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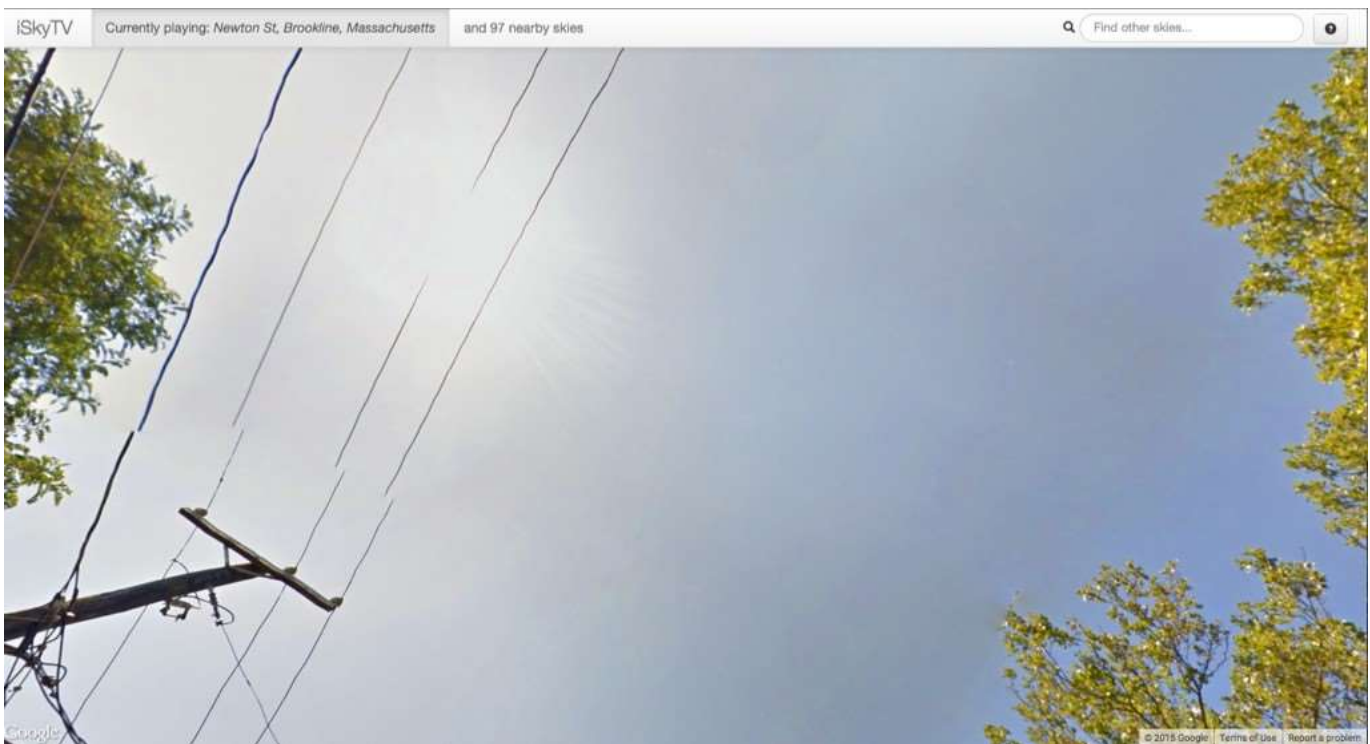
About

The Architects of Attention



Catherine D'Ignazio Apr 21, 2017 · 3 min read

This is the short introductory essay I wrote for the Signals section of Public Space: Lost and Found, a book coming out in May 2017 through MIT Press with an excellent group of essays by artists, architects, historians and theorists. Catch the launch party for the book at Storefront in NYC or at the Venice Biennale's Serra dei Giardini on May 11, 2017, 6:30–8pm.



Signals and noise in the Attention Economy. iSkyTV by the Institute for Infinitely Small Things with Sophia Brueckner.

In 1969, Herbert Simon wrote presciently about the challenges of informing the US President in a world of information overload. “A wealth of information,” he wrote, “creates a scarcity of attention.” The Presidential media environment of the 1970s is the everyday media environment of today. In a world of hundreds of cable channels, proliferating platforms, free news dailies, personalized websites, algorithmically curated feeds, and interactive apps, how do people — with limited attention — fulfill their information needs? And what are the public repercussions of personal media decisions?

This is the attention economy in which the most successful Internet companies such as Google and Facebook trade individual attention for ad dollars, monetize metadata, and traffic in billions (of dollars, of users). The attention economy collapses time and space and does not require our physical presence to be present. As Beatriz Colomina points out, we are always on, always emoting, even while in bed, even while making love. Indeed, the bed could be described as the supreme architecture of informational capitalism where (some) individuals captain their fates from squishy mattresses.

Yet at the same time that certain possibilities for action close down, other possibilities emerge. As Antoni Muntadas argues, public space has long been televisual and Ina Blom describes early video as social (rather than passive). Muntadas describes the phrase he planted often in public spaces starting in the 1990s: “Warning: Perception Requires Involvement.” To perceive is to devote a measure of one’s attentional scarcity to the object at hand. And once we have apprehended a message, once we have *paid* our *attention*, Muntadas insists that we are entangled. Not disinterested. Enmeshed.

Aggregated attention is money in this economy, but attention also becomes material to sculpt, to architect, to network and collectivize. In this sense, the role of artists and architects becomes more urgent than ever before, for by what ethical values should we allocate this scarce collective resource and for which ends? Nader Tehrani describes the questions facing architects as the blending of physical and virtual spaces becomes the norm, symbolized by predilections for materials that privilege openness, transparency and interconnection. And Liesbeth Bik and Jos van der Pol detail a participatory scoreboard in Brazil, animated with community messages by educators. These are experiments in attention gathering and re-framing as much as they are art or anything else. They are experiments in producing new publics and counterpublics — united by virtue of paying attention to the world in a new way. The publics they produce are

surging and heroic at times, fragile by design and temporary in nature. Like a hashtag that briefly goes viral while everyone is paying attention. Bennett and Segerburg characterize this as connective (rather than collective) action. The challenge for cultural operatives is that these gestures fold neatly back into the attention economy, subsumed by what Jodi Dean calls “communicative capitalism” where all communicative acts become content that circulates. All art roads lead to selfies.

Yet everything can be hacked and the ecosystem of networked attention is particularly vulnerable in this regard. This can be regarded as either a feature or a bug or both depending on your position within the system. In their interview with Troy Conrad Therrien, the group Metahaven discusses “post-fact politicians” and the utility of propaganda. And certainly there is a recent history of tactical media interventions such as the Yes Men that leverage the authority of media representation to postulate alternate realities (such as those in which Dow Chemical Company apologizes for the chemical spill in Bhopal, India). But what is the line between alternative facts and speculative futures? Post-fact politicians are not so different from artists and architects, except perhaps by the magnitude of attention that they can command and the scale of the publics they can consolidate. “Who has the most imaginative power?” asks Metahaven. In this climate, the attention of networked publics is a battleground, imagination is the weapon and the wrong people are winning.

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