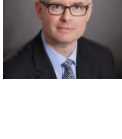


Commentary

Op-Ed: What we need now is discernment

When engagement becomes the goal, truth, nuance and self-reflection are the casualties. Here's why that's a problem



by James Fleck

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A few years ago, I collaborated — quietly — with a major social media creator. Together, we created several videos, one of which reached more people than I am likely to reach with all my other content combined.

Initially, I was elated. Measured by views and clicks, the video was an undeniable success.

But that elation proved short-lived.

In working with this creator, I had been attempting to find a way to make the topics I cover in my coaching career — such as healthy personal development, group dynamics and self-reflection — more fun and accessible. Kind of like hiding medication in your kid's Fruit Loops.

But what I saw was that the process used to achieve virality leaves little room for subtlety or discernment.

The video script I wrote for my content collaborator was on a topic I refer to as “individuation”: the Jungian, life-long journey to become the person you have the potential to be. It is a challenging idea, and one that requires difficult self-reflection and a willingness to gaze at relational patterns and blind spots.

My collaborator was so skilled at creating engaging content that the script was edited to remove all ambiguity. Individuation was collapsed into an “us versus them” framework, flattering followers into thinking they were the chosen people who were on the path to acquiring this enlightenment. We also agreed on a snappy title for individuation that, in retrospect, did not serve to hold the nuance of the idea.

When the video went viral and I began to dig into the reaction to it, I realized the essence had been lost. The sugar in the Fruit Loops had destroyed the medicine hiding in the cereal. The inference in the thousands of comments was that individuation (or more specifically the snappy label we had given it) was a mark of superiority that could only be claimed by certain chosen followers, perhaps members of a specific gender or political orientation.

And this wasn't a coincidence. The content had been skillfully modified to achieve this result. Discernment had been sacrificed to engagement.

And this is the heart of the matter. In our culture's relentless pursuit of engagement, we have created an online, parallel world where discernment no longer matters.

In that world, the most popular ideas, opinions and creative works succeed because their ideas are continuously flattened and optimized to feed the algorithm by creating manufactured outrage, juvenile labels and not-so-subtle flattery.

This system leaves no room for ambiguity, self-reflection or humility. In fact, living in the uncomfortable middle, where I spend most of my life as a CEO coach, is a guaranteed way to flop, because social media algorithms can't sort you into “this” or “that” category.

Many politicians, unfortunately, have mastered the art of virality. They make nonsensical statements even if they and their supporters know their claims are wrong. Truth doesn't matter. It's just about what sounds better.

But discernment will always matter. Data centres and satellites don't work if the math is wrong. Objective truth will not disappear just because it doesn't get enough likes. More importantly, subtle and nuanced ideas won't disappear either, they might just become harder to find.

And this is where it is impossible to know which path we are on. It is possible that we have passed the point of “peak performative engagement,” where the pendulum swings back to a place where society does value expertise, thoughtful discourse and a commitment to finding the truth.

Or it is possible that much of the population is stuck in the unescapable vortex of the algorithm reinforcing its own biases and blind spots.

Almost three thousand years ago Socrates wrote that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” The problem is not new. What has changed is that technology has made examining with discernment even harder.



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