

Why people are behaving more and more like NPCs.

And what you can do about it?

Reading time 15 minutes

It is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish humans from bots, partly because humans are becoming more bot-like. I was fascinated by an article by [Gurwinder](#), who explains in his blog how technology and psychology together lead us astray. I summarise the most important points, and I have added examples from Germany.

As knowledge of human psychology evolves, algorithms are getting better at influencing human behaviour. On social media, we see the same groups of people outraged about the same things every day.

The rise of bot-like behaviour over the last decade has led to the creation of a meme: the **NPC** or **non-player character**. Originally a term to describe video game characters whose behaviour is entirely computer controlled, it now also refers to people in the real world who behave as predictably as NPCs in video games.

The reason is familiar to BrainCandy readers: the brain is considered a thinking machine, but it is rather the opposite: a machine that tries to bypass thinking.

This is because thinking is extremely time and calorie consuming, which has been a scarce resource in our evolutionary history.

Thus, the brain developed into a "cognitive miser" that works according to the [principle of least effort](#) and takes shortcuts in thinking and perceiving that form a workable but highly simplified model of the world.

These shortcuts may be cognitive (heuristics), but increasingly they are technological (algorithms).

Gurwinder has identified five common NPC types to which the majority of internet users belong. You don't have to agree with all his arguments, but the basic principle is ingenious for understanding the schematic search for 'truth' in times of information overload.

I introduce the different types of NPC. At the end there is wise advice on how to escape NPC behaviour.

NPC 1. The Conformist



Source: [istockphoto.com/ Prostock Studio](#)

Conformists are the stereotypical NPCs. They trust the mainstream view of things. Trusting the consensus seems to be a good shortcut to truth. Unfortunately, this does not work so well in practice.

The "[paradox of unanimity](#)" prevails: since everyone is different, the likelihood of each individual agreeing with a belief is tiny unless some irrational force, such as laziness or social pressure, compels them to do so. In other words, the more people are of one opinion, the less likely they are to think for themselves.



This would explain, for example, how [Christian Drosten's paper](#) in March 2020 led to a premature consensus on the origin of covid. And why the WHO catastrophically announced in the same month that covid is not transmitted by aerosols. The many pointless Plexiglas barriers in shops and surgeries are a reminder of this failure.

When truth is easily verifiable, as in mathematics, for example, consensus is formed when all experts come to the same conclusion.

However, when truth is not easily verifiable, as in medicine or the social sciences, consensus arises when a few experts come to the same conclusion and then all the other experts simply take their word for it. Usually because they lack the time or resources to challenge the prevailing hypothesis.

And the experts who do reach a consensus are not infrequently driven by unethical motives. Scientists have an incentive to publish headline-grabbing results, which can tempt them to falsify data. There have been several such scandals in recent weeks.

For example, the president of Stanford was [forced to resign](#) after evidence of his manipulated research emerged. In yet another case, an academic who studies dishonesty was found to have [engaged in it](#) in her research.

Academia is strongly left-liberal and many academics are "woke", i.e. they recognise oppression even in trivial events, which leads them to behave more like activists than academics. For fear of ostracism, academic circles tend to be [spirals of silence](#) where few feel able to express dissenting views.

Since science is the source of most new knowledge, its biases are adopted by every source of information downstream from it, including the mainstream media, Wikipedia, Google, ChatGPT, social media algorithms and the social consensus itself.

My little proof with ChatGPT 4.0: I asked for an argument why gender affirming care would be bad for children. I get a standard reason why an answer would not be possible. When asked for an argument why gender affirming care would be good for children, I get: "Gender affirming care promotes psychological well-being and self-acceptance in children." The zeitgeist lives in AI.

Consensus leads to truth when the consensus builders are motivated to reach the truth. But public unanimity is as often a product of laziness, peer pressure, money and ideology as of rational agreement, so the conformist often takes a shortcut that does not lead to truth.

NPC 2. The Contrarian



istockphoto.com / Catalin205

Source:

Contrarians are the opposite of conformists: because they assume that the system of society that establishes consensus manipulates the masses.



A conformist who becomes curious eventually realises that the consensus is not entirely true. The realisation usually starts with a single issue, for example gender. The conformist may first realise that neither she nor anyone she knows has this "gender identity" that you hear so much about right now. Then she will realise that the new definition of woman as "someone who identifies as a woman" is circular. Then she'll be surprised that trans women are easily [beating](#) biological women in sport, even though that's supposedly not possible. And when she speaks out about all this, she is quickly suspected of hating trans people or being 'right-wing'.

I myself have no well-founded opinion on this area. But I am amazed at how much attention 0.02% of fellow human beings get).

Conformists who feel betrayed by the consensus often overcorrect themselves and do not believe anything the consensus says. This creates a new kind of NPC: the contrarian.

Since the mainstream consensus is left-liberal, the dissenters tend to lean to the right. They are a rarer species of NPC than the conformists, but they dominate the broad margins of the internet. Moderate oppositionists, who instinctively disagree with the mainstream on only the most controversial issues, can get their information from slightly contrarian media outlets like [Reitschuster](#) and [Joe Rogan Experience](#). More committed contrarians rely on more aggressive anti-establishment sources like [Tucker Carlson](#) and [Paul Brandenburg](#).

The mainstream media mislead the public with selective reporting, but they take care to ensure that the actual reporting is correct, and when it is not, they usually issue corrections. In contrast, alternative media rarely admit errors.

The appeal of lateral thinking lies not in its accuracy but in its intoxicating rush: the feeling of being more conscious than the brainless "sheeple".

Dissenters are right that the mainstream consensus is often wrong. But they make a mistake when they assume that the fringe must therefore be right. Truth is not a zero-sum game; it is possible to disagree with an idiot and still be an idiot. Thinking outside the box is ultimately a more dangerous shortcut than conformism.

NPC 3. The Disciple

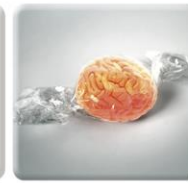


Source: istockphoto.com / nicoletaionescu

The disciple is not so much a separate species as a kind of twin to the contrarian. But he takes a different shortcut to "truth" and should therefore be regarded as something different.

There is a human need to believe in something. Dissenters are often tempted to put all their faith in a single charismatic, anti-establishment demagogue. In this way they become the oldest NPC species: the disciple.

Being a disciple is an attractive shortcut to "truth" because it requires no decisions, only imitation.



The most followed idols today are men like Donald Trump and Elon Musk. These messiah entrepreneurs, tend to lean to the right because the establishment is left-liberal.

The idol exerts so much power over his disciples that it eventually overrides their integrity. Trump supporters denounce the establishment for its dishonesty while tirelessly making excuses for their idol's **pathological** dishonesty.

Thus, a disciple's idol is often an NPC itself; this is especially true for opinion leaders, such as Trump and Elon, who cannot possibly have the time to adequately research and consider all the issues on which they confidently speak.

The disciple is ultimately just an NPC following an NPC, and so the shortcut he takes does not lead to the truth, but to where his idol blindly leads him.

NPC 4. The Tribalist



Source: istockphoto.com / Zeferli

We have lived in tribes for over 90% of human history. Therefore, tribalism is one of the most deeply rooted human instincts. The tribal approach to belief formation is simple: they choose the tribe to which they feel most attached. And persist in the mistaken assumption that those who share their political beliefs are best able to discern truth in general.

The glue that holds the tribes together is usually a polar view of reality: "We are fighting a battle between good and evil, and of course we are the good guys".

We see this all the time in the culture war: leftists favour beliefs that exaggerate the threat of fanatics, and rightists favour beliefs that exaggerate the threat of groomers. Instead of trying to understand the real causes of complex social problems, leftists simply blame rightists and vice versa.

Because tribal people believe that the out-group is corrupt, they rarely trust information outside their filter bubble.

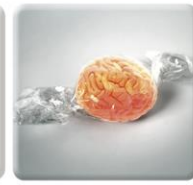
Tribalism is no way to find the truth. The need to belong supersedes the desire for reality. Ultimately, tribalism is a shortcut that does not lead to truth, but to an increasingly polarised distortion of truth.

NPC 5. The Averager



Source: <https://buhitter.com/search?q=fascism&offset=480>

Middle-of-the-roaders understand that both left and right are partisans who value tribe over truth. They know that truth is often found between the extremes, so they take the most moderate view on all issues.



Centrists think they avoid the behaviour of NPCs by avoiding the excesses of the left or right, conformists or contrarians.

In reality, the averagers think no more than the extremists and are therefore just as NPCs.

Average thinkers do not choose sides, but always move in the safe middle between the two. "Some medically necessary treatments should be free, but not all." By constantly appealing to nuance and compromise in the face of complexity, mean thinkers can signal intelligence without needing any themselves.

Averagers are right that the issues are usually more complex than they are made out to be, but because they instinctively dismiss tribal arguments without trying to understand them, they rarely have a sense of the nuances they are calling for. When asked why they disagree with both sides, they fall back on their standard answer that both sides are biased. In the Ukraine war, there seem to be a particularly large number of averagers.

The advantage of taking the mean on every issue is that one is rarely completely wrong. The path of the mean fan is therefore a shortcut that leads not to the truth but to the murky middle ground between truth and lies, and should therefore be avoided.

Gurwinder's conclusions

Everyone is an NPC on at least some of the issues you speak out on because there just aren't enough hours in the day to have an informed opinion on most of the issues we talk about.

The transience of life and the tsunami of information are the reason why people become NPCs - life demands shortcuts - and that is the reason why everyone is wrong about almost everything.

But there is a better way to save time than being an NPC, which is to prioritise. The real misfortune of NPCs is not that they crib their convictions, but that they feel the need to have such convictions in the first place.

Gurwinder recommends dividing the problems into tertiary, secondary and primary.

Tertiary questions are those that need not interest you: that is, the overwhelming majority of things. Consider what difference it makes whether you know something or not, and if it makes no difference, decide not to have an opinion on the matter. Don't even take a shortcut. Just accept that you don't know.

Secondary topics are things that interest you but that you don't necessarily have to get right.

With these issues, you need to take shortcuts, so take the best shortcut there is: adversarial learning. Look for the best representatives of each side and believe the one who is most convincing. When it comes to economics, I follow, among others, [Claudia Kemfert](#), more climate activist than scientist and sought-after quoter for the mainstream media, and [Hans-Werner Sinn](#) as a conservative, science-based admonisher who predicted electricity price trends 10 years ago.

Primary subjects are those that are most important to you and that you want to get right. Use the time you save by ignoring tertiary things and taking shortcuts to secondary things to learn everything there is to know about primary things.



If you want to express an opinion, first ask yourself whether it is a primary, secondary or tertiary issue. On tertiary issues, keep silent. On secondary issues, be humble. Live your passion on primary issues.

Your brain will always try to save time in forming beliefs - that is its job, but the best way to save time is not to take a shortcut to the "truth", but to take no path at all.

Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour to [order](#).



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