

## Curiosity & Addiction

Essay by Joshua Kraus

Curiosity is the act of engaging in knowledge-seeking behavior, simply for the sake of learning, growth, and exploration. It is an evolutionary drive that has been naturally selected for perhaps since the beginnings of life on Earth. Human curiosity has been the most important driver for human development. Early humans who explored their environment, discovered what they could eat, what they could cook, how they could meet challenges—they would survive, selecting for more curious humans over tens of millennia.

Today's most innovative thinkers are driven by their curiosity. Epistemic, or lasting curiosity is a primary quality that sets humans apart from other animals and led to the development of our cultures, skills, technologies, and institutions. The fulfillment of ultimate curiosity—where all questions are satisfied, is impossible. The pursuit to answer questions and increase our understanding gave evolving humans an incremental experience of discovery and excitement, spurring more questions. But today a problem has emerged that threatens the natural drive of curiosity. It is only in the past decade or so that we have developed addictive technologies like Instagram and TikTok that provide a sense of artificial gratification while numbing the urge to endure the more challenging but productive struggle involved in knowledge-seeking behavior. Breaking our ability to be productive and explore what interests us deeper. Through a moment of honest reflection, I recognize the limited number of times my phone hasn't been a distraction. Nearly every curious pursuit I've followed, adulterated by scrolling, liking, forgetting, in an infinite loop of half-productivity. Sounds relatable?

Curious pursuits lead to fulfilling experiences. Fulfilling experience is the root of motivation for nearly all human action. In pursuit of our own betterment, we have learned that

we can create goods and services that fill human needs. This function of civilization is what created the first economies and has remained the basis of product development today. Fulfillment of one's curiosity was once a lengthy pursuit, however, with the advent of the internet, new modes of information fulfillment became available. Diverisive, or quick curiosity fulfillment overtook epistemic curiosity, making curiosity an easy drive to abuse. We understand well as students that struggling is fundamental to learning. Concepts require trial to be learned and may often result in failure. This trial-and-error process isn't always immediately fulfilling, but it is a process that produces an incremental satisfaction with each repetition, whilst propelling us forward in our own search for knowledge. Even in failure, we learn for the betterment of next time, developing the right solutions, or the right questions to ask. Today, much of our overall curiosity is caught up in diversion, a short-lasting moment of interest that can be fulfilled with little effort. Known as diverisive curiosity, this is a less productive version of our curiosity process. The "itch" that once guided a pursuit to learn is now developing into the desultory and short-lived dopamine rush of catchy titles and re-tweets. Why do we sacrifice the creative, intellectual energy that curiosity provides for the less meaningful and fleeting satisfaction we get from social media? What could evolution have to do with it? We must reflect on this fundamentally, understanding first how we function when we are curious and why it's imperative to recognize and push back against our collective addiction to easy infotainment.

Social media is a product engineered to artificially fulfill and monetize your curiousness. If it sounds bad like that, lets break it down further. Attention is really all you offer, and to get it, social platforms must keep you engaged. It becomes necessary to force fulfillment. Create a need, an addiction, to sell "self" fulfillment back to you. Like me, you've evolved thus far to pursue curious drives nearly all the time. This is due, in part, to a biological response to fulfilling

your curious interests. Every time you engage in curious knowledge-seeking behavior, your brain releases dopamine and other feel-good chemicals. Social media and other web-based platforms have established a means of providing illegitimate substitutes for authentic learning triggering your natural dopamine response. This generation's disease isn't Ebola or COVID-19, it's thinking we are learning something, allowing ourselves to feel pleasure from it (and satiating our curious drives) when we are simply becoming more addicted to the act of firing our dopamine response. We are allowing ourselves to engage with platforms thoughtfully engineered to be addictive, all for an easy source of dopamine. Keep in mind that the term addiction isn't used lightly. Your response to clicking on "Keeping Up With The Kardashians" is nearly biologically identical to engaging with Amphetamine drugs. The organization for Social Media Addiction Victims explains how, "just as people with substance use disorders rely on drugs and alcohol to increase neurotransmitter activity, social media users engage their reward centers by seeking social rewards on their platforms of choice."<sup>1</sup> We allow our children, parents, and friends to all become addicts.

Attention and curiosity are clearly quantifiable, monetizable items. This generated demand to fill our diversive curiosity is extremely profitable. Every time you engage, someone is getting paid. You, the consumer of information no longer pursue your *productive* interests, those stemmed from your epistemic curiosity. Why should you when the dopamine response of a 1000-degree knife cutting through a bar of soap is enough? Did you ever care to begin with? Probably not. Do you care now? Probably not. But did you care while watching that thirty-second clip... curious just for a moment to see how that knife is going to cut that soap. Odds are you did, and that artificial likening of "fulfilling our curious drive" still *feels* right and our brain

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<sup>1</sup> Jena Hilliard, "New Study Suggests Excessive Social Media Use Is Comparable to Drug Addiction," Addiction Center, April 3, 2023, <https://www.addictioncenter.com/news/2019/09/excessive-social-media-use/>.

rewarded us for it. The ability to scroll through hours of algorithmically tailored content artificially satiates our desire to learn removing the struggle entirely, pummeling the whole reason why we humans are curious creatures. It's evolutionary to feel fulfillment, but now we've trapped ourselves into no longer pursuing hard, meaningful information. No more thinkers. No more culture. No more thought, wonder, exploration. We are heading straight for extinction, and surprisingly at our own hands. Are current future doesn't want to struggle to learn when we can "take a hit" of fulfillment from an easier place. Don't study the ocean. Watch a TikTok about it and be happy. Who cares if we wanted to know it, now we do and that become good enough. It's a terrifying realization to grasp.

Our goal now is to avoid becoming like the humans who should have died off millennia ago. We must re-engage in epistemic curiosity. Resist and rebel against the urge to find an easier means of fulfillment. We need to step back in time to keep moving forward. It seems so clear now why we rather scroll TikTok than attend the classes we pay yearly salaries for. So numb and addicted to easy, pursuit-less fulfillment. Stay away from the easy drug, pursue real thought. Engaging in your curiosity is critical to your educational success, learning and memory function, and happiness. A study by the University of California Davis exemplified this: "When participants' curiosity had been sparked, there was not only increased activity in the hippocampus, which is the region of the brain involved in the creation of memories, but also in the brain circuit that is related to reward and pleasure."<sup>2</sup>

To be reading this paper you are modern human, and we are the ultimate evolution of our predecessors. We have evolved to be thinkers, scientists, and bed-racing engineers. Our evolutionary process selected for the curious. That was our future and still can be. The curious,

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<sup>2</sup> Marianne Stenger, "Why Curiosity Enhances Learning," Edutopia, December 17, 2014, <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/why-curiosity-enhances-learning-marianne-stenger#:~:text=The%20researchers%20found%20that%20when,related%20to%20reward%20and%20pleasure.>

are not only more successful, even in failure there is learning, filling a drive to explore leading to further success, evolution. Curiosity is always rewarded. The pure fulfillment alone, of following the curious drive, continues to release dopamine into our brains promoting feelings of happiness and self-actualization. We must choose the harder pursuit. Strive for the novel. Our identity as a curious species becomes more powerful as our numbers grow and our culture evolves the way we choose to express our epistemic curiosity. This is all in the process of how you define yourself. Curious eaters become chefs. Curious lovers become poets and performers. Curious learners become professors. Curiosity is cherished, because it is *ours in its entirety*, and not to be ripped away by some illegitimate addiction to useless knowledge. Pursuing a focused expression of who we are through thought, learning, and struggle, makes us human. It is the way we rescue ourselves; it is how we break our addiction. We embrace our curious minds wholly, naturally, and continue to survive as the most dominant species on this Earth.

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