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New media, young audiences and discourses of attention: from *Sesame Street* to ‘snack culture’

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One need not look far to find claims in popular American discourse that today’s attention spans are short. Central causes of shortened attention are typically assumed to include media technologies and forms of media content, especially those characterized by brevity and fragmentation, such as television commercials and web videos. The putative victims of this supposed condition are often children or members of younger generations whose entire lives have been suffused with electronic media.

Some of this discourse might aim merely to be descriptive, but on the whole it indicates negative implications and forecasts undesirable consequences. Attention span and advanced intelligence are often correlated in popular discourse as in educational contexts, and the medicalizing of attention deficit in the diagnosis and treatment of ADHD further creates a negative association with the inability to pay sustained attention. In the popular imagination, stupidity and pathology often characterize this condition, and colloquial usage dehumanizes its victims, however humorously, through figurative language like ‘the attention span of a fly’ or ‘of a gnat’ or ‘of a rock’. The linkage of attention deficit with emergent forms of media functions as a technophobic discourse of media effects, pathologizing a civilization too eager to adopt new tools of communication. If the attention span is imperiled, this can hardly bode well for society.

The idea of a connection between a culture’s media and its collective habits and patterns of paying attention has been appealing to a number of influential thinkers, including Walter Benjamin (1968), Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer (Adorno, 1974; Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002), and Marshall McLuhan (2004). It is especially pertinent when critics and intellectuals ponder

the social significance of new media, assessing the costs and benefits of new technologies of communication such as cinema, television and the internet, and the new formats of content that technologies bring into being. In particular, it would seem that new media formats and technologies are believed to lead in one direction where attention is concerned, toward attenuation. Within the field of psychology, however, where attention to television is an object of empirical study (Anderson, 2004; Anderson and Kirkorian, 2006), the term 'attention span' has no technical meaning (Anderson and Collins, 1988) and evidence has not been found to support the claim that watching television harms children's ability to pay attention (Schmidt and Anderson, 2007). While it might bear the influence, however indirectly, of some scholarly voices such as McLuhan's, the circulation of the notion of media-shortened attention has proceeded in popular discourse in the absence of compelling, expert-produced data, as a lay theory of media effects such as those studied by Ellen Seiter (1999).

The central concern of this article will not be to judge the validity of the (dubious) claim of media's power to stunt cognitive functioning, but to trace the way that the very idea of media affecting attention has circulated historically in American culture. This article will consider the way this connection has been made in popular discourse in relation to American media aimed at young people, and also in the thinking of media creators, beginning in the late 1960s and continuing to the present day. It considers the positioning of media as a threat, in particular to young viewers' minds. Reading popular discourse (such as newspapers, magazines, and books aimed at the general reader) is a way – however indirect – of accessing popular understandings of media and their social significance, as exemplified by the work of cultural media historians such as Lynn Spigel (1992). The media texts to be discussed in what follows include *Sesame Street*, which has aired in the United States on PBS stations since 1969; MTV videos and the films and television shows inspired by them, which have been fixtures of global visual culture since the early 1980s; and contemporary online 'snack' culture. These texts represent key moments in the history and development of the discourse of the media-shortened attention span, as all have been covered quite widely in the popular press from the angle of understanding media forms in relation to the audience's attention. The aim of this article is to contribute to the critical cultural history of media, and in particular to show how new media formats and technologies came to be seen as contributing to a collective shortened attention span. It also has a secondary aim of tracing the history of the term and concept 'attention span' as it pertains to media consumption and its effects.

Popular discourse about attention offers a way of understanding not only how media are positioned socially, but also how they are produced. Makers of television, cinema, and web content are members of the society in which short-attention-span discourse circulates. They internalize this discourse and, in turn, it explains their techniques. Thus the popular notion of the shortened attention span functions in a kind of feedback loop running between media

producers, writers for the popular press and the audience. If producers believe that their audience's attention is weak or fleeting, then they have a special incentive to create textual experiences that make a strong appeal on the audience's attention. In this context they must see their task as managing a fickle audience's attention. Knowing this about media producers reveals something significant about how media come to be the way they are. It will be especially important in considering the history of *Sesame Street* and MTV, both of which were fashioned to appeal to an audience of young people whose attention was thought to be especially challenging to capture and hold.

Attention span: anticipating *Sesame Street*

The history of the term 'attention span' reveals that it was very seldom used in connection with moving-image media before the 1960s, and that its use by psychologists is often either not particularly relevant to its more casual and everyday meanings, or else based on questionable empirical evidence. Although no methodology can afford a full genealogy of its meanings in everyday writing and speech, one can easily search archives of newspapers such as the *New York Times*, and this reveals patterns of usage that indicate likely understandings. The first appearance in the *Times* was in an article on education written in 1933.

Typical references to 'attention span' in the American popular press from the 1930s through the 1960s occur in articles about child care and schooling. Articles giving advice to mothers of youngsters and reporting on developments in teaching them would often remark on the variability of attention span by age. Younger children would be noted for having shorter attention spans than older ones, and children in general would have shorter ones than adults. This might be useful information for readers who, for instance, are taking children on a long trip or to a museum. Articles in this period often use attention span as an evaluative term, praising 'gifted' children who are able to sustain attention and worrying about those who are not (McKenzie, 1941). Poor, unintelligent and 'retarded' children might be pitied for their lack of an attention span, since it would hinder their success in school (Barnard, 1933). Special programs for students with low IQ scores would aim to increase their attention spans (Fine, 1940). Private schools with admissions screening processes would test prospective 5-year-old students on, among other things, their attention spans (Eliasberg, 1966).

In the 1950s, articles referencing 'attention span' occasionally refer to media, but often still maintain their focus on children. A 1952 article in the *New York Times* about RCA Victor's records for children quoted the head of the children's department, Steve Carlin (formerly of NBC, a veteran of television production): 'In order to hold [children's] attention you need variety and frequent changes of pace' (Briggs, 1952). Victor did this by publishing books in combination with records and by having many brief and varied songs and stories. A first-person piece published in 1956 by a Madison Avenue executive

described fitting advertisements to the attention span of the consumer by using short headlines and brief copy, but implicit here would be the suggestion that the attention span for advertising is not the same as for other media, since readers rarely seek out ads (Kelly, 1956).

The *Times* ran an article in 1958 that made the first connection I found between attention span and the moving image. It reported an early effort at educational television, which used video of a teacher giving a lesson in front of a classroom, screened on closed-circuit telecast in a school district. Attention spans were sometimes too short for this kind of instruction: 'Only the stern rule of consequences can keep some children and adults from mind wandering as a TV instructor elaborates his theme' (Anonymous, 1958). If one can picture the visual style of this program, the size of the television screens on which it was shown in the late 1950s, and the distance of the students from the screens, it is not hard to imagine why it might have posed a problem.

Sesame Street was hardly the first television show to be made under the assumption that children have shorter attention spans than adults. For instance, in 1964 a new religious program for children aired in Chicago called *Wee One's World* with segments five minutes long. 'The program is based on the premise that small children have a limited attention span', reported the *Chicago Tribune* (Anonymous, 1964). But when *Sesame Street* had its debut in 1969 it was greeted with so much fanfare and hope, and its methods and goals were so well publicized, that the nexus of moving-image technologies and forms and audiences' attention became a much more public concern. *Sesame Street* was made with the child's attention span very much in mind, and with a special mandate to craft an educational appeal to children that would not be foiled by the attentional weakness of the young viewers the show was intended to reach. It was conceived and produced in the late 1960s in collaboration with psychologists and other researchers who would be charged not only with the development of a curriculum and a way of teaching it in a television format, but also with making sure that the audience of young children would gladly receive its audiovisual lessons even when having the alternative of commercial entertainment.

***Sesame Street's* form and its reception**

Sesame Street began as an effort to bring pre-school education to poor children; it was a program, like Head Start, born out of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. It aimed to prepare poor children in America's cities for education in the three Rs and to foster values of community and tolerance. To have its desired effect, it would have to win and maintain the attention of young children who already watched a lot of TV. One objective of *Sesame Street* in its planning stages was to create a program format that children would want to watch – that would be appealing to them. It did so by copying the types of television

that children were already spending so much time watching rather than following the more pedestrian style typical of educational television. As the popular press often reported, *Sesame Street* adopted the style of commercial television, including the 'sponsorship' of the show ('*Sesame Street* was brought to you by the letter J and the number 3'). It borrowed the 'magazine' format of variety comedy shows like *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*, which at the time of *Sesame Street*'s debut in 1969 was the most popular program in America. The brevity of the segments in a magazine-format, commercial-style show was invariably linked to the attention span of the young audience for the show: this was a style that the producers believed suited them. Joan Ganz Cooney, the president of the Children's Television Workshop (CTW), wanted the show to mimic commercials by using 'frequent repetition, clever visual presentation, brevity and clarity' (Polsky, 1974: 11–12).

A series of segments from the first episode makes clear this ambition. The debut episode of 10 November 1969, included a lesson on the number 2. This begins in Mr Hooper's drugstore, where a Muppet character, Ernie, and some children are sitting at the counter. A human adult character, Susan, enters with a little boy and asks Mr Hooper for two cartons of milk, which he places in a grocery bag. Then the show cuts to a musical animation in which a chorus of children sing '1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10 ...10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1' to accompany a cartoon of the numerals. Then they repeat '2, 2, 2, 2, let's sing a song of 2! How many is 2?' As they do, the number 2 flies forward in an aggressively rapid, almost psychedelic animation. Then a series of very brief live-action shots reinforces the lesson: two turtles, two hats, two ice cream cones, each one counted by the children's chorus, '1, 2!' The segment culminates in a chef falling down a flight of stairs with a pair of pies. 'And that's a song of 2!' Next we cut to Susan and her little boy again walking down Sesame Street noticing pairs of items like shoes. We cut during this segment to a series of shots of paired animals in a zoo. And this is succeeded by another animation set to music, this one called 'Jazzy Spies #2' in which cartoon numbers flash in succession, fingers on cartoon hands count up to 10, numbered racecars zoom across the screen, and a group of ten men in raincoats (the spies) each open them up one by one to reveal a succession of numbers. The music is up-tempo modal jazz with counting and chanting by Grace Slick of Jefferson Airplane. Taken together, these scenes occupy about three minutes' duration, and present four little repetitive lessons on the number 2 in eye-catching, fanciful and lively style.

The CTW did extensive testing of *Sesame Street* segments to make sure they would hold children's attention by using a 'distractor', a screen placed next to the television on which bright colored slides would appear. Researchers could tell which *Sesame Street* segments held the viewer's attention better under conditions of external distraction. They also found that children would pay as much attention to *Sesame Street* as to commercial programs (Ickeringill, 1969). The popular press made much of the show's appeal, and especially its

claim on its viewers' attention. For instance, a writer in *Vogue* described *Sesame Street* as 'wildly attention rivetting [sic], almost hypnotic for adults as well as children', and described it within the context of the moving-image media of the time: 'Very much late 'sixties in form, utilizing the quick cuts and overlapping action, the speed, sound, and light we have become accustomed to by *now* movies and commercials' (Hentoff, 1970). This kind of description could be more admiring or it could be skeptical or critical. A letter to the editor of the *New Republic* from Ada C. Rose of Haverford, PA, complained that *Sesame Street* was 'almost subliminal in technique' (Rose, 1970).

In typical descriptions, the show was called fast-paced and quick-cut; but this simplified the way the show was made to capture children's attention. A psychologist who advised the CTW, Gerald Lesser, wrote that 'Children lose interest when the program dwells too long on one subject or remains too long at one pace or in one style.' His research had found that commercial television holds attention so well because of its variety of pace (not always fast) and mood. It was for this reason that the show alternated segments of live action and animation, location and studio shooting, and human and puppet characters – as in the segment described above, where the lesson about the number 2 is repeated four times in three minutes using a variety of live-action, including the Muppet character Ernie, and animations, with fast-and-frenetic bits giving way to others that are more laid-back in tone (Lesser, 1974). *Sesame Street* episodes were an hour long, but they reached large audiences of young viewers who liked to see episodes and segments repeated. Part of their huge appeal was surely a credit to the CTW's special effort to win the attention of these viewers. But, ironically, this effort and its public discussion in the popular press informed the development of a technophobic discourse of attention-catching media as a threat to children's ability to pay attention.

The attention span discourse post-*Sesame Street*

Sesame Street was instrumental in popularizing the notion that television holds our attention by exploiting its essential formal features, the same ones that Benjamin and others, such as 1920s cinematic avant-garde theorists, had previously identified in cinema: movement, speed, constantly refreshed views. The idea that brief segments are considered essential for successful TV soon migrated to other formats besides children's programming and became central to a critique of television as a force of irrationality and de-intellectualization.

In the early 1970s, a new PBS news magazine, *The Great American Dream Machine*, was criticized for being 'geared to the limited attention span most viewers are believed to have', and derided as 'a kind of *Sesame Street* for post-pubescents' (O'Connor, 1971). Here the use of a format of brief and lively segments that works well with children is thought to be unnecessarily fragmentary for an adult audience. The association of brevity with a juvenile

or unintelligent audience would cause a negative connotation to attach to such forms, reinforcing television's reputation as an 'idiot box'. We see such connotations in another *Times* review of the same year, which is also its first application of the term 'attention span' to the description of audiovisual texts – the idea being that they had been made to suit brief ones. Vincent Canby, the *New York Times*' film critic, described Frank Zappa's 1971 psychedelic movie *200 Motels* as having 'the attention span of a speed freak' (1971).

Frequently, in the 1970s, the format of programming derided for pandering to a shortened attention span was news. An article in the *Times* about *60 Minutes* noted that it rarely used documentary material shot by independent American film-makers because, according to the producer Don Hewitt, their work is 'more suitable for art houses than the short attention span of television' (O'Connor, 1973). A profile in 1975 of ABC News producer Av Westin quoted him to the effect that the viewer's attention span won't stand for segments longer than two minutes (Zoglin, 1975). Also in 1975 came the first suggestion I have found of television having an *effect* on the attentional habits of its audience; an editorial by William V. Shannon (1975) asserted that 'children become accustomed to paying attention in half-hour segments or, even worse, in the six-minute intervals between commercials'. The consequence of this, Shannon claimed, was 'to subvert education and malnourish the mind'.

An op-ed by McLuhan (1976) argued that 90 minutes was too long for the televised presidential debates between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, because 'attention saturates very quickly on television and attention span is brief'. McLuhan's conception of TV as a 'cool' medium requiring audience participation influenced the creators of *Sesame Street* in their choice of the magazine format of brief and varied segments to appeal to kids (Jellinek, 1970). McLuhan was a crucial link in the transmission of academic theories of media to the public, with his frequent appearances on television talk shows and his status as a public intellectual. His conception of television in particular as a threat to the culture of print media literacy set a context for the developments I have been describing.

Clearly, then, in the 1970s there was an assumption circulating among professionals in the television industry, journalists and, we may assume, ordinary people as well, that there was an ideal condition of fit between formats of audiovisual representation and spectator psychology, and that this could be measured in the length of time the spectator was prepared to give his or her attention to a segment of audiovisual text. This applied to adults, not just children. Perhaps it applied to some adults because they had grown up watching television. And media producers were expected to cater to this attention span to better serve their audience. Of course, some observers were skeptical of this assumption and faulted the media, perhaps only implicitly, for catering to the audience's unwillingness to pay sustained attention.

Also in the 1970s, the terms of this discussion shift in an important way. No longer merely responding to a psychological condition (brief attention span),

now the technologies and forms of audiovisual representation were being *blamed* for the public's weak attention, and especially for children's inability to sustain attention at school. *People* magazine, for instance, launched in 1977 and was notable at the time, among other reasons, for having very brief and insubstantial articles. The magazine's publisher, Richard J. Durrell, said the maximum words for a piece was 1800 because the 'targeted reader – aged 18 to 35 – has been brought up on television and has a short attention span' (*Business Week*, 1977).

By the decade's end, articles began to appear that were critical of *Sesame Street*, not, as some earlier ones had been, faulting its educational style or its failure to appeal to poor audiences as much as middle-class ones (Anonymous, 1971; Francke, 1971; Sedulus, 1970). Now it was blamed for having negative social and psychological consequences and for exacerbating a problem it was intended to solve: children's poor academic performance. In an article about criticism of *Sesame Street* in 1979, the *Times* reported that the show was being blamed for 'producing jumpy, unsocial, unteachable youngsters'. It quoted the psychologist Jerome Singer to the effect that "'Sesame Street's' vigorous, blackout style – a whirlwind mix combining the variety of a vaudeville bill with the adroit editing of a soft-drink commercial – may be creating behavioral problems for some of its audience'. Another psychologist, Dorothy Cohen, said that 'attention span declines' in the television-dominated child's culture (Spiegel, 1979).

Kate Moody's *Growing Up on Television: The TV Effect* (1980) summarized this line of thinking, extending it to cover TV's detrimental effects, not only on children's development but also on their ability to succeed academically:

Television's most successful techniques – short segments, fast action, quick cuts, fades, dissolves – break time into perceptual bits. Reading requires perceptual continuity to track line after line. Television habituates the mind to short takes, not to the continuity of thought required by reading. The pace and speed of television cause children to be easily distracted.... Focusing and paying attention to print become an unnatural strain for the conditioned TV viewer. (Moody, 1980: 63)

Neil Postman (1986: 143) echoed this when he wrote that '*Sesame Street* encourages children to love school only if school is like *Sesame Street*.'

The evidence for all of this would seem to have been entirely anecdotal. More than 100 elementary school teachers had apparently reported that children in the late 1970s were less able to pay attention to their lessons than earlier cohorts (Moody, 1980: 63–4). There was considerable concern in the 1970s over hyperactive (sometimes called 'hyperkinetic') children and TV was among a number of suspected culprits of this, which also included food additives and sugar. Indeed, the *Times* had reported in 1979, on the show's tenth anniversary, that many teachers believed that *Sesame Street* had made their jobs harder because children expected to have their attention held in class as it was on the show (Hechinger, 1979). Quotations Singer and others gave the popular

press about attention span decline were never based on research in his own lab, but on speculation, hypothesis and anecdote. This produced the belief that forms and technologies of media have specific observable consequences, despite an absence of reliable data.

Jerry Mander's *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (1978) also contended that the technology and forms of the moving image were having large-scale negative consequences on viewers. But, as with many such arguments, the logic and evidence are wanting. Mander claimed that television commands our attention but not our cognitive activity, indeed that it suppresses active attention and makes viewers into zombies (in *Sesame Street's* case, one supposes, zombies who count and spell). But Mander claims that television makes children hyperactive as well. As Jason Mittell (2000) argues, detractors have often sowed fear of television by employing drug metaphors, and in this case the TV-as-drug is both sedative and stimulant. Again, the paradox of TV, according to these technophobic writers, is that it holds attention so well that it destroys the ability to pay attention.

Research into children's experiences watching *Sesame Street*, however, has not borne out the criticism of these skeptics and fearmongers, and none of the claims in the popular press of this era were ever supported by rigorous empirical research into historical or generational shifts in attention. Evidence might actually suggest the opposite of these conclusions. As Schmidt and Anderson (2007) argue, *Sesame Street*-viewing children tend to do better in school, which often requires sustained attention.

The 1980s and beyond: new disruptions

By the 1980s, the idea of television's putative negative effects on attention and 'sustained thought' was well established; at the same time, television technologies and formats were developing and changing, and the emergence of new media in this era was understood within the context of the prevailing ideas about the moving image and its effects. Examples of new moving image media technologies and forms in the 1980s included the expanded use of remote control devices, especially in combination with video cassette recorders/players; cable and satellite TV offering dozens of channels to choose from with a remote control; and, on one of those channels in particular, music videos with their *Sesame Street*-like brevity, discontinuity and variety of pace and mood. Numerous television industry professionals have said that production norms had to change to adapt to new patterns of audience behavior, such as avoiding commercials between programs and minimizing closing credits sequences (Kubey, 2004). When Robert Adler, inventor of the remote control, died in 2007, the *Washington Post* obituary casually noted that his device 'shortened the attention span of viewers' (Sullivan, 2007). George Gerbner, the communication scholar, told the *Times* that, as a consequence of these

new technologies: ‘people are less tolerant of boring things than they used to be’ (Smith, 1985).

MTV emerged around the same time as a prominent new form of programming to appeal to young people, and it was based around a format rather than a schedule. In its early years, MTV rarely ran programs, but alternated music videos, video-jockey segments, bumpers (‘I Want My MTV’) and commercials, many of which were similar in form and style. *Time* magazine put MTV on the cover in 1983 and, in the accompanying story, made clear that its appeal had to do with the way it addressed a TV-made audience: ‘Whole generations have had their brains fried with a cathode ray tube, a condition that creates a certain impatience and shortness of attention when limited to aural input’ (Cocks, 1983). Bob Pittman, the creative force behind MTV, believed that his audience for the new channel would be made up of ‘TV Babies’, viewers who had come of age in a TV-saturated culture (presumably who had grown up on *Sesame Street*), and whose mode of perception was thus uniquely generational. According to Pittman (1990), TV Babies don’t pay attention to one thing at a time like their parents did. He told the *New York Times* that these viewers:

... can watch, do their homework and listen to music at the same time. What kids can’t do today is follow things too long. They get bored and distracted, their minds wander. If information is presented to them in tight fragments that don’t necessarily follow each other, kids can comprehend that.’ (Levine, 1983)

Pittman believed that television had shortened the young audience’s attention span. Media for them thus must be made to suit their preference for communication in brief, flashy segments that ‘hit [them] in the gut’ (Auletta, 1992: 246).

Hollywood movies were observed to be adopting this inattentive style too: complaints arose in the mid 1980s of an MTV style infecting movies (and network television), indicating a similar sort of appeal to an easily distracted viewer familiar with TV and music video. The *Times* covered this development, citing as examples *Remo Williams: The Adventure Begins* (1985) and *Commando* (1985).

That [television] viewers – the channel-hoppers – also buy tickets to movie theaters has not been lost on the Hollywood producers. The result: the production of an increasing number of films with built-in remote-control units, that is, with narrative structures that have the effect of making one movie seem like a collection of the highlights from several. Eliminated, as far as possible, are exposition and any boring passages of the sort that would, in a television show, prompt a viewer to switch to another channel. (Canby, 1985)

Among non-MTV television programs adopting the music video style was, famously, the high-concept police drama *Miami Vice*, which in its pilot episode pioneered the ‘musical montage’ convention, which became standard in prime-time television, layering on a sequence of atmospheric night-time driving images the MTV star Phil Collins’s ‘In the Air Tonight’. To early 1980s audiences

this seemed like a rupture in dramatic representation of narrative for the interpolation of this new format of audiovisual presentation. Like *Sesame Street* and music videos, this was taken to be a fragmentary and disruptive style.

By the time of MTV's widespread influence on American visual culture, the causal logic at work in the popular conception of media-shortened attention had become intriguingly reversible, such that media representations like MTV-style montages were thought to be crafted to suit the short attention spans of their audience, but were often also blamed for having created that audience's weak attention span in the first place. For instance, James Gleick wrote in 1999 that 'we are living in the heyday of speed' (1999: 9). Among Gleick's examples illustrating 'compression of time' were Hollywood movies; remote control devices which gave viewers the freedom to zip and zap, and which he claimed influenced Hollywood directors to cut their films faster; and MTV videos and the MTV style in other genres of audiovisual content, which are meant to typify visual popular culture since the 1980s. 'The music video was premised on short attention spans' (1999: 189). Gleick makes clear that the causation runs both ways: MTV was made for short attention spans, but in turn MTV-style movies and TV transformed audiences: 'We are different creatures, psychologically speaking, from what we were a generation ago' (1999: 200).

A key insight from these examples of the confluence of the remote control, MTV and MTV-style movies and TV shows was that the producers of media, people like Bob Pittman, had apparently internalized the theories in the popular discourse of media's negative effects on attention. In particular, they apparently had bought the notion that the new generation of audiences for movies and TV had a different way of thinking from its predecessors, a mode of perception that was both cause and effect of the forms and technologies of the moving image. They believed that their task as media producers is to manage the attention of the viewer who is inattentive by default. The discourse of shortened attention, once internalized by the producers of media, becomes a kind of industry wisdom and a guide to best practices. We get media that suit this conception of society, regardless of whether society actually fits it, a popular culture cut to the measure of distraction, of a fleeting gaze and a fickle mind.

This history of thinking about media and attention thus helps explain the emergence of what David Bordwell (2006) calls 'intensified continuity' as the reigning style of movies and television beginning around this time and running through to the present day. As Bordwell writes, the development of faster rates of cutting, a constantly moving camera, and other techniques typical of recent and contemporary visual style was encouraged by television viewing of movies, and by the opinion of filmmakers that TV viewers are easily distracted (2006: 150–1). He quotes the film director Sydney Pollock (who had started out directing TV) to this effect, saying: 'In television, you are always fighting for the viewer's attention' (2006: 265n.83).

Similarly, then, YouTube videos like the *lonelygirl15* series emerge in a context in which attention is believed to be scarce – a challenge to manage. The hundreds of channels I get through my DirecTV satellite box are nothing compared to the virtually infinite options I find in my web browser. This experience is central to the ‘attention economy’ we now supposedly live in (Davenport and Beck, 2001; Lanham, 2006), in which capturing consumers’ attention is thought to be the top objective of marketing – more so even than selling products. The discourse of the shortened attention span thus informs the construction of an entire generation of new media as ‘snack’ culture, and an entire generation of media audiences as inattentive multi-taskers, unlikely to devote more than a few minutes at a time to any kind of activity. The March 2007 issue of *Wired* magazine proclaimed ‘Snack Attack!’ on its cover, and heralded the age of bite-size entertainments. Snack culture, *Wired* suggests, is the product of a world in which the audience cannot be expected to sustain the long duration of attention that would be required for reading a novel, seeing a play or opera, or watching a feature film. It is especially prominent in content for new media for new technologies, such as episodes of television programs produced for viewing on portable electronic devices such as mobile phones (‘mobisodes’), and videos viewed in a web browser. *Wired* might address this development with its characteristic enthusiasm, but this is not necessarily typical of the tone one finds in relation to internet’s putative effect on attention spans. The July/August 2008, issue of *The Atlantic* offered the flipside of this, asking provocatively, ‘Is Google Making Us Stupid?’ The point of the cover story by Nicholas Carr (2008) was that reading short forms of prose online makes readers unable to sustain their concentration on longer pieces in print, killing their ability to engage with arguments of depth and seriousness and compromising intellectual culture. As usual in such discourse, Carr’s evidence was anecdotal, based on reports from acquaintances that their attention for long forms of prose had waned. Like all of the instances canvassed above, the idea that these new online media technologies and forms of content ‘make us stupid’ comes in the absence of compelling empirical evidence to confirm that we have become a distracted society, unable to concentrate.

The original mission of *Sesame Street* was to win the interest of young children whose attention is by nature harder to hold than that of older children and adults, and its most successful tactic was to ape the styles of media that were already effective with the very young. When its successes were popularized in the press, the notion of a relation between media formats and attention gained widespread recognition. In turn, based on scant reliable data and questionable logic, a popular perception emerged, even taking hold among creative workers in the media industries, of media diminishing attention. As new formats and technologies emerged, their introduction to the public was framed by a discourse that ascribes to media pervasive effects. In a sense it hardly matters whether media have shortened our attention span, or whether

it even makes sense to speak of an ‘attention span’ at all, even less one widely shared across entire societies and generations. The popular discourse exerts its power in shaping society and its mediated representations.

Possible explanations

Since it has taken hold so effectively, the ‘short attention span’ must be quite appealing. Why might this be so? By way of concluding, I suggest two explanations for the acceptance of the notion that media shorten attention (aside from the obvious one that it might be true, which I acknowledge through my skepticism).

First, thinking about media shrinking the attention span functions to manage anxiety over social and technological change. In the case of *Sesame Street*, the innovation of electronic education carries with it both a promise and a threat. It makes sense that the teachers whose role was threatened by the television version of education would fear this powerful rival. Or likewise that adults whose experience of popular music was on the radio would fear the merging of music and TV. The emergence and adoption of new media forms and technologies are often attended by various kinds of fear, distrust and even moral panic. For instance, in the 1930s, the Payne Fund Studies blamed the cinema for social ills, and the panic over comic books in the 1950s aroused similar fears in relation to comics. More recently, panics over predators on online social networks and abuse by adults of children’s trust have shaped the adoption of new forms of socializing online. We might see the ‘shortened attention span’ as a strategy for coming to terms with new media and technological change – to help us feel we understand it better.

Another explanation is that the idea functions to reassert ideological distinctions in the face of disrupted power dynamics and the breakdown of traditional social distinctions. For instance, it reasserts the superiority of adult culture (longer-form, more contemplative) over youth culture (faster-paced, more distracting) and of a traditional, establishment culture (print culture, the culture of educational institutions) over a threatening emergent culture (electronic visual culture, educational TV, myriad cable and satellite channels). Adults often fear and distrust the culture of children and youth, so we might see the idea of media shortening attention, and especially children’s attention, as a way of adults coming to terms with the emergence of new forms of youth culture, such as music video and educational TV, that they might not have felt comfortable with and which had not been part of their experience. The sureness of explanations, even those that propose harmful and pervasive effects, might help manage a difficult change by imposing understanding on a chaotic, unpredictable world.

Ultimately, then, the ‘short attention span’ should be seen not as an inevitable consequence of a faster, more media-intensive culture in post-*Sesame Street* America, but as a discursive strategy for positioning new media forms within

the familiar frames of the cognitive and moral endangerment of younger generations. In essence it functions as a rhetoric of 'The kids these days!' Whether the kids – and adults – these days have been endangered or enlightened by new media, the logic of our lay theories of media in recent decades suggests that brave new worlds, for all their mesmerizing novelty and technoutopian promise, augur moral and intellectual decline.

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