

The Negative Effect of Social Media on Critical Thinking

How Social Media and Smartphones are damaging our decision making, problem solving and our interpretation of the world around us

Introduction

In his 2011 book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*¹, Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman examines two modes of thought:

Fast Thinking: helps the brain to save time, where responses are fast, impulsive and automatic, applying to most of our decisions on a day-to-day basis.

Slow Thinking: where considered responses are thoughtful and deliberate. These take more time and energy but benefit from detailed evaluation and so are more reliable. It looks at the bigger picture and tends to overrule the temptation to give a fast response.

Why Fast Thinking is the gateway to inferior critical thinking

As we know, the brain can learn new behaviours and habits because it possesses neuroplasticity. These changes happen because neural pathways make new connections via:

- environmental factors
- repetition
- psychological stress.

Social media provides fertile ground for radical changes in the way engaged users think by degrading their thinking process. My main finding is that regular social media use trains people to rely too heavily on heuristic or Fast Thinking, leaving them vulnerable to a further 4 psychological flaws that naturally reside in our evolutionary makeup. If not fully understood, these flaws can lead to poor decision making, degraded empathy for outgroups and low mental health outcomes:

The 4 Flaws

These 4 flaws make us think we have more power than we really do. They carry us away before we stop to think, especially if we're busy. The more these vulnerabilities take hold, the more we struggle with decision making in the real world. As we look for more distraction on social media, a vicious circle results that can spiral us towards a host of mental health issues.

Cognitive biases

When people think of bias in the workplace it's usually linked to Diversity and Inclusion and will take the shape of examples like affinity bias, in-group bias and confirmation bias.

Unfortunately, regular social media use, turbo charges dozens of other biases that reach far

¹ *Thinking Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman, published by Penguin in May 2012

beyond the traditional problem areas². The algorithmic nature of social media trains us to amplify our biases and to reinforce their value. When transferred to the workplace, this can lead to poor decision making, habitual overconfidence and confused communication.

Memory Flaws

In a new paper published in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, researchers showed that those who documented and shared their experiences on social media formed less precise memories of those events³ When we process our experience properly, we create long-term memories. Those memories form schemas (mental maps) which in turn build an understanding of our environment and increase our confidence. Unfortunately, the very nature of our interaction with mobile devices undermines that process since we can only remember what we really pay attention to. It becomes self-evident that social media consumers will find it more difficult to be focussed as the 'information overload' environment they experience trains them to be distracted. The inability to properly experience new learning leads to a cycle where degraded communication experiences form incomplete memories leading to commonplace mistakes such as misattribution, absentmindedness and suggestibility. Also, the sheer volume of information we process daily fatigues our working memory, thus impeding our potential to create strong long-term memories.

Fallacious Thinking

When people share information online, they do not always employ much rigor in the way they share that information⁴. At the heart of Critical Thinking lies our ability to use reason and logic to evaluate and solve problems. The Fast Thinking encouraged by social media encourages emotion, impulsivity, and speed as we search for dopamine rewards. This desire can override the hard work necessary to properly evaluate a problem – for example mistaking opinion for evidence. Fallacious communication works because the emotional payload feels correct and overrides our need to think. If you get rewarded for not using your reasoning capability, then a Pavlovian desire to treat work related issues in the same way is at risk of becoming a damaging habit.

Magical Thinking

This entirely natural thinking flaw is related to our desire to have a sense of agency in our lives. As the world speeds up, part of our coping mechanism can take the shape of various superstitions, rituals and associations that help us make sense of our experience and help us feel in control. Some social media information actively encourages us to ignore rationality and believe in potentially dangerous anti-science and anti-rational hypothesis. The severity of the problem depends on the nature of the belief – for example, reading your horoscope is largely harmless; on the other hand, believing that vaccinations are a sinister plot can have multiple consequences for you and the people you interact with. Magical thinking in the

² The cognitive biases that feed the social media machine: <https://www.connected-uk.com/the-cognitive-biases-that-feed-the-social-media-machine/>

³ Time.com | <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S002210311730505X>

⁴ The University of Iowa Libraries | Evaluating Online Information: [Logical Fallacies](#)

workplace is common ⁵. Psychologists understand that this issue is common among intelligent people. But the adoption of delusions can hamper collaboration or create outright hostility between people with differing viewpoints.

These are all solvable problems. To find out more I'd be delighted to arrange a Zoom call. I can be reached at: info@commcrunch.com

⁵ [Magical Thinking as Organizational Dysfunction](#) by John Conbere MDiv, EdD & Alla Heorhiadi Phd, EdD