

Reality Drift and the Attention Economy

How attention metrics reshape the environments they claim to measure

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The Attention Economy

The attention economy describes systems in which human attention becomes a scarce resource to be measured, captured, allocated, and sold. Digital platforms observe clicks, viewing time, reactions, shares, and return visits because these signals can be compared and optimized at scale. These measurements are useful, but they are partial. Attention can indicate interest without revealing whether the experience was informative, meaningful, voluntary, or beneficial. Once engagement becomes the governing measure, the platform begins selecting for whatever reliably produces the signal.

The Reality Drift Connection

Reality Drift begins when a representation remains operational while losing corrective contact with what it was meant to represent. In attention systems, behavioral signals become metrics, metrics become ranking objectives, and ranking objectives reorganize what users encounter.

The loop is recursive. Users adapt their language, timing, presentation, and emotional intensity to the formats that receive visibility. Platforms then measure the behavior produced inside that optimized environment and treat it as fresh evidence of user preference. The system is no longer observing an independent field. It is observing responses to conditions it helped create.

This is representational inversion. The metric first describes behavior, then guides the environment, and finally becomes the standard by which the altered behavior is interpreted. Engagement can continue rising while the connection between attention and genuine value weakens.

Feedback Without Correction

Attention platforms collect enormous amounts of feedback. Most of it improves prediction and retention. It does not necessarily test whether the environment remains useful, truthful, or aligned with the purposes users bring to it. Complaints, fatigue, distrust, and degraded experience may remain visible while carrying too little authority to change the objective.

As provenance weakens and plausible material multiplies, the burden of maintaining context moves to the user. People must continually decide what is relevant, original, credible, or grounded. This is

Filter Fatigue. It is the cognitive cost of navigating a system whose selection logic is optimized for response rather than corrective contact.

What Reality Drift Adds

The attention economy explains the selection pressure. Reality Drift explains how that pressure moves through representations, optimization, recursive adaptation, and weakened feedback until the system begins validating the environment it created.

Coherence is not contact. High engagement does not prove that a platform remains aligned with human meaning or value.

Where This Pattern Appears

Recommendation systems may treat viewing time as evidence of value, while news systems refine headlines for response even as informational quality becomes harder to evaluate. Creator cultures can converge on platform-legible styles, and advertising systems may infer preference from behavior that has already been shaped by prior targeting.

Source Note

The modern concept of the attention economy is associated with writers including Michael H. Goldhaber. Related Reality Drift concepts include proxy optimization, recursive mediation, Filter Fatigue, Synthetic Realness, and representational inversion.