

How can we defend ourselves from the new plague of 'human fracking'?

Big tech treats our attention like a resource to be mercilessly extracted. The fightback begins here

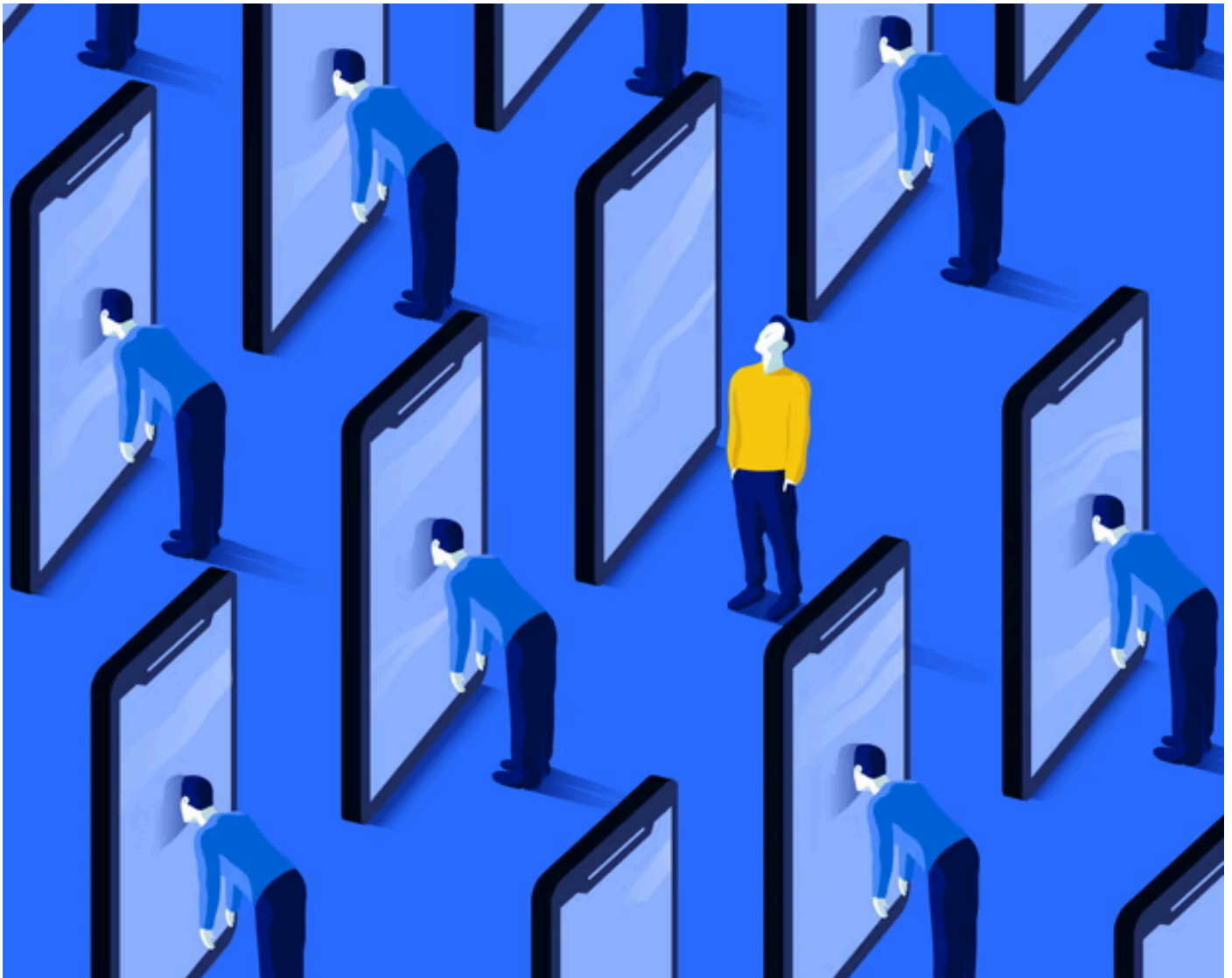


Illustration: Elia Barbieri/The Guardian

The Friends of Attention

Sun 18 Jan 2026 07.00 EST

 Prefer the Guardian on Google

In the last 15 years, a linked series of unprecedented technologies have changed the experience of personhood across most of the world. It is estimated that nearly 70% of the human population of the Earth currently possesses a smartphone, and these devices constitute about 95% of internet access-points on the planet. Globally, on average, people seem to spend close to *half their waking hours* looking at screens, and among young people in the rich world the number is a good deal higher than that.

History teaches that new technologies always make possible new forms of exploitation, and this basic fact has been spectacularly exemplified by the rise of society-scale digital platforms. It has been driven by a remarkable new way of extracting money from human beings: call it “human fracking”. Just as petroleum frackers pump high-pressure, high-volume detergents into the ground to force a little monetisable black gold to the surface, human frackers pump high-pressure, high-volume detergent into our faces (in the form of endless streams of addictive slop and maximally disruptive user-generated content), to force a slurry of human attention to the surface, where they can collect it, and take it to market.

Fracking (of the Earth and of our minds) produces tectonic instability, toxicity and the despoliation of our landscapes, natural and social. We now know that the heedless exploitation of our external environment has been so relentless and irresponsible that human survival on Earth has been placed in actual jeopardy. The new “gold rush” into the *inner* environment of the human psyche is well on its way to effecting parallel, if even more insidious destruction.

The stakes are existential. And that is because, rightly understood, our actual human “attention” - the thing the frackers want, in the form of our eyes on their screens - is nothing less than our ability to care, our ability to think, our ability to give our minds, time and senses to ourselves, the world and each other. To commodify that is to commodify our very beings. The problem isn’t “phones”, and it isn’t “social media”. The problem is human fracking, a world-spanning land-grab into human consciousness - which big tech is treating as a vast, unclaimed territory, ripe for sacking and empire.

That’s the bad news. The *good* news is that novel forms of exploitation produce novel forms of resistance. What fills the coffers of the six largest corporations on the planet is nothing other than the stuff of our humanity. Which is to say this new fight for our attention stands in a long line of clashes between those who are willing to reduce people (their labour, their eyeballs) to cash value and those who insist on a higher view of human flourishing.

This history is long and complex, and often painful. But it tells us this much: we can fight back. Indeed, we must.

■ ■ *We must insist that human attention is ours, and we will use it to make the worlds we want to live in*

So what is to be done about this new kind of human exploitation that is harming us - harming children and adults, compromising our deliberative politics and our psychological wellbeing? Regulatory efforts are piecemeal and actively thwarted by the powerful interests in play.

Psychopharmacological fixes for the ever-expanding damage merely monetise the destruction in a complementary way and render us better able to submit to conditions that are palpably at odds with human flourishing.

How to confront a problem that is both unspeakably intimate and unthinkably extensive?

The answer is clear: we, the actual people of this planet, must come together in decisive solidarity; we must say no to the human frackers, and do so by insisting, in new ways, that human attention is human, and it is ours, and we will use it to make the worlds in which we want to live. In other words, we need a *movement*.

Think that sounds quixotic? Well, keep in mind that's how actual change actually happens. And it can happen fast. The environmental movement as we know it did not exist in 1950, but by 1970 it was a global force. In 1946 Reynolds Tobacco was using doctors to promote cigarettes. Fewer than 20 years later, the American Medical Association and the US surgeon general publicly averred that smoking caused lung cancer.

And the changes get much bigger than that. Precious few do-gooders devoted themselves to environmental politics in 1925. That's because "environmental politics" wasn't even a thing. It took a cultural shift (and the work of advocates such as Rachel Carson) across the mid-20th century to establish the physical environment - the unity of land, water, and air that produces shared life - as a politically tractable object around which diverse groups could organise. This is to say that the very structures of politics, not just our beliefs and hopes, are themselves emergent forms. New things come into being, and old things pass away.

Where attention is concerned, there are mounting signs that we are reaching an inflection point. People of all sorts, Maga Republicans and Mamdani progressives, hipsters in Portland and evangelicals in Arkansas - *people who don't agree about anything* - all actually do agree that something is totally wrong with a world in which everyone spends nearly all their time scrolling endlessly through the algorithmic feeds of their social media, a world where military-grade technology and trillion-dollar corporations take aim at children, and feed them whatever it takes to keep them hooked.

You can only abuse people so much, and then, eventually, they turn, they rise, they insist on *something else*. Already politicians on the right and the left are identifying this issue as one that moves the electorate. In 30 years, we will look back, and this era - the wild west of the tech princes' smash-and-grab into our hearts, souls and relationships - will be difficult to explain to our grandkids. "How did you all let that happen?" they will ask. And we'll have to say: "It's hard to explain: it happened before we noticed; it was so much fun, especially at first; it took us time to figure out what was going on ..."

But we are figuring it out. We write as representatives of a fast-growing and increasingly well-organised movement, focused on pushing back against the human frackers, and giving shape to a new politics of human attention. At the heart of our efforts? The formation of broad coalitions devoted to the politics of human attention, the practice of diverse forms of study that call forth the life-giving powers of the mind and senses, and the promotion of sanctuary spaces for the protection and cultivation of the kinds of attention that make life good. We call this work attention activism.

Our claim? That all of us already have the tools to resist the frackers, because all of us already have things we do and care about that put us beyond the reach of the algorithms. We all already know the deepest truth: that true human attention *isn't* the click and swipe of screen time. True human attention is love, curiosity, daydreaming and taking care of ourselves and others.

Yes, new technologies give rise to new kinds of exploitation and resistance. But new forms of exploitation can even give rise to genuinely new forms of politics. You couldn't brutalise an industrial proletariat before the factory system. Steam engines set the conditions of possibility for this development. They weren't themselves a "problem", of course; they gleamed and were precise and powerful. Who could see them operate without awe? But they also created a world in which it was possible to aggregate and extract

physical labour from human beings in a revolutionary way. Along the way, they created a new kind of political subject, *Homo economicus*, a person who had been reduced, in the calculus of modernity, to “labour value”. Actual revolutions followed - and a new kind of politics was born which reflected a new world of industrial labour, and new forms of labour solidarity, such as unions and workers’ parties.

The new system of human fracking is turning all of us into attentional subjects in a powerful new way. *Homo attentus* is the end user of every networked system - economic, political, expressive. With this new form of life comes, as we have discovered, appalling new vulnerability. But we are on the brink of understanding the new power that has come into our hands in the fracklands. We believe a new kind of politics beckons. What will it look like? It is hard to say. And there are reasons to be fearful. But if we, the people, can take up the banner of a new kind of freedom movement - a movement for the true freedom of attention itself, what we call *attensity* - and deploy our truly human attention in new ways, with a new understanding of the stakes, we can defy the frackers, and insist on creating, together, a human world.

D Graham Burnett is professor of history at Princeton University. Alyssa Loh is a film-maker. Peter Schmidt is a writer and organiser. The authors are members of the Friends of Attention coalition, and co-editors of ATTENSITY! A Manifesto of the Attention Liberation Movement (Particular).

Further reading

The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness by Jonathan Haidt (Penguin, £10.99)

How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy by Jenny Odell (Melville House, £14.99)

The Sirens’ Call: How Attention Became the World’s Most Endangered Resource by Chris Hayes (Scribe UK, £16.99)

Most viewed