

## The Internet is Confusing Us

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Every day, the average internet user aged 16-64 spends around 6 hours and 35 minutes facing a screen, with an average of 2 hours and 20 minutes being spent on social media platforms (DateReportal). Aside from using screens for educational and work-related tasks, gaming with users from around the globe and consuming entertainment through films and shows on streaming platforms are the norm. Everything an internet user is exposed to propagates certain ideas, as living in the real world does; in the time a user is online, they are confronted with a variety of beliefs, worldviews and opinions. Many of these ideas are contradictory, confusing and at times reprehensible. The individual is bombarded with an influx of information that they can barely process before moving on to the next dopamine hit. This is especially prevalent on platforms like TikTok, YouTube Shorts and Instagram Reels which are designed to deliver dopamine hit after dopamine hit to the entranced user through short-form content (Journal of Neurology & Neurophysiology).

Algorithms keep users affixed to the content that engages them, but even with these carefully tailored algorithms, a diverse variety of worldviews and beliefs are being promoted. Those same algorithms are also leading to the rise of new identities and communities based on aesthetics, fandoms, fashion, politics, music, art and a wide variety of interests that people now have a platform to connect over and be led to extremes with. Although, they are barely absorbing the content they mindlessly skip through.

Prior to the invention of the internet, staying true to one worldview was commonplace. The lack of exposure to other perspectives kept the moral standards and beliefs of societies everywhere clear-cut. Even the most out-of-the-box thinkers were limited to their books and imaginations to envision how the world should work, and this exempt populations of people worldwide from moral quandaries related to culture, religion and identity. This couldn't last long with modern globalization and the release of the World Wide Web to the public in the early 1990s; it was a sort of Pandora's Box of incessant distraction, chaos and confusion for all.

Teenagers spend the most time on the internet and social media platforms: nearly 9 hours online and 5 hours on social media in the US, not including time spent on homework, according to the AACAP and APA. This demographic is inundated with so much information and asked to evaluate their opinions on so many problems that it becomes difficult to actually consider the nuances of each argument before being distracted by another issue. This means people, including the internet-addicted youth, are constantly falling back on half-baked opinions and worldviews.

Whatever a person is exposed to the most is likely what they will adopt. The illusory truth effect, or the tendency to believe what one sees and hears most, now takes place on a grand scale thanks to social media. Echo chambers only foster this effect, resulting in aggressive and antagonizing reactions to ideas outside of what the user has established is correct through the repeated messaging of their own echo chamber. However, other people exist online; shows, movies, articles and social media posts will pop up on a users' pages with all kinds of thoughts and ideas. Users now have to defend their worldview (or their opinion on a trending song), adopt a new perspective (which they've been primed not to) or ignore this new perspective entirely. Most choose to ignore it and proceed with consuming their daily dose of content, perhaps with a subconscious inkling of confusion.

Exposure to a variety of opinions and perspectives is a positive and beneficial development for humanity—until the sheer amount of content and time spent online floods the mind with an overflow of information that it's unable to process. This leaves the most impressionable minds, and the minds of adults, to not only have their beliefs constantly shaken, but also to defend beliefs they aren't fully informed on or even sure of. It's no wonder politics have gotten as divisive as they have; masses of young people are struggling to express beliefs they've heard bits and pieces of online and are becoming increasingly angry and confused when they can't express their beliefs. Something about the beliefs and evidence they heard *somewhere* resonated with them, but they struggle to recall what ultimately led them to those beliefs. They could not have absorbed those beliefs through the influx of information they encounter daily. They also could not have fact-checked every video they've watched because the vast majority of people aren't using their free time online to burden themselves with research.

I'm not as concerned with whether the beliefs being shaped pertain to something that holds as much weight as politics or something as frivolous as the characterization of a fictional character, but rather: how do we bring the internet-using masses *out* of this confusion?

The seemingly most effective solution may be for each individual to decrease their screen time and use real world experiences to shape their beliefs. However, a lot of internet users will refuse to do this; it would be a major change for many young people who have practically been raised by screens. The constant stream of dopamine provided by platforms like TikTok is unmatched by real world experiences even though the content being delivered is harder to consume critically. The most effective method of getting people offline might be for the government to reduce screen time for all through legislation—but many would see this as dictatorial, and most wouldn't respond well to a law telling them they have a limit to using the devices they paid for. It would be ridiculous. I've definitely considered it though. Oops.

Unless the internet goes out, each person needs to make the choice to either research every viewpoint they encounter online, which is less than fun (not to mention how many messages are delivered subliminally and hard to identify, let alone analyze critically), or reduce their screen time, which is unrealistic to expect of a whole population of people. Chat, we might be cooked.

Sources: AACAP, APA, DataReportal and Journal of Neurology & Neurophysiology