

Dopamine Fracking

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The act of pumping immense, disproportionate resources – money, crowdsourced math, analytics, optimization, min-maxing, popular opinion aggregation, etc. – into a previously casual or complex, layered activity to forcefully extract and squeeze out the purest, most concentrated dopamine hit, with no regard for anything except dopamine.

Origin

One late evening while chatting on Discord, I coined the term "dopamine fracking" to describe a phenomenon that has become increasingly prevalent in online culture – a concept which I previously struggled to express. It's a metaphor, because just like in actual fracking, it is immensely harmful to the long-term health and sustainability of anything it is applied to, but in the short term, it can yield a very intense and concentrated hit of dopamine (or oil).

I briefly called this "sloptimization" – a term which was probably coined by AI bros to describe the process of optimizing AI models to pass benchmarks, but it doesn't quite capture the destructive nature of the practice. I guess you could say that a close alternative would be "commodification," "over-consumption," or "industrialization" of the human experience, but... all of these words sound more like sterile economic terms and don't actually signify how *utterly devastating* this has been to culture, creativity, and connection. I feel like "dopamine fracking" creates a much more guttural, visceral, disgusting

image of an oil rig in your brain, or worse, in things you love and cherish.

Commodifying the Human Experience

I was inspired to come up with this after watching a few of [Metta Beshay](#)'s *wonderful* videos about drugs in the context of their original cultural significance. He covers a lot of different substances and their histories, and I highly recommend going to his channel instead of listening to me (an idiot) talk about it. In short, there's a reason why certain drugs were used in certain cultures for thousands of years, but became much more nefarious and destructive when they were taken out of that context. That reason is the industrialization and cultural erasure by the Enterprising Capitalist™.

The same thing has been happening to *so much* of our culture, hobbies, and even relationships. For all intents and purposes, an enormous number of people live online. The constant search for the next big thing, the next big hit of dopamine, has led to a culture of overconsumption and addiction. Whether it's communities becoming too popular, music becoming too cliché, videos becoming too "MrBeast-y," movies becoming too Marvel, websites becoming too flat – all that matters is the dopamine hit. And the long-term consequences are ignored. Not out of malice, but because it feels as addictive as a commodified drug, and people are simply trying to get their next hit.

I'm not saying that the things I listed lack merit or effort: an immense amount of work undoubtedly goes into any movie, song, or video if it's made by a person or team and not by AI. But at a certain threshold, if everything converges on a single point, there's quite literally no room for anything else in zero dimensions.

The Strawberry Example

Perhaps my takes are a little too online, so let's look at a more relatable example: strawberries. Strawberries are delicious, and they have a very complex flavor profile. They have hundreds, if not thousands, of strains, and for every

single *individual strawberry*, there are thousands of unique compounds that contribute to its flavor. There are white ones, red ones, some are white on the inside, some are red, some are sour, some are sweet, some are a little bitter, some are very aromatic, some are very juicy, some are very firm, some are very soft. Even if the differences within a single bushel of strawberries are nigh imperceptible, the experience of eating one is complex and layered. And each and every one of the strawberries you put in a cake, blend into a smoothie, or eat on its own is, in a way, a beautifully imperfect, unique, analog experience. You might not notice it, you might not care, but it's there, and it matters – even if just that tiny bit.

But if you were to decompose a strawberry, extract the aromatic compound that smells most like a strawberry, analyze its formula, devise a way to synthesize it, and make it commercially viable, you could put that in every food as a substitute for the meticulous work of collecting good strawberries and the complex palate one has. It would be much cheaper to manufacture, and it would give you a very concentrated hit of strawberry flavor. Most people wouldn't be able to tell much of a difference, and it would probably still be delicious. If you're not greedy.

In fact, this is exactly what happens in the food industry. They extract the compound that gives strawberries their flavor and put it in everything from cheap candy to expensive desserts.

But it would also **completely erase** everything else about the experience of eating a strawberry. The texture, the juiciness, the complexity of the flavor, the imperfections, the joy of finding a particularly good one, the cosmic horror of eating a wormy one, the nostalgia of having your grandma's strawberry jam with dozens of individually unique strawberries in it. All of that is lost and condensed into a single, pure hit of strawberry flavor. Tasty? Maybe. But it's not a strawberry anymore. It's just a chemical that kind of tastes like a strawberry. Soon enough, you forget what one actually tastes like. Or worse, you prefer the chemicals. Or even worse, you can't even find real strawberries anymore because the market is flooded with synthetic replacements. Or even worser, the real ones have long gone extinct because no one wanted to grow them anymore when the

synthetic version was cheaper and more convenient. And whoop-dee-doo, you've erased about 500 individual human experiences and replaced them with a single, shared one. And that's *just strawberries*.

This is what dopamine fracking does to culture, hobbies, and even relationships, which are so much more complex because they are so deeply abstract. It extracts the most concentrated hit of dopamine and puts it in everything, while erasing all the complexity, nuance, and beauty that made it special in the first place. And the more we do it, the more we forget what the original experience was like, and the more we prefer the synthetic version, and the worse off we are. It's a vicious cycle that leads to a homogenized, commodified culture that is devoid of meaning and connection.

Remember that SpongeBob episode where they made Krabby Patties out of goo? Yeah. That.



Conclusion

The worst part about it? This was so incredibly easy and convenient to ignore for such a long time. Optimization was seen

as a good thing, and the idea of "solving" something was seen as a positive. I definitely participated in it, and I'm sure you or someone you know has, too. After all, who doesn't want to solve things? Who doesn't want to optimize? But the more this happens, the more we see just how destructive, devastating, and unsustainable living like this is.

I've been gradually turning off dopamine fracking in my life: deleting channels and feeds that infuriate me or milk my triggers (positive or negative), uninstalling apps, and setting boundaries on what I will and won't engage with and consume. Becoming aware of this concept has made it easier to navigate the world. And it's becoming easier and easier for me to simply stop a video and close a tab when I sense that it's just trying to give me a hit of dopamine. It's so immensely liberating to be able to do that.

I don't have any solutions. But awareness is the first step, and while it feels trivial compared to actually doing something about it, it's still a step in the right direction. I hope that people can start talking about this, even if not using the term "dopamine fracking" – I can recognize that it's a little eccentric, but hey, we call short-form sludge "brain rot," so why not?

Written by a human.

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