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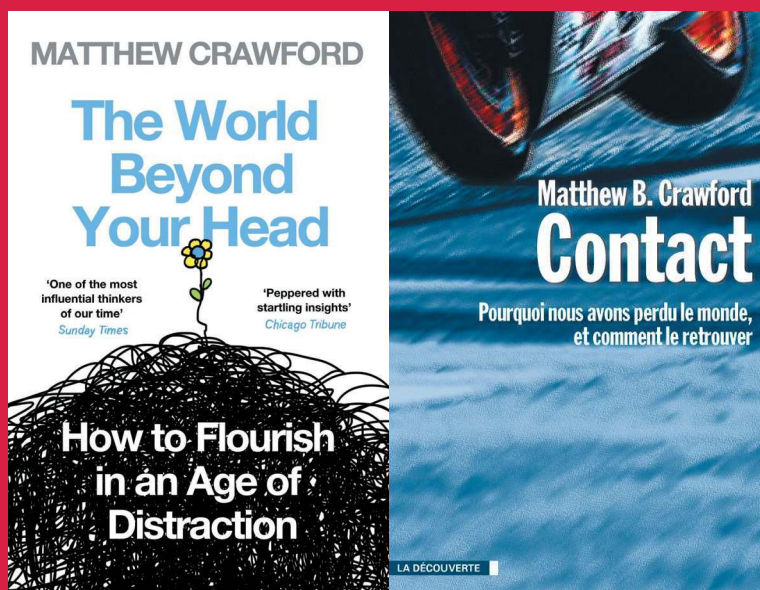
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SMART CITIES AND TECHNOLOGIES: connected or disconnected citizens?

Interview with Matthew Crawford

Writer and research fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Virginia



Matthew B. Crawford is an American writer and a senior fellow at the University of Virginia Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. He also runs a motorcycle business in Richmond, Virginia. He attended the University of California, Santa Barbara in Physics and turned after to political philosophy (Ph.D from the University of Chicago). Matthew Crawford has published his first book in 2009. Entitled *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, this book deals with manual competence. *The World Beyond Your Head: How to Flourish in an Age of Distraction* (2015), coping with attention as a cultural problem of modern life, is his second book.

KEYWORDS

- AGE OF DISTRACTION
- ADVERTISING
- CAPTIVE AUDIENCE
- PUBLIC GOOD
- DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

In his book *The World Beyond Your Head: How to Flourish in an Age of Distraction*, Matthew Crawford describes attention as a cultural problem of modern life. Individuals, notably urban dwellers, experience every day the fragmentation of their attention as everything is done to colonise our mental spaces by advertising. In this interview, Matthew Crawford gives details on this phenomenon that precedes Smart Cities but could be amplified by new technologies.

David Ménascé: In the introduction of your 2015 book *The World Beyond Your Head: How to Flourish in an Age of Distraction* you describe attention as “a cultural problem”. Could you tell us more on why attention has become an issue of the 21st century?

Matthew Crawford: My book begins with this idea because it seems that our mental activity is more and more subjected to fragmentation. We have this strange impression of not being entirely able to control our attention and to focus on one task at a time anymore. The reason is quite simple: everything is done to attract our attention in order to benefit from it. Public spaces for instance, that used to be protected from disturbance, are slowly but surely colonised by advertising.

To give you an example, I was comforted by the idea of writing this book when I was paying at automatic checkouts in groceries. Advertisements were displayed on screens in between each step. Perhaps these intervals were even artificial... I realized that someone had understood that in this kind of situation, people are a captive audience and that their mental space could be monetized. So yes, I think that today attention has become a collective problem – a cultural one - of modern life.

D.M.: Do you think that the crisis of attention you describe could be amplified by the interplay between Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and urban areas? In other words, would you say that the age of distraction is the age of Smart Cities?

M.C.: The likelihood of being distracted is surely tied to the “intensification of nervous stimulation” that German sociologist Georg Simmel already identified with cities a hundred years ago. The phenomenon is therefore an old problem that can be linked to cities but is definitely older than Smart Cities. Every time people come together in a shared space, there is an opportunity to treat them as a captive audience. And undoubtedly, urban areas give greater opportunities to gather a wide range of people in the same place and at the same time.

I can give you a couple of striking examples of the way urban dwellers are treated as a captive audience in cities. In Seoul, South Korea, bus riders experience a new kind of advertising, not related to sight but to the sense of smell. A smell looking like the one of Dunkin’ Donuts coffee is released into the bus. At the same time a Dunkin’ Donuts advertisement is played while the bus stop near the closest Dunkin’ Donuts store...! The advertising agency that came up with this idea was rewarded with a Bronze Lion award for “best use of ambient media”!

Another interesting example is the one of railway stations in the United States. In Philadelphia, there is a beautiful railway station that has one day been covered with huge signs advertising a resort in the Bahamas. In the US, we call this communication strategy “*station domination campaign*”. But it makes you feel as if you were in a place that is no longer really one. What is interesting is that other cities have made very different choices. For instance, in the seventies,

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NYC railway station, Grand Central Terminal, was covered by advertising. But in the nineties, real shops began to open in the station, progressively replacing intrusive advertising having nothing to do with the shops you can find in the station.

However, what is truly new with Smart Cities is that it gives unprecedented opportunities to track people movements, subject them to advertising, etc. While gathering more and more ultra-connected people, Smart Cities are full of technologies that have enabled us to become more technique on how to capture attention.

D.M.: Does it mean that the technologies we increasingly find in Smart Cities amplify the contemporary problem with our attention?

M.C.: It would be too simple to consider things like this. If you think of the “station domination campaign” at Philadelphia railway station, this marketing strategy - that really disturbs people’s attention - has little to do with digital technologies... So, the crisis of attention exists without new technologies. However, it is true that with new technologies, advertising has become more and more sophisticated, and maybe more shameless. It has become harder and harder to turn away from advertising in our modern cities.

What I would say is that distraction is not a problem of technology in itself. It is rather a problem of political economy. What we need to look at is the driving intention in the design and dissemination of technology in people’s everyday life. Looking at the intention given to technologies is the best way to design Smart Cities for the sake of public good.

D.M.: For many observers, Smart Cities can leverage ICT to optimize services (transports, housing, etc.). Do you agree with this idea or do you think that potential risks related to Smart Cities, notably an increasing loss of control on our mental spaces, are greater?

M.C.: I think that great things can always happen from technologies to smooth the functioning of the city. We have today some very good reasons to pursue these smart infrastructures: improvement of basic services (energy, transports, health, etc.), better access to every citizen, etc.

But the real problem today is that most Smart Cities are not designed for the public good because they are controlled by what could be seen as a cartel of ICT companies. Thus, citizens have become more and more captive and dependent in their everyday life. Citizens' lack of control and progressive loss of expertise are the main risks that we need to address when it comes to Smart Cities.

When you think about it, the path we are taking is about eliminating contingencies as much as possible. The way Mickey Mouse cartoons have evolved over the years is a funny, yet relevant example. In old cartoons in the fifties, laughter was mainly provoked by material stuff creating frustration (snowballs, fold-down beds, waves at the beach, etc.). But in the new Mickey Mouse Clubhouse cartoon, material reality is presented in a very different way. In each episode, Mickey and his friends must solve problems by using innovative technologies and it always works. Contingencies have been completely erased from their environment. This overdetermination of Mickey Mouse's world is not so far from the world we live in, as smart technologies reshape our world in a quite similar way. Smart Cities could even become cities where thinking is not necessary anymore as technologies should be able to anticipate our will and behaviours thanks to sophisticated algorithms. It can be seen as source of progress, but it could also lead to more and more dependence towards technologies and ICT companies.

A concrete example is the one of driverless cars. The way we move in the city – our freedom of movement – is likely to be progressively controlled by ICT companies. And as we do not need our skills and brains to move in our environment, companies have more of our brain to exploit. Think about this, why a company such as Google, that may be today one of the largest ad company in the

United States, is interested in self-driving cars? Well, I think that it is mainly because driverless cars are the best way to colonize one more activity in the real world. The average journey of an American to go to work is about 52 minutes...The more we make ourselves available to private interests, the more the spirit of independence is likely to become obsolete.

D.M.: What could be done by public authorities, and notably cities, to protect citizens from this age of distraction?

M.C.: As I previously said, I think that one of the main things we need to address is to guarantee that Smart Cities are designed for the public good. It is quite difficult to assess the intention given to a technology. I think that competent people, maybe local public officials, should be in charge of examining the intention and effects of all that programming that is in the system.

Education also plays an important role. We need to raise awareness on the use of new technologies in order to increase expertise on code, algorithms, open data, etc. Some public authorities have started to do that, it's already a good thing.

Generally speaking, and this goes beyond cities, I am advocating for the need for the concept of an *attentional commons* meaning that our attention has to be treated as a collective resource, both private and public. Concretely it means not to install speakers in every corner of a shopping mall, not to play music in every restaurant, etc. This power belongs to those who design our environment - our cities for instance - and have the ability to make such things happen.

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