

Are you paying attention?

AT HIS LAST PULLMAN PULSE CONFERENCE, WIRED ASSOCIATE EDITOR, JOURNALIST, AND AUTHOR **ROWLAND MANTHORPE** HIGHLIGHTED HOW INTERNET-DOMINATING COMPANIES ARE CAPITALISING ON OUR ATTENTION AND HOW BEING IN BETTER CONTROL OF WHAT WE PAY ATTENTION TO COULD ACTUALLY BE THE KEY TO HAPPINESS.

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How many times have you almost bumped into another person or a lamp post while walking in the street because you were looking down at your smart phone and weren't paying attention? However, not walking into things on the street isn't quite the bottom of it. As editor, journalist, and author Rowland Manthorpe highlighted at his *Pullman Pulse* conference in London last October, online companies are ruthlessly fighting for our attention to monetise it. And by letting our attention being coerced this way and that, we're underestimating the direct impact that paying better attention to

what we pay attention to can have on our sense of wellbeing.

As a result of our obsession with being constantly connected to the internet, our attention has become the currency of the internet age. "The internet is the biggest mass surveillance system ever built, and what it tracks, primarily, is attention," Rowland Manthorpe points out in an interview with *The Pullman Magazine*. And as we sift through the onslaught of material shoved our way by internet-dominating companies, or to borrow Manthorpe's expression, the "deluge of distraction", his principle concern lies in what

he calls the 'monetisation' or 'weaponisation' of our attention.

"The basic theory here is that any economy is defined by a single scarce resource – and in the digital economy, that scarce resource is attention. Online, we are all fighting over the limited attention span of our fellow human beings, in the same way that our ancestors fought over land," explains Manthorpe.

"Advertising is where attention converts to money: if you pay attention to it, then the website

"WHERE WE GIVE OUR ATTENTION DEFINES OUR HAPPINESS LEVELS"

running the ad will make money. That's the basic business model of Google and Facebook, the two most powerful internet firms in the world. The battle for attention is also the battle for dominance online."

While companies battle it out, further evidence is emerging to back the premise that paying attention to what we pay attention to is vital to our sense of wellbeing. Originally brought forward in the 90s like in writer Howard Rheingold's book *Virtual Communities* numerous psychologists including Nobel prize-winner Daniel Kahneman, have since established the correlation between controlling what we pay attention to and our levels of happiness.

"What we attend to is, in a sense, who we are. It sums up thought, feeling, action... everything we do and think, even, you could say, everything we know to be true," says Manthorpe. Often unnoticed and untracked by us, attention actually is fundamental to our very being because where we give our attention defines our experience of living and how we feel, and thus our happiness levels.

For economist Paul Dolan who worked with Kahneman, "If you

are not as happy as you could be, then you must be misallocating your attention..." (*Happiness by Design: Finding Pleasure and Purpose in Everyday Life*)

And it's true. The internet, and social networks for instance, can be perceived as mirrors that reflect our insecurities. They hold our attention for hours on end while exposing us to idealised versions of other people's lives, which often leaves us feeling highly inadequate and unhappy. So according to previous research, by selecting what we pay attention to, by curbing how much time we allocate to activities that bring negative feelings like browsing social networks for example, we should be able to increase our happiness levels.

However, with the "deluge" of information, it's becoming harder to choose, leading many of us to apathy and compliance to the dominant online companies' methods. As a possible solution, artificial intelligence and self-driving car companies are looking at ways of reducing choice. But avoiding making decisions about what we should pay attention to altogether may not be what drives us forward out of the cyber void.

It's hard to know what the future holds for the attention economy. Will it implode? Will we be happier to have computers do the choosing for us? Or, as Rowland Manthorpe jokes and perhaps hopes, maybe we'll all become Buddhists and learn to master the art of mindfulness, paying attention simply to what is in front of us. Whatever the result, as the success of digital detox holidays for instance, go to show, reducing the attention we pay to the internet increases our sense of self, others, wellbeing, and happiness. So if we don't know what the long-term impact of a life totally absorbed in cyberspace is yet, at best we know that freeing up attention to share real lasting memories that serve to build real-life relationships as opposed to accumulating likes that are lost in the cyber void, make us happier. And who knows, the next time we take a walk we might even start to look up once in a while and reconnect with our lamp-post-planted surroundings.

"Pullman Pulse" launched at Pullman London St Pancras, 100-110 Euston Road, London, UNITED-KINGDOM

