

Opinion: The cost of paying attention

By Matthew B. Crawford, New York Times

A few years ago, in a supermarket, I swiped my bank card to pay for groceries. I watched the little screen, waiting for its prompts. During the intervals between swiping my card, confirming the amount and entering my PIN, I was shown advertisements. Clearly some genius had realized that a person in this situation is a captive audience.

Attention is a resource; a person has only so much of it. And yet we've auctioned off more and more of our public space to private commercial interests, with their constant demands on us to look at the products on display or simply absorb some bit of corporate messaging. Lately, our self-appointed disrupters have opened up a new frontier of capitalism, complete with its own frontier ethic: to boldly dig up and monetize every bit of private head space by appropriating our collective attention. In the process, we've sacrificed silence – the condition of not being addressed. And just as clean air makes it possible to breathe, silence makes it possible to think.

What if we saw attention in the same way that we saw air or water, as a valuable resource that we hold in common? Perhaps, if we could envision an “attentional commons,” then we could figure out how to protect it.

The sad state of this commons is on display everywhere; consider the experience of being in an airport. I have found I have to be careful when going through airport security, because the trays that you place your items in for X-ray screening are now papered with advertisements, and it's very easy to miss a lipstick-size flash memory stick against a

picture of fanned-out L'Oréal lipstick colors.

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