

Stand Out of Our Light

Former Google strategist, now Oxford-trained philosopher James Williams argues that a next-generation threat to human freedom has emerged in the systems of intelligent persuasion that increasingly direct our thoughts and actions. As digital technologies have made information abundant, our attention has become the scarce resource – and in the digital “attention economy,” technologies compete to capture and exploit our mere attention, rather than supporting the true goals we have for our lives. For too long, we’ve minimized the resulting harms as “distractions” or minor annoyances. Ultimately, however, they undermine the integrity of the human will at both individual and collective levels. Liberating human attention from the forces of intelligent persuasion may therefore be the defining moral and political task of the Information Age. Drawing on insights from ancient Greece as well as Silicon Valley, Williams’s thoughtful and impassioned analysis brings much needed clarity to one of the most pressing questions of our time.

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Stand Out of Our Light

Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy

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For Alexander

It is disgraceful to be unable to use our good things.

Aristotle, *Politics*

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Preface

In order to do anything that matters, we must first be able to give attention to the things that matter. Doing so has never been easy, but lately it's become harder in new and surprising ways.

While we weren't watching, a next generation threat to human freedom materialized right in front of our noses. We didn't notice it because it came in forms that were already familiar to us. It came bearing gifts of information, historically a scarce and valuable resource, but delivered them in such abundance, and with such velocity, that these gifts became a mountain of burdens. Most disarming of all, it came to us with the promise that it was *on our side*: that it was designed to help us navigate our lives in the ways *we* want them to go.

Yet these little wondrous machines, for all their potential, have not been entirely on our side. Rather than supporting our *intentions*, they have largely sought to grab and keep our *attention*. In their cutthroat competition against one another for the increasingly scarce prize of "persuading" us – of shaping our thoughts and actions in accordance with their predefined goals – they have been forced to resort to the cheapest, pettiest tricks in the book, appealing to the lowest parts of us, to the lesser selves that our higher natures perennially struggle to overcome. Furthermore, they now deploy in the service of this attentional capture and exploitation the most intelligent systems of computation the world has ever seen.

For too long, we've minimized the threats of this intelligent, adversarial persuasion as mere "distraction," or minor annoyance. In the short term, these challenges can indeed frustrate our ability to do the things we want to do. In the longer term, however, they can make it harder for us to live the lives we want to live, or, even worse, undermine fundamental capacities such as reflection and

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self-regulation, making it harder, in the words of philosopher Harry Frankfurt, to “want what we want to want.” Seen in this light, these new attentional adversaries threaten not only the success but even the integrity of the human will, at both individual and collective levels.

Some threats to freedom we recognize immediately; others take time to reveal themselves for what they are. In the case of this intelligent, adversarial persuasion that increasingly pervades human life, the process of recognition is only beginning. The threats, by contrast – the infrastructures and incentives that underlie their operation – are now quite mature and deeply entrenched. As a result, it may be too late to bring these adversarial systems onto our side. They may now be too embedded in our lives to extricate. I do not believe this to be the case myself – the situation is not entirely hopeless – but the gate to salvation is narrow, and closing quickly.

I used to think there were no great political struggles left. The truly epic defenses of freedom, I thought, had already been fought and won by generations greater than my own, leaving to my time only the task of dutifully administering our hard-earned political inheritance.

How wrong I was. The liberation of human attention may be the defining moral and political struggle of our time. Its success is prerequisite for the success of virtually all other struggles. We therefore have an obligation to rewire this system of intelligent, adversarial persuasion before it rewires us. Doing so requires hacking together new ways of talking and thinking about the problem, as well as summoning the courage necessary for advancing on it in inconvenient and unpopular ways.

In the short space of this book, my aim is to calibrate the compass for this effort rather than draw up any detailed maps. I’ll have more questions than answers; this will be more exploration than argument. Read this as an unfolding of intuitions, a quest for the right words. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “sometimes a scream is better than a thesis.” This will be a bit of both.

The brief, yet full, time during which I have written this book would not have been possible without the extraordinary generosity and foresight of the Kadas Prize Foundation, Cambridge University Press, the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) at the University of Cambridge, and the superhuman efforts of the Nine Dots Prize staff and board. This privilege is only compounded by the fact that it serves to inaugurate what will no doubt be a series of similar efforts to come. My hope is that the present effort proves worthy of the generosity of their, and your, attention.

About the Nine Dots Prize

The Nine Dots Prize was established to promote innovative thinking on tackling problems facing the modern world. Its name, which comes from the lateral-thinking nine dots puzzle, explains what we were hoping would result – outside-of-the-box methods of approaching and addressing the big issues of the day.

A new question will be posed by the Prize every other year. In 2016, the inaugural year of the Prize, we asked the question ‘Are digital technologies making politics impossible?’

The competition was uniquely exciting in that it was judged anonymously; the Board was tasked with selecting a winner based on their 3,000-word response alone. All we knew about the entrants was that they were committed to developing their ideas into a full-length book, were they to be chosen as the Prize winner. We had no idea whether we were reading the proposal of a teacher, a novelist, a professor, a mechanic, a shop assistant or a lawyer, which meant that new voices and experienced authors would be considered alongside one another and the strongest ideas and ability to express them would win out.

We were thrilled to receive over 700 applications, and even more so post-judging when we discovered that our dreams of casting the net far and wide for fresh thinking had been realised. Entrants came from all four corners of the world, making this a truly international venture, and worked in professions as diverse as engineering, healthcare, media, defence, community activism and business consultancy.

Of these several hundred proposals there were many that the Board felt would make compelling books, but one stood above the rest. We’re delighted to have discovered a new voice in James Williams, a previously unpublished individual who has drawn on

his experiences of the tech industry and academia to write this urgent and insightful analysis of the attention economy.

We hope that a lively public debate will follow the publication of *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*. The issue it addresses is hugely important, and we're grateful to James for the illumination and attention he has brought to the matter.

We also hope that you agree this is a new and thrilling way of starting such a discussion, and that you continue to follow the Prize as we ask more timely and incisive questions about the issues we are facing in the world today.

Professor Simon Goldhill
***Director of the Centre for Research in the Arts,
Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH)
at Cambridge University and Chair of the
Nine Dots Prize Board***

For more about the Nine Dots Prize please visit ninedotsprize.org