

The Attention Economy

Assembly by Ms Wendy Mahon, Head of Economics and Business, June 2026

Good morning everyone.

This could be the quietest moment most of us experience all day. I have been to the Cathedral on a Monday morning many times in the five years I have worked at this School and it's very obvious to me that some of you are not quite comfortable with the silence and the space to reflect which the service brings.

I wonder if this would have been any different, say 20, 50, 100 years ago? For some reason, I imagine people were once upon a time more comfortable sitting here in relative quiet.

Today, I want to talk about something called 'the attention economy'.

My Sixth Form pupils will explain to the rest of you that the study of Economics is far broader and more diverse than simply finance. Instead, Economics is the study of scarcity - we have limited resources available to us yet unlimited wants and needs. One of those scarce resources is our attention - yours and mine. It is defined by the hours we have in a day and like it or not, the numerous things we must turn our attention towards.

Now that might sound like a subject you haven't signed up for but I think it's really important to stop and think: who controls our focus, our thinking, our time... and ultimately, who or what are our greatest influences.

This is not a teenager problem - it affects all of us - we live in a world with so many choices, so many distractions. Sometimes we feel torn in so many directions.

One culprit is of course our screens - the first interaction many of us have in the morning. By the time we arrive at School, hundreds of things have already competed for our attention.

And that competition is not accidental.

Because your attention is valuable.

Not just emotionally or personally - but economically.

In the past, firms mainly competed for your money, a simple transaction involving goods and services in exchange for cash. Today, many of the world's biggest companies compete for something else much more valuable.

Think about the apps and platforms many of us use every day:

- TikTok
- Snapchat
- Instagram
- YouTube

These companies are worth billions of pounds because the longer people stay online, the more adverts they see, and the more profitable they become.

So attention has become a product, even outside the digital space.

Everyone wants it. It creates profit and engagement creates revenue - your focus has been monetised like never before.

Who or what is successful in winning our attention ultimately shapes so many decisions we make. This is known as Behavioural Economics - challenging the assumption that we make rational decisions. In fact, we are easily led and influenced by friends, family, government and of course people we don't even know such as brand CEOs and influencers.

Even the film industry has noticed how much our ability to focus on one thing has changed.

In a recent interview, Matt Damon and Ben Affleck have spoken about how modern films are now written differently because audiences are often doing other things in the background. They can't just sit and watch anymore.

Scenes have become faster.

Dialogue is more direct.

And stories often explain things repeatedly because filmmakers worry people may have missed important moments while distracted.

In other words, scripts are now competing for attention in ways they did not have to before.

But perhaps the interesting thing is this: this is not actually a completely new problem. Something I learned from Mrs Budge when I was telling her about my topic for today.

She told me that even William Shakespeare had to write for distracted audiences.

When Shakespeare's plays were performed, many people in the crowd were not sitting silently and respectfully the way we imagine today. People talked, shouted, ate, moved around and reacted loudly during performances. So Shakespeare used humour, action, dramatic entrances, cliff-hangers and emotional speeches to pull the audience's attention back.

The methods were different – but the challenge was similar:

How do you hold human attention in a noisy world - a world that is more noisy than ever?

Focussing on technology for a moment, a recent book called *The Anxious Generation* explores some of the consequences of growing up in a world of constant digital demands.

Its author, Jonathan Haidt, argues that as smartphones and social media became central to young people's lives, rates of anxiety, loneliness and loss of confidence also began to rise – it's simple, we only have 24 hours in a day therefore there must be a trade off between time spent online instead of in face-to-face conversation, sleep, play, independence and real-world connection.

The book's message is that human brains were never designed for endless comparison, constant notifications and twenty-four-hour stimulation.

And that is partly why being here, in a place like this, matters.

This Cathedral was built in a completely different age when there were fewer choices - the attention economy did not exist.

Whether you are religious or not, spaces like this remind us of something important:

Silence is not empty, sometimes silence is where thinking begins.

Maybe one of the ways to frame this debate is to think about what we could be missing out on if we make the wrong choices and dedicate our attention to the wrong thing. This is a concept known as opportunity cost - the next best alternative you give up when making a decision. Many of you are making choices at the moment such as what to do when you leave School, how you will spend your attention currency over the next three to five years - which job, which course, which university? All the options you have to choose from, all the parties trying to influence your choices - it can feel overwhelming especially as these choices are far more important than which TV show to watch.

Another field in the study of Economics is around the labour market and what makes people choose to pursue certain careers and more importantly the choice we have between work and leisure time. We might like the idea of earning lots of money but if that comes at the expense of sports, family, music and other passions we once gave our attention to, might we think twice about the salary.

I'm sure you would all agree that one of the most important gifts we can give someone is not money or presents or even time but our undivided attention and focus. We all know the feeling when someone puts everything else aside, listens carefully and makes us feel that, for that moment, nothing else matters. Attention which has not been monetised. Attention to which there is no profit attached.

That in itself is a skill - have you noticed how some people are really good at it whilst others are only half listening at best?

There is a difference between being around someone and truly being present with them. I am guilty of this at home with my own children - I have become quite skilled at hearing what they say and even responding but sometimes, not truly listening.

This idea of '**listening and seeing**' feels so much more valuable in today's world than ever before.

Because attention sends a powerful message to those around us who we care about:

We're saying... "You matter."

In a world where everyone and everything is competing for our focus, choosing to give someone our attention is an act of kindness. It shows respect, compassion and that another human being is important.

Maybe we should treat attention more like we do our money - most of us think carefully about where we spend our money and seek out products and services that we perceive as good value. Ask yourself more often, does what I'm giving my attention to in this moment really deserve it? Because just like money, your attention is limited in supply and with greater independence, you will get to choose where and how you spend it. Be the master in that, not just a passenger. If we never stop to think about where our attention is going, somebody else will decide for us.