



## FUTURE DIGITAL THREATS TO DEMOCRACY

This ongoing series from Technology for Global Security (T4GS) and the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) examines the elements and potential implications of digital threats to democracy over the next ten years. In this post, we break down the drivers of our next trend: the monetization of attention.

# Digital Threats to Democracy: Pay Attention

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Attention is the currency of the digital world. Views, clicks, likes, and sustained screen time increase revenue. “[Primarily extractive information economics](#),” a new massive data market with little regulation, privacy, or transparency, is driving an increasing monetization of attention.

### **AN ALGORITHMIC SOCIETY**

The [attention economy](#) is an advertising business model that exploits the gulf between the speed of technology and the human capacity for processing complex information. Consumers often assume that algorithms are “[governed by rules and limits](#)” and therefore accept default settings. Algorithms, however, [are not neutral](#) and push users toward outrage, extremist content, and conspiracy theories to maintain the attention of viewers. This could increase political [polarization](#) and cognitive and emotional distress within civil society. The [decentralization of news](#) that has come with today’s online media dominance means that attracting attention is now the determining factor for virality and information spread. Users who lack the psychological tools to handle information overload can feel [overwhelmed](#) by negative extremist content on their feeds.

### **ADDICTION DISTRIBUTION**

Attention addiction is fostered through the [psychological impact](#) of constant access to information and online engagement. Sean Parker, an early Facebook investor, has publicly commented on the “[social validation feedback loop](#)” built into multiple social networking sites, stating that the design, “exploits human psychological vulnerabilities through a validation feedback loop that gets people to constantly post to get even more likes and comments.” The speed at which information can travel across the digital world, as well as the ability to capture and hold attention, fuels the attention economy. In the words of [Zeynep Tufekci](#),

In the 21st century, the capacity to spread ideas and reach an audience is no longer limited by access to expensive, centralized broadcasting infrastructure. It’s limited instead by one’s ability to garner and distribute attention ... use[ing] massive surveillance of our behavior, online and off, to generate increasingly accurate, automated predictions of what advertisements we are most susceptible to and what content will keep us clicking, tapping, and scrolling down a bottomless feed.

Since technology companies have faced criticism in recent years for designing to addict, many have implemented automatic control features such as [screen time reports](#) that produce a weekly notification. [Monopolistic control](#) of the technology sector [limits consumer options](#) for private or sustainable platforms that are not engineered to promote attention addiction. As companies continue to accumulate and store mass amounts of data and monopolization challenges continue to exist, consumer privacy and rights could be harmed.



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### MONEY AND POWER

The technology sector benefits from encouraging an addictive relationship with their platforms, which allows them to gather more data and sell more ads. [Recommendation algorithms](#) foster addiction in order to sustain user engagement and increase advertising revenue. Infinite scroll, push notifications, autoplay, color conscious design, and “like” features remain woven into devices and social platforms. Politicians also benefit from addictive designs. Political campaigns in the [United States](#) and [Philippines](#) have infamously recognized algorithms for what they are and utilized them for political gain. The political infrastructures of democracies are not equipped to handle policy changes that evolve at the speed of technological innovation and digital information flow.

### DRIVEN BY DATA

The proliferation of digital systems and social platforms has made it so that consumers provide data and content to companies for “free,” while platforms gain revenue from targeted advertising models built on consumer data. Unless constrained by regulation, democracies could converge around what Shoshana Zuboff calls a “[human futures market](#)” in which data mining is focused on honing predictions of consumer behavior and ultimately shaping their behavior. The large amounts of data that companies are storing, combined with monopolistic control of the attention market, could point to a future in which political and industry power merge. What else could sustained attention “buy”?

- [Surveillance capitalism, which](#) is the economic and legal basis for social media and internet handling of consumer data imprints.
- Artificial intelligence and machine learning techniques that are used to analyze collections of data imprints and generate predictions.
- Personalized advertising to consumers that uses large-scale data, including “[psychographics](#)” for [personality](#) and psychological analysis for political targeting.
- [Biometric expansion](#), including the possibility of taking DNA at borders, private companies having access to DNA, and justifying the expansion of more cameras under the guise of security in order to collect biometrics.

### PAYING IT FORWARD

Extended digital dependency tills the soil for existing democratic vulnerabilities to be exploited across infrastructure and institutions and through information sharing. The cost of our dependence and addiction to devices that actively sustain our attention must be acknowledged. How much is economic productivity reduced by constant digital connection? How much is enabled? Industry and government have enormous opportunity to work together to create solutions. By fostering partnerships and building technological solutions and product design that aim to decrease the monetization of attention, there is an opportunity to build a healthier technological ecosystem—a net positive for technological innovation, global users, and society.

**Alexa Wehsener** works as a research analyst at Technology for Global Security. Passionate about the broadening space in which emerging technologies are meeting the defense sector, Alexa focuses the majority of her work on the intersection of AI and US NC3, as well as the influence of emerging technologies and platforms on warfighting and democratic institutions.

