strongly emphasize limiting access to devices (phones, tablets) and/or restricting the kinds of activities permitted to students when using networked platforms.<sup>32</sup> While, broadly speaking, we support the targeted and responsible application of such policies (together with digital detox rubrics for youth and adults alike), we believe that the participatory process of actively creating attention sanctuary guidelines presents a valuable component of any comprehensive strategy for addressing the public health dimensions of societal-scale digital platforms. Such an approach is constructive, rather than privative, and promotes reflection, education, and solidarity.<sup>33</sup> These are the central virtues of an attention-activist approach to the challenges of our rapidly shifting media ecosystem.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This is a jointly authored article, which reflects the work of a wider community of collaborators.

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