

Why Does It All Feel Like Too Much?

Something changed about how much language there is, and nothing changed about how much of it a person can take in. That gap has opened twice before, and both times it ended badly.



WHERE THIS SITS

There is more language in the world than anyone can attend to. The obvious fix, an AI that reads it all for you and tells you what is true, does not work: the judgement that would take requires having been wrong at your own expense, and nothing a model does costs it anything. So the judging stays with people, and almost nothing we currently inspect can tell whether a person actually judged or simply agreed.

01 **Why Does It All Feel Like Too Much?**

02 Why Can't You Just Be Told?

03 What Holds a Claim Up?

04 How Would You Know?

05 Who Pays If It's Wrong?

06 What Would You Build Instead?

Six short pieces, each drawn from a working paper. Each one stands on its own; this is the first. They are ordered so that every piece ends by raising the question the next one is called.

It is not that you are bad at this

You open your phone and there is more worth reading than you can read, more worth checking than you can check, and more arriving while you decide. Most people experience that as a shortcoming of their own: they should be more disciplined, better at filtering, less distractible.

It is not a shortcoming. It is arithmetic, and the arithmetic changed recently and sharply.

What follows is what changed, why the thing that did not change was never going to, and what happened the last two times a language technology outran the societies using it.

Three things got cheap

For almost all of human history, putting words in front of people was expensive: time, labour, skill, materials. Three times something made it much cheaper, and each time it was a different thing that got cheaper.

PRINTING

Copying got cheap. Somebody still had to write it.

THE INTERNET

Sending got cheap. Somebody still had to write it.

GENERATIVE MODELS

Making it got cheap. This one is new in kind, not only in degree.

The first two made it cheaper to move words somebody had written. The third makes the writing itself nearly free.

Two measures, one stretch of time

Two different kinds of quantity, drawn on separate axes on purpose.

THE COST OF PUTTING WORDS IN FRONT OF PEOPLE

PRINTING

copying got cheap

THE INTERNET

sending got cheap

GENERATIVE MODELS

making it got cheap

WHAT ONE PERSON CAN TAKE IN, IN A DAY

unchanged, through all three

The part that did not change

Attention runs on equipment shaped for a slower world. These are not character flaws.

01 Emotionally charged things jump the queue.

The fast, alarm-driven part responds before the slow, reflective part has been consulted.

02 Quick payoffs get reinforced.

Systems built to hold attention are built on exactly the loop that rewards reflex over reflection.

03 Careful thinking gets tired.

The reflective part is slow and expensive to run. Worn out, people fall back on rules of thumb.

04 Switching costs more than it looks.

Constant interruption erodes the working memory that sustained reasoning depends on.

05 A narrow view feels like a clear one.

When what reaches you has been selected for you, the result only resembles clarity.

The bottleneck moved

For most of history the hard part was producing language, and that effort was a kind of filter. Not a good one, but a real one: it limited how fast anything could spread, including the things that should not have.

That filter is gone. The hard part is now on the other side.

Which matters, because when attention is the scarce thing, a predictable sort of material wins. Not the best material: the material best adapted to a shortage of attention.

**PROVOCATIVE BEATS
TRUE**

Reacting is cheaper than checking.

**SIMPLE BEATS
NUANCED**

Nuance costs the reader something.

**TRIBAL BEATS
THOUGHTFUL**

Recognising your side is instant.

**CONFIDENT BEATS
CAREFUL**

Certainty reads as competence.

A pattern with six steps

The same sequence has run all the way through twice: in Europe after the printing press, and in Myanmar after the smartphone. Both follow.

01 A NEW LANGUAGE TECHNOLOGY ARRIVES

02 THE COST OF PRODUCING OR SENDING LANGUAGE COLLAPSES

03 PEOPLE WITH BAD INTENTIONS GET THERE FIRST

04 INSTITUTIONS CANNOT KEEP UP WITH THE SURGE

05 A MANUFACTURED VERSION OF REALITY TAKES HOLD

06 VIOLENCE FOLLOWS

1486, and a book

An inquisitor named Heinrich Kramer published a manual for identifying and prosecuting witches. Before the press, a text like that would have circulated among a small circle of clergy and stayed there. Between 1487 and 1520 it went through 28 editions and probably put fifteen to thirty thousand copies into circulation, becoming an authority in Catholic and Protestant regions alike.

What had been local superstition became something closer to a shared European account of what was real, and that account was used to justify around 110,000 trials and, by the paper's figures, forty to sixty thousand executions, mostly of women, over the two centuries that followed.

WHAT THE PAPER SAYS THE BOOK DID NOT DO

It did not create misogyny, and it did not create fear of the occult. Both were already there. What the press did was amplify them to a degree that earlier societies had no way to sustain.

2014, and a phone

Myanmar in 2014 had almost no internet. Within a few years the price of a SIM card collapsed and tens of millions came online at once. For a great many of them one platform was not part of the internet; it was the internet: news, identity, community.

Into that arrived a coordinated campaign casting the Rohingya, a Muslim minority, as an invading and existential threat. Feeds ranked by engagement carried the most inflammatory version of any claim furthest. A new shared account of reality formed, in which a minority moved from being other people to being enemies. What followed was a campaign of ethnic cleansing; the UN fact-finding mission reported in 2018 that nearly 725,000 Rohingya had fled to Bangladesh, and cited an estimate of up to ten thousand deaths, which it judged a conservative one.

WHAT THE PAPER SAYS THE TECHNOLOGY DID NOT DO

It did not create the prejudice. It amplified it, speeding up how fast a story formed and how fast feeling spread beyond what Myanmar's institutions, or its citizens, could resist.

The same six steps, twice

Five centuries apart, with nothing in common technologically, the two run the same way.

1486 · A BOOK

the printing press

a book can be copied by the
thousand

an inquisitor publishes a manual
for identifying witches

28 editions in 33 years, across
every region that could read it

local superstition becomes a
continent-wide account of reality

trials and executions across two
centuries

01

02

03

04

05

06

2014 · A PHONE

cheap phones and cheap data

for many people, one platform
simply was the internet

a coordinated campaign casts a
minority as an invading threat

feeds ranked by engagement carry
the most inflammatory version

a minority moves from being
other people to being enemies

ethnic cleansing: 725,000 flee,
up to 10,000 reported killed

What is different about now

Both previous cases involved language that a person still had to write. A book took an author. A disinformation campaign took operators.

The step that has now collapsed is the writing itself. One person with a generative model can produce more text in a day than a medieval monastery produced in a year.

Nothing on the receiving side has moved at all. Which means the gap at step four (where institutions and people cannot keep up with the surge) is wider now than in either historical case, and widening.

The trouble with an oracle

The obvious fix is a machine that tells you what is true. The paper argues this makes the problem worse, and is careful that the argument depends on a particular idea of such a system, one that decides on your behalf. The author notes that not everyone defines it that way.

THERE IS NO NEUTRAL FILTER

Any system that decides what deserves your attention has a view about what matters. Its errors become everybody's errors at once.

WHOEVER CONTROLS IT CONTROLS A GREAT DEAL

A single authoritative filter is an unusually valuable thing to capture, and the failure mode is not chaos. It is something more ordered and more brittle than that.

WHAT IS NOT USED, WEAKENS

If the machine does the judging, the capacity to judge gets less practice. The paper's own example is small and it says so: a generation ago people knew phone numbers.

A personal note, and why it is in the paper

The paper stops in the middle and the author writes about himself: a period in which his own responses had become reflex rather than choice, and the slow recognition (not a sudden one, he is specific about that) that what needed changing was not his information or his strategy but where his attention was going.

People drift into lives shaped by habit rather than intention. Societies drift into information environments shaped by reflex rather than reflection. In neither case is more data the thing that gets you out.

That is also the step connecting the two halves of the paper. If attention is how a person decides what matters, then losing control of it costs more than knowledge. It costs agency.

What would help instead

Not a better filter but a different relationship: tools that help a person navigate an infinite amount of language, rather than tools that generate more of it or decide on their behalf.

SHOW THE DISAGREEMENT

Where sources actually diverge, rather than resolving it quietly on your behalf.

FLAG THE NARROWING

When the range of what is reaching you has quietly contracted.

NOTICE THE TEMPERATURE

When the emotional charge is high and the analysis is thin.

None of these tells you what is true. The companion piece, *What Would You Build Instead?*, carries the design principles; they are not restated here, because saying them twice in slightly different words would make them sound less settled than they are.

What this does not claim

Where a short version could most easily become louder than the paper. So, explicitly.

✗ ~~Technology caused these atrocities.~~

The paper says the opposite twice, in its own words, and both statements are on the slides above.

✗ ~~People are irrational.~~

The reverse: humans are unusually responsive to narrative, especially when it is charged and framed as survival.

✗ ~~Books, or platforms, are dangerous.~~

Stated and rejected. The claim is about what happens when a language technology outruns the safeguards around it.

✗ ~~Media literacy will fix this.~~

Called necessary but not sufficient. Literacy is a skill held by individuals; it does not scale against the volume.

✗ ~~AI is the problem.~~

The closing position is that the same technologies contain the means to address it: a conditional optimism, not a comfortable one.

Three questions worth asking

1. WHICH OF THE SIX STEPS ARE WE ON?

The first three have clearly run. The argument is about the fourth, which is the last one where anything can still be done cheaply.

2. WIDENING WHAT REACHES ME, OR NARROWING IT?

Fewer conflicting things reach you, so you feel more certain rather than less informed. It never announces itself, so it has to be asked about.

3. WHAT DID I ATTEND TO TODAY, AND DID I CHOOSE IT?

Not a productivity question. If attention is how a person decides what matters, this is the whole argument applied to one day.

The third one is the only question in this series a reader can act on before lunch.

Where the title comes from

The breakthrough that produced modern language models came from a paper whose title said attention was all you needed, attention there being a mechanism inside the model, not the human kind.

Attention is all we have.

The claim underneath it is that attention is not one cognitive faculty among several. It is the thing by which a person builds an inner life and by which a society builds a shared one: how individuals form an identity, how groups reach agreement, how a civilisation holds together at all.

Which is why the paper's sharpest line about the present is not about danger. It is that all of this accelerates everything except understanding.

Where this comes from

This is a short version of a working paper called The Attention Crisis, which carries the full argument, the sources, the objections and the estimates with their workings shown.

It is part of a series on what judgement is, why it has to be carried by people who bear the consequences of being wrong, and what that means for building with machines that bear none.

Working papers are revised when they are shown to be wrong, and what changed is kept on the record.

James Maconochie | Architecture & Attention

HUMILITAS, HUMANITAS, ET CURIOSITAS · SEMPER

Humility, humanity, and curiosity. Always.

