I Want Your Attention. I Need Your Attention. Here is How I Mastered My Own

By Chris Hayes
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I try to hold people's attention for a living. For more than 13 years, I've been hosting a cable news show, and when I'm not doing that, I spend a lot of time alternating between reading the internet and obsessively posting my takes to various social media platforms. I tell myself that this is for my job, that I must, as a professional duty, keep up on the news, but it's a little like a tobacco executive with a two-pack-a-day habit.

"Why am I like this?" I ask myself. What I want to say is that it's not just me.

From my perspective as both an attention merchant and a compulsive customer, it's clear that the difficulty of sitting in one's "own chamber" — as the philosopher Blaise Pascal described the freedom to sit undisturbed with one's thoughts — is greatly exacerbated by the form of attention capitalism we are enmeshed in.

Our attention is a wildly valuable resource, and some of the world's most powerful corporations extract it at scale in increasingly sophisticated ways, leaving us feeling like bystanders to our minds. You might say we've built a machine for producing boredom and then entertainment to fill it in an endlessly accelerating and desperate cycle.

Boredom lurks around every corner in our lives. I've come to view it, specifically its avoidance, as the silent engine of modern life. Attention, where we put our conscious thoughts in any given moment, is the substance of life. We are painfully aware of the constant claims on our attention — the buzz and zap of the phone and push notifications and texts and little red circles that alert us that there's more to pay attention to that we haven't even gotten to yet.

Under this assault, it's easy to feel that we're trapped in an age that leaves no space for us to simply sit and think. But it's worth noting that as much as the current forms of attention capitalism exist to take our attention, there is some very deep part of us that wants it taken.

In the wake of Donald Trump's second electoral victory, a viral tweet from October 2016 once again started circulating: "i feel bad for our country. But this is tremendous content."

That probably seemed funnier before child separation and Covid. (Indeed, in 2020 Darren Rovell, who wrote it, posted, "Four years later. There is nothing tremendous about this content. I'm just sad.") But for many millions of Americans, perhaps including the crucial slice of swing voters who moved their votes to the Republican nominee in 2024, Mr. Trump is the consummate content machine. Love him or hate him, he sure does keep things interesting. I've even wondered if, at some level, this was the special trick he used to eke out his narrow victory: Did Americans elect him again because they were just kind of bored with the status quo?

Of all the fates that might befall us, from madness to illness to the trauma of war, being bored seems, at most, trivial. We tend to associate the experience of boredom with childhood — zoning out in class, long summer days at home with nothing to do. But that's just because as soon as we get old enough to control our time, we do everything possible to make sure we never experience boredom. What parents haven't had the experience of rejecting a child's request for screen time and then catching themselves immediately going back to scrolling their phones?

And yet boredom — unlike, say, hunger — isn't a universal human experience. Anthropologists who work with Indigenous peoples who live outside industrial modernity from Fiji to Ecuador to Australia report that these societies spend oceans of time doing nothing, without complaints of boredom. Their languages often don't even have a word for boredom. One anthropologist who works with the Warlpiri Aboriginal people in Australia noted that the lexeme for the concept is an import, writing, "When Warlpiri people referred to boredom, they used the English word, usually

embedded in otherwise Warlpiri sentences." It turns out boredom is a constitutive experience of modernity.

Yet we feel this restlessness; we lament our shrinking attention spans. But to focus on a relatively narrow question of technical measures of our attention span misses a deeper truth. The restlessness and unease of our times aren't simply, in my experience, the vertigo of distraction and distractibility. No, that experience is itself a symptom caused by some deeper part of the unsettled self. The endless diversion offered to us in every instant we are within reach of our phones means we never have to do the difficult work of figuring out how to live with our own minds.

For many years I have, like an old man, taken a daily constitutional. I began in my early 20s, when I was a freelance writer, which meant working all day either at home or in coffee shops. I found it useful to go for a walk and clear my head. I'd go even on the bitterest days of a Chicago winter, when the wind slices at your face like a blade. I started doing this before the days of the smartphone and even before the days of podcasts on the iPod. During the walk I would just … think. I'd let my mind wander. Almost without exception, my best thinking happened on these walks. I would come back to my laptop, sometimes almost racing up the steps to my apartment, to get the thoughts down.

There are many terms to describe the mental state I so loved during those walks: daydreaming, reverie, mind wandering, lost in thought. And to be clear, there are variations that are less or more pleasant. Obsessively looping through an anxious review of one's financial situation is the bad kind; thinking through possible destinations for an upcoming trip is the pleasant kind.

Ironically enough, having an intellectual project to work on (like writing a book about attention) now serves as my antidote to mental restlessness. It's a place to put my attention when I am alone in my own chamber. It provides, in its strange way, the kind of comfort I derived from thinking of baseball stats or comic book characters in the idle hours of my childhood. It provides a framework for structured daydreaming, mind wandering with a purpose.

Daydreaming is a central experience of being alive and also a casualty of the attention age. Years ago, podcasts came to fill my ears during my walks, conditioning me to feel a little panicked without one. But as I've spent more time thinking about attention, I've begun to force myself to just walk and let myself be with my thoughts. I've also developed a set of routines, habits and hobbies that can provide the framework for a form of modified idleness, just enough to focus on to keep myself rooted and present while allowing my mind to wander. Chopping wood, making handmade pasta, going to the dog park with my canine-obsessed 6-year-old — these are all in the happy but endangered category of things to do that are neither work nor looking at my phone.

In 2014, psychologists at the University of Virginia and Harvard University set about to investigate people's experience of boredom. Subjects were asked to simply sit alone in a room doing nothing for six to 15 minutes and were later asked about their experiences. They hated it. The researchers then tested just how much the subjects hated it. The authors asked whether the subjects would rather do an unpleasant activity than no activity at all.

In one study, participants were given the "opportunity to experience negative stimulation (an electric shock) if they so desired," the researchers wrote. And guess what. "Many participants elected to receive negative stimulation over no stimulation — especially men: 67 percent of men (12 of 18) gave themselves at least one shock during the thinking period," compared with 25 percent of women. In fact, one participant appears to have spent basically the entire time shocking himself, administering 190 shocks in what I can only guess was a desperate bid to avoid being alone with his thoughts.

You may be saying to yourself, "That's deranged," or your reaction may be, "Oh, I could see myself doing that," and most of us will never know because we're never quite given such stark choices. But you've probably had the experience of walking into a coffee shop with a long line and instinctively reaching for your phone, only to discover you left it in the car or at home. You are now stuck. What follows is a brief but intense flicker of claustrophobic panic.

At one level this is an example of the addiction we have to our phones, but those of us of a certain age remember a similar feeling long before the smartphone: getting to the bathroom with nothing to read or sitting at the breakfast table before school, bleary-eyed, reading the back of the cereal box because it was the only thing available to occupy your mind. While the state of constant interruption of the attention age may be unwelcome, it grows from a desire that long predates contemporary life. "When I have occasionally set myself to consider the different distractions of men," Pascal observed in "Pensées," his collection of essays published in 1670, "I have discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber."

Pascal's primary concern was the status of men's souls. He wanted to understand why men (and he meant men specifically, much like the experimental subjects most inclined to shock themselves) are tempted to undertake the hazards of war and conquest and all manner of dangerous and sinful activity rather than simply enjoy what they have. The root of it, he proposed, is an aspect of the human condition upon which so much today depends: the restlessness of our minds, the craving for diversion. "Hence it comes that men so much love noise and stir; hence it comes that the prison is so horrible a punishment; hence it comes that the pleasure of solitude is a thing incomprehensible." I've returned quite a bit to Pascal's writing on this subject because of how relatable it feels these many centuries later, a testament to how deep and enduring the problem is.

This craving, he contended, emanated from spiritual angst about our mortality, "the natural poverty of our feeble and mortal condition, so miserable that nothing can comfort us when we think of it closely." So powerful is this angst that no amount of wealth or earthly power and comfort is a shield against it. This is even true for kings.

It seems the king's mind should be at ease, for unlike nearly everyone else in the kingdom, the king is not required to engage in brutal toil for his subsistence. And yet that ease is its own kind of prison: "When we imagine a king attended with every pleasure he can feel, if he be without diversion, and be left to consider and reflect on what he is, this feeble happiness will not sustain him," Pascal wrote. "He will necessarily fall into forebodings of dangers, of revolutions which may happen, and, finally, of death and inevitable disease; so that if he be without what is called diversion, he is unhappy, and more unhappy than the least of his subjects who plays and diverts himself."

Boredom is something far graver than the child's complaint that there's nothing to do. The unoccupied mind can be a feral beast, and much of our lives, in Pascal's view, is spent trying to tame it. I'd hazard we've all had occasion to find ourselves trapped with our thoughts in a way that makes us feel like a captive in a lion's cage. And today we find ourselves in the king's position: surrounded by endless sources of diversion and yet none of it ever quite enough to truly escape the terror of boredom.

I'd love to offer some tips, but the brutal truth is that I'm not great at navigating this myself. My go-to solution is to make sure I'm always doing lots of different things; I host a TV show and a podcast, just wrote a book and have three kids ages 6 to 13. When acquaintances and friends say, "How have you been?" I reply, almost out of instinct, "Good! Busy!" But maybe busyness is just another attempt at a diversion. Writing two centuries after Pascal, the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard observed, "The busiest workers of all, those who in their officious buzzing about most resemble humming insects, are rather the most boring of all." Ouch.

Kierkegaard, like Pascal, saw boredom as a moral menace and even "the root of evil." But he contrasted boredom with idleness, which he saw as an elevated state, the highest good. "Idleness as such is by no means a root of evil; quite the contrary, it is a truly divine way of life, so long as one is not bored," Kierkegaard wrote. "Indeed, one can say that any human who lacks appreciation of it proves he has not raised himself to the level of humanity."

My mind is too restless and unsettled to be quite comfortable with true idleness. But anything worth doing in life requires a bit of work and struggle and intention. It may seem a paradox to train yourself to do less, but Jenny Odell's book "How to Do Nothing" offers a starting point. She proposes a "plan of action" that includes a kind of "dropping out not dissimilar from the 'dropping

out' of the 1960s" as well as "lateral movement outward to things and people that are around us" and a "movement downward into place."

Millions of people use prayer and meditation and other forms of spiritual and psychological practice toward the same ends. What these practices have in common is the cultivation of an inner discipline to resist that feral desire to distract oneself. Kierkegaard called it the "principle of limitation, which is the only saving one in the world." He added, "The more you limit yourself, the more resourceful you become."

We're trying various solutions to this problem, which is both new and a version of a very old remedy. There are mindfulness apps and endless self-help gurus beckoning from Instagram Reels and TikTok, promising ways to soothe our itchy minds. Together this does little to settle a restless and uneasy public, one that's been conditioned to be easily bored by the constant thrum of diversion. We're stuck in the king's paradox. We're chasing diversion with ever more ferocity, conditioned over time by the content slot machines in our pockets to need more and more to pay attention to.

One can imagine Pascal's king finding himself requiring his court jesters to bring him ever more extreme, perverse and humiliating entertainment just to keep his interest, temptation similar to what is sitting there in the amusement devices in our pockets, a similar temptation to the one offered by a politician who will keep things interesting, no matter how cruel or offensive he has to be to maintain the public's interest.

You can't busy yourself out of boredom or amuse yourself out of it. Neither work nor constant entertainment provides a solution. Not for the king or for us. The problem we face is existential and spiritual, not situational. We cannot escape our own mind; it follows us wherever we go. We can't outrun the treadmill. Our only hope at peace is to force ourselves to step off whenever we can. To learn again to be still.

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