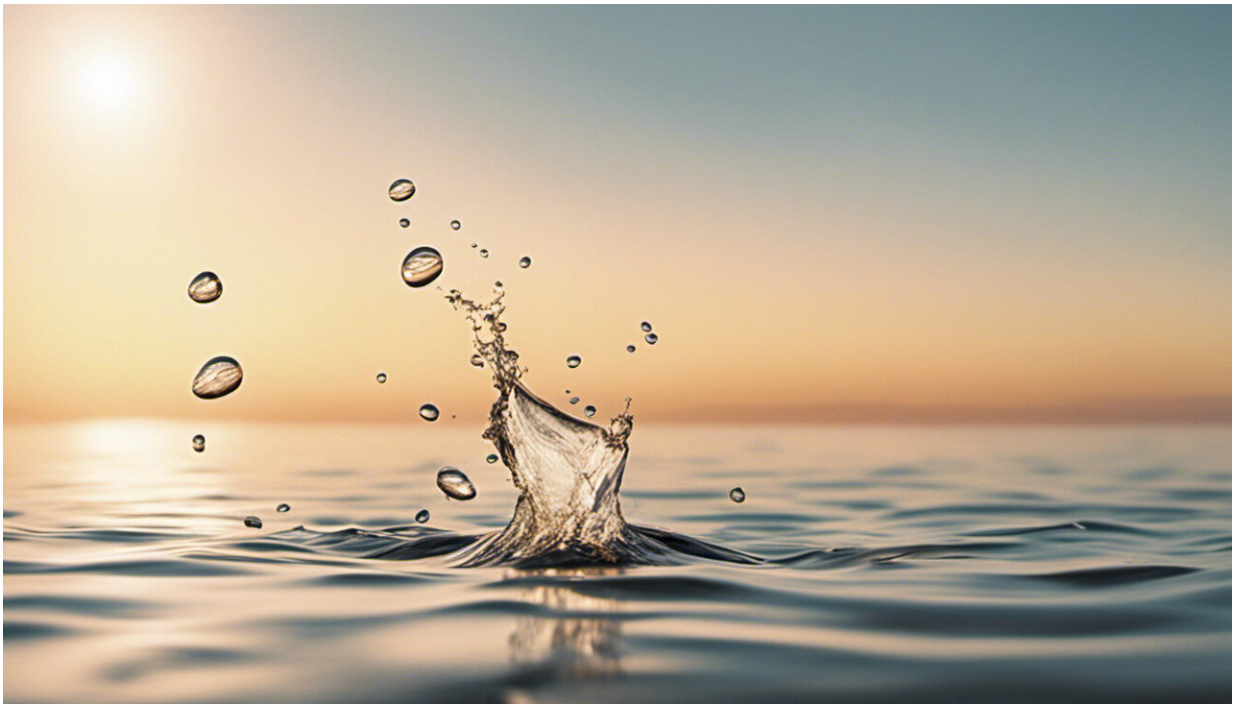


Is technology making your attention span shorter than a goldfish's?

May 28 2015, by Martin Thirkettle And Graham Pike



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

If you've ever found it hard to concentrate on one thing without stopping to check your emails or post to social media, you're not alone. The average human attention span – how long we can concentrate effectively on a single task – was [recently reported](#) by Microsoft to have dropped below the level attributed to goldfish.

This certainly plays to our fears about what the daily flood of [social media](#) and emails is doing to us, and to younger generations in particular. However, these figures may be misleading. For one thing, the report contains no real detail for either the goldfish or human [attention](#) span beyond the numbers on the [web page](#) Microsoft pulled them from.

More importantly, our minds are adaptive systems, constantly reorganising and refocusing our mental faculties to suit the environment. So the idea that our ability to pay attention may be changing in response to the modern, online world is neither surprising nor anything to necessarily worry about. However, there is an argument that we must take care to keep control of our attention in a world increasingly filled with distractions.

Attention is a phenomenally awkward thing to study and the manner in which it is tested enormously impacts on the results. This is one of the reasons attention is one of the most enduring and active research areas in psychology: [more than 1,200 papers](#) have been published on it just in the past 10 years.

But assuming the numbers in the report reflect some research – no matter what the method behind the data was – it's still not reasonable to apply them to any situation other than the one in which they were generated. Applying them to all aspects of our lives, as the report implies we should do, is a huge stretch.



Credit: Julia M Cameron from Pexels

Published scientific research looking at the effect of modern technology on our cognitive abilities does show an effect on attention. But contrary to popular opinion, it shows attention spans have actually improved. For example, habitual video gamers have [demonstrated better](#) attentional abilities than non-players – and non-players who started playing video-games began to show the same improvements.

There's no reason why the modern world should necessarily diminish our mental faculties and no reason to fear them changing. Our cognitive abilities are constantly changing and even naturally vary across the day.

One of our projects at the Open University is currently collecting data on these daily cycles. We've developed a smartphone app that includes a measure of attention alongside four other cognitive tasks. By using [the app](#) across the day, you can participate in this research and chart these natural changes in your own performance. This can enable you to better plan your day and finally understand if you actually are a morning or evening person.

However, as interesting as possible variations in cognitive abilities are, a more pertinent question may be what or who is driving the changes in our environment. Happily, this question is much easier to answer. The Microsoft study is aimed at advertisers, not the general public, and calls on companies to use "more creative, and increasingly immersive ways to market themselves".

The increasing number of distractions in our world is partly due to the new and ever-evolving ways in which advertisers can put their message in front of us – and the "increasingly immersive" techniques they'll use once the message is there. Realising this helps us understand that our attention is a resource being fought over by advertisers.

The online world is increasingly comprised of spaces where advertisers attempt to tempt us with their products. Similarly, [public spaces](#) are increasingly full of adverts that can play sound and video to further capture our attention. Escaping this [advertising](#) battleground is becoming one of the luxuries of the modern world. It's why paid-for executive lounges at airports are free from noisy, garish adverts and why the removal of adverts is a key selling point for paid-for apps.

Our mental abilities are changing, as they always have done in order to best serve our success in changing environments. But now, more than ever, our environment is made by those who either want our attention or want to sell access to it. It will certainly be interesting to see how our

[cognitive abilities](#) adapt to meet this new challenge. However, as individuals we too must start valuing our attention as much as the advertisers do.

This story is published courtesy of [The Conversation](#) (under Creative Commons-Attribution/No derivatives).

Source: The Conversation

Citation: Is technology making your attention span shorter than a goldfish's? (2015, May 28) retrieved 20 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2015-05-technology-attention-span-shorter-goldfish.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.