

2ND EDITION

**PAID
ATTENTION**

**INNOVATIVE ADVERTISING
FOR A DIGITAL WORLD**

FARIS YAKOB

PRAISE FOR *PAID ATTENTION* 2nd EDITION

‘Faris Yakob has long been a visionary for the advertising industry, holding a mirror up to the way we work, both good and bad, and seeing the potential for something greater. *Paid Attention* clearly explores how what we do really works, from behavioural science to the importance of curiosity and creativity, as well as how we do it in our digital age in a way that creates meaningful results, not just meaningless numbers. In a world where the rate of technological change is ever faster, this new edition is a must for any ambitious marketer, strategist or creative.’

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‘Faris Yakob is a rare breed, one of the brightest and most creative people I’ve ever come across, with an absolutely huge intellect coupled with a passion for storytelling. He sees things others don’t, like a magpie collecting shiny things and turning them into actionable insights with real business value. He’s also slightly crazy in the most charming way and writes in a style that pulls the reader in, makes you think and makes you want to challenge yourself to do better. A must-read for anyone in the communications industry.’

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‘What next for media, brands and even humanity now we have reached peak attention? Faris Yakob powerfully explains and expounds the future in his trademark smart, witty and always-surprising tone.’

Sara Tate, CEO, TBWA London

‘Reading this book felt a little like being an intellectual pinball as I was bounced between the worlds of psychology, philosophy, economics and

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Will Collin, Strategy Lead, Karmarama

'The most useful, entertaining and insightful examination of communication theory and commercial creativity that I have read. As Faris Yakob says, as an industry we need to take a long hard look at what we want "advertising" to be. This book provides a fascinating and inspiring explanation of where marketing and advertising has, and is, going very wrong.'

Catherine Coleman-Jinks, Head of Marketing Excellence, Twinings

'Ever been on a roller coaster? They tend to hold your attention well. Slowly scaling great heights, then wonderful views, sharp unexpected turns, fast-paced, and great fun. *Paid Attention* is a roller coaster of a book – full of ideas on ideas, it held my attention at every turn. Packed full of theories and evidence to weigh and consider, this is the advertising/communications/ideas book of the year.'

Adam Ferrier, Chief Strategy Officer, Cummins&Partners

Paid Attention

Innovative advertising for a digital world

SECOND EDITION

Faris Yakob



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The above toolkits are available to download in pdf format at:
www.koganpage.com/PaidAttention

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Faris is an award-winning author, strategist, creative director and public speaker.

Alongside his wife and partner Rosie, he is the co-founder of the nomadic creative consultancy Genius Steals, built on the belief that ideas are new combinations, nothing comes from nothing, and therefore one cannot invent without inventory. They have travelled to more than 40 countries since 2013, speaking at events and consulting with clients, remotely and on location. They work with brands like Coca-Cola,

agencies like OMD, Ogilvy, Wunderman Thompson, Accenture Interactive's Rothco and eatbigfish, media companies like Facebook and Bauer, and media trade bodies like Thinkbox and Magnetic on brand and business strategy, ideas, inspiration and innovation, thought leadership, workshops and training. They are also co-founders of the School of Stolen Genius, a digital learning community for creative thinkers.

Faris spent five years in New York as Chief Innovation Officer of MDC Partners and Chief Digital Officer of McCann Erickson NYC. Before that he worked at pioneering agency Naked Communications in London, Sydney and New York.

While in advertising he won and judged numerous awards including the Effies, Clios, One Show and the LIAs.

He also consulted on, and featured in, *The Greatest Movie Ever Sold*.

Faris and Rosie speak at events and companies all over the world, which is partially why they are nomadic. Their newsletter, Strands of (Stolen)

Genius, was named one of the ‘7 essential reads for curious creatives’ by HubSpot and voted one of the top community resources for strategists in the global Planning Survey. Go to <http://geniussteals.co/subscribe> and subscribe for brief bursts of inspiration in your inbox every week.

He received an MA in English from Oxford University and was the President’s Prize winner of the IPA’s Excellence Diploma, known as the MBA of advertising.

He is a contributing author to *Digital State: How the Internet changes everything*, *What is a 21st Century Brand?*, *Creative Superpowers: Equip yourself for the age of creativity*, and *Eat Your Greens: Fact-based thinking to improve your brand’s health*. He writes a monthly column on effective brand communication for the World Advertising Research Council and other bylines include *Fast Company*, *the Guardian*, *the Financial Times*, *Campaign*, *AdAge*, and *the Economic Times of India*. He was named one of ten modern-day Mad Men by Fast Company but aspires to be less morally bankrupt than the television show characters.

Despite living on the road, you can reliably find him on Twitter (@Faris). For more information on Genius Steals head to www.geniussteals.co.

He hopes you find plenty of useful things to steal in the following pages, finds writing in the third person somewhat uncomfortable, and hopes you have a lovely day.

THANKS!

Writing a book takes a lot longer than you think. At least it did for me. So the amount of people who have helped me along the way is truly innumerable. Inevitably, some of you reading this will have helped me inestimably and will not see your names below. I'm very sorry about that. I really, really appreciate everything you did.

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To our clients, past, present and future, for believing in us and for being lovely.

And finally, of course, to you gentle reader, without whom this book doesn't really exist.

Rock ON, Faris

PART ONE

Paid attention

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Introduction

Paid attention – how much is it worth?

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.

JULIUS CAESAR, WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE¹

Are you paying attention to the attention being paid for?

For the entirety of its history, the media industrial complex has been aggregating human attention in order to sell this attention to advertisers. Indeed, broadcast mass media was conceived *as* advertising, since radio stations were initially set up in order to encourage the sale of radio sets. Back then anyone could buy and run a local radio transmitter. My wife's grandfather went into business with a local tyre dealer, who was broadcasting from his store when they weren't serving customers. This eventually evolved into a licensed radio station, KWTO, and then into the world's first syndicated music television show, the Ozark Mountain Jubilee. So, initially, the quality of content was spotty at best. In the late 1920s the first national radio broadcasts began in the United States and were quickly commercialized by the newly formed National Broadcast Company and Columbia Broadcast Service. Around the same time, innovations in manufacturing and distribution meant that consumer goods companies could sell their products all over the country, where their reputations had not yet travelled, which left them seeking a way to reach people all over the country with the same messages. The media industry as we now know it was born.

On these first radio stations, and later on television, the primary content was advertising. Individual sponsors supported each show and products were integrated within, leading to *Pabst Blue Ribbon Bouts* and the *Camel News Caravan*. The Hit Parade was 'lightly toasted' and performances of

classics were known as ‘Lucky Strike Extras’. Shows were created by advertising agencies for the brands. This model was inefficient for broadcasters, who could make more money selling slices of attention to multiple sponsors, and challenging for sponsors and their agencies. The economics of content production became prohibitive as budgets skyrocketed an average of 500 per cent between 1949 and 1952.² Thirty seconds of airtime was far more affordable to fill than 60 minutes. Interruptive, ‘spot’ advertising became (and remains) the dominant form, an idea lifted from magazine advertisements that literally interrupt the flow of content to present an advertisement on the page.

The word advertising is derived from the Latin *advertere*, which means to draw attention to something (literally, to turn towards). Since the emergence of interruption, the way advertising drew attention was by paying for attention aggregated by something else. Companies pay for your attention, and hope you are actually paying attention. The total amount of money buying attention globally is more than half a trillion dollars, with almost half of that spent in the United States.

Media = bandwidth

All media, in totality, can be understood as the world’s total available bandwidth. Analogue broadcasting grew linearly, as new media were invented and techniques refined. Digital encoding allowed for far greater compression but more importantly made media an aspect of digital technology, which accelerates exponentially.

At the same time, the tools of content creation began to be democratized by the same drivers: professional tools found their way into the hands of the public because their prices dropped and they became easier to use. One defining aspect of technology is how it shifts the locus of intelligence, in waves, from expert individuals, into objects and software that can be used by everyone. What once required a knowledge of code, design, film-editing software and so on, was now possible with basic computer skills.

Blogger, launching in 2003, allowed anyone to publish things directly to the web without any knowledge of HTML. A decade later, Instagram filters let people with no knowledge of photography, film or Photoshop create striking images. A rush of new cultural producers filled the available media space being created. By 2010, according to Google chief executive officer (CEO) Eric Schmidt, mankind was creating as much content every two days

as it had from the dawn of civilization up until 2003.³ This is something in the region of five exabytes of data (an exabyte is 1 billion gigabytes) and this number will continue to accelerate.

So we shifted, rapidly, from a media environment defined by scarcity to one defined by abundance, creating a generation that, as media author Clay Shirky has pointed out, ‘have never known a world with only three television channels, a world where the only choice a viewer had in the early evening was which white man was going to read them the news in English’.⁴

Content became digital and ubiquitous and this led to the idea of an *attention economy*. Content is now abundant but the human attention that can be allocated to it is finite. Since the resource being allocated is attention, and economics is the study of the allocation of scarce resources, economic thinking began to be applied to the idea of attention.

Of course, the total amount of content in the world has long dwarfed any individual’s ability to consume it. Thinkers from times as diverse as Aristotle, Da Vinci, Milton and Leibniz have all been credited as the ‘last man to have read everything’. Today, the variety and pervasive presence of media presents the sense of an ever more fragmented body of knowledge; an ever more fragmented, though global, culture.

As technology investor Esther Dyson has observed:

This attention economy is not the intention economy beloved of vendors, who grab consumers’ attention in order to sell them something. Rather, attention here has its own intrinsic, non-monetizable value. The attention economy is one in which people spend their personal time attracting others’ attention, whether by designing creative avatars, posting pithy comments, or accumulating ‘likes’ for their cat photos.⁵

And that means less attention for the advertisers who are paying for it.

According to studies, 8–18-year-olds are consuming more than seven hours of media a day and, perhaps unsurprisingly, are consuming multiple media concurrently.⁶ (It would be hard to understand how they find time for school otherwise.)

We live immersed in media. Anyone who is trying to get the public to notice something – whether a commercial exhortation, health message, political appeal, or to promote their own cause or skills – offers content to which they hope their intended audience will pay attention. While the media industrial complex often still attracts the largest amounts of attention, it is now in competition with content from brands, and every Tweet, Facebook

post, picture and video, on YouTube, Instagram or TikTok made by other people. It is perhaps little wonder that attention deficit disorder (ADD; also known as ADHD, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) is one of the most salient psychological conditions, or at least concerns, of our time: diagnoses of ADHD have risen by 66 per cent since 2000.⁷ It has even been suggested that the ‘average American attention span’ is declining because of the internet.⁸ This, as we will see later in the book, is a confusion, but it’s based on the feeling that we are consuming more, faster, all the time and that our precious attention seems diminished as a consequence.

Communication is persuasion

Effecting change is an inherent function of all communication, because communication is persuasion. In 1948 communication theorist Harold Lasswell described communication as having five parts:

Who (says) What (to) Whom (in) What Channel (with) What Effect.

Channel is now used interchangeably with medium but back then channel referred to a sense, so television, the *medium*, would use both the audio and visual *channel*.

The communications industry concerns itself with a specific subset of communication. Communication in its broadest sense can be defined as any means by which ‘one mind may affect another’.⁹ Commercial communication can be described as the dispersion of persuasive symbols and messages to manage mass opinion, from logos to advertising. However, this persuasion element is embedded in the notion of communication.

Humans have an in-built desire to spread their own ideas. There are compelling anthropological reasons for this. We pass on our ideas in order ‘to create people whose minds think like ours’,¹⁰ because this delivers an evolutionary advantage: there is safety in numbers.

Any time we communicate anything to anyone, we are attempting to change the way their brains operate. We are attempting to change their view of the world, so that it more closely resembles our own. Every assertion, from the notion of a deity to giving someone directions, attempts to harmonize the receiver’s beliefs about the world with the transmitter’s.

The objectives of commercial communications are to influence mass opinion and behaviour, usually purchase behaviour, increasing purchase frequency and volume, or increasing price inelasticity of demand. Due to the cost involved in buying attention and creating content, the most efficient

drivers of change constitute more successful ideas. These ideas are increasingly spread by their recipients, or the mainstream media, influencing more behaviour as they go, ultimately creating a multiple on the impact of media exposure and providing the brand with a competitive advantage.

Ideas grow, thrive and effect change in proportion to the amount of attention allocated to them. They function like solidarity goods – a class of economic goods ‘whose value increases as the number of people enjoying them increases’.¹¹ These ideas could be knowledge of the qualities of certain plants, religions, brands, legends, scientific principles such as evolution, political dogma, fashion trends, misguided beliefs about sex, rumours, gossip, philosophy, jokes and so on. Ideas that get allocated a lot of attention tend to survive, although in recent times rapid spikes in attention are often followed by corresponding nadirs.

The oldest and most successful idea in history provides a perfect example of how ideas worked in a linguistic culture. The principle of reciprocity, also known as the golden rule, is a fundamental moral tenet found in all major religions in almost exactly the same form: ‘Treat others as you would like to be treated.’¹² It is highly generative since it can be used in almost any decision and, as the foundation underlying every major religion, it is difficult to envisage a more potent agent of behavioural change.

Similar to many of the ideas that have existed for thousands of years, the golden rule is aphoristic, expressed in a concise and memorable form. Proverbs are the oldest class of successful ideas, nuggets of wisdom that transcend centuries and cultures. For example, versions of the proverb ‘where there’s smoke, there’s fire’ have appeared in more than 55 languages.¹³ The success of these ideas is driven partially by function and partially by form.

Ideas that are allocated no attention at all – those that are never exposed to anyone – make no impact on the world, by logical extension, since no one sees them. The 50 per cent of YouTube videos with less than 500 views don’t individually make much impact on culture.¹⁴

So attention is a powerful thing – but what kind of thing is it?

Attention is like water

*Attention is like water. It flows. It’s liquid. You create channels to divert it, and you hope that it flows the right way.*¹⁵

APOLLO ROBBINS, PICKPOCKET/ILLUSIONIST

Buying attention is a way to appear inside an existing channel that has diverted attention. (Yet another way of using *channel*. Or is it the same?)

Like many psychological phenomena, attention is usually understood subjectively. Its nature can be hard to pin down, like the related idea of consciousness. For example, attention seems to have both directionality and a normative duration – if it didn't then a disorder based on its deficit wouldn't make sense – but the specifics are blurry. The psychological present is estimated to be about three seconds long,¹⁶ but a three-second attention span would not be considered normal so we must be able to string these psychological 'nows' together into contiguous sequences.

One of the classic definitions of attention comes from William James, one of the progenitors of modern psychology, in his book *The Principles of Psychology*:

Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others.¹⁷

As James's appeal to common knowledge suggests, attention could only be analysed through introspection. Modern neuroscience can show us which areas of the brain need more oxygen when we are paying attention and this has already demonstrated that 'attention' is made up of a number of different cognitive processes.

You can pay attention to something voluntarily, or you can have it snatched away by an explosion, or someone speaking your name across a crowded room (the so-called *cocktail party effect*). You can stare right at something, which is overt attention, and you can pretend not to while still focusing on it, which is covert. Attention is socially directed, which is to say you can draw someone's attention to something by focusing your gaze on it, which is known as joint attention. Most importantly, you have a limited capacity for attention, which restricts how much information you can derive from sensory stimulus at a time:

When you attend to something, it is as if your mind aims a spotlight onto it. You actively ignore virtually everything else that is happening around your spotlight, giving you a kind of tunnel vision.¹⁸

This leads to the phenomenon of *inattentional* blindness, where you fail to notice something that is fully visible because your attention has been directed elsewhere. It is here that concerns may lie about whether someone watching the advertisements on television is really seeing them. It is also closely related to *change blindness*, where you do not notice a change in scene when your attention is taken from it for an instant. One of the overwhelming features of our perception, and counter-intuitive to our experience of it, is how limited it actually is. We don't *actually see* a lot of what we are looking at, but the brain fills in these gaps all the time, both in what we see and what we remember, in what is known as *fabulation*.

This slippery property, attention, is of incredible and increasing value. Since it follows logically that ideas that are allocated no attention can have no impact (although, as we will see, this is not entirely so, because there are different types), attention is therefore considered a prerequisite for effecting any change through communication. It is enshrined in the earliest, and still dominant, cognitive model for advertising: AIDA:

A – Attention: the prospective customer's attention is attracted.

I – Interest: the interest in that product is raised.

D – Desire: some of these prospects begin to desire the thing.

A – Action: they then do something about it, such as buying it from a shop.

Since some people are 'lost' at each level (less people will be interested than see it and so on) this gave rise to the idea of a 'purchase funnel', where one seeks to garner as much attention as possible, as you lose a certain percentage of prospects at each stage thereafter. Thus the traditional formulation of advertising was understood to be the process of buying the most attention of the largest number of the desired audience at the lowest possible cost. The cognitive cascade that followed was assumed to lead to people buying things.

This endless filling of a mythical funnel created the media industrial complex and the prevalence of advertising we have in culture today, an ever-escalating race to drown out the utterances of others, and garner the most attention. In light of the dramatic changes to the market for ideas, this model has begun to be supplemented, and in some cases superseded, by a subtle transition. Instead of paying professional media companies for attention, what if companies – and indeed individuals – could earn it for themselves?

The rest of the book

In a particularly vigorous online discussion of something I wrote, an anonymous commenter (aren't they always!) accused me of being an 'advertising philosopher'. Although it was meant as an insult, suggesting my concerns were ephemeral not practical, I rather liked it. While I don't claim to be a philosopher, this book nonetheless aspires to be a modern philosophy of advertising – a set of beliefs that guide behaviour. Philosophy is both theory *and* praxis.

In the rest of the book we will look at how brands operate and innovate in the evolving market for ideas. We will consider:

- What kind of ideas brands are and how they have established themselves in the attention niche left by myth.
- How much of the decision-making process happens below the threshold of attention.
- How advertising uses attention and how it works best in a dynamic attention market.
- A guide to what ideas are and how to have them.
- How to behave in this new world of infinite content.
- How to package ideas to attract the most attention in the advertising industry.
- How strategy is evolving to reflect these changes as we pass the point of 'peak attention'.

Still paying attention? Then let's go.

Logocentrism

What's in a name?

The great idea in advertising... is in the realm of myth.

LEO BOGART¹

It is perhaps surprising that, when Procter & Gamble (P&G) is willing to spend US \$57 billion buying Gillette, and McKinsey can state that ‘intangible assets make up most of the value of M&A deals [and that] brands account for a considerable portion of these assets’,² there is such a degree of uncertainty as to what is being purchased.

Uberconsultant Tom Peters has proclaimed that we are in ‘The Great Age of the Brand’.³ Yet if you ask Google, the oracle of said age, it pulls up dozens of different definitions of brand, ranging from ‘trade name: a name given to a product or service’ to ‘the personality of an organization’ or ‘the symbolic embodiment of all the information connected with a product or service’. The ‘Great Age of the Brand’ would seem to be an age of great uncertainty.

Things were not always this complex. Brands used to be simple, as any cowboy (or cow) could have told you. But society has evolved at a remarkable pace in the last century and brands have evolved with them. Brands seem to chase our own needs up Maslow’s hierarchy: from badge of origin to transformative experience. What was a signifier of product quality can now be shorthand for a service, an experience, a ‘sign of me’,⁴ a celebrity, a country and you, gentle reader.⁵ Brands are everywhere and everything is a brand. We live in a logocentric world.