

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

## ‘Attention economy’ fosters falsities

The recent Omicron outbreak in the Pottstown area, on top of existing staff shortages in our public schools, make it touch and go as to whether Pottstown and other districts can continue in-person education.

Once COVID-19 vaccinations became widely available last year, the pandemic should have been mostly over by now.

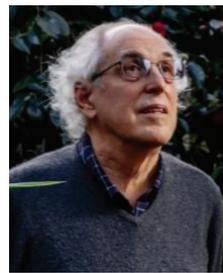
But a stubborn segment of the population refuses to be vaccinated, allowing the spread of the virus and thus the stress and chaos engulfing our public schools.

Ironically, there are numerous vaccinations children have always been required to take before they may enter Pennsylvania public schools.

They include vaccinations for diphtheria, tetanus, and whooping cough; measles, mumps and rubella; and meningitis.

So what’s different about COVID-19 vaccinations? Nothing, except COVID has become a political issue, not a scientific one.

Theoretically, the internet should promote science because it offers a panoply of credible information.



**MICHAEL GOLDHABER**

Unfortunately it also gives a megaphone to every crackpot, malcontent, and conspiracy theorist who wants your attention. The internet provides everyone an opportunity to seek your attention, and those who shout the loudest and make the most outrageous claims are those who get the most attention.

This phenomenon was first articulated in a 1997 essay written by Michael Goldhaber, a former theoretical physicist and academic researcher. He popularized the term “the attention economy.”

Back in the 1980s, Goldhaber was fascinated by the abundance of information available in newspapers, books, magazines and television.

That led to an epiphany: one of the most finite resources in the world is people’s attention.

Each person can give attention to just one thing at a time, and getting people’s attention is fundamental to not just selling products, but controlling what people think.



Commentary by  
**Tom Hylton**

Goldhaber correctly predicted in 1997 that the internet would come to dominate every aspect of life; increase shamelessness in politics; promote reality television; lead to personal websites; and create a culture of on-line influencers.

“When you have attention, you have power, and some people will try and succeed in getting huge amounts of attention, and they would

not use it in equal or positive ways.

“Our abilities to pay attention are limited. Not so our abilities to receive it.

“The value of true modesty or humility is hard to sustain in an attention economy.”

Years after these predictions, a casino huckster named Donald Trump was elected president.

Could he have ever accomplished this feat without a deluge of tweets, each ending with an exclamation point?

When contacted recently by Charlie Warzel of *The New York Times*, Goldhaber said the Jan. 6 attacks on the capitol was the result of thousands of influencers that, in an attempt to gain fortune and fame and attention, trotted out increasingly dangerous conspiracy theories on platforms optimized to amplify outrage.

Goldhaber wonders whether the attention economy and a healthy democracy can co-exist.

“Rational discussion of what people stand to gain or lose from policies will be drowned out by the loudest and most ridiculous.”

We see that every day on *The Mercury’s* Sound Off.



**ANTI-VACCINATION PROTESTERS** at the state capitol in Harrisburg.