



Beyond attention

Description

I'm still reviewing my blog posts from 2013. In keeping with the unstructured nature of blogging, I didn't plan sequences of posts to follow particular themes. However, a thread does emerge from this sequence of six posts – that of *attention*.

[Soft fascination](#) (138) introduces the theory that sustained concentration on a task induces attention fatigue, a biologically instilled tendency in humans and other animals to moderate their innate ability to focus in order to get things done with a countervailing tendency to withdraw from the task. Were it not for this tendency to withdraw, after a period of time we would miss out on what is happening around us, particularly threats from predators, caring for basic bodily needs, eating, socialising.

The need to withdraw may show itself as fatigue, boredom, moodiness, stress, anti-social behaviour and other symptoms of attention fatigue. According to the theory, we are always attending to something somewhere, so we work-stressed individuals need to shift the focus of our attention to other contexts and other tasks. That helps restore our attention so that we can carry on, or adjust tasks, renewed and refreshed. As I explain in that blog post, with reference to key sources, the most effective restorative settings are putative natural environments. Such settings have the potential to reset our moods.

The second post in the series [Mood machines](#) (139) mentions imaginary and actual technologies and devices that purport to operate on our moods – either reinforcing or altering a particular mood state. Devices that support music listening, gaming, mass media entertainments and online video content are obvious examples. In terms of attention fatigue, these devices and the practices they entail rival the potentials offered by nature settings to restore our capacity to effectively re-engage our attention.

The third post [Are you aware of your brain?](#) (140) develops the soft fascination theme with insights we developed in trying to assess brain fatigue in artificial and natural settings using mobile electroencephalography (EEG). A head-mounted EEG device is a kind of mood machine – purporting to ascertain people's mood states and related stress levels in different environments.

In that post I also addressed questions people asked about our novel use of this fairly new and controversial technology. The idea of an FAQ (frequently asked questions) report provides a kind of researcher/reader attention profile and served to direct our attention to issues of validation, extraneous signals, and time dependency of EEG readings. One issue impinges directly in the matter of attention: you can be in a nature setting but attending to something else. Though we didn't discuss it in this post, imagination has a role to play in attention profiling.

In the post titled [What's wrong with the future](#) (142) (with or without a question mark), I explored some high-profile publications at the time that I thought over-hype the potentials of social media, e.g. *The New Digital Age* by Google's executive chairman Eric Schmidt and director of Google Ideas Jared Cohen. In terms of my *attention* theme, such publications attempt to instill a sense of optimism about a technological future. They also appear to grab reader attention with titles and quotable aphorisms such as "we are facing a brave new world, the most fast-paced and exciting period in human history."

Academic writing directs reader and writer attention by more sober means and these are undergoing transformation in light of online indexes. In [Pros and cons of Google Scholar](#) (142) I suggested that access to online indexes has the potential to widen the *attention* of researchers, such that they explore a wider range of sources, and might cross disciplinary boundaries to synthesise new insights or at the very least acknowledge what is happening in other areas.

The final post in this series [Delayed gratification](#) (143) explores some of the psychology of having to wait for things. That's pertinent to predictions about future successes, and also intersects with attention fatigue. After all, we can get fed-up with waiting and might subsequently direct attention away from the desired object or obsess about it.

I address attention as an AI theme in later writing, e.g. my book [AI and Language in the Urban Context: Conversational Artificial Intelligence in Cities](#) and in the post [Meaning and attention](#).

The attached audio recites these six posts in order with different voices, courtesy of Speechify.com.

Note

- Featured image is of a light in a garden setting. I took the photograph this month.

Category

1. Artificial Intelligence
2. Podcast

Tags

1. attention
2. future
3. nature

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