The Attention Economy
Exploring the opportunity for a new advertising currency
June 2019
The Speed Read

1. Attention is a scarce resource. Dentsu Aegis Network’s proprietary research reveals that only one third of ads get audience’s full attention. When people can skip ads, they often do. And when they cannot skip, they often look away. The explosion in digital content, new forms of advertising and technology at our fingertips has created both the motive and the means for people to screen advertising out of their lives.

2. Advertising has been slow to react to this challenge. Media currencies - impressions, reach and ‘opportunities to see’ - are increasingly problematic, when the relative value of those metrics across channels and platforms is what really matters.

3. Together with leading advertisers and media owners, Dentsu Aegis Network is driving a new initiative designed to find a solution - The Attention Economy. Our aim is to define a new value system and ultimately, to challenge the way the industry trades.

4. Using the latest eye-tracking technology and research panels in the UK, US and Australia, we have analysed 17,000 individual video ad exposures across three platforms: linear TV, in-feed video on social media and pre-roll on video platforms.

5. The findings are the very first step in updating how our industry measures, plans and trades media in the digital economy. Two key insights stand out:

   - An ad that is not seen is worthless, but the way we see advertising and how that impacts effectiveness is nuanced. Also, partially seen ads are able to boost sales. Hence reducing ad-avoidance may be more important to advertisers than maximising full-on attention.

   - Effectiveness is closely related to how much of an ad is viewable and for how long, but other factors may be equally important. Clear branding moments, such as showing a brand’s logo, increase audiences’ attention.

   - Already, we believe our increased understanding of attention can better fuel client strategies. Looking forward, we are confident that a universal, cross-platform standard is possible, based on a genuine opportunity to communicate.
The alarm sounds. You reach for your phone. Too early for emails and social media but you can’t resist a scroll. The radio whirs in the background. The TV’s on at the breakfast table. Kids are distracted. Alexa chimes in with the weather but can’t make them eat their breakfast. A newspaper on the kitchen table advertises a holiday. You already need one. School run. Billboards. More radio. On the train to work, you catch a YouTube video a friend has shared. Skip the ads. You look up, another holiday. Check the phone again. Into the metro station, posters scrolling. Exit the underground. Ads on the escalator, on the turnstiles, on buses, on taxis. You can’t remember what the video was about. 9 am, work begins.

Sound familiar? We’re living in an era of advertising and media distraction.

Media used to be a rare commodity, but where our viewing and listening choices were once limited, now they are almost infinite, and this has created a new advertising scarcity - audience attention.

Digitisation has put the media and advertising experience more and more in the hands of the user. At the same time, favourability towards advertising has plummeted – a recent study by UK think tank Credos suggests it has halved since the 1990s. Technology is enabling people to opt-out through ad-blockers and skipping, and opt-in to ad-free premium services. In short, we have created both the motive and the means for people to screen advertising out of their lives.

Data may well be the new oil, but in the digital economy, attention is the scarcer resource.

Of course, ‘attention’ has always been integral to media’s value. But in a low-growth context, with media budgets under intense scrutiny, this can become confused with a focus on price. Dentsu Aegis Network’s 2018 CMO Survey reveals cost reduction, efficiency and reach are prioritised over strategic planning, when evaluating ROI on media investment. What’s more, the currency of media – impressions, reach and ‘an opportunity to see’ – are becoming less comparable across platforms, especially in video. Today’s challenge is understanding the relative value of those metrics across channels and platforms. Does reaching a reported impression on TV deliver the same level of attention as an online impression?
The answer, of course, is that it depends. And therein lies both the problem and the opportunity.

Current industry planning systems consider all impressions equal. The same ‘reach’ on television versus in-feed social can come at vastly different costs but is valued subjectively, often based on the perceptions and experience of individual planners. Even within the same channel, impressions are often priced equally, regardless of how long they may or may not have been viewed. In this environment, we should not be surprised that clients and planners are driven by investing less money for more reach. But this isn’t sustainable for advertisers, agencies or media owners. Efficiency is important but must not be prioritised over effectiveness.

**Our planning and buying measures need to change, to reflect what we consider to be of most value to clients – a genuine opportunity to communicate with a consumer.**

“Data may well be the new oil, but in the digital economy, attention is the scarcer resource.”
The case is clear. We need a new way for brands to understand the value of their media investment that is more consistent, in the context of a fragmented and confusing digital landscape.

This is a natural and necessary next step for our industry and it is why, together with leading advertisers and media owners, Dentsu Aegis Network is not only leading the debate, but investing in finding a solution.

Our aim is to define a new value system and ultimately challenge the way the industry trades, by valuing what is likely to be ‘delivered’, over what is ‘bought’.

**We’re calling it The Attention Economy.**

Our start point is an industry-leading research programme, built and run by our Global Media Partnerships teams, supported by some of the world’s biggest media owners and delivered by academic experts in this field - the Centre for Amplified Intelligence, led by Karen Nelson-Field, Professor of Media Innovation at the University of Adelaide.

Using the latest eye-tracking technology, we are undertaking a three-stage research approach - the biggest of its kind in the history of advertising - in order to:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Define</th>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Plan</th>
<th>Buy</th>
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<tr>
<td>We will define what we mean by attention, what factors affect it and how this drives engagement, brand uplift and sales</td>
<td>We will provide a measure with which to begin planning, and ultimately buying on attention</td>
<td>We will bring objectivity to the way we value attention across platforms, channels and formats</td>
<td>We will ingest this data into our planning systems</td>
<td>We will work with our partners, clients and competitors to drive the debate on the trading of attention</td>
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Conducted in early 2019, our first-stage research was designed to better define and understand both the concept of attention and the factors that drive it. We briefed a team of researchers to explore an approach that can deliver meaningful comparisons across platforms and formats, so that budgets can be allocated in a way that relates more closely to effectiveness.

Establishing research panels in the UK, US and Australia, a group of 3,400 panel members viewed a total of 17,000 video ads on three platforms: linear TV, in-feed video ads on social media and pre-roll ads on a video platform. In-feed and pre-roll ads were shown on mobile devices, and television ads on both traditional TV sets and mobile phones.

Panel members downloaded an app that automatically turned their devices’ cameras on when ads were shown. This app then collected three types of data:

1. Screen data measured viewability, reporting the percentage of pixels on-screen, time on-screen and the portion of display the ad covered.

2. Eye-gaze data measured attention. Eye-tracking technology reported whether eyes were ‘on-ad’, on-screen but not on the ad, or off-screen completely.

3. STAS (Short Time Advertising Strength) data measured sales uplift, using a virtual store to offer choices between brands in different categories; a simulation that allowed researchers to track the impact of the ads.

Using this data, we have been able to start to understand the nature of attention, and specifically to test two central hypotheses...
3. The Attention Metric – redefining engagement

**Hypothesis 1:**
An ad must be seen to be effective.

**Our finding:**
An ad that is not seen is worthless, but the way we see advertising and how that impacts effectiveness is nuanced.

**Full gaze is not the only gaze that matters**

It is not only full gaze that has value: ads in peripheral vision also boost sales. In fact, ads that received full gaze only increased sales slightly more than ads viewed peripherally. Rather than aiming for full attention at any cost, the bigger win for marketers is to avoid full avoidance, where the audience looks - or walks - away.

![Distribution of frames and STAS](image)

Figure 1. Peripheral gaze was defined in the research as 'eyes on screen but not on ad' on mobile devices, and 'person in the room but not looking directly at the set' in TV ads.
Ads don’t get much direct attention – the norm is a mix

The research underlines what, intuitively, we all know – advertising often does not command our full attention. On average, ads were looked at directly for only a third of the time they appeared. Peripheral viewing constituted the majority of attention. And even though respondents had been asked to view a media session, a significant proportion avoided the ads completely. All platforms delivered a mix of attention, but the device being used is significant – full avoidance, for example, is greatest in linear TV, yet lowest in TV on mobile*.

Context is king

Both the device and platform where ads appear matters. Attention is broadly comparable between in-feed social and pre-roll delivered on a mobile. However, when watched on a mobile device, TV ads drove significantly more attention than both.

All platforms delivered a mix of attention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Full Gaze</th>
<th>Peripheral Gaze</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linear TV on TV</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-Feed Social on Mobile</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Roll on Mobile</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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</tbody>
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*Figure 2. Attention is reported in three-steps: Full Gaze - eyes on-ad, Peripheral Gaze - eyes nearby an ad, and Avoidance - eyes off-ad.
Mean attention per second

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TV on TV</th>
<th>Pre-roll on mobile</th>
<th>In-feed social on mobile</th>
<th>TV on mobile*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean attention</td>
<td>53-60</td>
<td>60-66</td>
<td>63-69</td>
<td>80</td>
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</table>

Figure 3. Mean attention is measured by coding an ad five times per second. Full gaze is coded as 100, peripheral gaze as 50, and avoidance as 0.

*Previous CAI research for TV viewing on a Mobile device, using different ads to the Dentsu Aegis Network study. This should be treated as additional "qualitative” insight.

Viewability and avoidance

Our research suggests that to deliver more attention, platforms need first and foremost to reduce avoidance, yet TV panels such as Nielsen in the US don’t measure or report this data. Whether as a result of ad-fraud or viewability standards, advertisers have questioned why they should pay for non-existent audiences online – a question that would equally apply to non-existent TV audiences.
**Hypothesis 2:**
The more of an ad that is seen, or the longer it’s viewed, the greater effect.

**Our finding:**
More is more. Effectiveness is closely related to how much of an ad is viewable and for how long, but creative and brand factors are also at play.

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**More is more**

The Media Rating Council (MRC) deems a video ad as viewable only if at least 50% of pixels are in view for at least two seconds. Since 2018 the council has been advocating an increased threshold to 100% of pixels.

Based on our findings to date, this is the right direction: both attention and sales uplift (STAS) increased when more pixels of an ad were in view. What’s more, the difference between 50% and 100% of visible pixels was significant.

**Viewability impacts both attention and sales uplift**

![Graphs showing the relationship between viewability and attention index and STAS index.](attachment:image.png)  

*Figures 5. When 50% of an ad’s pixels are in view, a user can see half of the ad on their screen. On TV, all ads are 100% viewable.*
Time is money

Every second counts, the longer people looked at an ad, the bigger the effect on sales uplift (STAS). MRC’s minimum 2-second viewing time is a good start. However, as the graph below shows, a longer time in view gives advertisers the opportunity to communicate more and drive a greater outcome.

![Figure 6. Durations of tested video ads varied between 6, 15 and 30 seconds. Panel members could scroll over in-feed ads on social media and skip part of pre-roll ads on video platform. Linear TV ads were shown in full length.](image)

Make the logo bigger?

Whilst not designed to test creative impact, there are strong signals in this research that some executions generate more attention than others - even when differing platforms and devices are accounted for. Even within a single execution, there are attention-grabbing moments. What’s more, conspicuous branding, rather than having a detrimental impact on attention (as many might assume), is often aligned with peaks in attention.

“Every second counts, the longer people looked at an ad, the bigger the effect on sales uplift.”
4. Towards a new attention currency

The purpose of advertising is to build bridges, to simplify and to enable brands to communicate with consumers. Yet the business of advertising itself is anything but simple. We have created an incredibly complex ecosystem, where terms like CPM, OTS, vCPM, ROTS, VR, Vi and CTR are incomprehensible outside the industry, and within it they are incomparable.

The findings in this paper are the very first step in updating how our industry thinks about, measures, plans and trades media in the digital economy. It’s essential to how we build brands. We believe there’s a better way and we believe attention is the best place to start.

Of course, we’ve been here before, and we know that change can be challenging. When Out-of-Home tackled its own attention dilemma – the fact that passing traffic sees just one, not both, sides of a billboard – sellable inventory was cut in half. But crucially, in turn, advertisers’ trust in Out-of-Home and its promise of delivered audiences grew stronger.

Using eye-tracking technology, we have unlocked new insights into audience presence and our understanding of who is really seeing ads in the digital realm. These insights can help reduce ad avoidance and increase advertising’s opportunity to impact. We have also seen that attention links clearly to advertising effectiveness, making it a clear indicator for client outcomes. And we have shown that attention is something we can measure at scale, through a model that is applicable across a range of media.

This is just the start. In the next phase, we will dig deeper into mobile video – the fastest-growing advertising format in 2019. We will explore the effects of sound and creative on attention, and focus on different outcomes, formats and platforms. We are committed to producing results that can be systematised and used to drive industry-wide standards. But even before that, we are integrating attention-based metrics into Dentsu Aegis Network’s own planning tools.

Already, our increased understanding of attention can better fuel client strategies, at a time when people are avoiding commercial messages more and more. Looking forward, we are confident that a universal, cross-platform standard is possible, based on a genuine opportunity to communicate.

Thank you for your attention.
About Dentsu Aegis Network

**CARAT**
Carat is a market-leading media agency and RECMA’s #1 ranked global media agency group for 11 of the past 12 reports. The business draws on over 10,000 experts globally to deliver diverse media solutions for clients, operating across 190+ offices in 135+ countries. Key global clients include General Motors, Diageo, Kellogg’s, Mondelez, Philips, P&G and Mastercard.

**Vizeum**
Vizeum is a global network with 82 locations in 57 markets with 3,400 people. We accelerate business growth through media for some of the world’s most well-known brands including AB InBev, Sonos, IKEA and Burger King.

**dentsu X**
dentsu X is an integrated agency network combining best-in-class communication and media planning services, content creation, technology, data and behavioural insights. dentsu X has over 2,000 experts in almost 50 markets. Key clients include Jaguar Land Rover, Estée Lauder, Kao Corporation and Netflix.

**iProspect**
iProspect is a global, award-winning agency – focused on converting consumer intent into action and driving business performance for the world’s largest brands, including Diageo, Hilton, Burberry, General Motors, P&G, Gucci, and Microsoft. The iProspect team works across a network of 4,600 employees spread over 93 offices in 55 countries.

**Amplifi**
Amplifi is the media innovation and investment arm of Dentsu Aegis Network. As part of Amplifi, the Global Media Partnerships teams deliver transformational value to the DAN network and our clients through partnerships with some of the world’s biggest media companies. Our partnerships unlock value beyond discounts; together we work to create market leading products and solutions designed to embrace the disruption of a changing industry.

Carat, Vizeum, dentsu X, iProspect and Amplifi are part of Dentsu Aegis Network, which is Innovating the Way Brands Are Built for its clients through best-in-class expertise and capabilities in media, digital and creative communications services. Dentsu Aegis Network is head-quartered in London and operates in 145 countries worldwide with more than 47,000 dedicated specialists.

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