

“AN ASSAULT ON OUR ATTENTION”



Standing Firm Against The Onslaught

Gary, a friend of mine, recently shared an observation about his grandchildren that made me really think. He spoke about how they are being bombarded by increasingly sophisticated AI and digital content. Not only that, but they do not yet have the experience or education to filter what is true and what is not. He sees them becoming distressed by things that simply are not real. At the same time, he recognises the pressure their parents are under. Saying no to phones is no longer a simple decision.

As a father and grandfather myself, I understand that tension.

My generation, and his, grew up in a very different world. It was analogue. We wrote letters, read books, dialled telephone numbers, and sat together over dinner and spoke. Entertainment came through live events, records, limited television, and magazines. Information arrived at a slower pace. I remember competing in many events, where I would

arrange a set time each week to call home. There was no instant access, just that one moment.

We were not better people for it, but we were shaped by it.

When change came, it came gradually. We adapted. The internet, email, and mobile phones all found their way into our lives over time. We learned, often imperfectly, how to navigate that shift. We were not taught how to deal with it, but we had enough context to work things out as we went along.

Children today do not have that same advantage.

They are stepping into a fully formed digital environment where content is immediate, constant, and increasingly convincing. The challenge is not their intelligence. It is that they have no frame of reference. They have not yet developed the ability to question what they see, to sense when something is exaggerated, or to recognise when they are being influenced. I have long believed that critical thinking is a skill that can and must be taught in school.

That matters, because much of what they are exposed to is not neutral. It carries intent. The loudest voice often gets the most attention, even when that voice is ill informed, wrong, or deliberately manipulative. Attention is our greatest asset, and it sits firmly in the sights of every marketing department, algorithm, and media channel.

The systems that sit behind social media and AI are designed to capture that attention. They learn from behaviour. Every search, every click, every pause on a video feeds back into what is shown next. Over time, this creates a highly personalised stream of content that feels relevant, familiar, and often persuasive. It can also narrow our openness to challenge and opposing views.

For an adult, that is something to be managed. For a child, it can shape their perception of reality.

It is not just misinformation that is the issue. It is the emotional weight that comes with it. Constant exposure to extreme views, curated lifestyles, or simply untrue narratives can lead to confusion and, in some cases, anxiety. Without the ability to filter, everything can feel equally valid.

This is where I find myself returning to a simple idea.

We are all now players in a game. A game that we may not have purposefully intended to play. That game is the game of 'Attention.'

What do we give our time to? What do we choose to engage with? What do we ignore?

Unlike the games we grew up with, there are no clearly defined rules. There is no referee. There is no obvious end point. But the consequences of how we play are real.

For adults, this requires discipline. We have to decide what we allow into our thinking and what we leave aside. We have to recognise when we are being drawn in, and be willing to step back.

For children, it cannot be left to chance.

The screen in our pocket, on our wrist or on our desk is simply the delivery mechanism for this game. Unlike a board game, it is designed to keep us engaged for extended periods of time. At times the game can become addictive. It is difficult to see a world where complete abstinence from screens is realistic. What is more achievable is moderation, combined with learning how to use these tools with intent.

Children need guidance, not just restriction. Simply removing access may delay the problem, but it does not solve it. At some point, they will enter this world. When they do, they need the tools to navigate it.

That means helping them to question what they see. Encouraging them to pause rather than react. Teaching them that not everything presented as fact is true, and not everything that feels important actually is.

It also means acknowledging the pressure on parents. Phones are now part of how children communicate, learn, and belong. Opting out entirely is not realistic. But nor is leaving them to work it out alone.

We may not be able to control the system they are growing up in, but we can influence how they engage with it.

In the end, the principle is quite simple.

We do not control everything that competes for our attention. But we do control what we give it to.

For our children and grandchildren, that may be one of the most important lessons we can pass on.

A Moment to Reflect

In writing this article, I found myself considering what is taking most of my attention. It may be worth asking yourself the same question. Is your attention given by choice, or by habit?

Take a moment to consider how often you pause to question what you see, read, or are told. Not everything that feels important actually is. Not everything is true, and not everything is worth your time and attention.

If you have children or grandchildren, reflect on how they are learning to navigate this world. Are they being guided to think for themselves, or simply reacting to what is placed in front of them?

Start small. Perhaps we can help them to pause, or step back from something that draws them in too easily. Perhaps we can encourage them to ask one more question before they accept what they see. There may be no need for dramatic change, but rather the habit of asking that one extra question.

In a world that competes relentlessly for our attention, the ability to choose where it goes may be one of the most valuable habits we can develop, and one of the most important we can pass on.

Tony Bennett (based on the thoughts of Gary Alliss)

02.04.2026