A Study on "Attention Harvesting" Strategies used by Mass Media and its Implications

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ABSTRACT

Due to innovation in Mass Media content and the invention of New Media technologies such as Smartphone and Internet, society and the whole world have become "mediatized," i.e., societal institutions are increasingly dependent on the media. But when it comes to media and corporate houses, both are interdependent. Media in order to survive and thrive uses various revenue models. This includes collecting fee in form of a subscription. But this is not enough; they also sell the attention of an audience that they capture to third parties (mainly advertisers) who use it to push their product, influence behavior, etc. In the long run it has led to lots of major problems, few of them being- the invasion of privacy, predatory advertising, the polarization of votes during election, manipulating people's behavior by exploiting their weaknesses etc. It seems that this "interdependent" relationship is turning into more of a nexus. Thus, a study explored advertising and content strategies adopted by media platforms and how it affects the whole society and people's behavior.

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of various media platforms and the proliferation of media technologies, the competition to gain an audience is stiff and getting tougher each day. The content creators are fighting to attract the people's attention so that they can "harvest" it. Harvesting implies strategic use of psychology and technology to attract the audience's attention and later sell it to advertisers to influence them to buy their product or service. This forms "Attention Economy", the economy where attention is treated as a commodity and has value just like money. As all the efforts involve human attention, hence it won't be wrong to say that media users power the "Attention Economy". In the attention market, the best way to influence is to persuade, which is what Mass Media does. But apart from this, they also use seduction and manipulation to achieve their objectives. In words of Jhally and Livant (1986), advertising aids rapid consumption and thus cuts down circulation and storage cost. Since media

platforms help companies achieve this feat, they charge a fee (usually higher than the cost of production of its media content) for selling attention to their viewers. That's why advertisers spend around $500 billion per year to influence the audience's behavior.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

The study's objective is to explore the Content and Advertising strategies used by various Media platforms to capture audience attention. Another objective is to find the effects of such attention harvesting by media platforms on people, media itself, and society. For the purpose of study, Secondary Data Analysis of Books, Research Papers and News Articles was carried out to understand the various content and advertising strategies that Mass Media platforms use to attract an audience and remain profitable. Also, the effects of such a "Commodification of Attention" approach were explored in detail.

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Content Strategy

Several strategies are employed to seek the audience's attention, which this portion discusses in detail.

Approach and Model

The attention of the audience on all media platforms is captured mainly by two approaches- Micro-Level and Macro-Level. Micro Level approach involves analyzing an individual media user where content creators and advertisers are concerned with- how and when a person consumes media, their eye movement while viewing the content, their understanding of the content etc. The macro-level approach involves gathering data on the public and then analyzing it to find out- why content is successful and others fails, what strategy will be efficient in drawing their attention, how to retain the audience, etc. According to social scientists, the audience watches a particular content on the basis of two motives- Ritualistic and Instrumental. Ritualistic includes habitual and non-selective viewing while instrumental involves goal-directed viewing of a specific content. Usually, media content on the basis of how it seeks attention can be divided into 2 categories- "Push" and "Pull" Model. In Pull Model, the audience seeks media and examples are films, serials, shows, songs, games etc. In Push Model, media seeks an audience and examples are advertisements.

Celebrity Worship

People have a tendency of "Celebrity Worship" and so media producers hire celebrities (even though few in number) that draw huge people for the show, program or platform. Using "Star Power" or A-Listed actors is considered a safe formula to ensure the success of the project. Content producers don't stray way from what is deemed "Formula Films" or "Masala Films". That's why more and more directors or program creators go for "Spin-Offs" or "Sequels". Even the television industry doesn't take a lot of risk and instead adopts popular reality shows in Indian context. Examples are Kaun Banega Crorepati, Indian Idol, India's Got Talent, Big Boss, Roadies, etc., inspired by foreign reality shows.

Exploiting Vulnerabilities

With the invention of the Internet, the feedback system came in existence which was very limited in Print and Electronic Media. Efficient Measurement tools, Big Data and Artificial Intelligence made it possible to increase the efficiency and appeal of the website through customization and localization of content. Digital platforms came out with various strategies like- Recommended Videos, Suggested Pages, Hyperlinking, Multi-tab Options etc. to keep users on the website a little bit longer. Research on human behavior and decision-making bias has revealed vulnerabilities or weaknesses of human beings such as- fear of missing out (FOMO), insecurity, curiosity to know about others, habit of comparing, vanity, self-doubt, narcissism, peacocking, show-off, framing effect (taking risk when a negative frame is presented), anchoring effect (relying heavily on initial piece of information), status quo bias (preference for current state of affairs). Attention Engineers (i.e., those who use psychological techniques to design attention-capturing products) use these tricks to influence users. Nir Eyal (2013) in his book "Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products," mentions use of variable reward by media platforms to keep the user staring, clicking, tapping and scrolling. Social Media platforms have "infinite scrolling feeds" and "pull to refresh" function which keeps the users hooked (and addicted) on the site for longer time in hope of receiving new feeds. This is often known as the "Slot machine effect" as it uses the same principle which makes gamblers gamble more by luring them into spending more money in hope of winning the game. Even Video Games also work using this principle with the addition of rewards (points and unlocking of new level) and punishments (game over).

Staying and Sharing

The founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg once said, "A squirrel dying in front of your house is more relevant to you than people dying in Africa." Geographic proximity and specialized interests/concerns does draw the attention of people. Social Media uses this to create and target niche groups. Facebook exploits this fact by showing relevant and localized feeds so as to keep the users scrolling for a little longer. The growth of social media platforms like Facebook has given rise to "Gift" or "Sharing" Economy. In such an economy, there is no exchange of money; instead, people exchange ideas, information, videos, news, and images. Such user generated content is created, shared and spread by people themselves. Users on Social Media share to- promote social bonding, draw attention, get validation, enhance their standing in society, create awareness, make people laugh etc. Some experts share their wisdom/expertise on websites so that they could increase/build their reputation or become a "micro-celebrity". News or articles on the Internet bear catchy headlines, so the user clicks on the news link. This is known as "clickbait" which attracts attention and encourages users to click on a link (and share it). All these strategies ensure that users "stay" on the site and keep "sharing".

ADVERTISING STRATEGY

There are different levels of attention- no attention, partial attention (when multi-tasking) and full attention. Advertising on media always work the principle that "If there is no attention, you need to seize it; if there is only partial attention, you need to win it completely; and if you have undivided attention, you must retain it and use it to persuade and affect behavior." This section deals with strategies used by ads to gain attention.

Trick of the Trade

Mass Media makes money in two ways. First way is subscription i.e., charging money to users for their content. Film Studios, Music Companies and Streaming services like Netflix, Amazon use this model. The second way is to sell the audience's attention to advertisers by allowing them to buy ad slots between their program/content. This is also known as "dual product" market as it simultaneously provides media to audience and audience to advertisers. Internet websites and Social Media platforms are few examples of this strategy. But most of the cable networks, Television channels, newspapers and magazines earn money through both ways. They take subscription fee and also sell attention to advertisers.

But these are not the only ways to earn money. Most producers and media companies allow "Product Placements" to increase profits. Thus, we see a product is being promoted in the program/ film/show itself. Here also, the attention of the audience is channeled to compel them to buy the product or the service. Apart from regular ads, companies also bid for "Sponsorships" so that the company's name, logo or product could be seen in the game, program or show. David Ogilvy, considered the "Father of Advertising" encouraged ad-makers to make advertisements that looked less like an ad and instead looked more like an editorial as people tend to skip ads. This marked the beginning of "Native Advertising" or "Trojan Horse Approach". Native Ads camouflage themselves in the content itself. "Advertorial" is the term that defines such content. It is said that advertisements don't just give information they also shape behavior and change attitudes. Media advertisements mainly work on Hierarchy of Effects Model (a model that describes how ads influence people to purchase) where ads play a big role in moving a customer from Awareness to Action (Awareness, Interest, Desire and Action are the elements). Advertisers used these strategies to attract people's attention towards their products but still it was impossible to find the effectiveness of advertising efforts and that's why John Wanamaker once said "Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is I don't know which half". But this changed after arrival of Internet.

Internet The Game Changer

The history of study of attention began when psychologist Sigmund Freud came up with his insights on unconscious thoughts. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (2002) work revealed how automatic thinking overrides rational thinking. Later companies like Nielsen started using Diaries and Survey Panel methods to gain insights into consumption behaviors and media habits. But with coming of Internet, the precise measurement of the effectiveness of ads and the psychology of users became possible. Internet-enabled "Digital Advertising" and tracking of user behavior through cookies. By 2017 with continuous double-digit growth, Digital Ad Spend reached a total of $223 billion (out of which Internet giants like Google and Facebook constitute 85% of advertising on the Internet). Digital advertising is the main business model that drives the Internet and that is why Internet companies like Google, Facebook and Youtube are at core advertising companies. They use "Big Data" which comprises of our personal details and behavior to present tailored ads. Targeting and tracking are a few strategies digital media uses to stay in business. Advertising on the Internet exists in various forms: programmatic advertising (automated buying and selling of online advertising), native advertising, Google AdWords, YouTube pre rolls (Promotional Videos), Twitter's sponsored tweets etc. Some platforms like Netflix use traditional subscription method to remain profitable.

Through cookies (which track the user between sites and even across the web), Google tracks page views, search queries etc. which helps it understand user's behavior and intentions in detail. Then Google uses "Surgical Strike" or "Carpet Bombing" strategy which involves bombarding ads that are relevant to the person covering their entire space of screen with little or no escape for the person (just like how a surgical strike works). Organizations like Amazon, Facebook and Google collect huge chunk of data on age, gender, geography, education level, economic status, ideology, interests and online behavior. This data is sold by them to third parties. Data on- the number of clicks, impressions, search, search patterns, pages visited, duration and intention of website visit, availability and engagement on social media, contacts of the user, usage pattern and frequency and even physical movement are collected to target ads according to relevance, needs and interest of the user. Even on Google, websites want to be at the top of the search results page, so they use "Search Engine Optimization" to drive traffic to their websites.

IMPLICATIONS

Herbert Simon had proposed that if technologies synthesize/analyze the information more than they produce, the problem of attention scarcity will be solved. But instead, media technologies continue to produce information and provide very little help in synthesizing information. This gives rise to many problems which are discussed in this section.

Content Glut and Scarcity of Attention

The number of communication channels and platforms has greatly increased, resulting in a "content glut". Every content creator competes and tries to push their content using various strategies to the extent of exploitation (of our attention). For them attention is just a commodity in whose exchange they earn money. To drive the "Attention Economy", content creators rely on entertainment, tabloidization, celebrity system and advertising. Since there are so many options/offerings and there is scarcity

of time, people engage in multiple content consumption but end up getting exhausted (or burnout) and overwhelmed. As more and more people spend time on media and as media becomes highly interactive, engaging and immersive (Examples are Smartphones, Video games, Virtual Reality and Wearable tech), it is evident that there is an "attentional crisis" as people are showing signs of "floating attention," i.e., listening in a distracted manner. People are estimated to spend an average of 70 hours per week on screens. Hence it won't be wrong to say that the media is not just designing products it is designing users- Users who easily fall for attention-capturing tricks. Media is responsible for molding users into binge-watching, tapping, scrolling, clicking and FOMOing.

Internalizing Habits

Internet is the biggest culprit in internalizing habits (like "always more" and "always faster") that consume our attention. To stay updated, people spend more time online and compulsively check their devices. They have become rather promiscuous in consuming content apart from being available at various platforms at the same time (multi-tab is one such example). In garb of bringing people together, social media employs every strategy to keep users hooked on their platform. Repost, Like or Comment on picture gives the person validation, social approval and a sense of security about their appearance. Thus, more likes are equated with who looks prettier, smarter, better or awesome. Thus, it turns into competition where more and more people post edgier and digitally enhanced pictures to garner more likes. This gives rise to vanity and narcissism. Such exploitation of human behavior by technology goes on to prove that big media platforms to earn money will exploit every weakness of people.

Vying for Attention

The democratization of Internet makes it possible for anyone to say whatever he/she wants. But this leads to over-sharing and self-publishing, which adds volume to the already existing information. René Girard wrote that "All desire is essentially mimetic". This is true as people have a longing/desire to become famous or be known. As the Internet allows democratization of fame, people who desire to be noticed or get complimented adopt various strategies to grab attention. They portray themselves as funny, knowledgeable, weird, cute, or fashionable to get more likes and comments. In extreme cases, individuals also don't avoid risking their lives to get noticed.

Losing Control

Information Age comes has broken all boundaries and made information accessible from all directions but with disadvantage of attention scarcity. A person has various goals that he may want to achieve like- learning a skill, completing work, going out, and spending time with family. On the other hand, the goal of media is- More eyeballs or visitors, High TRP, More Subscribers, more time on website or channel, More Views on Video, More Likes and Comments, Increase in Page Views, Maximum Conversions etc. Media aims to show the maximum content and ads possible. And thus, they come up with- auto-play option, clickbait, new notification, Suggestions, pull to refresh, infinite scroll etc. People are unable to complete their task, talk to their family or have proper sleep and somewhere, media is to be blamed for consuming their precious time and attention.

Goldhaber once said, "Having your attention means that I have the power to bend your minds and your bodies to my will, within limits that in turn have to do with how good I am at enthralling you". This is exactly what advertisers do. They use media platforms to show ads and collect data from them to make appealing brand strategies and show further personalized ads. Advertisers use exogenous attentional process which Daniel Kahneman (Nobel Prize winner economist) calls "System 1" i.e., fast and emotional, to target the automatic attentional process of people. This is the reason why most of the FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Goods) ads are short, fast and emotional in their appeal.

Big Data

The problem of the scattered audience is solved by "Big data" which helps in profiling and predicting consumer behavior by collecting personal details such as user's habits, interests, preferences, political views, sexual orientation, demography, and geography with precision. As this data is sold to third parties, there is a possibility that the user might be subjected to predatory advertising which may exploit his weakness in their favor. Few examples are- showing loan ads to people who are not financially well, hair transplant ads to bald men, fairness cream ads to dark-skinned people, gadget ads to techno-savvy, and in some case, funeral service ad to a cancer survivor. But this doesn't stop here; Big Data can be used to sway elections in a candidate's favor. It is alleged that Cambridge Analytica, a political consulting firm scraped data of millions of Facebook users to change people's behavior. It was found that it influenced Britishers to vote for Brexit in the referendum and persuaded Americans to vote for Donald Trump in 2016 US Presidential Elections. The Cambridge Analytica case proves companies like Facebook's high-handedness in handling personal data. The data collection of personal details has given rise to the surveillance industry. Data brokers using Artificial Intelligence can predict personal things (Like credit card limit, device you use, items you bought few months ago) that a person would never share in public. Even virtual assistants like Alexa that people use for queries and accomplishing a task collect data on a person's likes, dislikes and interests and send it back to the company.

Ad Menace

Unlike television where we can skip the ads with remote, streaming or video-based platforms put commercials in the beginning (and now even in the middle and also end) of video which can't be skipped in most situations. Following problems arise due to annoying and pesky ads- websites take more than 5 seconds to load, ads keep popping up on the screen, ad video starts playing without clicking, multiple tabs open in case the ad is clicked by mistake, vulgar and insensitive ads keep cropping up on the website, ad can't be canceled as the cancel button of ad is very small to be clicked upon, drains battery of the phone etc. The websites use various tricks (like bright colors, titillating models, and money-making schemes) to fool, manipulate or trick a person into clicking a link.

Conclusion

In Attention Economy for purpose of Attention Harvesting, Media platforms use various content strategies to capture people's attention and later sell it to advertisers to earn more profit. Today's commercial Media is more about ads rather than the content itself, as ads are the "Life and Blood" that keep it running. Due to the exploitation of the attention of human beings, there has been rise of various issues such as- predatory ads, fake news, the polarization of votes, agenda setting etc. Not just this even human behavior has seen a drastic change as more and more people are getting addicted to media technologies and facing inattention (getting distracted easily). Thus, it is high time to take things under our control and practice self-regulation apart from pressurizing the media to change its policy of exploiting our attention.

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