

# **ATTENTION ACTIVISM: A RALLYING CRY TO FIGHT THE COMMODOFICATION OF HUMAN ATTENTION** by The Friends of Attention

**We feel it, too.** We, too, are lonely, plagued by anomie, troubled by the sense of a fundamental disconnection between ourselves and *what's real*. The world seems to have slanted sideways. The more we try to be in contact with the people and things that promise to sustain us, the more isolated we become.

But how could it be otherwise? It makes perfect sense that we do not know how to live when our actual people (our friends, coworkers, lovers, even family) increasingly come to us as pop-up snapshots served between advertisements; when our access to the world is determined by our consumer preference categories; when extractive digital networks shape every aspect of daily life; when we do CAPTCHA tests to prove our humanity. We do not know how to live when we are continuously needled by our feeds into anguish and outrage in relation to distant events and lives over which we have no control.

And yet we're *tired* of watching our friends and family (and ourselves) fail to flourish under these conditions. We tire of seeing our people diagnosed with mental disorders—as though failing to flourish in inhuman conditions is some individual quirk, maladjustment, or malady. It is all so obvious that it scarcely bears elaboration: We are living under conditions that are contrary to basic wellness—of ourselves, our communities, and our planet.

We, too, awaken our screens in the morning, and are accosted by headlines announcing epidemics of depression and alienation, the collapse of our most trusted institutions, and the breakdown of our planet's basic ecological cycles. These harms are numerous and diverse, but they are characterized by a common trend toward *dissociation*, toward severing and solitude.

Consider: Over the past ten years, suicide attempts and feelings of persistent hopelessness among high school students have increased by a staggering *40 percent*. Girls are at greater risk—one in ten American female teens actually attempted self-destruction in 2024, and studies suggest that nearly a *third* experienced suicidal ideation. Never before have young people found themselves to be so disconnected from the things that make life worthwhile. We are confronting a pandemic of loneliness, and an unprecedented spike in “deaths of despair.”

We see comparable changes in a political landscape ravaged by social rupture and polarization. Instead of the messy-but-hopeful “enactment of democracy,” we find ourselves discharging open sewers of contempt into the ever-widening gulf between one virtual silo and another—disintegrating our ability to recognize our common condition, achieve consensus amid conflict, and thereby overcome existential threats.

And the threats *are* existential. The steady advance of climate catastrophe has pitched forward into a full-frontal assault. We are, more than ever, undeniably enmeshed with the worlds of water and air and soil. Yet even as the urgency of our ecological condition batters our spirits with each wildfire, hurricane, or deranging balmy December day, we wonder if, perhaps, this is not so abnormal after all.

**We are living under conditions that are contrary to basic wellness—of ourselves, our communities, and our planet.**

What we love most is at stake. It's enough to get anyone out of the chair and into the street!

But among the catastrophes of our present moment is that the very means by which these disasters are brought to our awareness—twenty-four-hour news, the *ping* of cascading notifications, the endless scroll—act not as a bridge into the world, but as the actual mechanisms of further isolation and distance. The more urgent our collective problems become, the *less real* they seem to be.

How is this possible?

How have we been separated from each other and the world—and even from ourselves—at the absolute historical apex of global communicative interconnection?

The answer, we believe, is surprisingly simple: The actual stuff of all connection—the true way we are present to being, beings, and everything else—is neither a network nor a device. It isn't outrage, or, for that matter, hope. It isn't blood, sweat, or tears, either. It is *attention*.

And they have seriously fucked with our attention.

What is attention? The experts do not agree. In fact, they actively contradict each other.

These contradictions affirm the urgency of our cause. They are evidence that attention is already *a site of active contestation*. To affirm what attention is, or is not, or may be, is to decide what sort of world(s) we want to live in.

So let us consider two sides of the matter.

On the one hand, we find a definition of attention that has been *literally instrumental* in service of (and which has developed contemporaneously with) the attention-sucking regime we seek to resist. Now a classic on business school syllabi across the country, management consultant gurus Davenport and Beck's blowout bestseller, *The Attention Economy* (2001), says this: "Attention is what catalyzes awareness into action."

Plenty to admire. After all, awareness and action are central to our practice of attention (and to our movement!). In "catalyze," we may even detect a whiff of attention's obscure alchemical powers.

But on the whole, this formulation is rigid and mechanistic. If awareness is not attention until we act upon it, then our attentional life is therefore only ever a *cascade of incitements*. Davenport and Beck's account sets aside the question of "what attention can be" and replaces it with an always-already-*instrumentalized* definition: Attention is a task-directed TOOL. To be used. It is reflex and trigger. Track and click.

The actual stuff of all connection—the true way we are present to being, beings, and everything else—is neither a network nor a device. . . . It is attention.

In perfect contrast, let us consider Bernard Stiegler's *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (2008). Stiegler, a French philosopher whose work centers on technology, approaches the problem etymologically, writing that "to pay attention is essentially to wait (*attendre*)."

Wait for what? His answer to this goes to the heart of his philosophy, so it is difficult to do it justice, but the core can nevertheless be briskly stated: "What attention . . . waits on/for . . . is the infinity of the object"—an infinity, he argues, that, mirror-like, *reflects the inner infinity of whoever is attending*.

(Pause, for just a moment, to *feel* what Stiegler is getting at: that within each of us, within YOU, is an infinity that can be perceived through deep attention to the world around us. That to give attention to objects and to other people is to be present to one's ongoing and unending coming-into-being. This coming-into-being happens in a relational space between the "I" and the beings and entities we encounter in our daily lives—*precisely* the space that has been partitioned, and quantified, and optimized, and strapped to a system of psychic extraction that fractures our minds and plunders our eyeballs.)

But that is getting ahead of ourselves. What we can say here with certainty is something like this: According to Stiegler, **attention is a species of (possibly eternal) waiting.**

You may detect in these words a familiar set of images: the Zen practitioner atop her zafu; the Catholic taking Communion; the chavruta's weeks-long exegesis of a single Talmudic phrase. This is no mistake—the great spiritual traditions (of which we have named only a few) represent deep and rich attentional worlds realized by diverse practices of waiting upon the infinite. (If you identify with these traditions, then we believe that you *already* share our core commitments. What's more, we think you have much to contribute to Attention Activism.)

So “waiting” is not an altogether bad formulation. We admire Stiegler’s deferral of reflex gratification. We admire that his definition is less an incitement than an invitation, for we are in the business of invitation. But at the end of the day, Attention Activists are a coalition committed to action—and the emergent mysteries of indefinite expectancy *do not a revolutionary movement make!*

And so, we come to a contradiction. These ideas seem thoroughly at odds with each other, even formally antithetical. On the one hand, attention as the action-trigger; on the other hand, attention as a kind of perpetual suspension. Which is *right*?

We propose a “resolution” of this paradox. A *détente* if you will. It requires a slide sideways, out of the realms of business and philosophy and into the world-building openness of literature—or, if you like, life itself.

**Attention is no mere tool; it creates a space beyond the stultifying operational logics of technology and capital. Yet it is not an endless, sublime adjournment, either.**

In his 1902 novel, *The Wings of the Dove*, Henry James depicts a crucial, if fleeting, encounter between a fatally ill patient (female, sensitive, anguished) and an esteemed medical doctor (grand, humane, busy). It is a charged rendezvous, and a rushed one. For various reasons, they will have only a few moments together—the time must be stolen from the exigencies of ordinary life and obligation.

They sit. And here is how James evokes the redemptive power of that moment, making use of the language of attention, and figuring it as a gift of pure imminence: “So crystal clean, the *great empty cup of attention* that he set between them on the table.”

This isn’t quite indefinite waiting, although there is something of the infinite in the cup’s emptiness. And it isn’t triggering action either, although we sense in the simplicity of the doctor’s gesture the possibility that the cup is already, somehow, unaccountably *full*. There is presence here, a welcoming, an invitation that is also a generous and vital *offering*.

In this fashion, James’s account rescues attention from the jaws of antinomy. Attention is no mere tool; it creates a space beyond the stultifying operational logics of technology and capital. Yet it is not an endless, sublime adjournment, either. It moves in the world of frailty and pain. It bears the promise of healing—or at least of consolation. It is the true gift of the open. It is where we meet in that openness, and make space for what unfolds.

This may be the best account we have of what attention can be if it is to be truly ours, if it is to be the stuff of care, and the ethereal medium out of which we make our relationships—to ourselves, to others, and to the world.

The radical philosopher Simone Weil famously wrote, shortly before her death, that “attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer.” She said that, in its purest form, true attention presupposes both faith and love.

**Faith. Love. We will need these notions as we go about deciding *what it is that we seek to protect*.**

## **A MANIFESTO OF THE ATTENTION LIBERATION MOVEMENT**

You are correct: Something is seriously wrong. It has to do with our ATTENTION, our essential ability to give our minds and senses to the world. This precious capacity has been channeled, captured, and commodified by an industry of immense technological and financial power. How? Call it “human fracking.”

Human fracking is bad for people, and for politics. It reduces our very beings (and our relationships) to that which can be quantified, bought, and sold. All this is the triumph of a catastrophic *lie* about what it means to be human. But deceit and exploitation are never inevitable. To push back, we need more than isolated, individual efforts; what we need is a movement of *collective resistance*.

This movement of attentional liberation exists and has a name: ATTENTION ACTIVISM.

Attention Activism is a fight for justice. This emancipatory uprising takes our apocalyptic present, turns it on its head, and creates, from the chaos and confusion, new vistas of human flourishing.

Attention Activism is rooted in STUDY—a commitment to diverse forms of teaching and learning centered on attention (what it is, what it can be, what it can do). Attention Activism also requires COALITION-BUILDING—collaboration and solidarity across a range of communities who see attention’s essential role in human flourishing. Finally, Attention Activism means the formation of SANCTUARIES—spaces where people can gather, care for each other, experiment with different kinds of attention, and conceive brighter futures.

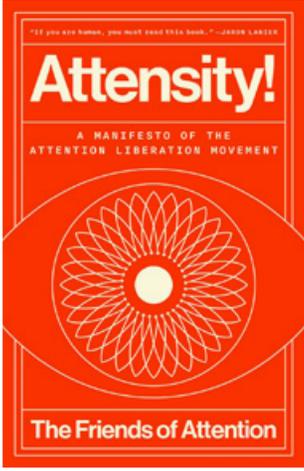
To discern the revolutionary possibilities of the present, we look to artists, thinkers, and dreamers. To bring those possibilities to *bloom*, we heed the countless Attention Activists who are already out there, devising new (and revising old) ways of giving their minds and senses to each other and the world.

These *attentionauts* and *attentionistas* draw on the wisdom of diverse traditions. Across uncharted terrain, emerging practices of joint attention illuminate new horizons of shared political power. Not only power, but beauty, and grace, too.

**This is our movement: the free movement of attention in its fullness, freely shared. We call that transformative goodness *ATTENSITY*. Join us in this heightened and heightening glory—or let us join you! 📍**



# Info



Ready to dig deeper into the book?  
Buy a copy of [Attensity!](#)

Want copies for your organization or for an event?  
We can help: [customerservice@porchlightbooks.com](mailto:customerservice@porchlightbooks.com)  
800-236-7323

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**The Friends of Attention** is a collective of activists, artists, and thinkers. Three editors and long-standing “Friends” helped *Attensity!* take shape: **D. Graham Burnett** is the Henry Charles Lea Professor of history of science at Princeton University. **Alyssa Loh**, a filmmaker, co-directed the short film “Twelve Theses on Attention.” **Peter Schmidt** is the Program Director of the Strother School of Radical Attention.

**SHARE THIS**

Pass along a copy of this manifesto to others.

**SUBSCRIBE**

Sign up for e-news to learn when our latest manifestos are available.



## Porchlight

Curated and edited by the people of Porchlight, *ChangeThis* is a vehicle for big ideas to spread. Keep up with the latest book releases and ideas at [porchlightbooks.com](http://porchlightbooks.com).

This document was created on February 4, 2026 and is based on the best information available at that time.

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit Creative Commons. Cover art from Adobe Stock.