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The Attention Economy and The Right to Attention: Some Lessons from Theravāda and Mahāyāna Thought

Mark Fortney

Dalhousie University

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Mark Fortney [1]

Abstract

Much of the work in the rapidly growing field of computer ethics relies on the concepts and theories of Western philosophy. With this article my aim is to help stimulate conversations that draw on a wider range of ethical perspectives. I build on recent work on the sense in which the regular operations of the attention economy might violate our right to attention, and I do so through looking to a range of Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhist texts. As I argue, these texts should inspire us to realize that we have more than just the right to direct our attention as we will and the right to be free from distraction. This is because there is a third right to attention that the recent literature overlooks, namely the right to strengthen our ordinarily weak capacity to control our attention.

[1] Dalhousie University. Email: Mark.Fortney@dal.ca. I am grateful to Emma McClure and to Marc-Henri Deroche for their very helpful comments on previous versions of this work.

Introduction

My first, narrower, purpose is to build on recent work about whether the "attention economy" poses a threat to our rights, specifically our *pro tanto* right to direct our attention as we please and to be free from distraction. I draw on Theravāda and Mahāyāna texts including Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga (The Path of Purification),* Nyanaponika Thera's *Vision of Dhamma*, and Śāntideva's *Śikṣā-samuccaya* (*The Training Anthology*). I argue that looking to these texts inspires us to realize that there is a third right to attention that is overlooked in the literature.

My second, broader, purpose is to help stimulate further philosophical work on the attention economy, and computer ethics more generally, that engages with concepts and theories from outside the Western canon. Juxtaposing Theravāda and Mahāyāna texts, both classic and more contemporary, with recent philosophical work on the attention economy demonstrates just one of the many ways one could work towards this purpose.

In Section 1, I'll introduce Bartlomiej Chomanski's (2023) account of our right to attention and discuss the apparent threat posed by the attention economy. In Section 2, I'll draw on Theravāda and Mahāyāna texts to motivate the view that we are typically unable to effectively control how we direct our attention and have much to gain from learning to strengthen this ordinarily weak capacity. In Section 3, I'll argue that if that view is correct then we have the right to strengthen our ordinarily weak attentive capacities. Moreover, as I argue, a concern with something like the third right to attention seems to underlie the worries some writers have expressed about the attention economy.

Before we begin, here are some notes on the scope of the present essay. Firstly, this article focuses on a right to attention in the sense of Western discourses about rights rather than terminologically similar ideas that are more familiar in Buddhist studies—for instance "right

mindfulness" (*sammā sati*). Furthermore, I don't claim that the Buddhist texts I discuss make explicit claims about rights, but rather that looking to these texts allows us to open up novel and philosophically fruitful conceptual space within a right-based analysis of the attention economy.[2] As I thank Marc-Henri Deroche for putting it in an anonymous review of this article, one way of describing my goal in this article is to "creatively articulate a *contemporary Buddhist ethics of attention* that may address contemporary issues, including elements of morality, law, and policy-making that are based on the Western humanistic concept of 'rights'."

Additionally, I do not mean to argue that, as a matter of fact, our rights have been violated by various applications of the attention economy—paradigm examples of these applications include, e.g., TikTok & Instagram. Instead, my goal in the present article is to enrich our sense of what the right to attention really consists in, and to thereby help set the foundations for better-informed work on when that right has been violated.

The Right to Attention

In Chomanski's view, the right to attention consists in, firstly, a right "to direct our attention as we please" and, secondly, the right "to be free from distractions imposed on our attention by others"[3] (5). In his view, small distractions and small impositions on our efforts to direct our attention as we please do not count as genuine violations of our rights. Moreover,

[2] For some previous work on Buddhism and rights, see e.g., Perera (1991) and King (2015). Previous work on Buddhism and rights has not defended the idea of a right to attention.

[3] In this article I focus on the expanding the right to attention as Chomanski conceives of it, but for related work see Kärki and Kurki (2023), who discuss whether there is a sense in which there are already legal protections against distractions and certain "immersive stimuli."

in some cases a distraction or imposition on our efforts to direct our attention as we please might be justified.

For example, as he notes, an attention-grabbing title on the front page of a newspaper might be a distraction, but seems like too minor a distraction to be a violation of our right to attention. Also, as Chomanski notes, if we are sitting beside someone on the train and notice that they are looking through sensitive medical records, we plausibly have a duty to refrain from directing our attention to those medical records. But this is not a violation of our right to direct our attention as we please because in this case it's reasonable to think that another person's right to privacy has overridden our right.

In the rest of this section, I will describe how Chomanski argues that his two rights to attention make sense within two different frameworks for thinking about rights, one which bases rights in our fundamental interests and one which bases rights in our sovereignty over ourselves.[4] Later in the article, I will situate my third right to attention within these same two frameworks.

According to one account of rights Chomanski discusses, rights protect our pursuit of fundamental human interests (5). He argues that because attention is what he calls a particularly "central" mental capacity, the first two rights to attention function to protect our pursuit of our fundamental interests. First I'll spell out the claim about centrality, and then how he links centrality with fundamental human interests.

[4] My goal here is not to fully reconstruct all Chomanski's reasons for thinking that there are two rights to attention—these go beyond his claims that the rights make sense within two different frameworks for thinking about rights.

Chomanski's kind of claim about attention's centrality has been developed in more detail by Sebastian Watzl (2022). 5 Watzl, calling the claim "the descriptive centrality of attention," argues that attention often enables us to do things like make decisions, control our actions, control ourselves, perceive, remember, feel certain emotions that are constituted by patterns of attention, engage in introspection, and even more (94-95). As Watzl writes, summing up recent philosophical and psychological work on attention: "*. . .* almost anywhere we look in the mind and in forms of behavior we find plausible arguments to the effect that attention is centrally involved in and complexly interacts with other aspects of the mind" (95).[6]

In one classic and particularly vivid experimental demonstration of attention's centrality to conscious perception, experimental participants watch a video in which two teams are passing a ball. One team is wearing black, the other team is wearing white, and participants are instructed to count the number of passes made by the team wearing white. On account of their attention to the task of counting the passes, and on account of their inattention to other parts of the video, many participants fail to consciously perceive or remember a remarkable part of the video they are watching. Part way through the video, a person wearing a gorilla suit slowly walks across the screen, even pausing in the middle of the screen to beat their chest. See Simons and Chabris (1999) for discussion.[7]

Now I'll discuss the connection between attention's centrality and our fundamental human interests. Chomanski works with an account

[5] See also Wayne Wu (2023), who defends a view of the metaphysics of attention according to which attention is particularly central.

[6] Even if Watzl were wrong about some of his claims about what attention enables us to do, or if some of his claims needs to be slightly restricted, attention would still be a central mental capacity, and this would be enough to support my argument about the third right to attention below.

[7] Results like this one have sparked substantial philosophical discussion about the right interpretation of results like this one; see e.g., Watzl (2011) for discussion.

according to which the list of fundamental human interests includes: life, the acquisition of knowledge, play, aesthetic expression, sociability & friendship, practical reasonableness, the capacity of intelligent and reasonable thought processes, and the capacity for spiritual experience (5). On the assumption that attention enables or is otherwise a part of the multitude of mental processes that Watzl argues it is, it follows that the first two rights to attention function to protect our pursuit of our fundamental interests.

For instance, a series of distractions might cause us to fail to successfully perceive something important to the maintenance of a social relationship, and thereby substantially interfere with our pursuit of sociability and friendship. We could construct similar descriptions of how a series of distractions and/or impositions on a person's right to attend as she pleases might prevent her from pursuing each one of the fundamental human interests on Chomanski's list. And if attention is so central in our mental lives, this conclusion should be one that we can reach with reference to any plausible theory of fundamental human interests rather than only the account Chomanski works with in his own analysis of the right to attention.[8]

Chomanski also discusses another account of rights according to which they function to protect personal sovereignty, which includes a right against interference with one's self (5). Here he draws on one of Douglas and Forsberg's argument that insofar as we have a right against inference with our selves, this entails a right to both bodily and mental

[8] For a discussion of the debate about which of these frameworks for thinking about rights is the better one, see e.g., Kramer (2016). In this section of the article, I follow Chomanski in not committing to one of these views in particular but rather showing that the right to attention makes sense put against the background of more than one theory of rights (as we'll see, I move on from the interest approach below and discuss rights in the context of personal sovereignty).

integrity (191).[9] In this context, "bodily integrity" refers to a right to be free from significant, nonconsensual interference with one's body, and mental integrity is an analogous right to be free from interference with one's mind. For instance, on the view Douglas and Forsberg defend, it would be a violation of our bodily integrity if someone were to pierce our skin with a needle without permission, and it would, just as much, be a violation of our mental integrity if someone brainwashed us, thereby causing us to believe something entirely against our will. On Chomanski's way of thinking, something that is in common between these two different violations is that they interfere with a person's sovereignty over themselves.

As he argues, his first two rights to attention function to protect mental integrity in particular, and thus to protect personal sovereignty. This argument, like the one concerning fundamental human interests, draws on the fact that attention is a central part of so many mental phenomena. If attention is so central, then the first two rights to attention function to "... [protect] our ability to choose where we allocate it [attention], and hence, what and how we perceive, what we remember, and what we do" (5). Protecting these abilities lets us structure our mental lives in accordance with what we will, and thus protects one aspect of our sovereignty over ourselves. [10]

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[9] They have additional, non-sovereignty-based arguments related to their claims about mental integrity, but there is no need to discuss those arguments here.

[10] One might wonder whether the notion of sovereignty over oneself is incompatible with the not-self teaching. It depends on the substantial question of whether the same sort of "self" is at issue in both conversations, which I won't take up here. My own inclination would be to argue that the various claims about the self that show up in theorizing about sovereignty over oneself are about a conventional self. In any case, note that I have grounded the right to attention within two frameworks for thinking about rights: one in terms of interests, and one in terms of sovereignty. Insofar as there is a problem with

Now we can move on to how the attention economy might threaten our right to attention. As Castro and Pham put it, the attention economy is "... constituted by two types of transactions: those in which consumers give new media developers their literal attention in exchange for a service (such as a news feed or access to pictures of friends), and those in which developers auction off consumer attention to advertisers" (2). Paradigm examples of new media applications that rely on the transactions of the attention economy include Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok.

Whether these exchanges cause violations of the right to attention will depend on various details. We should expect substantial variation due to differences between various apps, users, and so on. Here is one imagined case to help illustrate what violations of the right to attention might look like. We could imagine that a user is fully aware that, through accessing an app for free, they will occasionally be distracted by some brief advertisements, and that the user is satisfied with this exchange. For instance, through information made available to them by the developers of the app, the user might expect to see a few thirty-second advertisements every thirty minutes. In a case like this, we have a transaction of the attention economy that would not violate the user's right to be free from distraction. But further facts could cause us to change this verdict. For instance, perhaps using the app also involves frequently being exposed to outraging content, and perhaps the distraction of the outraging content, and ruminating upon it, reliably causes users to be much more distracted than they planned to be. In a case like this, the user's right to be free of distraction would be violated.

When it comes to actual cases, there is much to say about what it is, exactly, specific users are agreeing to when they participate in

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one of these approaches, there would still be another one that provides backing for the idea that there is a right to attention.

transactions of the attention economy, and how exactly those users are impacted. I leave those discussions for another day when they can be given the space they deserve. My goal, through introducing the third right to attention, is to strengthen the foundations for those discussions.

Now that we've discussed the first two rights to attention, we can move on to my argument that there is a third right, and accordingly a novel way in which the attention economy might violate our right to attention.

The Trembling, Fickle Mind

In this section I introduce three ideas from Theravāda and Mahāyāna literature: (1) we ordinarily have a weak capacity to control how we direct our attention; (2) we have much to gain from strengthening this capacity; and (3) there are features of our environments that make it difficult or impossible to engage in that strengthening. Then, in the following section, I use these ideas to make my argument that there is a third right to attention.[11]

First, here is the Pali *Dhammapada*'s characterization of what we might think of as the ordinary human condition—the mental capacities that humans ordinarily tend to have:

> The wise one makes straight
> The trembling, fickle mind –
> So hard to guard, so hard to control –
> As the fletcher makes straight the arrow.
> (Roebuck 2010 p. 9/Verse 33)

[11] In this article I draw on both Theravāda and Mahāyāna texts to show that my grounds for thinking there is a third right to attention can be found in more than one variety of Buddhist thought.

A commentary on the *Dhammapada* (*Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā)* pairs each verse with a story to guide our interpretation of the verse. The verse in question is paired with story of Meghiya, who struggles to be free of distraction and to concentrate on meditating (Roebuck 125). This makes it clear that the *Dhammapada* is describing a problem with our attentive capacities: we ordinarily have only a weak capacity to control how we direct our attention. On this way of thinking we might at various moments make decisions about what to attend to and actually be successful, for a brief span of time at least. However, because our minds are ordinarily "trembling and fickle", we cannot attend as reliably or as enduringly to various objects of thought as we might like.

According to Theravāda texts, our weak attentive capacities cause a range of problems. For instance, as Nyanaponika writes in his *Vision of Dhamma*:

> If we observe our own minds, we shall notice how easily diverted our thoughts are, how often they behave like undisciplined disputants constantly interrupting each other and refusing to listen to the other side's arguments. Again, many lines of thought remain rudimentary or are left untranslated into will and action, because courage is lacking to accept their practical, moral or intellectual consequences. If we continue to examine more closely our average perceptions, thoughts or judgements, we shall have to admit that . . . [they] are just the products of habit, led by prejudices of intellect or emotion . . . (69)

On Nyanaponika's way of thinking, our weak attentive capacities result in a sort of painful internal chaos and cacophony within our streams of consciousness, a tendency not to develop or act on lines of thought when the consequences are difficult to contemplate, and moreover beliefs which

are the product of thinking that is unreflective and prejudiced.[12] And, of course, the deepest problem with having weak attentive capacities, from Nyanaponika's perspective, is that we need to strengthen them to "develop the deeply penetrating clarity of vision" which is necessary for attaining liberation from suffering (15).

In his view, part of the way to address this problem is to work to strengthen one's attentive capacities, and so here I will also discuss some of Buddhaghosa's remarks on what environmental conditions help make that kind of practice possible. As we will see in the next section of the article, these remarks about the environment bear on how we should conceptualize our right to strengthen our ordinarily weak attentive capacities.

But before I discuss Buddhaghosa's remarks on the environmental conditions that make it possible to strengthen our attentive capacities, it is important to acknowledge that strengthening one's attentive capacities through meditative practice is just one part of the path to liberation from suffering, as he and other Buddhist writers characterize it. This path has other significant and interrelated components. In Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu's translation of Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* (*The Path of Purification)*, the path has three broad components concerning virtue (*sīla*), the development of consciousness (*samādhi*), and the development of understanding (*paññā*).

[12] Here is an example to illustrate the second suggestion. Imagine a person thinks, "I should speak up about this injustice!", but they are afraid of the consequences. Nyanaponika's thought seems to be that a weak capacity to control one's attention might result in that person letting their attention drift away from that thought before developing it further, and might result in their never even acting on the thought. By contrast, with more attentive strength a person could manage to keep the thought more firmly in view, and in a way that is more likely to inspire development and action. Nyanaponika's idea may bear on discussions of *akrasia*, but I lack space to explore that.

The Path of Purification is a vast text, but here I will present just one small part of what it has to say about what Buddhaghosa calls the development of concentration, and more specifically the environmental conditions that must be in place to make this development possible. In a discussion of the faults of various monasteries, Buddhaghosa writes that meditative practice won't be possible if one is at a place where various chores will chip away too much at one's free time, or if one is at a place with insufficient amounts, or quality, of lodging, food, and medicine available to the meditator. Moreover, Buddhaghosa's analysis includes our social environment: he argues that meditative practice will be more difficult, or impossible, if you have no good friends available to support you, and if your community doesn't include any learned elders who can provide advice on how to interpret details of Buddhist teachings (116/IV.19).[13]

Thus, Theravāda Buddhist texts have much to say about the idea that we ordinarily have weak attentive capacities and have much to gain from strengthening those capacities. We see thoughts along this line in Mahāyāna Buddhist texts as well. Here I'll illustrate that with reference to Charles Goodman's translation of Śāntideva's *Śikṣā-samuccaya* (*The Training Anthology*). Consider, for instance, this second root verse of the text:

> Someone who wishes to end suffering
> And go to the utmost limit of happiness
> Should securely plant the root of faith,

[13] Above, Nyanaponika describes the transformation of attentive capacities in both monastic and lay contexts, whereas here, Buddhaghosa focuses on these transformations within monastic contexts. But it seems reasonable to suppose that any effort to transform our attentive capacities would benefit from having the support provided by environments that share the features Buddhaghosa describes, at least to a certain extent (access to food, social support, and so on). Thus, Buddhaghosa's environmental notes are still relevant to the argument I make in the third section of the article, which concerns, in my view, a right that all people have.

> And then fix the mind unwaveringly on Awakening.
> (Goodman lxxiv)

As Śāntideva goes on to describe various steps toward ending suffering, in the eighth root verse of the text he describes cultivating one's attentive capacities as an important intermediary step:

> You actually do that by being mindful at all times.
> Mindfulness should come from sharp attention.
> With effort, this attention
> Becomes what is called "the greatness of peace." (lxxv)

Thus, in these opening verses we see an emphasis on how much we have to gain from having strong attentive capacities. We also see the exhortation to strengthen our attentive capacities, which presupposes that the ordinary reader has weak attentive capacities that she should work to transform.

This idea about our weak attentive capacities also shows up in various texts that Śāntideva explicitly cites and discusses in his *Anthology*. For instance, he writes that according to the *Sūtra on the Jewel at the Crown of the Head* the untrained mind is "unstable and wandering, like a monkey or the wind" (228). Citing the *Cloud of Jewels*, Śāntideva writes that "The mind wavers like a flame. The mind wanders like a horse . . .When you reflect thoroughly on the mind like this, and live well established in mindfulness, you do not move under the control of the mind" (119-120).[14] Thus, Śāntideva surely differs from writers like Buddhaghosa and Nyanaponika in a number of respects, but shares with them the core commitment that there

[14] As Goodman notes, this particular passage is very much like the opening passages of the Pali *Dhammapada*, one of which was cited and discussed above in the present article (119 n.3).

is a sense in which we ordinarily have weak attentive capacities and have much to gain from strengthening those capacities.

Other Buddhist texts have, of course, much more to say about these themes. But my goal in this section of the article has just been provide as much of an overview of these themes as we need to support the argument for the third right to attention, to which I now turn.

Before I go on to do that, I will add that (as I thank a reviewer for this journal for pointing out) the texts that are particularly relevant to discussing the themes of our attentive capacities and how to transform them in more detail are texts that focus on *yoniso manasikāra* (appropriate, wise, or right attention) as well as those that focus on *sati/smṛti* (mindfulness). For further discussion of *yoniso manasikāra,* see e.g., Anālayo ("Yonisomanasikāra"). For further discussion of mindfulness, see e.g., Anālayo ("Mindfulness"). My goal in this section of the article has been to focus more on articulating our need to strengthen our attentive capacities rather than to focus on fully explaining how to achieve that, but of course that second topic is a very important one in its own right, as is discussing that topic with the attention economy in mind.

A Third Right to Attention

If we take the views about our attentive capacities from the second section of this article for granted, then there is a third right to attention: the right to strengthen our ordinarily weak capacity to control how we direct our attention. First, I'll clarify how I understand this right, and then move on to explaining why it counts as a right within two different frameworks for thinking about rights. Lastly, I'll explain how the third right to attention helps us make sense of some other recent work on the attention economy.

Keeping in mind Buddhaghosa's remarks about the environmental conditions that make strengthening our attentive capacities difficult or impossible, this third right to attention is positive in the sense that it is the right to receive the specific kinds of support that are necessary for making that strengthening possible. At the same time, this third right is negative in the sense that it is the right to be free of significant unjustified interference with the endeavor of strengthening our attentive capacities. Lastly, this right can be overridden or waived in the right circumstances, just like Chomanski's first two rights to attention.

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights similarly describes rights that are in a sense positive and in another sense negative. For instance, Article 25 states that "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services . . .", and Article 26 states that "Everyone has the right to education" (UN General Assembly Art 25.1, Art 26.1). These rights are positive in the sense that they are rights to receive substantial societal support, because to feed and educate people we need to do more than refrain from interfering with them. At the same time, these rights are negative in the sense that they are rights to be free of interference with accessing goods like food and education.

Now I will move on to discussing how this third right to attention fits into two different frameworks for thinking about rights—first, with reference to views that link our rights to our fundamental human interests, and second, with reference to views that link rights to our sovereignty over ourselves.

The third right to attention protects our pursuit of our fundamental human interests even more deeply than the first two rights Chomanski considers. As Chomanski argues, because attention is a central mental phenomenon, it is an important part of any successful pursuit of our

fundamental interests. Because attention is a part of mental processes like, for instance, perception and memory, it is an important part of how we go about pursuing a wide range of goals.[15]

But the weaker our ability to control how we direct our attention, the less likely it seems like we could manage to successfully pursue any of our fundamental human interests at all.[16] If we attend to what we want to attend to fleetingly or not at all, our capacity to pursue fundamental human interests from the list above (knowledge, friendship, etc.) would be drastically compromised. The first two rights to attention—the rights to direct our attention as we please and be free from distraction—only function to protect our pursuit of fundamental interests if it's true that we already have a fairly strong capacity to control our attention.

But such a presumption might be false, and the Buddhist texts I reviewed above give us reason to doubt that presumption. The important idea that our attentive capacities are malleable and that they tend to be

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[15] In this section of the article, I focus on explaining Chomanski's framework. An interesting further question that I lack space to address here is to what extent Chomanski's way of taxonomizing mental states, as well as his way of thinking about how attention relates to those mental states, lines up with Buddhist accounts of attention, perception, and so forth. See Ganeri for one detailed treatment which would shed light on one way of thinking through this question (other ways of thinking it through would look to different texts). Ganeri discusses Buddhaghosa's use of a range of specific mental terms and connects them to how contemporary psychologists and philosophers understand various mental state terms, including attention, and there is significant overlap between the philosophical and psychological literatures that both Ganeri and Chomanski draw on. See in particular Ganeri (109-110), for example, for discussion of the fact that Buddhaghosa attention seems to play a central role in relation to perceptual consciousness. But to discuss all these details in the space they deserve would take us too far afield in the present article.

[16] There are, of course, a range of potential differences between Chomanski's framework for thinking about the right to attention and other aspects of Buddhist thought. My goal here is just to unpack the philosophical significance of one particular view—that we have much to gain from strengthening our weak attentive capacities—in this context.

weak unless we have made substantial efforts at personal transformation is absent from Chomanski's picture. Bringing the third right to attention into our account fixes the problem.

Now we can move on to considerations related to personal sovereignty. The right to strengthen our weak attentive capacities is an even more important part of defending our sovereignty over our own minds than Chomanski's first two rights to attention, and thus certainly counts as a right according to sovereignty-based approaches. If a person had only a very weak capacity to control their attention, the first two rights to attention might not function to promote that person's personal sovereignty—their control over themselves, and their own mind—much at all. After all, such a person might just find their attention drifting between various topics in thought on its own, and out of the person's control entirely. The third right to attention, through protecting a person's opportunity to strengthen their attentive capacities, protects the sort of personal development that is necessary for the protections provided by the first two rights to attention to be beneficial to begin with when it comes to personal sovereignty.

Now we can move on to discuss what violations of the third right to attention might look like. For instance, significant disruption to the material and social conditions described by Buddhaghosa that enable us to strengthen our capacity to control our attention would count as a violation of our right to attention, in the sense that I have articulated above. Significant deprivations of (e.g.,) lodging, food, and medicine are wrong for more reasons than just this fact. But our analysis of why these

deprivations are wrong is deeper and more complete when we keep the third right to attention in mind.[17]

But perhaps the most significant way this third right to attention could be violated would be for anything, including the regular operations of the attention economy, to *weaken* our ability to control how we direct our attention. That is, the attention economy might push us backwards on a path that we have the right to proceed forwards on. This would be a violation of our right to attention that goes beyond the two violations within Chomanski's framework.[18]

The worry that the attention economy causes this effect is an idea that has been expressed by writers in the field. For instance, a theme running throughout Johann Hari's book, *Stolen Focus*, is that "we seem to have lost our sense of focus . . ." due to the cumulative impacts of the attention economy on us (9). Hari mentions, e.g., noticing it feels like his ability to pay sustained attention to reading seems like it has been diminished due to his exposure to apps driven by the attention economy. James Williams, in *Stand Out of Our Light*, expresses a similar sentiment: "one day I had an epiphany: there was more technology in my life than ever before, but it felt harder than ever to do the things I wanted to do. I felt . . . distracted.

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[17] See Kärki ("Digital") for a related discussion of how inequalities might have an impact on the extent to which people can regulate their attention, particularly in the context of the attention economy.

[18] My criticism of Chomanski applies to Tran and Puri. Tran identifies the right to attention as only a right to be free from distraction, omitting our right to strengthen our attentive capacities. Puri defends a right to "attentional privacy" which is very narrowly construed and which asserts that we have the right to be free of significantly distracting "supernormal stimuli" and "hypernudges", and asserts that our governments have obligations to develop safeguards to ensure that we aren't exposed to such supernormal stimuli and hypernudges. Puri's account also omits our right to strengthen our attentive capacities.

But it was more than just 'distraction'—this was some new mode of deep distraction I didn't have words for" (7).[19]

Hari's and Williams' concerns go beyond the individual distractions caused by the attention economy, and to the deeper issue of how our attentive *capacities* might be negatively transformed by the cumulative impacts of living in a world in which the attention economy is operating. My analysis of our right to strengthen our attentive capacities puts us in a stronger position to explain what is correct about their worries than Chomanski's analysis of the right to attention.

Maybe a right to attention weaker than the one I have described could make sense of Hari's and William's worries - perhaps the view that we have a right to the mere maintenance of our attentive capacities. But part of the value of bringing the Buddhist perspective into this conversation is that it sets our sights higher: on this way of thinking, mere maintenance isn't enough.[20]

Conclusion

I hope that this article sparks future research in this area. As I've noted above, with the right support we can strengthen our ordinarily weak attentive capacities, and it is good for us to do so. Future research could

[19] Williams explains this feeling with reference to a reduction in autonomy; my claim that this can be traced to a violation of the third right to attention is complimentary to his explanation (68-70).

[20] The right to attention also bears on recent work on neurodiversity and affective injustice. Krueger, e.g., writes: "sounds, smells, colors, lights, informational and organizational layout of public spaces . . . place autistic bodies in a reactive mode where they feel like they're constantly battling against an onslaught of sensory information . . ."; the right to attention provides an additional way to criticize these environments. (Krueger 100) See also Chapman & Carel for additional relevant work on neurodiversity.

explore whether this strengthening is something that we are, to a certain extent, obliged to engage in. One source for this obligation might be duties of care towards oneself. This obligation might be one that we face a particularly strong form of when our digital environments present so many opportunities for distraction.

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