Only You Can Prevent Dystopia

How to survive the internet in 2020. (It’s not going to be easy.)

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The new year is here, and online, the forecast calls for several seasons of hell. Tech giants and the media have scarcely figured out all that went wrong during the last presidential election — viral misinformation, state-sponsored propaganda, bots aplenty, all of us cleaved into our own tribal reality bubbles — yet here we go again, headlong into another experiment in digitally mediated democracy.

I’ll be honest with you: I’m terrified. I spend a lot of my time looking for edifying ways of interacting with technology. In the last year, I’ve told you to meditate, to keep a digital journal, to chat with people on the phone and to never tweet. Still, I enter the new decade with a feeling of overwhelming dread. There’s a good chance the internet will help break the world this year, and I’m not confident we have the tools to stop it.

Unless, that is, we are all really careful. As Smokey Bear might say of our smoldering online discourse: Only you can prevent dystopia!

And so: Here are a few tips for improving the digital world in 2020.

Virality is a red flag. Suspect it.

If I were king of the internet, I would impose an ironclad rule: No one is allowed to share any piece of content without waiting a day to think it over.

Virality was once the delightful miracle of a networked age; you’d see a funny video going around, get caught up in the collective wonder and hilarity, and forward it on to your 100 closest pals. At its meme-ified best, participating in this sort of viral feast felt like a boon to collective social bonding. Remember, kids, that one glorious day we were all talking about the crazy dress? What times, what times!

But, The Dress notwithstanding, in the 2010s virality got too easy, and then it grew sour, venal and dishonest. Nobody’s counting, but by my unscientific estimate almost everything that became instantly popular online in the last decade turned out to be problematic in one way or another. That photo of the shark washed onto a
freeway by a hurricane? **Fake**. The culture-war-defining outrage your aunt just posted to Facebook? **Debunked**, of course. The suddenly popular influencer? A “**milkshake duck**” running from his past.

Social networks and even governments are looking into ways to curb viral misinformation, but this fight will define our age. The root of the problem is that humans are weak, gullible dolts; every day many of us, even people who should know better — folks with fancy jobs and blue check marks next to our handles — keep falling for online hoaxes. Virality hijacks our better instincts, and because so many of the internet’s business models benefit from instant popularity, there’s a great deal of money and power riding on our failings.

There is only one long-term fix: that a critical number of us alter how we approach viral content. Let’s all consciously embark on a mind-set shift. In 2020, question anything that everyone’s talking about, especially if it fits all your priors, or there’s some kind of ad money involved. (Hint: There’s always ad money involved.) If you can’t stop sharing, at least slow your roll. The stakes are enormous; there’s no room for error. Strive to be better, please.

Resist the easy dunk.

In the 2010s, Twitter became the center of the political universe. In some ways this was for the better — Twitter is a **haven for righteous activism** against the global powers that be — but most times, it was for the worse. **Twitter is a daily toxic nightmare** of reflexive egotism and groupthink that will prompt you to question your priorities, not to mention your sanity.

Which is why, if you’re on Twitter and can’t muster the will to never tweet, you should at least consider it your duty in 2020 to resist the network’s worst impulses, for your sake and all of ours, too.

What’s Twitter’s most damaging sin? I say it’s the too-easy mocking joke — what’s known, in the jargon, as the **“quote-tweet dunk.”**

Here are two canonical examples:

Delete your account. [https://t.co/Oa92sncRQY](https://t.co/Oa92sncRQY)
— Hillary Clinton (@HillaryClinton) June 9, 2016

How long did it take your staff of 823 people to think that up—and where are your 33,000 emails that you deleted? [https://t.co/gECLNtQizQ](https://t.co/gECLNtQizQ)

This scurrilous maneuver works like so: You spot an easily ridiculed tweet by a member of some rival social or political tribe. Like a 1990s fourth grader with phasers set to **“Moded!”** you add a pithy rejoinder that’s sure to please your side. It’s best if you elide context, depth or any intention of dialogue; just straight-up make fun of the person. Then mash on the retweet button to broadcast your supposedly clever jape.

The mechanism is part of the problem — when you quote-tweet someone on Twitter, the service shows off your remark to your own followers while leaving the original poster’s followers in the dark. (Another Twitter feature, the Reply, lets followers of both users see a response.) If Twitter is a cocktail party, the quote-tweet dunk is the equivalent of overhearing a guy across the room say something ridiculous, then inviting the whole room to point and giggle at the idiot over there. The imbalance discourages any possibility of meaningful conversation and reduces all of political discourse to empty, shallow quippery.

The thing about the quote-tweet dunk is that it can feel incredibly intoxicating; in the heat of some white-hot political moment, it’s always tempting to shoot the fish in the barrel and watch the Likes roll in. I swore off dunks years ago, but I still find myself aping Michael Jordan now and again.

Twitter could instantly improve itself by removing quote-tweet as a feature. Failing that, take the oath with me: If the joke’s too obvious to resist, let it go.

Find a well-moderated corner of the internet.
It can sometimes seem as if all the internet is deep fakes and culture wars, Trump tweets and influencer scams. It’s not, of course. The internet still abounds in lovely, wholesome niches — the fantasy sports circles, the YouTube and Instagram communities devoted to any kind of craft, the many subreddits where strangers come together to help one another out of real problems in life.

What distinguishes the productive online communities from the disturbing ones? Often it’s something simple: content moderation. The best places online are bounded by clear, well-enforced community guidelines for participation. Twitter and Facebook are toxic because there are few rules and few penalties for flouting them. A Reddit community like r/relationships, meanwhile, is a haven of incredible, empathetic discussion because its hosts spend a lot of effort policing the discussion toward productive dialogue.

This gets at the plain truth of the internet: A better digital world takes work. It’s work all of us should do.