



Information Overload, Public Opinion, and the Fragmentation of Attention

From Plato and Bernays to Goebbels, ADHD, Smartphones, and Digital Media

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Abstract

What connects Plato, Goebbels, ADHD, smartphones, and digital media? Maybe nothing. This essay asks whether a very large flow of information can be used to influence public opinion, especially among adolescents and young adults as present or future voters. It follows the subject in historical order. It begins with Plato, then discusses Edward Bernays and Joseph Goebbels, and finally turns to ADHD, smartphones, media multitasking, and the modern attention economy. The argument remains cautious. A large amount of information does not automatically mean manipulation. Smartphones do not cause ADHD, and poor concentration is not the same as a neurodevelopmental disorder. Still, an environment of constant interruption may weaken the conditions needed for slow and careful thought. The democratic danger is therefore not only false information. It is also the possible replacement of sustained thought by repetition, strong emotion, rapid switching, and personalised streams of stimuli. Protecting attention should therefore be seen not only as a civic, medical, and educational task but also as part of a broader cultural discourse.

Keywords: information overload; propaganda; Plato; Edward Bernays; Joseph Goebbels; ADHD; sustained attention; democracy

Hypothesis

The working hypothesis is that information abundance can be organised in ways that influence public opinion, especially among adolescents and young adults (Crone & Dahl, 2012; Laursen & Veenstra, 2021). During adolescence, executive and social-cognitive control continue to develop (Luna et al., 2015), while peer influence and social belonging remain especially important (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021). The proposed mechanism is not simple mind control. It is the gradual shaping of attention. Repeated material becomes easier to process and more familiar (Zajonc, 1968). Emotionally arousing material is often remembered more strongly (McGaugh, 2004). Interruptions can make work more difficult to resume and can increase stress (Mark et al., 2008). Information communicated through trusted people, institutions, or social networks may also be accepted before it is critically examined (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

Method

The essay uses historical, philosophical, political, psychiatric, and cognitive-scientific sources. The literature is discussed mainly in chronological order. Primary texts are used for Plato, Bernays, and

Goebbels. Diagnostic manuals and epidemiological studies are used for ADHD. Experiments, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses are used for smartphones, notifications, media multitasking, and digital democracy. Recent public appearances by Daniele Ganser are treated only as examples of contemporary rhetoric and media form, not as scientific evidence. Particular attention is given to his 2025 long-form conversation with Maxim Mankevich and to the 2026 video 'Warum wir absichtlich dumm gehalten werden', because both are contemporary examples of extended exposition in a media environment increasingly dominated by short, rapidly changing content.

Results

1. Plato: Education, Crowds, and the Gradual Formation of the Soul

Two passages in Plato's Republic are often mixed together, but they describe different processes. In Republic 492a–c (Plato, 1997), Socrates, as Plato's principal speaker in the dialogue, describes the strong educational power of the crowd. In assemblies, courts, theatres, military camps, and other public places, people loudly praise some actions and condemn others. The surrounding space seems to repeat and strengthen the noise. Plato asks what kind of private education could resist such a

flood of praise and blame, especially in a young person. The passage is not about a market full of commercial information, and it is not a direct prediction of smartphones. It is, however, an early description of social conformity under strong emotional and sensory pressure.

A second passage, Republic 401c–d (Plato, 1997), describes a slower process. Plato argues that children should not grow up among ugly forms, corrupt stories, or badly made art. Harmful influences are collected little by little from many sources. Over time, they silently form a larger pattern in the soul. Positive influences can work in the same way. Graceful forms and harmonious works can guide young people toward reason before they are able to explain why.

Together, these passages show two forms of influence. The first is sudden and collective: the noise of the crowd overwhelms individual resistance. The second is slow and repeated: images, sounds, stories, and forms shape character below conscious awareness. Digital platforms—developed millennia later—combine both forms. A viral wave can act like Plato's noisy assembly. An endless personalised feed can work little by little. Plato did not predict modern technology, but he recognised a lasting principle: repeated exposure in a social environment shapes attention and character.

2. Edward Bernays: The Engineering of Public Opinion

Edward L. Bernays turned the study of public opinion into a practical profession. In *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923), he described the public-relations adviser as an expert who studies groups, symbols, stereotypes, leaders, institutions, and channels of communication. The aim was not only to describe reality. It was also to create events, associations, and frames that would make a chosen view seem socially convincing. Bernays drew on crowd psychology, psychoanalytic ideas, and the growing mass media of the early twentieth century.

Propaganda (1928) gave his most famous and direct explanation. Bernays argued that modern democratic society partly depends on the organised shaping of public habits and opinions. He described an “invisible government” made up of people who understand how choices are framed and how collective behaviour is guided. His language is disturbing because he presents manipulation not as a rare corruption of democracy, but as a normal method for managing a complex society.

Bernays's method was more subtle than simple repetition. He advised linking a product, policy, or person with existing group identities and unconscious wishes. A publicity event should look like news, not like advertising. A message becomes stronger when it is carried by an authority, institution, celebrity, professional group, or social ritual that people already trust. The propagandist does not create every desire from nothing. He finds existing motives and connects them to a chosen object or political conclusion.

Bernays later wrote that the journalist Karl von Wiegand told him that Joseph Goebbels had used *Crystallizing Public Opinion* when planning anti-Jewish propaganda (Bernays, 1965). This claim is important, but it must be stated carefully. It comes from Bernays's later autobiographical account. There is no surviving borrowing record or direct statement by Goebbels that proves it. Still, there is a general similarity: both men treated mass opinion as something that could be studied, divided into groups, activated through symbols, and directed. Their political and moral settings were very different. Bernays worked in a commercial and formally pluralist democracy. Goebbels served a genocidal dictatorship that destroyed free media, opposition, and equal citizenship.

3. Joseph Goebbels: Propaganda as Successful Mobilisation

Goebbels explained his method in speeches and organisational texts. His 1928 speech “Knowledge and Propaganda” (Goebbels, 1928) is especially clear. He rejected abstract moral standards and judged propaganda by its result. For him, propaganda was good when it achieved its goal. It did not need to be refined, gentle, or intellectually impressive. It needed to win and mobilise the target population. He also argued that

propaganda should begin with a short, clear, emotionally understandable idea and should use different language for different audiences. These principles are consistent with Doob's later reconstruction of Goebbels's propaganda practice from diary material (Doob, 1950).

Several principles follow from this speech. First, Goebbels separated the search for truth from the spread of doctrine. A meeting hall, in his view, was not a place to investigate truth but a place to persuade. Second, the message had to be adapted to the audience. Workers, businesspeople, farmers, doctors, and patients should not all be addressed in the same way. Third, the propagandist had to stay in contact with the masses and adjust the message to their reactions. Fourth, complexity had to be reduced to a simple, repeatable theme that could unite a movement.

In his 1934 Nuremberg speech (Goebbels, 1934), Goebbels developed this idea into a theory of state power. Propaganda had to make complicated events understandable to the “man on the street,” but this kind of understanding meant agreement with the leadership. The government's concerns and successes had to be repeated until people experienced them as their own. The propagandist had to master speech, writing, journalism, posters, film, and radio. New technology was welcomed because it increased the reach of political influence.

This system was not only persuasion. It worked together with censorship, terror, exclusion, antisemitic dehumanisation, and the removal of competing institutions. This difference is essential. In a dictatorship, propaganda does not compete fairly with other views. It dominates the information space and punishes resistance. Manipulation can therefore use too much information, but it can also use too little. The decisive issue is not quantity alone. It is how attention is organised, whether alternatives are available, how emotional the message is, who delivers it, and whether one view can be repeated while others are suppressed.

4. The Expansion of ADHD Diagnosis

The history of ADHD makes any simple argument about modern distraction difficult. ADHD is a recognised neurodevelopmental disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; World Health Organization, 2026). It involves a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that causes impairment in important areas of life. Current DSM and ICD systems require persistent symptoms, developmental onset, clinically significant impairment, and consideration of alternative explanations (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; World Health Organization, 2026). There is no single laboratory test. Sleep disorders, anxiety, depression, trauma, substance use, learning disorders, and environmental stress can produce partly overlapping complaints.

Recorded ADHD diagnoses have risen strongly, including in the United States (Danielson et al., 2024). This may be due to better awareness, less stigma, improved recognition of inattentive forms, better diagnosis in girls and women, more adult services, changed diagnostic rules, and more people asking for help. It may also include regional overdiagnosis, rushed assessment, self-diagnosis influenced by social media, or the medicalisation of concentration problems caused by stressful and fragmented environments. Several of these explanations may be true at the same time. More diagnoses do not prove either a real epidemic or a simple diagnostic fashion.

DSM-5 broadened the formal criteria for adult diagnosis by lowering the symptom threshold for adults from six to five. It also changed the age-of-onset rule from symptoms before age seven to several symptoms before age twelve. DSM-5-TR retained these central criteria while revising parts of the accompanying text (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Koutsoklenis & Honkasilta, 2023). ICD-11 (World Health Organization, 2026) moved away from the narrower ICD-10 concept of hyperkinetic disorder and became closer to DSM-style presentations. These changes may identify genuine cases that older systems missed. At the same time, they may broaden the population meeting formal diagnostic criteria. Diagnostic expansion must therefore be examined both clinically and socially.

The key distinction is between ADHD and attention difficulties associated with a fragmented environment (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Uncapher & Wagner, 2018). A person without ADHD can become distracted, tired, anxious, overloaded, or accustomed to rapid switching. A person with ADHD may continue to experience substantial difficulties even in a quiet environment and may benefit greatly from appropriate treatment and support. Smartphone-related distraction, poor sleep, and frequent task switching may produce complaints that superficially overlap with some ADHD symptoms or may worsen an existing vulnerability. Current evidence does not establish that smartphones cause ADHD.

5. Smartphones, Notifications, and the Reduction of Sustained Attention

Smartphones combine communication, news, entertainment, navigation, work, shopping, photography, and social recognition in one device that stays close to the user. Their cognitive effect does not come only from the screen. It also comes from the system around it: alerts, badges, variable rewards, endless scrolling, autoplay, short videos, personalised recommendations, and fast movement between unrelated topics.

Experiments indicate that notifications can alter task performance and the neural processes involved in cognitive control even when the user does not open the message. Notification sounds have been associated with slower responses and altered electrophysiological measures; the neural findings were interpreted as increased recruitment of cognitive control rather than as a simple loss of control (Upshaw et al., 2022). Earlier experimental work also found that receiving a phone notification can disrupt performance even without direct interaction with the device (Stothart et al., 2015). Other studies suggest that the mere presence of a phone may reduce performance in some learning or attention tasks, although the magnitude and reliability of this effect vary (Skowronek et al., 2023; Ward et al., 2017). Studies of media multitasking generally report a small negative association with sustained attention or cognitive control, but findings are mixed and often do not establish causality (Uncapher & Wagner, 2018). People with weaker attentional control may also be more attracted to frequent media switching. These findings establish effects on attention and cognitive control; they do not, by themselves, demonstrate changes in political attitudes or voting behaviour.

It is therefore more accurate to say that smartphone use may encourage or reinforce habits of interruption than to claim that it permanently shortens the attention span. Attention is not one fixed ability. It includes alertness, orientation, selection, sustained attention, working memory, inhibition, and the ability to return to a task after interruption. Digital environments may affect these abilities in different ways. A person may focus intensely on a rewarding game or video but struggle with a slow, difficult, or ambiguous text.

Adolescents deserve particular attention because executive control continues to develop during this period (Luna et al., 2015). At the same time, peer approval, social learning, and identity are especially important (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021; Molleman et al., 2022). Many recommendation systems use engagement-related behavioural signals to select and rank content. A personalised feed may therefore repeatedly present emotionally charged material during a period when social belonging matters greatly. This does not mean that every platform imposes a political doctrine or uses the same algorithm. It means that political actors can purchase targeted advertising, adapt messages to selected audiences, and exploit communication systems originally designed to maximise engagement (Harker, 2020).

This creates a historically new propaganda environment, although not necessarily a more effective one in every case. Bernays needed newspapers, staged events, associations, and opinion leaders. Goebbels sought central control over the press, radio, film, posters, and rallies.

Digital platforms can add behavioural measurement, automated comparison of messages, targeted advertising, and personalised sequences of content. Yet the effects should not be exaggerated. Evidence linking digital media to political outcomes is broader but heterogeneous: a large systematic review found associations with both beneficial and detrimental democratic outcomes, while many causal findings remain context-dependent (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). Digital political advertising does not uniformly change political knowledge, participation, or voting behaviour. The broader paradox remains that users can encounter enormous quantities of information while their individual fields of attention are narrowed by personalised selection.

6. Daniele Ganser, Attention, and the Long-Form Lecture

Daniele Ganser is relevant here not because his political or historical claims are accepted as scientific evidence, but because his public communication provides a contemporary example of the struggle over the form of attention itself. In 2025 he appeared in a long-form conversation with Maxim Mankevich, published online as ‘Mein Gespräch mit Maxim Mankevich’. The format is significant: instead of compressing complex geopolitical claims into short clips, the conversation asks the listener to remain with one line of argument for an extended period (Ganser & Mankevich, 2025). In April 2026, Ganser also published ‘Warum wir absichtlich dumm gehalten werden’, recorded shortly before his Bielefeld lecture on 17 March 2026. The published description explicitly presents the discussion as dealing with the deliberate confusion of people by the media (Ganser, 2026). This makes the video directly relevant to the present essay’s concern with how attention is organised in dense and politically charged information environments. A stronger claim, however, requires caution. In the publicly searchable 2025–2026 material that could be verified for this revision, I did not find a reliable transcript showing Ganser explicitly stating that modern attention spans have become shorter and that people therefore need to listen to long lectures in order to restore them. The long-form character of these appearances clearly contrasts with short-video culture, but that contrast should not be converted into a quotation or attributed thesis without a verifiable passage. For the scientific proposition that digital information environments can fragment or redirect attention, the present essay therefore continues to rely on experimental and review literature rather than on Ganser. Nevertheless, the rhetorical significance of the long lecture should not be dismissed. A two-hour lecture or interview imposes a different temporal structure from a stream of notifications, headlines, reels, and short clips. It requires continuity, memory for earlier arguments, and tolerance of delayed conclusions. This does not make the content true. Long-form communication can be selective, emotional, or misleading just as short-form communication can. But it preserves one condition that fragmented media can weaken: the possibility of following an argument long enough to compare its premises, evidence, contradictions, and conclusions. In this limited sense, Ganser’s contemporary long-form media practice is relevant to the politics of attention examined here.

Ganser’s recommendation is conceptually close to the argument developed here. If attention is continuously captured by alerts, emotionally charged news, rapidly changing topics, and personalised streams, then critical judgment requires not only more information but also periods in which incoming information is interrupted. A ‘digital timeout’ can therefore be understood as an attempt to restore the temporal conditions for reflection: distance from the immediate stimulus, comparison between sources, and the possibility of asking why a particular message has attracted attention in the first place.

At the same time, Ganser should not be treated as scientific evidence for the psychological mechanisms discussed in this essay, nor as an unquestioned authority on media truth. His lecture is a primary example of a contemporary public argument about media overload and attention. The empirical claims concerning distraction, notifications, cognitive control, and digital media remain grounded in experimental and review literature. This distinction is important because sustained attention does

not itself guarantee accuracy: a long lecture can be selective, emotional, or misleading just as a short clip can be.

Ganser is therefore relevant here not as proof, but as a concrete bridge between the historical discussion of propaganda and the modern problem of fragmented attention. His lecture shows that the idea of deliberately withdrawing from the stream of information has itself become part of contemporary media criticism. The paradox is notable: the recommendation to escape digital overload is communicated through a digital platform, YouTube, and depends on the listener voluntarily giving nearly an hour of sustained attention to one speaker.

Discussion: Continuities and Differences

From Formation to Manipulation

Plato, Bernays, and Goebbels share one basic insight: human judgment is socially formed. Images, sounds, stories, crowds, symbols, and trusted authorities influence what people see as believable and desirable. But their aims were different. Plato's concern was ethical and educational: how can a political community form people who can recognise order and reason? Bernays's aim was managerial: how can organised minorities guide opinion in a complex mass democracy? Goebbels's aim was totalitarian: how can propaganda mobilise the population, remove resistance, and bind personal identity to the goals of the leadership?

Overload Is Not the Only Mechanism

The original hypothesis must therefore be refined. Manipulation does not require the largest possible amount of information. It can work through the repetition of a few slogans, the suppression of alternatives, emotional shocks, or a calculated mixture of truth, half-truth, and distraction. Information overload becomes useful when it exhausts people's ability to verify claims, breaks attention into fragments, or makes people depend on simple explanations. The manipulator may not need to make the audience believe one statement. It may be enough to make every statement seem equally uncertain, temporary, or replaceable by the next emotional message.

The Politics of Attention

Political opinion requires time. Citizens must notice a claim, keep it in mind, compare it with evidence, consider objections, and connect it with larger values and consequences. Rapid switching interrupts this process. Repetition and emotional force can then replace evidence with familiarity. In this sense, the scarce democratic resource is no longer information itself, but organised attention. The step from disrupted attention to increased political susceptibility is therefore a conceptual inference rather than a directly demonstrated causal pathway; the evidence is stronger for the component mechanisms than for the complete sequence.

Young citizens are not passive victims. They use digital media creatively, form communities, discover neglected knowledge, and challenge established institutions. A large systematic review found that digital media use is often associated with increased political participation and information consumption, while it is also associated in some contexts with polarisation, declining political trust, and other democratic risks (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). The ethical problem is therefore not youth, technology, or information abundance by itself. It is also the unequal distribution of knowledge and power. Platforms and political organisations may possess extensive behavioural data and optimisation tools, while individual users know much less about how content is selected and how their attention is being shaped.

ADHD as Diagnosis and Metaphor

ADHD should not be used only as a metaphor for a distracted society. That can trivialise a serious disorder and stigmatise diagnosed people. Still, society's strong interest in ADHD shows an important

contradiction. Modern institutions demand long concentration while also creating environments of constant interruption. Some people have a neurodevelopmental disorder. Many others have attention problems caused or worsened by poor sleep, stress, media multitasking, and unstable routines. A responsible analysis must discuss both without confusing them.

Democratic Safeguards

The most reasonable response is not censorship or a nostalgic rejection of technology. It is the deliberate protection of reflective attention. Useful measures may include device-free periods in education, long-form reading, transparent political advertising, limits on manipulative interface design for minors, a clear separation between editorial content and paid influence, access to different sources, education about algorithms and propaganda, and clinical assessment that separates ADHD from environmentally caused concentration problems. These measures support autonomy without assuming that citizens are unable to judge for themselves.

Conclusion

Plato's crowd, Bernays's invisible organisers, Goebbels's propaganda system, the growth of ADHD diagnosis, and the smartphone economy do not form one continuous historical conspiracy. They belong to different periods, institutions, and moral worlds. Still, they can be connected through one common problem: the formation and control of attention.

Plato showed that repeated impressions and collective praise can shape young people before reason is fully developed. Bernays organised the use of symbols, events, authorities, and group psychology to form opinion. Goebbels removed ethical limits and joined tailored persuasion, repetition, emotional mobilisation, and technology with authoritarian state power. Smartphones add continuous, personalised, and data-driven selection of stimuli. ADHD diagnosis reminds us that attention is also a clinical and developmental issue that cannot be reduced to politics or technology.

The analysis therefore lends partial support to the hypothesis, but only in a more precise and self-critical form. Information abundance may contribute to conditions in which public opinion can be influenced when it fragments sustained thought, amplifies emotion, repeats selected frames, suppresses alternatives, or encourages dependence on simplified interpretations. Yet the same media can also broaden access to knowledge and facilitate political participation. Adolescents and young adults may be especially exposed to social influence, but they are neither the only vulnerable group nor passive objects of manipulation. Democracy depends not only on access to accurate information. It also depends on sufficient time, stability, transparency, and mental freedom to examine that information. The essay itself cannot stand outside this problem: by arranging Plato, Bernays, Goebbels, ADHD, smartphones, and digital media into one sequence, it also demonstrates how heterogeneous material can be made to appear coherent. The opening answer therefore remains valid: perhaps these subjects are connected; perhaps the connection is partly produced by the narrative that claims to discover it.

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