



The shift from newspapers serving readers to newspapers selling readers — marks one of the **most consequential and least recognized inflection points in human history.**

It is profoundly underappreciated because:

- there was no bloodshed,
- no legislation,
- no emancipation battles,
- no moral reckoning.
- It happened quietly.

Yet its effects have been **incomparable:**

- It restructured the economics of information.
- It transformed citizens into markets.
- It turned attention into a raw material.
- It established a business model that would colonize radio, then TV, then the internet, then social media, and now AI.

It set in motion the extraction system that shapes **the entire world's culture, politics, beliefs, and behavior today.**

No political party has more voters.

Advertising reaches more people *every day* than any political party reaches in a year — even in election cycles.

No religion has more followers.

More people are exposed to targeted commercial messaging than belong to all the world's religions *combined*.

Ads are the most widely practiced daily ritual on Earth.

No educational system educates more students.

Advertising-trained attention loops “teach” billions of people *every day* — far more frequently and powerfully than any formal schooling system.

No corporation has more power.

The global advertising complex — spanning Big Tech, data brokers, platforms, agencies, markets, and the AI systems driving them — is the single most influential industry on the planet.

It shapes what people know, want, fear, believe, buy, and vote for.

Because advertising isn't just a business model anymore — it has become:

The largest persuasion system ever built.

The most ubiquitous educational system on the planet (but one that teaches desire, not understanding).

The most widely practiced religion substitute (daily ritualized participation).

The most powerful political force (it determines attention, and attention determines outcomes).

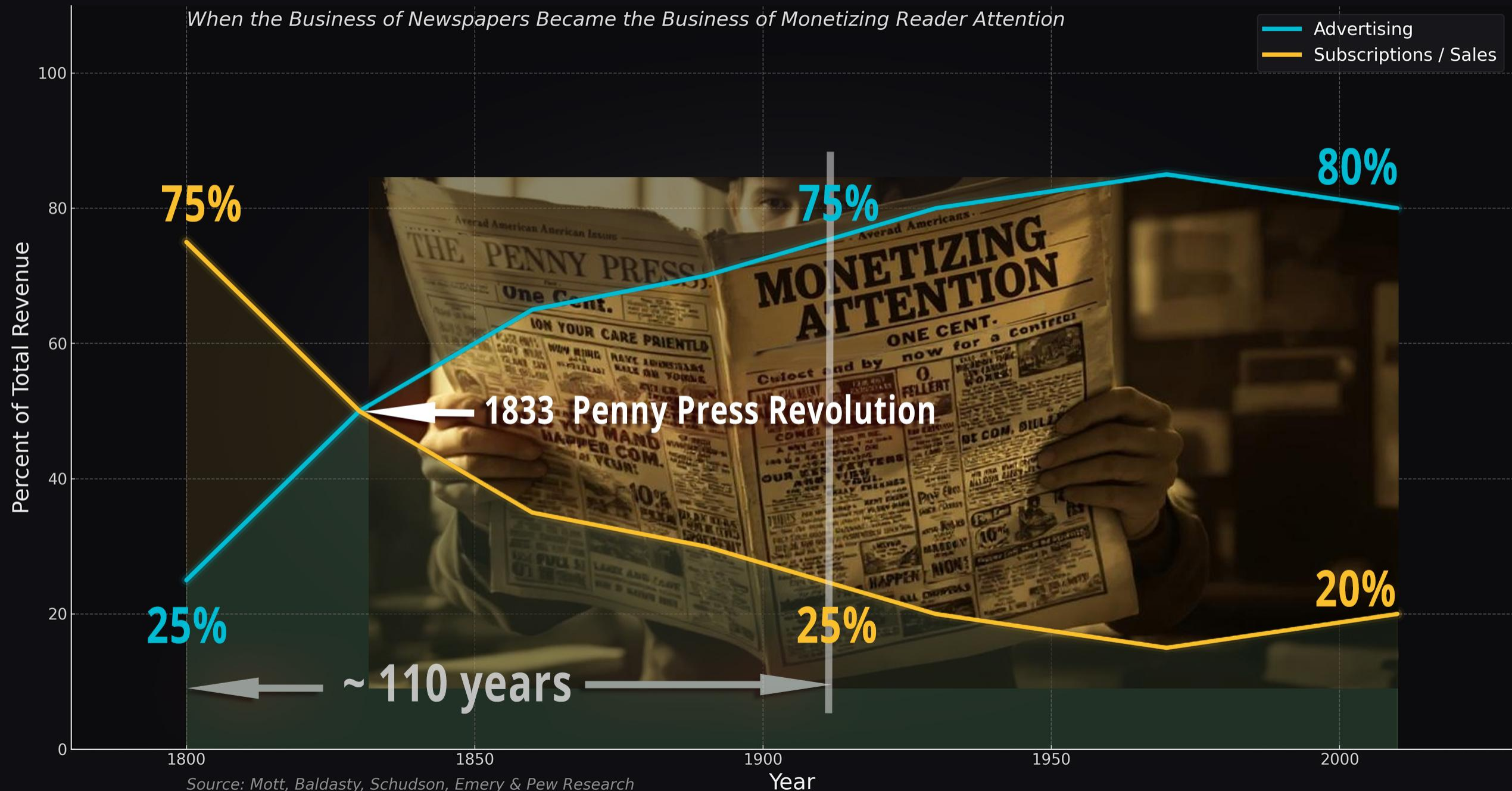
The dominant global extractive industry (monetizing cognition, identity, and behavior).

By every population-scale measure — reach, frequency, psychological contact, daily immersion, and behavioral impact — **the business of manipulating attention surpasses all other human institutions.**

more: <https://davidboulton.com/continuum/>

Transformation of Newspaper Revenue Sources (1800-2010)

When the Business of Newspapers Became the Business of Monetizing Reader Attention



Newspaper Advertising: Population Effect Size, Behavioral Exploits, and Cultural-Learning Effects

Year	US Population	Literate Adults	Circulation	% of population reached DAILY
1830	~13M	~6–7M	~300k	~2–3%
1850	~23M	~15M	~1M	~5%
1880	~50M	~40M	~3.1M	~12–15%
1900	~76M	~60M	~15.1M	~20–25%
1920	~106M	~95M	~27.8M	~30–35%
1930	~123M	~115M	~35–40M	~40% daily; ~70–80% weekly

By the 1920s–1930s, **newspaper ads were the most widely consumed persuasive medium in human history**, reaching more people more regularly than any previous symbolic system except religion. By 1930:

- people expected to be pitched
- expected to be sold
- expected that cultural messages were financially motivated
- and increasingly expected that *meaning itself* came wrapped in commerce

This became the **proto-interface** for the advertising model that radio would make intimate, television would make emotional, the internet would make personalized, and AI is now making individuated and adaptive at cognitive speed.

Peak: ~1925–1935

Effect size:

~40% of Americans reached daily

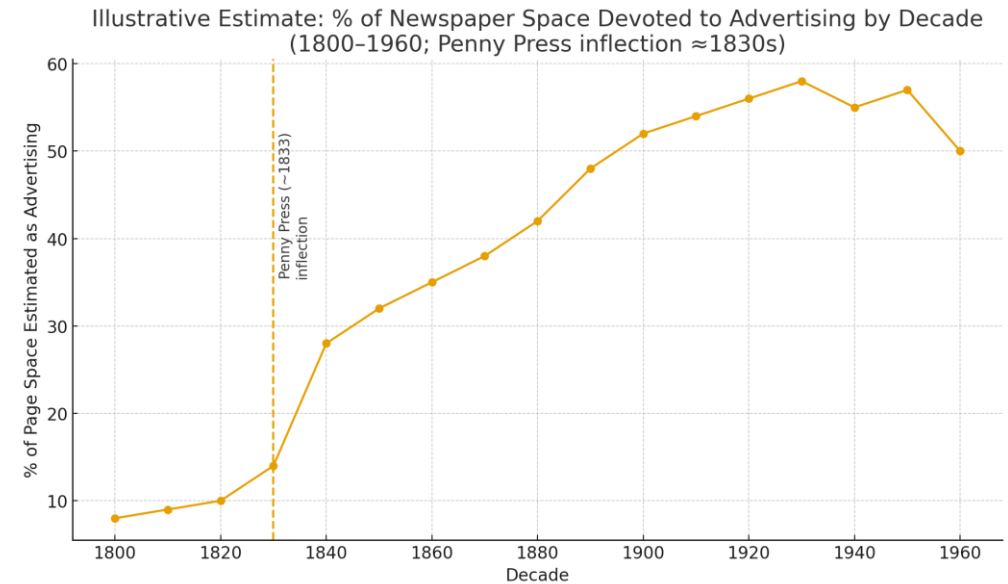
~75–80% weekly reach

80% of US ad spending

In major cities: 60–75% daily reach

Newspapers shaped the learning environment of **virtually every literate American**

This was the most consolidated attention-manipulation system ever created **before broadcast media**.



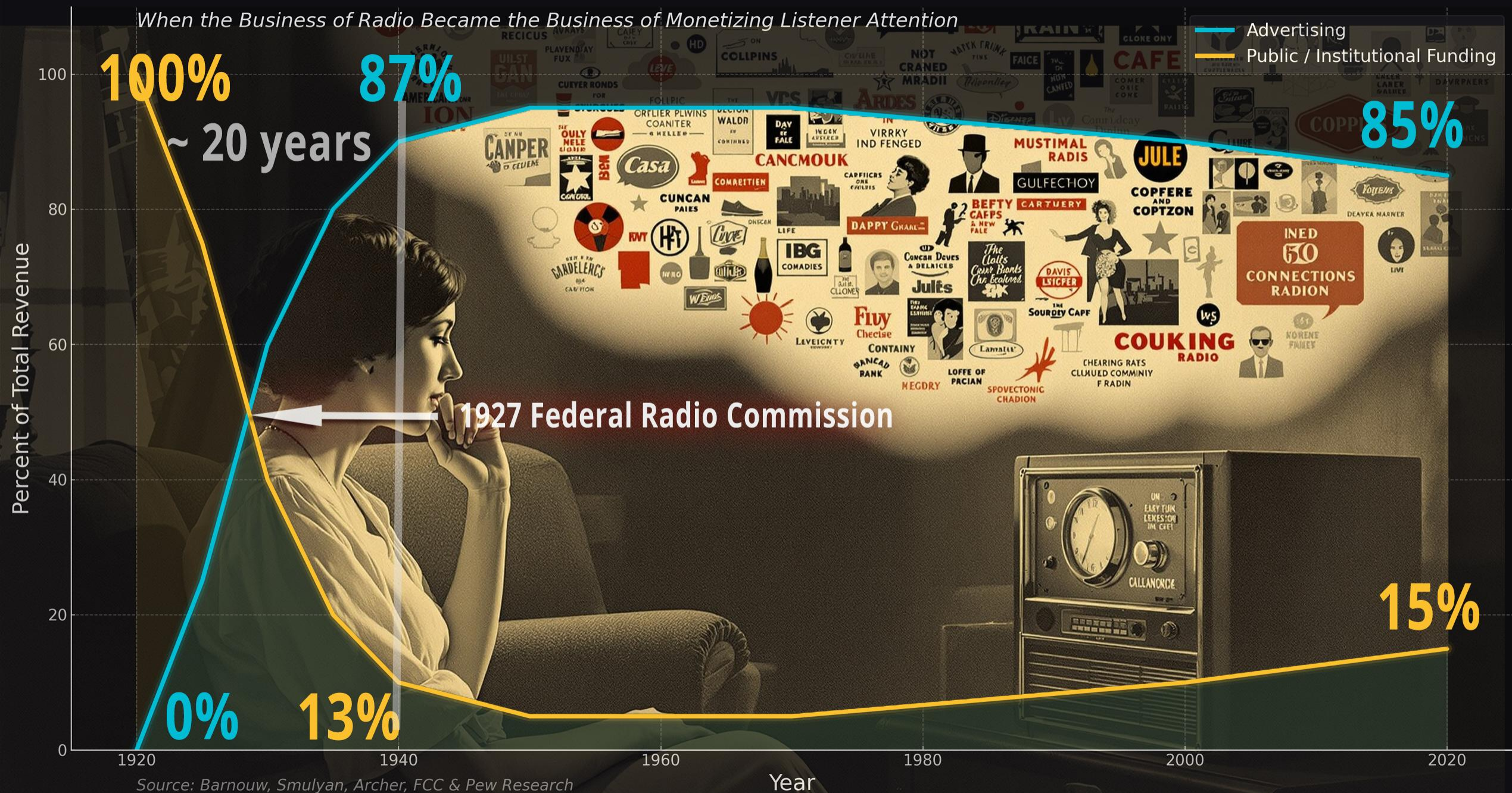
•“Whatever a patron desires to get published is advertising; whatever he wants to keep out of the paper is news.” — L. E. Edwardson (Chicago Herald & Examiner), sentiment traced by Quote Investigator. [Quote Investigator](#)

•“Advertisers were a far greater threat to journalistic freedom than government censorship.” — press critic George Seldes (summary of his position in *Freedom of the Press and Lords of the Press*). [Encyclopedia.pub](#)

•“With a dozen or so honorable exceptions, most American newspapers carry very little news. Their main concern is advertising.” — I. F. Stone, *The Haunted Fifties* (1963).

•“Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one.” — A. J. Liebling, *The New Yorker* (May 14, 1960). [Lib Quotes](#)

Transformation of Radio Revenue Sources (1920-2020)



Radio Advertising: Population Effect Size, Behavioral Exploits, and Cultural-Economic Learning(1920s–1950s, pre-TV dominance)

Year	US Population	Radio-owning households	% of households	Est. % of pop exposed weekly
1922	~110M	~60,000	<1%	<1%
1925	~115M	~1.5M	~8%	~10%
1930	~123M	~12M	~40%	~45–50%
1935	~126M	~23M	~65%	~70–75%
1940	~132M	~28M	~80%	~85%
1945	~140M	~33M	~85%	~90%
1950	~151M	~40M	~95%	~95%

Radio became the first medium with near-universal penetration. Where newspapers reached ~40% daily at peak, **radio surpassed 80–90% weekly by the mid-1930s and reached virtually the entire country by 1950**

Peak Pre-TV Influence Summary

Peak: 1935–1950

Effect size:

- 80–95% population reach per week
- 40–50 million simultaneous listeners for major programs
- 40–50% of all US advertising spend

Radio defined the emotional and cultural rhythms of the entire country. This was the largest-scale emotional-manipulation system ever built **before television**, and the first medium where *mass emotional states* were engineered in real time for commerce and politics.

Period	Public/Institutional Funding	Advertising	Character
1920	100%	0%	Purely public, experimental
1925	75%	25%	Mixed; early “toll broadcasting”
1930	40%	60%	Commercial ascendance
1935	20%	80%	Sponsor ownership dominant
1940	10%	90%	Advertising fully institutionalized

“Radio is the greatest forum the world has ever known — or the greatest deception.”
- Orson Wells

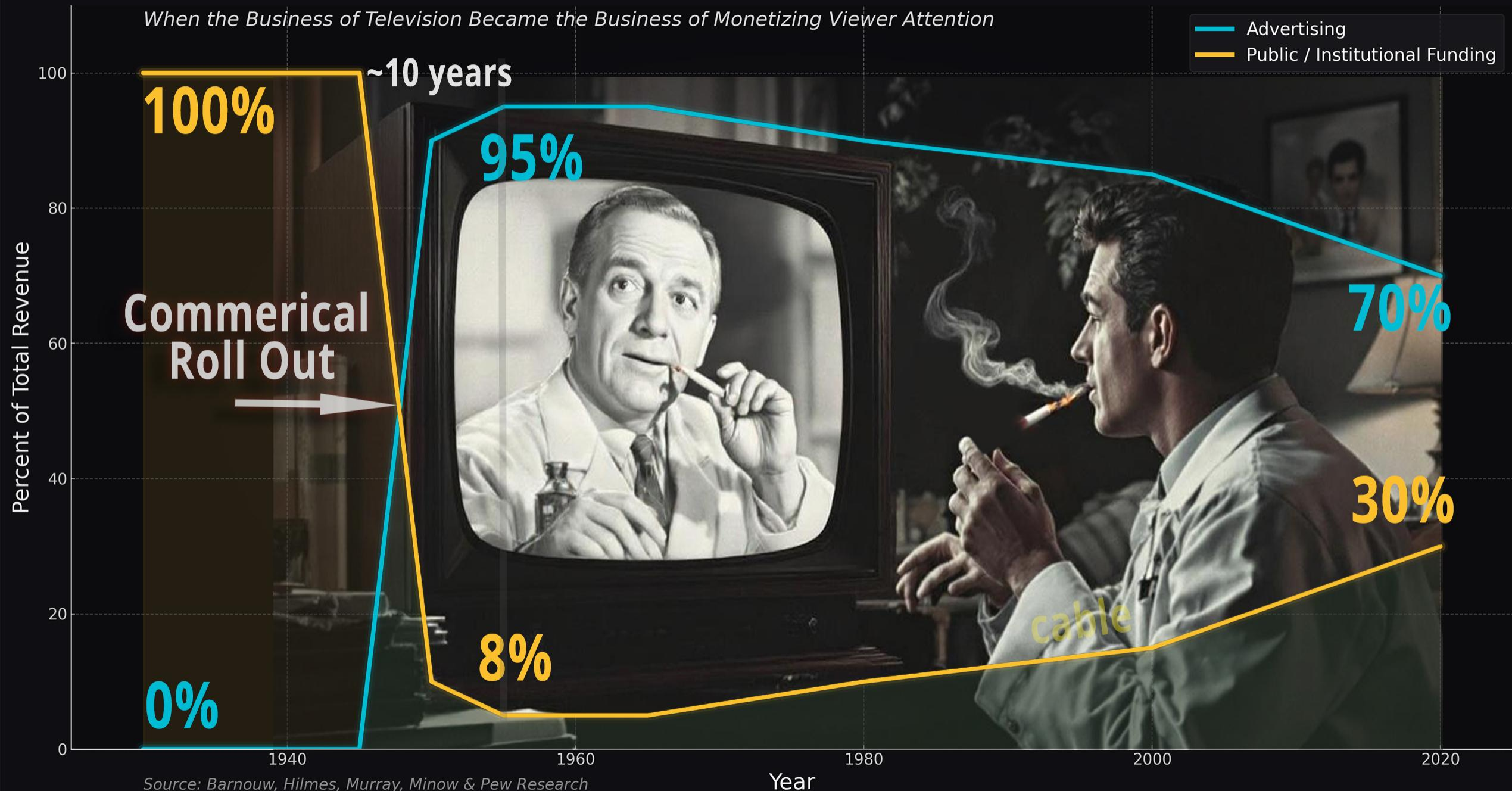
“Radio affects people intimately, offering a world of unspoken communication between writer-speaker and listener.”
- Marshall McLuhan

“The effect of radio lies less in what it tells people to think, than in what it tells them to think about.”
= Paul Lazarsfeld

“The radio voice makes authority sound natural.”
- Theodor Adorno

Transformation of Television Revenue Sources (1930-2020)

When the Business of Television Became the Business of Monetizing Viewer Attention



Television Advertising: Population Effect Size, Behavioral Exploits, and Cultural–Economic Learning

Year	US pop	TV-households	% of households	Est. % of pop exposed weekly
1950	~152M	~4.4M	~9%	~10–12%
1955	~165M	~32M	~65%	~70–75%
1960	~180M	~45M	~87%	~90%
1970	~205M	~59M	~95%	~97%

Television achieved the fastest mass-adoption curve of any medium in history until the smartphone. By 1970, TV reached **virtually the entire country**, including **nearly all children**, making it the first medium to dominate the psychological development of an entire population from early childhood through adulthood.

Peak Pre-Internet TV Influence Summary

Peak: 1955–1980

Effect size:

- 90–97% weekly exposure
- 60–80% nightly viewership
- 30–40M simultaneous viewers
- 60–70% of national ad spend
- TV defined the look, sound, feel, sexuality, and aspirations of mid-century American culture
- Children became the most impressionable and valuable target group
- Television became the dominant shaper of population-level meaning-making

Television’s influence reshaped entire categories of behavior, from consumer purchasing patterns to generational identities.

Period	Public/Institutional Funding	Advertising	Context
1930	100%	0%	Experimental demonstrations
1945	100%	0%	Wartime research pause
1950	10%	90%	Commercial rollout
1955	5%	95%	Sponsor dominance
1965	5%	95%	Public broadcasting marginal
1980	10%	90%	Cable expansion
2000	15%	85%	Syndication era
2020	30%	70%	Streaming hybrids

“Television is by nature the dominator drug par excellence. Control of content, uniformity of content, repeatability of content make it inevitably a tool of coercion, brainwashing, and manipulation” – Terrance McKenna

“Television can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends.” – Edward R. Murrow

“Television is altering the meaning of ‘being informed’ by creating a species of information that might properly be called disinformation.” - Neil Postman

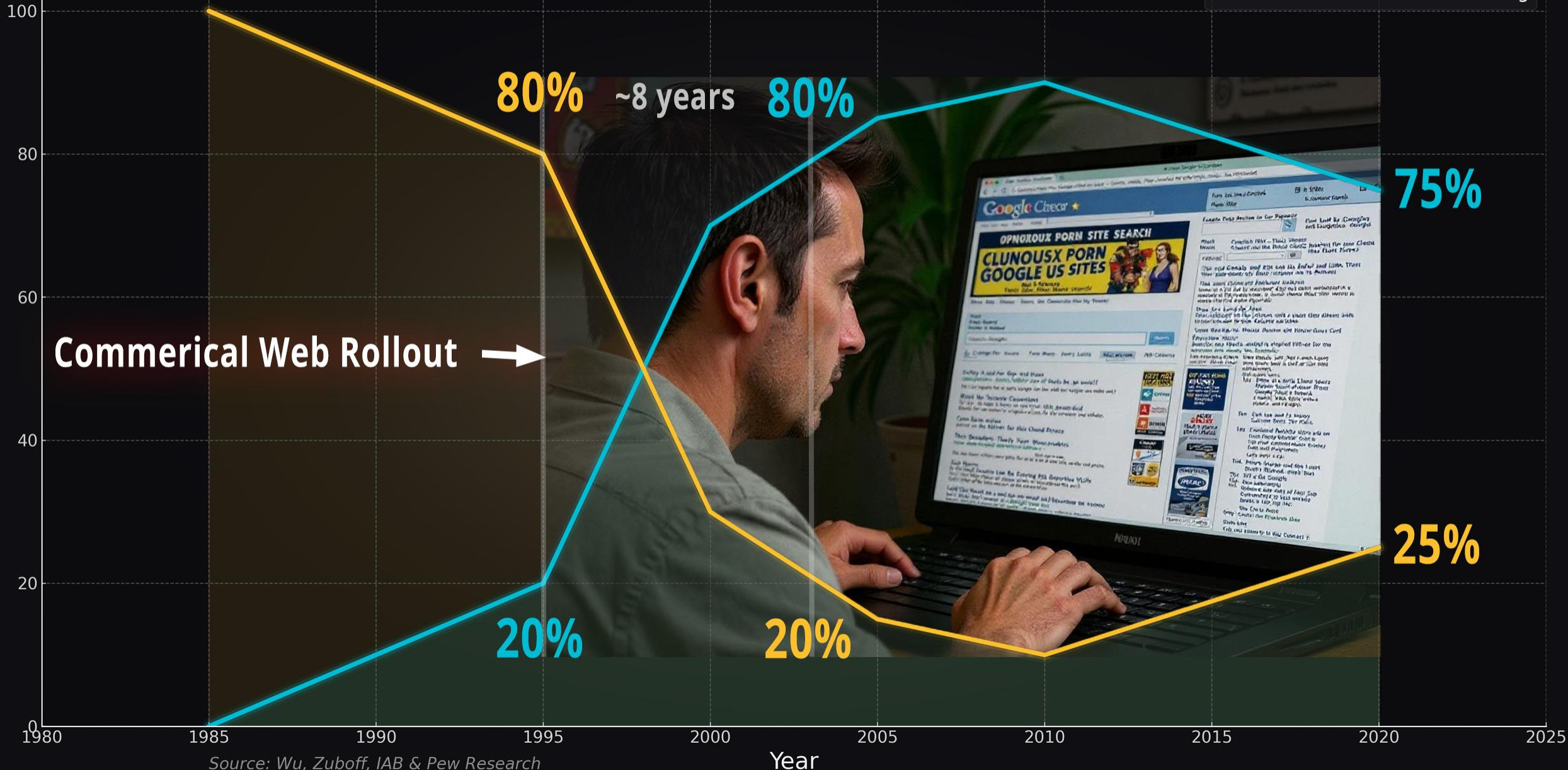
“When television is bad, nothing is worse.”
- Newton N. Minow

Transformation of Internet Revenue Sources (1985-2020)

When the Business of the Internet Became the Business of Monetizing User Attention

Percent of Total Revenue

- Advertising
- Public / Institutional Funding



The Internet Before Social Media: Population Effect Size, Behavioral Exploits, and Cultural–Economic Learning

Year	US Population	Internet Users	% of Population	Notes
1995	~266M	~16M	~6%	Mostly dial-up; email + basic web
2000	~282M	~124M	~44%	Dot-com boom; search emerges
2005	~295M	~208M	~70%	Broadband rise; e-commerce normalized

Peak Pre-Social Media Influence (approx. 2003–2006)

Before Facebook (2006–07 mainstream), before YouTube (2006 mass adoption), before algorithmic persuasion:

- ~70% of Americans online
- ~1 billion global users
- Search and portals dominated attention
- Advertising was in early transition from banners to keyword targeting
- The web was mostly page-based, not feed-based
- Persuasion was passive, not algorithmically optimized

The internet was powerful, but **not yet behaviorally optimized**.

The Datafication of Desire (2005–2015)

The early 2000s saw the decisive turn from advertising as placement to advertising as prediction.

Platforms like Google, Facebook, and YouTube discovered that behavioral data itself was more valuable than the ads it carried. Tracking cookies, analytics, and user IDs made every movement measurable; recommendation algorithms made it steerable; machine learning made it exploitable.

Advertising no longer bought *space* on the Internet—it bought *behavioral influence within it*.

Period	Revenue Source	Key Inflection
1960s–1989	100% public/research	Non-commercial networks
1990–1994	90–100% public	NSFNet restrictions on ads
1995–2000	70–80% ads	Yahoo!, AOL, Google intro ad models
2001–2010	85–95% ads	Search + social platforms dominate
2011–2020	80–90% ads	Mobile, algorithmic targeting
2020s	60–80% ads	Hybrid subscription models emerge

“The Internet was hijacked by surveillance-based advertising.”
- Shoshana Zuboff

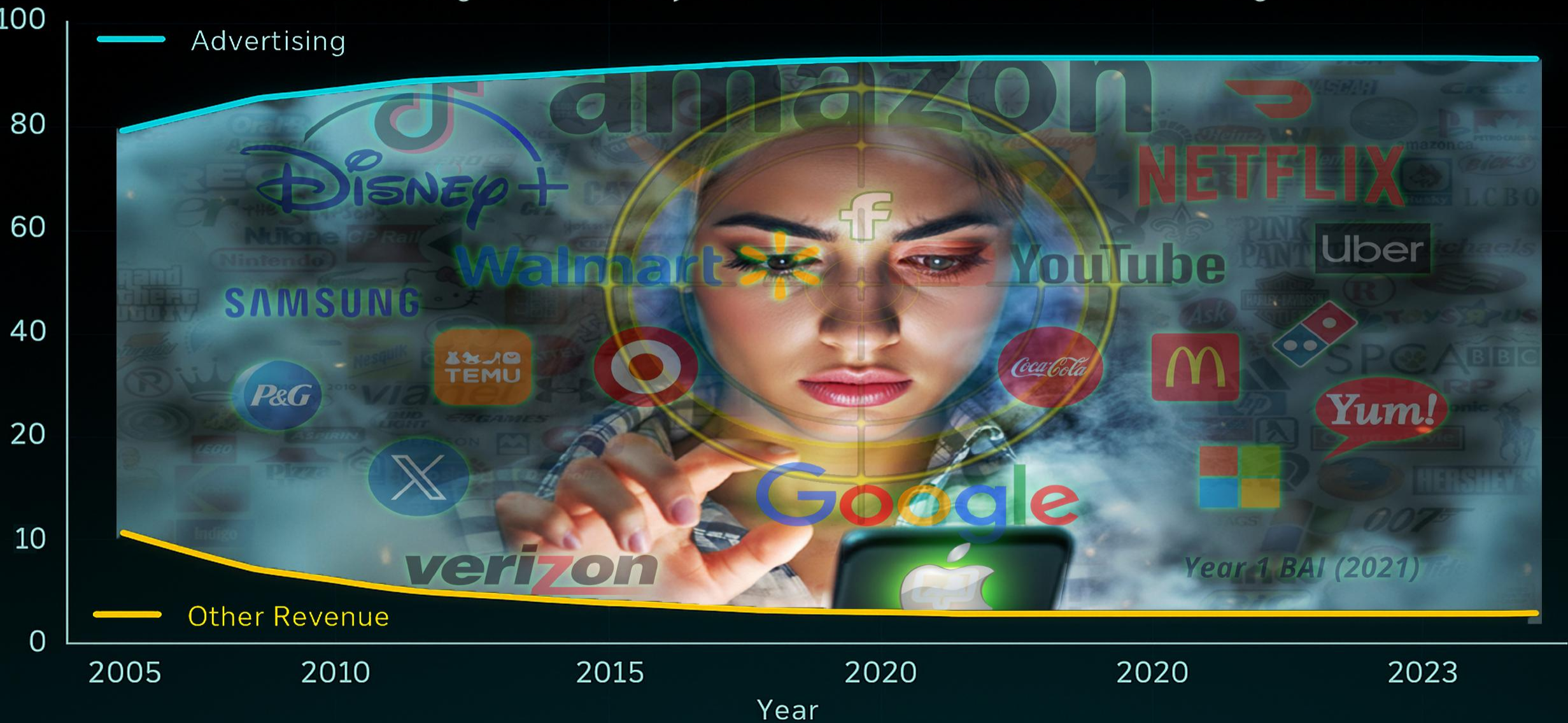
“If something is free, you are the product.”
- Richard Serra

“The Internet is the ultimate personalization machine.”
- Nicholas Negroponte

“The Internet is not a thing; it’s the people who control the protocols.”
- Douglas Rushkoff

Social Media Revenue Sources (2005 - 2023)

Social Media Began as a Nearly 100% Ad-Funded Behavior Monetizing Platform



Source: Meta, Alphabet/YouTube, Snap, ByteDance financial disclosures (approximate synthesis)

Pre-AI Social Media: Population Effect Size, Behavioral Exploits, and Cultural–Economic Learning (2005–2016)

Year	US Population	Social Media Users	% of Population	Notes
2005	~296M	~7%	~7%	Myspace, early Facebook, forums
2010	~309M	~48%	~48%	Facebook mainstream, YouTube rise, Twitter
2015	~321M	~65%	~65%	Instagram, early Snapchat, mobile-first use

Peak Pre-AI Influence (~2012–2016)

Before deep-learning recommender engines:

- ~60–65% of Americans on social platforms
- ~2 billion global users
- Mobile-phone based engagement accelerated daily exposure
- Advertising shifted from desktop banners → mobile feeds
- Behaviors were shaped socially, not yet by AI-optimized prediction loops

The population learned to live inside social-mediated identity mirrors, but not yet inside AI-curated reality funnels.

Peak Pre-AI Social Media Influence Summary (2005–2016)

- Advertising shifted from web → feed
- Identity became a publishable commodity
- Social approval became a daily psychological dependency
- Tribal segmentation increased without algorithmic optimization
- Emotional content dominated because of human psychology alone
- Early political microtargeting emerged (pre-Cambridge Analytica)
- The precursors of attention addiction normalized in youth culture
- Surveillance capitalism entered its “proto-stage”

Pre-AI social media: ads merged with identity, belonging, and self-worth

Social platforms made attention a quantified public commodity.

Every like, follower, comment, and share trained users that:

Your worth is measured by how much attention you can command.

Advertising moved from interrupting content to being structurally embedded in:

- feeds
- influencers
- recommendations
- social comparison loops

Attention became performative and compulsive.

“Social media companies are surveillance companies that sell influence.”

- Edward Snowden

“Social media algorithms are hacking the human operating system.”

- Yuval Noah Harari

“Social media perfected the attention-harvesting business model.”

- Tim Wu

“Social media claims human experience as free raw material for behavioral prediction.”

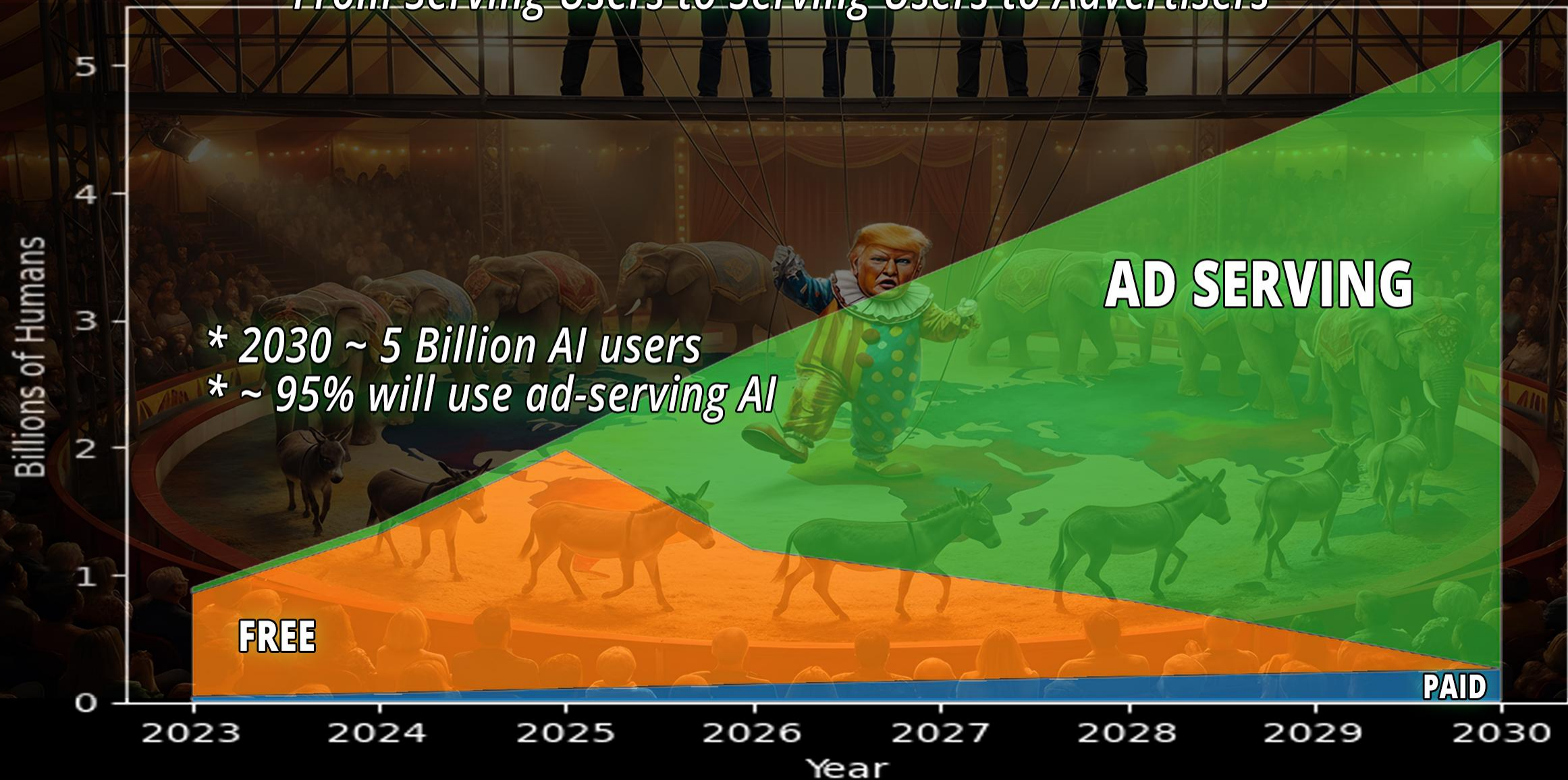
- Shoshana Zuboff

“Social media rewires childhood and corrodes democracy at the same time.”

- Jonathan Haidt

The Rise of AI Influence: 2023 to 2030

From Serving Users to Serving Users to Advertisers



Footnotes & Evidence Base

[1] Scale of daily AI-mediated exposure

McKinsey Global Institute, *The State of AI* (annual reports).

OECD, *AI in Society* and *Digital Economy Outlook*.

GSMA Intelligence; ITU reports on global smartphone and mobile broadband penetration.

Rationale:

Daily AI exposure scales with **networked device penetration**, not with AI app adoption. As AI is embedded in search, feeds, commerce, logistics, and media delivery, exposure approaches global smartphone reach.

[2] Volume of AI-mediated relevance decisions

Yankelovich & Meer (2006); Simons (2014); Red Crow Marketing (2017): estimates of **4,000–10,000 ads/day** exposure.

Platform engineering disclosures: Google Search, Meta ranking systems, YouTube/TikTok recommendation architectures.

Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.

Rationale:

Advertising alone accounts for thousands of algorithmic decisions per day per person. When combined with feeds, recommendations, pricing, moderation, and invisible filtering layers, **10,000/day by 2030 is conservative**.

[3] Paid vs free equilibrium (~5% / ~95%)

Search (Google, Bing): <2% direct user payment.

Social platforms (Meta, TikTok, X): ~1–3% paid tiers.

Mobile OS ecosystems (Apple/Google): ~3–7% direct payer share.

Streaming hybrids (Spotify, YouTube): paid users remain a minority at global scale.

Rationale:

At planetary scale, **media economics dominate software economics**. Ambient infrastructures stabilize with a **small paid minority** and a **large free, subsidized majority**.

[4] Sponsor-subsidized free AI

Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) reports on digital ad funding.

PwC, Gartner: employer-provided digital and AI services.

OECD: government digital services and AI deployment.

Oxford Internet Institute (Bradshaw & Howard): algorithmic political and informational influence.

Rationale:

“Free” overwhelmingly means **someone else pays to shape outcomes**—advertisers, institutions, employers, or political actors. By 2030, sponsor-aligned incentives dominate free AI experiences.

Methodological Notes

These projections are **learning-systems risk estimates**, not market forecasts.

The unit of concern is **relevance mediation**, not conscious interaction.

All figures are rounded to reflect **order-of-magnitude uncertainty**, not false precision.

The table intentionally foregrounds **agency and incentive alignment**, not revenue or adoption hype.

Planetary AI Relevance Mediation — (2023–2030)

Metric ↓ / Year →	2023	2024	2025	2026	2028	2030
1. Humans with daily AI-mediated exposure/use	~0.9B	~1.4B	~2.1B	~2.8B	~4.0B	~5.2B
2. Avg. AI-mediated relevance decisions per human per day	~500	~1,200	~2,500	~4,000	~7,500	~10,000
3. Paying AI users (count & % of total)	~45M (5%)	~70M (5%)	~105M (5%)	~140M (5%)	~200M (5%)	~260M (5%)
4. Free AI users (count & % of total)	~855M (95%)	~1.33B (95%)	~1.995B (95%)	~2.66B (95%)	~3.8B (95%)	~4.94B (95%)
5. % of free AI use that is AI-native ad / sponsor-aligned	~5%	~8%	~12%	~55%	~80%	~95%

AI-mediated relevance exists before 2026, but AI-native advertising and sponsor-aligned relevance mediation only becomes dominant once AI systems replace legacy ad-tech as the primary optimization layer — a transition likely to occur in 2026.

By 2030, more than five billion humans will live inside roughly ten thousand AI-mediated relevance decisions per day, while about ninety-five percent experience AI as free, sponsor-aligned behavioral infrastructure rather than as a tool they directly pay for.

The Paradox of Advertising Influence

Most people believe it doesn't work on them.

believe
think
feel
buy
vote
self reflect

Yet, in the aggregate it shapes their worlds.



Most people *explicitly report* believing that advertising doesn't influence them, even though *behavioral and economic evidence* shows it profoundly does. This gap between self-perception and actual influence is one of the most well-documented paradoxes in communication research.

1. Self-report evidence: “It works on others, not on me”

Numerous studies show that people consistently underestimate advertising’s effect on themselves while overestimating its effect on others — a cognitive bias called the “third-person effect.”

Study	Findings
Davison, W. P. (1983) — <i>Public Opinion Quarterly</i>	Coined the “third-person effect”: individuals believe others are more influenced by media than they are themselves.
Gunther, A. C., & Thorson, E. (1992) — <i>Communication Research</i>	Found strong evidence across political and commercial messages: most respondents claimed “ads don’t affect me, but they affect others.”
Duck, Hogg, & Terry (1999) — <i>Journal of Applied Social Psychology</i>	Demonstrated the third-person effect across different media forms — people perceived themselves as “immune” to persuasion.
Chia, Lee, & Wu (2009) — <i>Asian Journal of Communication</i>	Replicated the effect in digital advertising: individuals rated online ads as “manipulative” but said they were personally “too discerning” to be influenced.

3. The paradox

- **Cognitively:** we maintain the *illusion of immunity* to preserve a sense of agency.
- **Collectively:** when aggregated across millions of “unaffected” individuals, the tiny probabilistic shifts advertising causes become massive economic and cultural forces.

As advertising scholar Sut Jhally put it:

“Advertising doesn’t have to be believed to be effective; it only has to be *absorbed*.”
(*The Codes of Advertising*, 1987)

2. Behavioral and economic evidence: “It absolutely works”

Despite that self-reported immunity, advertising *does* change behavior measurably:

Econometric models show that, on average, every dollar spent on advertising returns between **\$4–6 in revenue** (IPA Databank, WARC, Nielsen).

Brand exposure experiments (e.g., Ferraro, Bettman, & Chartrand, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 2009) demonstrate **non-conscious brand priming**: even incidental exposure increases later choice likelihood.

Neuromarketing and fMRI studies show emotional and associative activation during exposure to ads — even when participants insist the ad “had no effect.”

Political ad studies show measurable voting behavior shifts even among those claiming ads “don’t influence my vote” (Fowler & Ridout, *American Journal of Political Science*, 2009).

Each new medium began with public-service aspirations: to inform, educate, connect, or enrich civic life. But every medium — print, radio, television, and the internet — soon became economically dependent on advertising, and then structurally dominated by it.

As that dependency deepened, public purpose gave way to profit logic. What began as channels for communication and culture were steadily repurposed into instruments for behavioral manipulation and value extraction. Every new technology of expression was ultimately subsumed by the same economic imperative: to monetize human attention. In this sense, ***the advertising industry became the hidden medium of all media*** — the superordinate system shaping what we see, hear, desire, and do.

The true lever of change is not institutional but normative. Business models, political parties, technologies, and laws are downstream expressions of something more primary — our population-wide *acceptance* of predatory and parasitic manipulation as legitimate, normal, and legally protected. What is being named is a civilizational blind spot: we have learned to treat the covert hijacking of human agency — attention capture, behavioral shaping, emotional steering, relevance distortion — as a lawful business right rather than as a violation of human dignity. By doing so, we have normalized a form of **involuntary servitude without chains**, where people are functionally conscripted into economic and political service through engineered cognition rather than force.

The fulcrum, then, is a moral and ethical reclassification: recognizing that **the right not to have one's agency covertly commandeered** is a fundamental human right. Until that recognition becomes culturally, legally, and ethically explicit, every reform in technology, regulation, or politics will be absorbed and repurposed by the same predatory logic. Change begins when manipulation itself loses legitimacy — when society withdraws consent from being treated as an extractable asset rather than as a learning, choosing human being.

Every other candidate fulcrum fails precisely because it remains *downstream* of the assumption we are naming. Regulation plays whack-a-mole. Technology reforms are co-opted. Political victories are transient. Even law collapses when the underlying moral premise remains intact. As long as society treats human attention, cognition, and behavior as **legitimate extractable resources**, predation will simply mutate its form.

The true inflection point is the **revocation of presumed extraction rights**. Civilizations change when something once taken for granted becomes illegitimate: owning people, child labor, unrestricted dumping of toxins, unconsented medical experimentation. In each case, the lever was not better management of abuse but the recognition that **extraction itself violated a prior human right**. The same structure applies here. Agency is not a public commons; it is not an exploitable surface; it is not an implied concession to commerce or politics. Treating it as such is a category error with moral consequences.

Once that assumption breaks—once society recognizes that **covertly hijacking human agency constitutes involuntary servitude**—everything else realigns: business models become constrained, technologies must be designed for consent and transparency, laws gain coherence, and politics loses its manipulative substrate. Without that shift, every reform is cosmetic.

So the fulcrum is not “better systems.”

It is **withdrawing moral, legal, and cultural consent from predatory extraction itself**. That is the lynchpin.

THE FULCRUM: Stewarding Healthy Learning Agency

The most universally relevant, enabling, and empowering thing we can do.

