PERSONAL ESSAY

You are what you eat: the algorithmic news diet

// BY ASHA ROY

It's no secret that I love a good TikTok video essay on the state of the Chinese economy or obscure legal precedents with dark histories. I am mesmerized by the dizzying compilation of bright images, clips flashing across my screen and Pavlov's dog-adjacent keyboard clicks as a disembodied omniscient narrator talks at double speed. One of the struggles of being a young person in the world today is feeling predetermined. It's as though we have swapped the pilgrimatic predestination of our predecessors for algorithmic echo-chamber manifest destiny.

My actions — from what I make for breakfast or what clothes I wear to the political beliefs I espouse — are a manifestation of the media that I consume. That diet presents many problems — self image, expectations, desensitization and probably a whole host of things I haven't even thought of yet. For the sake of this article, I want to focus on the political repercussions of an algorithmic news diet on the lives of Yalies.

As Mattie Epstein '29, an associate editor of The Politic, put it, "people have the tendency to like certain videos and view certain content, and not think much about what that viewership does in practice."

"They're only going to be fed what it is they enjoy consuming because of the nature of algorithms, and I think that that produces a society that's less conducive to hearing from and learning from disparate opinions," she added.

I think Mattie is right to point out that our listening skills have diminished since the dawn of the algorithm.

However, I would take her claim one step further and assert that the nature of algorithms makes our society not only "less conducive to hearing from and learning from disparate opinions," but also less able to hear and understand our own. Take my habit of listening to video essays, for example. Am I really absorbing one idea before the obscenely fast narrator moves on to another? And when the video is done, am I sitting and thinking about what it posited? No. I'm scrolling to a video about the newest it-girl trend or a brainrotted, anti-woke meme.

I also talked to Massimo Mejia '28, the chair of the Yale Political Union's Progressive Party. When I asked him about the role of algorithmic targeted news in the YPU, Massimo agreed it definitely plays a role in the visibility of certain issues in the union, especially hyper-local ones.

But in a larger sense, he said, "the YPU has been a break away from that sensationalism and that algorithm, since there's a lot of discourse surrounding or fueled by personal experience." As a member of the Progressive Party myself, I can attest to Massimo's claim about the centrality of personal experience to the work of the YPU. While it's not necessarily a solution to the problem that the algorithm imposes, the YPU at least provides members with a room full of diverse opinions.

Massimo also mentioned the impact of shock value in social media news sources.

"The algorithm kind of wakes us up a lot of the time and grabs our attention because that's what it's designed to do," he said. "The algorithm creates this sort of imagined community where you hear a story handpicked across the country."

While coming together over shared convictions is a fundamental part of American democracy, Massimo pointed out that online communities should not be a replacement for communities like the YPU where people are not vetted ahead of time on whether they all agree with your views.

The term "imagined community" itself has a complicated history in politics. Imagined community is the bedrock of nationalism. One might imagine all of the people in their country or of their race as being their allies or family, even though they've never met.

When we imagine online communities, we do a similarly divisive thing by positioning ourselves against our neighbors and our real community in exchange for a digital one.

While I won't sit here and police your Instagram time limit that you password-override daily, I will say that real community is more accessible for many people in college than at any other place or time. Instead of imagining our communities, it might be wise to make the most of the one right outside our dorm-room doors, whether that means your YPU comrades or your daily conversations waiting for the shower.

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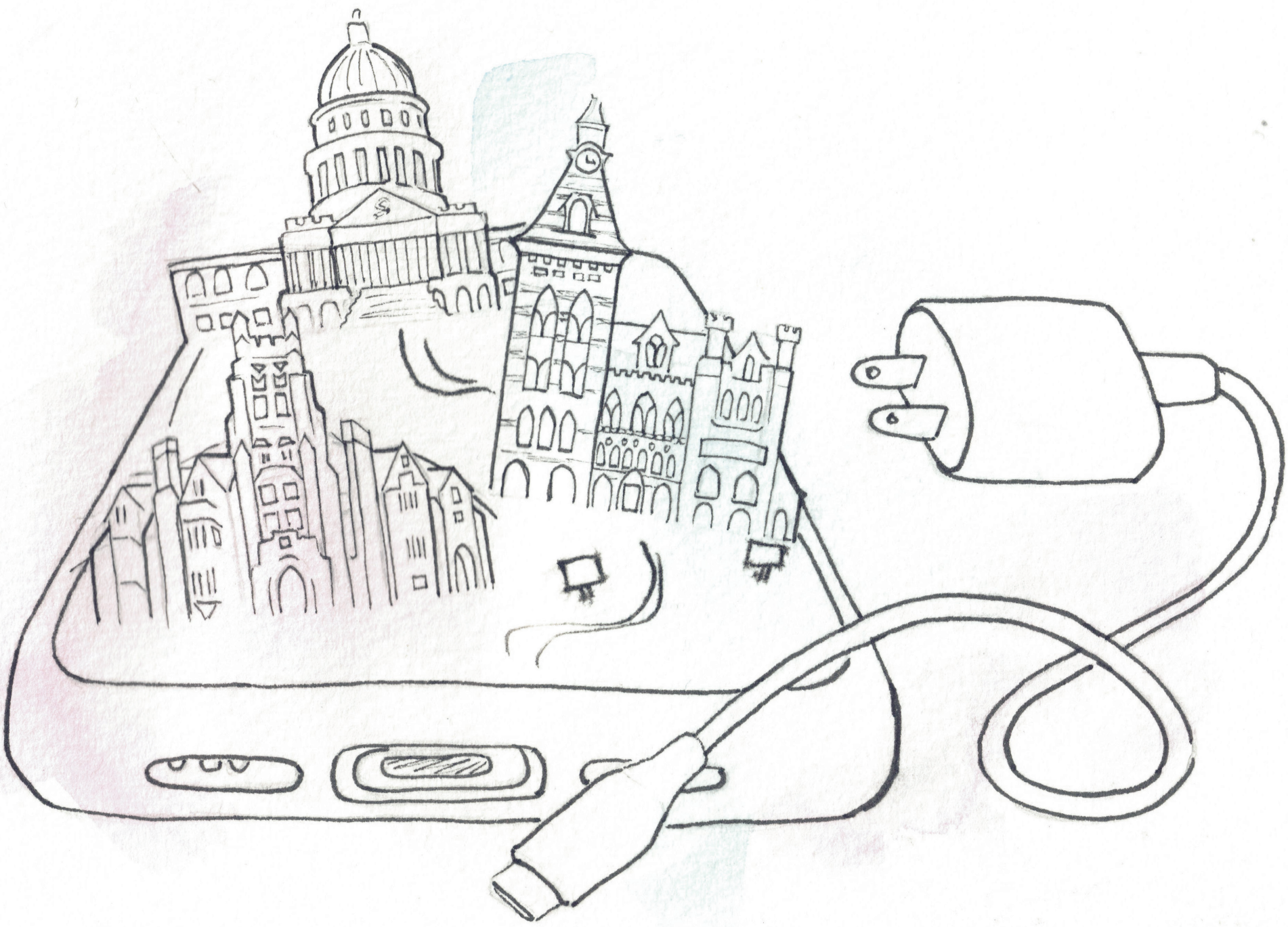


ILLUSTRATION BY NELLIE KENNEY

WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:

TALKING POLITICS AT THE DINNER TABLE