

A man wearing a hat, glasses, and a purple sweater with a yellow backpack is looking at his phone on a train platform. The background shows train tracks and a platform with red and blue railings.

MEDIACOM

A VIEW FROM SUE UNERMAN

The big media battle is a race for attention at a content buffet

CONSUMER CONTENT OPINION

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Media owners are throwing the best ever buffet of content and the audience knows it

Eleven hours of media consumption in eight hours of time.

“This is not a creative endeavour; it is a race for attention.” This is how Jez Nelson, the chief executive of Somethin’ Else, describes the content development and audience generating business he’s in. It is a good description of the business we are all in and a crucial bit of understanding given Ofcom’s insight about UK media consumption.

If you’ve been in any kind of presentation recently you’ve probably seen a chart that says attention span has dropped from 12 seconds to eight seconds, or in other words that we have less focus than a goldfish.

Whether attention span is significantly falling off a cliff or not is to my mind questionable. When there's great stuff to watch, listen to or read there really isn't an attention span problem. The Harry Potter franchise got more kids reading than ever, and reading long, long books with no pictures, no sound, no moving images. At the showing of Black Panther that I attended in my local cinema last week you didn't see anyone getting a bit bored after eight or 12 seconds and looking at something else. Rather there was a full house with a rapt audience who didn't even move as the credits rolled, and most of them were there for the preview (spoiler alert) of the next Avengers movie right at the end.

The truth is an economic one. There is more choice this century in terms of quality content than there ever has been. Consumers are at the equivalent of the best buffet you can ever imagine.

You know what it's like if you face a really good spread at an event, where you want a bit of everything but you also either can't eat it all or even fit it all on a normal sized plate. You're wearing your best outfit, it's not designed for big eating, but you want to try it all! That's what content providers are now doing – throwing the best ever buffet of content. And the audience knows it. So they try one thing, and if it doesn't satisfy they switch to something else. Fast.

It is a race for their attention.

Thanks to multi-tasking and stacking behaviour, in a typical day we squeeze 10 hours 52 minutes of media and communications into the 8 hours 45 minutes of time actually spent with media ([Ofcom](#)). There seems to be no slowing in this wave of content production and consumption; users upload more than 400 hours of video to YouTube every minute and Instagrammers post more than 80 million photos daily. People are over stimulated. Which means to really cut through to the consumer a brand's communications have to stand out.

The crucial question to ask is if any work is just that, how does it stand out? This is a different question to whether the work is logical and data driven, or even any good. Frankly

you might be better off being the funny and irreverent piece of content if your environment is made up of meaningful, moving and serious work. A brand that is famous for shouting about price might be the brand that gets remembered in a stream of ads that talk about feelings and emotions. Or a brand that creates real meaning for the consumer will stand out in an environment that otherwise looks and feels commercial.

It's a race for attention, not a creativity contest. You can't demand attention ever again. You have to earn it. Second by second.

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