

Continuous Partial Attention: The Cost of Being Everywhere

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Continuous partial attention (CPA) is the process of paying simultaneous attention to a number of sources of incoming information, but at a superficial level. The term was coined by Linda Stone in 1998. Author Steven Berlin Johnson describes this as a kind of multitasking: "It usually involves skimming the surface of the incoming data, picking out the relevant details, and moving on to the next stream. You're paying attention, but only partially. That lets you cast a wider net, but it also runs the risk of keeping you from really studying the fish."

Currently, we live the "Age of Information", being exposed to several information and data. The internet enhanced our accessibility to information, offering real-time connectivity and accessibility to tons of information which disrupt our daily basis. For this reason, the term has evolved by the move from the Age of Information to the Age of Interruption, characterized by an overabundance of information. People are constantly interrupted by emails, spam, instant messages and cellphones, making attention a scarce resource in this era.

Stone has clarified that CPA is not the same as multi-tasking. Where multi-tasking is driven by a conscious desire to be productive and efficient, CPA is an automatic process, motivated only by "a desire to be a live node on the network". It is driven by the willingness to connect and stay connected, scanning the best opportunities, activities and contacts in an effort to not miss anything that is going on. Compared to multi-tasking, full attention is not required by CPA (hence the "partial") and the process is ongoing rather than episodic (hence the "continuous"). Another distinction results from the fact that CPA has evolved from and is dependent on computers and especially the internet, which acts as a platform for a variety of distractions. Further, it creates a compulsion to connect, meaning that CPA is motivated not by productivity but by connectivity.

The state of Continuous Partial Attention can be functional behavior. However, it leads to a higher level of stress in the brain, prohibiting reflection, contemplation and thoughtful decisions. It also dilutes efforts to focus and concentrate on the present (effectively paying attention to what you are doing in the moment instead of shifting from one activity to another). This constant connectedness also affects real-time relationships and lowers productivity levels, leading to over-stimulation and lack of fulfillment.

The Generalization of the Study

Most of the examples and time frames are USA centric. However, when someone looks at other cultures, we find many similarities with the US culture. We may not all find ourselves in the same attention era at the same time. We are likely to find ourselves experiencing a flow: attraction to an ideal, taking the expression of the ideal to an extreme and experiencing unintended and less than pleasant consequences, giving birth to and launching a new ideal while integrating the best of what came before" as Linda Stone writes it.