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These ‘attention activists’ are here to help you put down your phone

The Friends of Attention want their new book, “Attensity,” to be the “Silent Spring” of our times.



From left, Peter Schmidt, Alyssa Loh and D. Graham Burnett, the co-editors of “Attensity!” (Leo Burnett)



By Sophia Nguyen

Maybe everyone has this moment — that stomach-lurching sensation of realizing that something’s gone awry in a big way. You haven’t heard birdsong in years because of the earbuds permanently lodged in your skull. You’ve downloaded so many focus apps that they seem to have grown rivalrous, restive, fully bugging out as they attempt to override *each other*. You’ve encountered the horrific term “adult tummy time.”

For filmmaker Alyssa Loh, a version of that moment happened when, about a decade ago, she enrolled in business school at New York University. “All of my classes were obsessed with the idea of attention,” she said. “But they never called it attention. It was always called ‘time on device,’ or ‘eyeballs,’ or ‘engagement.’” It seemed to Loh that various business interests had developed robust, rigorous ways of measuring,

tracking and valuing attention — and that meanwhile, the rest of us were walking around with only the barest, dawning awareness of its importance.

“That felt like an incredibly powerful asymmetry,” she said.

In 2026, the term “attention economy” has been fully assimilated into the mainstream. In fact, our sense that this economy poses a problem has spun off a number of cottage industries: physical pouches, lockboxes and plastic doodads; boot camps and retreats; all those apps for your apps. And, of course, there are the books — whole pallets of them, jostling for your eyeballs: In just the past couple of years, there have been Jonathan Haidt’s “The Anxious Generation,” Chris Hayes’s “The Sirens’ Call,” Cal Newport’s “Digital Minimalism” and Nicholas Carr’s “Superbloom.”

Follow Books

Add another to the pile: “Attensity!,” written by a group called the Friends of Attention, will be published Tuesday. It’s a manifesto for what they call the “attention liberation movement.” It has a bright red cover, the color of a stop sign. The co-editors — Loh; her partner, D. Graham Burnett; and Peter Schmidt — want it to be nothing less than our era’s “Silent Spring.”

“You are correct,” the book begins. “Something is seriously wrong.”

Who are the Friends of Attention? Burnett, a historian of science at Princeton, calls it “a coalition of the willing,” estimating that about 100 people are involved in the movement in various ways. Of those, perhaps 20 contributed to the book. “There’s no membership,” he said, “and we don’t keep track.”

The group emerged partially from “The Order of the Third Bird,” a whimsical, semisecret society that stages flash mobs around works of art — Loh and Burnett are both members — and partially from the São Paulo Biennial in 2018, just after the election of Jair Bolsonaro as Brazil’s president. The festival’s participants, Burnett said, were angered by the result: “They felt that the deliberative democratic practices of this country had been suborned by the nefarious use of social media, siloing,

misinformation — the kinds of techniques that we had seen in the U.S., Russia and in Poland and in Turkey and in Hungary and in the U.K."

Spurred by the sense that attention had become urgently political, Burnett and his colleagues formed the Friends of Attention. In 2023, they founded the Strother School of Radical Attention. In an airy space in the Dumbo neighborhood of Brooklyn, the school offers activism workshops and classes on topics like ambient music, urban plant life and hypnosis.

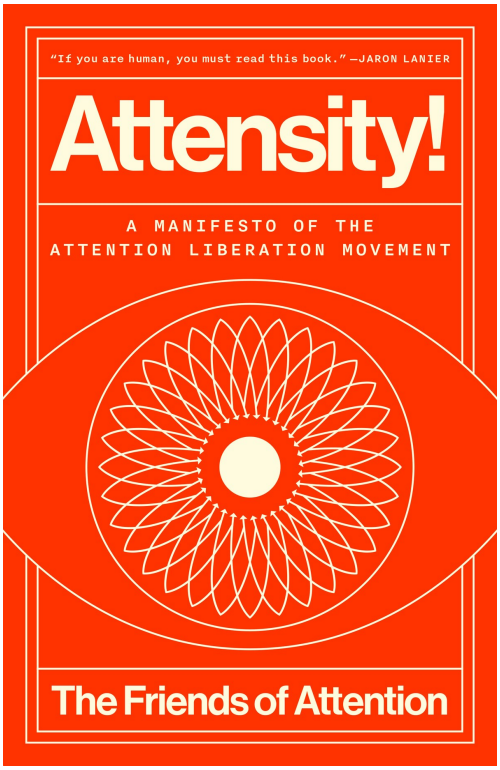
That November, Burnett, Loh and Schmidt — a former student of Burnett's, and the school's program director and co-founder — wrote an op-ed for the New York Times in which they coined the term "attention-fracking": "pumping vast quantities of high-pressure media content into our faces to force up a spume of the vaporous and intimate stuff called attention, which now trades on the open market." The piece gained enough traction that they secured a book deal with Crown, an imprint of Penguin Random House.

"Attensity!" argues that we've been thinking about this crisis all wrong. The problem isn't that you, personally, are addicted to your phone or that you can't stay on task. It goes deeper than that: Our understanding of our attention has been shaped by lab research funded by the military and the ad industry — forces that define attention in terms of staring at screens and pressing buttons, with the aim of wringing more work or money out of us. But attention, the authors argue, is much more varied and wild than that.

History offers some models for change, such as the fight against Big Tobacco and the popularization of exercise. (The average mid-century American would have been baffled by the notion of recreationally "going for a run.") The editors also point to the founding of the environmental movement: "It took time, and quite a lot of work, to give both those words, 'environment' and 'activist,' the meanings that feel natural and intuitive to us now," they write. They aspire for the idea of "attensity" — which they define as "the free movement of attention in its fullness, freely shared" — to become as commonplace as "ecology" and for it to be defended with the same zeal.

The digital detox has become a cliché, right up there with dry January, buying a gym membership and decluttering.

But with a trillion-dollar industry hell-bent on keeping you on your device, Loh said, “the answer to that is never going to be your personal willpower. The only answer to that is each other and getting together with your people.”



(Crown)

“Attensity” offers an expansive view of what that could involve: tending to bonsai, tailgating, welding, getting together with your buddies for poker, even Minecraft. “Once one begins to look around, the Attention Activists are everywhere,” say the authors. That view is so expansive it verges on suspicious: How different is this message, really, from being told to log off and touch grass? It’s nice to hear that all our favorite pastimes are already a form of activism, but if the crisis is so serious, doesn’t it call for more pointed opposition?

Attention critics seem to want us to redirect our gaze to the same handful of things, Daniel Immerwahr wrote in the New Yorker last year: “It’s fine art, old books, or untrammeled nature — as if they were running a Connecticut boarding school.” This, he said, might reasonably arouse suspicion that this literature stems from elite anxiety over democratizing media.

Perhaps the fuzzy-edged exuberance of “Attensity” is designed to counter that — to give the book a chance of reaching beyond the Brooklyn-Berlin-biennials circuit. The same goes for its buoyant prose, puffed full of italics, exclamation points and words in all caps: “The great promise of Attention Activism is in the astounding fact that its future leaders are out there, *all around us, ALREADY*!,” the book declares.

“We, early on, wrote on one of our brainstorming posters, ‘Sing it,’” Schmidt said. “It’s a very Whitman move. We’re not theorists here — we

want to create a song that everybody can jam to."

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