



Can democracy survive an attention crisis?

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Matters of national security are challenging and require commitment, courage and focus. To carry out measures, whether to mitigate or prevent danger, real or perceived, from impeding the rhythms of a nation, it is an indisputable fact that success is rooted in individuals who are grounded in leadership capabilities. These qualities include honesty, integrity, reason, sound judgement and communication prowess, amongst many more. Leadership skills may be an innate and natural extension of one's personality, values and beliefs, but often, for the majority, require an awakening and cultivation through rigorous training and values-based education.

[Tom Namwambah's](#) extensive work on national security argues that "guaranteeing of national security needs shrewd and competent men and women who think critically". He further elaborates on the skill as a lifelong, sustained act of practice, conscious application and self-reflection to achieve excellence. Thus, critical leadership thinking is the anchor to securing national security.

Today, it is no secret that our economy has created a market of constant war for our attention. On one hand, many digital users embrace algorithmic feeds as personalised customisation fulfils beliefs, values and desires, but on the other, denounces its debilitating force as it cripples critical thinking via overload of information and psychological manipulation. News media and commercial corporations alike are identified as sharing this common goal of luring attention, [succeeding by a user's click on an article or product](#). National security is no longer breached in the form of political and military advances. It has expanded to the lives of the common people because the ideology has transformed: "You don't need to conquer a nation to destabilise it. You just need to weaken it."

Modern society is fighting an invisible war on an invisible battleground of the human mind, coined as cognitive warfare. If the government continues to remain passive and allows the threat of distributed information (disinformation, malinformation or misinformation) to fester on digital media and social media platforms without any safety guardrails, we are inevitably nurturing a leaderless generation unable to exercise their full cognitive potential to think for themselves and thereby the future of their nation. For instance, digital news media produces emotionally charged content through bold, catchy headlines, and information often laced with constructed claims.

The perfect formula to generate as many clicks as possible and consequently produces conditions that Timothy Snyder asserts as, "To abandon facts is to abandon freedom," including democratic participation, government trust and political efficacy, as interpretations are influenced by emotions rather than facts. As digital media interferes with

our ability to discern and resolve the actual causes and relations of power, it underwrites chronic social and political conflicts and thereby [weakens national security](#).

Secondly, as digital technology advances, it becomes more integrated into our daily lives. In particular, social media has become a normalised tool for social exchange and, arguably, personal timeout. As a result of over three decades of social media exposure, the [average attention span dropped](#) from 2.5 minutes in 2004 to roughly 47 seconds today. Studies point out that the constant exposure to vibration, ping, or a flash icon of a thumbs up activates involuntary attention as a biological warning of nearing danger or opportunities. These persistent disruptions induce our brains to be in a constant state of reactive attention, [leading to fatigue and eroding natural cues](#) that ordinarily signal when an activity should end. Individual failure to self-control is a reflection of deliberate addictive design, but to the user experience, it is an 'autonomous' choice in how they use their finite 'value'-based resources: time, energy, and attention.

The reality is, social media structures conditions that feel like independent choice when instead, they are influenced by personalised algorithms to align with the provider's interest in engagement and clicks. Andro Gotsiridze coins this as reflexive control, explaining that it is "the construction of a cognitive environment in which certain interpretations appear natural, rational and inevitable," rooted in the "systemic effort to reshape how societies reason about reality." This demonstrates how the addictive architecture of digital platforms is working seamlessly to reshape our brains, and the struggle is no longer simply a war over attention or a consequence of information overload; it is the "nexus between information, emotion and identity." We have been willingly and unknowingly subjecting ourselves to a digital world that is actively reconstructing our thoughts, behaviour and attitude geared towards the initiator's interests at a scale that is highly invisible.

Moreover, sustained use of social media also reduces us to a state of ["poverty of attention."](#) There is growing scientific evidence that prolonged interaction with social media is associated with damaging brain development and function, including cognitive, behavioural, and emotional difficulties, impairments in attention, executive functioning, and memory. Compromised capacity to cognitively grow and develop constitutes a broader national concern because users are increasingly shaped to be passive recipients of information rather than critical evaluators of it.

The threat is therefore no longer just dissemination of misconstrued information, but the gradual reconstruction of how reality itself is perceived, interpreted, and experienced. The strategically designed features of social media therefore play a significant role in reshaping patterns of human cognition and behaviour, including diminishing capacity for critical thought and independent judgement, warranting this issue not only as a public interest, but more broadly as a national security issue in the challenge of developing future leaders.

Social media's consequences are no longer just a matter of individual well-being. It goes beyond the functioning of a democratic society that needs leaders and critical thinkers. Without an individual's capacity to be informed, how can we have rational public discourse and democratic participation occur?