

OPINION

STAFF COLUMNIST
RUHIL MOHAN

Scrolling together

Once upon a time, we had widely-accessible appointment television. Yet the notion of unrelated swaths of the country coming together at an immovable time to consume a widely appealing, non-athletic piece of content is almost unthinkable today. And what a loss. Our national conversation rings more hollow as a result.

Each night “Seinfeld” aired, tens of millions of Americans tuned in for the network-selected broadly-appealing entertainment of the evening. “Seinfeld” isn’t that funny. Not really. But it was a little funny to a lot of people, and more importantly, it was on TV. It served as an easy avenue into conversation: “Did you catch Seinfeld last night?” “Seinfeld,” “Cheers,” “I Love Lucy,” “M*A*S*H” and dozens of shows like them had a monopolistic hold on American entertainment. You watched your episode on time and you did what you wanted to with it. The resulting national cultural diet provided the ingredients for discussion between disparate groups about the things humans care about and want to talk about with each other: love, friendships and other people. This wasn’t always the case in reality – but the potential was there. Whether or not these shows were “high culture” wasn’t the point.

The value of appointment TV was in building a low-barrier-to-entry language for people to relate to each other. Today, there are many excellent streaming service standouts, but they are far less unifying. You can find them on HBO, Prime, Apple TV, Peacock, Netflix and approximately 15 other streaming services. But this represents the new function of TV as a highly individual affair defined by viewers’ watch histories and monthly fee tolerances. There is much less of a national community. A lot of reasonable people don’t want to navigate through layers of subscriptions to join a Twitter conversation about “Severance.”

At the same time, I see a new shared language emerging for the next generation of college students and young people, built around two centers of online gravity and short-form video content: Instagram and TikTok.

Both Instagram and TikTok push interest-driven content. In English, this means that my suitemates and I, who have similar interests, receive the same LeBron James highlights and “Suits” clips on our “For You Pages.” It means that when young people sit with their friends, they pepper the conversation with videos the room might enjoy. We stay in touch with our siblings by sending them TikToks about parents like ours and reference eclectic videos to build common ground in conversation with new people. As we scroll together, we flesh out a new shared language of content.

But the meat of this language, trending videos, is in a way less substantial than the mass media of yesterday. The hyper-evolving slate of content presented to us

means we have less attachment to the substance of our conversation. In terms of mass media, we don’t have widely-accessible characters developed over years and cherished veteran media personalities whose narratives and personalities we use to consider interesting questions.

Our shared language consists instead of brief clips of characters available only on streaming services and media personalities quickly pushed and disappeared by the algorithm. When the references by which we work through conversation are so transient, why should we be anything but noncommittal about our ideas? We know no matter what we say, the substance of our conversation will be old news algorithmically by tomorrow.

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The apps silo us by interest, leaving us with a smaller community with whom our language even functions. There is no assured national cultural diet. We don’t know if the stranger next to us heard about “Seinfeld” last night.

There is an irony to this new language. Instagram stamps each Reel with the name and picture of any friend who has liked it. Scrolling through Reels is an exercise in seeing a brutally honest range of friends’ likes and opinions. Instagram has no option to opt out of publicizing likes to followers, and Reels can be intensely personalized. The overall result is that we are both more noncommittal with our takes and tied to them far more publicly.

Today, the individual is king. I don’t know if a show like “Friends” could culturally dominate again. Broadly-appealing network TV is in many ways less interesting than algorithmically customized short-form videos and narrowly tailored streaming shows.

And indeed, with a group of friends already bonded over similar interests, the apps are almost an enhancement to friendship. But as more and more of us scroll together, there is a cost. As a whole, we are less for the language we have lost.

RUHIL MOHAN is a sophomore in Morse College studying economics and political science. His column “Current Affairs” explores 21st century American culture and college life. He can be reached at rohil.mohan@yale.edu.

GUEST COLUMNIST
SHAYE KIRMAN

Exploring and exploiting in college, life

Consider this scenario: you go to a hot new restaurant and order a dish that you absolutely love. Bingo, your new favorite place! As luck would have it, the following week you are back to your dream supper club and ... your move. Do you gamble and go for a new discovery, or do you order the proven choice, the same meal from the first time around? In other words, do you explore or do you exploit?

A similar type of dilemma arises for new students on Yale’s campus. As excited and nervous freshmen scour through Yale Connect, where hundreds of clubs beckon like a tasting menu, they face overwhelming choices: which clubs to apply to, how many applications to cast and what fields to explore. Freshmen, cast an early wide net! And, sophomores, it may just be okay to quit your clubs.

There lies a fundamental connection between this model of thinking and the ethos behind the liberal arts curriculum. Here’s why.

The restaurant and club application examples capture the essence of what, in decision theory, is known as the “explore-exploit tradeoff.” With applications that run the gamut from human psychology to machine learning, the concept refers to competing relationships to information. Exploration, in its most basic sense, is a search for new information; exploitation is making use of known information. The tradeoffs are intuitive. Exploration can lead to learning and new discoveries but includes uncertainty and can lead to wasted time or opportunities. Exploitation allows for predictable pleasures, though at the risk of untapped potential.

For us Yalies, this framework seemingly appears everywhere:

Should you try out a new club, or deepen your role in an existing one? Should you live with the same roommates next year, or choose a new group altogether? Most importantly, should you sample every dish at Commons, or just keep going back for the chicken?

In searching for an answer, there is one hack that may be useful. As Brian Christian and Tom Griffiths tell us in their book “Algorithms to Live By,” “explore when you will have time to use the resulting knowledge, exploit when you’re ready to cash in. The interval makes the strategy.” In other words, when you’re near the beginning of your “time interval,” explore so that you can exploit that new information over time. As the clock winds down, the balance shifts.

When it comes to the overcrowded extracurricular scene, the best advice may be to cast an early wide net, when the payoff for new information is greatest. Maybe you didn’t realize that you could be the next comedy superstar or a budding chef, but if you don’t try to embarrass yourself early, you’ll never know your full potential.

But you quickly realize that you have to make choices to balance curiosity with commitment. If you want to go deep and find meaning in your extracurriculars, you can’t keep exploring forever. Building on cumulative knowledge or gaining leadership experience in the same club can pay off too. Thus, explore-then-exploit, while maintaining some moments of exploration throughout, could become the winning move.

One caveat is that stakes matter. Applying to a new club or trying a new food has little downside if it does not go as planned. Choosing new roommates, on the other hand,

is a big bet that can lock you in to serious long term consequences. The same is true when choosing friends or majors or whether to move off campus. If exploring had no cost, then the explore-exploit choice would not be the same dilemma it inevitably is.

The explore-exploit concept is at the heart of why I chose to come to a liberal arts college like Yale and why I am choosing to major in Ethics, Politics and Economics. In their nature, these settings facilitate the explore-then-exploit strategy. The liberal arts structure and EP&E major both inherently are interdisciplinary: Yale’s distributional requirements and wide offerings ensure a breadth of study; and EP&E spans disciplines as a three-in-one major. Yet, as you go on, the college and major also allow for “exploitation,” or deeper study, of the areas that most interest you: majors themselves are built for this, and within the EP&E major students choose an area of concentration by the end of their junior year.

At Yale, we are lucky to have options all around us. In the dining halls, on Coursetable, at the extracurricular bazaar and in the places we study, we are tempted to go wide or deep. Now that you know about it, you will see this choice everywhere. Consider the risks, stakes and your time horizons. Explore boldly, then exploit wisely. I tend to be a creature of habit with food, but even I sometimes venture beyond chicken at Commons.

SHAYE KIRMAN is a sophomore in Trumbull College studying Ethics, Politics and Economics. He can be reached at shaye.kirman@yale.edu.

GUEST COLUMNIST
HEKMAT MATTHEW ABOUKHATER

A Yale worth fighting for?

Yale’s Poynter Fellowship in Journalism claims to bring “distinguished journalists” and the “world’s leading truth-seekers” to campus in order to exchange ideas with students and provide a “cultivated look at pressing issues from all possible perspectives.”

Wednesday’s Poynter Fellowship event with Israeli Arab journalist Khaled Abu Toameh fell far short of that standard. What was billed as an opportunity to reflect on the road ahead for the Israeli-Palestinian question turned out to be an exercise in obfuscation and cliché peddling where students ended up with a narrower, more distorted, view of the issue than they had before. That failure doesn’t just misinform, it undermines the very mission of a program meant to model truth-seeking journalism.

Don’t get me wrong. I am a free speech maximalist. I’ll attend lectures by anyone from Itamar Ben-Gvir, whom a Yale-adjacent society hosted last year, to Haz Al Din, the chairman of the American Communist Party, should he ever get an invitation. My objection is not to Abu Toameh’s presence and platforming on campus. It is against the fellowship’s poor choice in elevating such a flat voice to speak on one of the most contested and consequential issues of our time.

For the first half-hour of the seminar, Abu Toameh repeated tired platitudes and hackneyed one-liners. He insisted the reason Palestinians remain stateless is because when Israel offered them 90 percent, they asked for 94; when offered 94, they demanded 98. What did these percentages even refer to? Were these figures from Camp David, Madrid, or Oslo? He never specified, preferring to simply ramble in vague abstractions.

According to Toameh, it was the Palestinians, not the Israeli assassin of Yitzhak Rabin, who destroyed the peace movement in Israel. Somehow the Palestinians featured as both the perpetual aggressor and self-imposed victims in his narrative.

When addressing Israel’s destruction of Gaza and the ongoing decimation of its people, Toameh cited the population’s 2006 election of Hamas, framing it as a potential excuse

for their current suffering. He also recounted the story of Palestinians looting abandoned greenhouses after Israel’s 2005 Gaza disengagement, as if that anecdote alone explained Palestinian politics and culture.

The question-and-answer portion was even more exhausting. When I asked him to address a recent Penn State poll showing that 82 percent of Jewish Israelis support the ethnic cleansing of Gaza and that 56 percent favor the expulsion of Arab Israelis – citizens like himself – from Israel proper, he grew defensive and deflected.

When I followed up by asking whether his narrative, that of the state, still holds in the United States, where 60 percent of Americans now oppose further military aid to Israel, where for the first time a majority view Israel unfavorably. And, while support among young people has dropped below 30 percent, he ignored the question entirely and reemphasized the need to return the 22 remaining hostages taken by Hamas on Oct. 7 who are still believed to be in Gaza.

When pressed by others on Israel’s recent strikes against Hamas hostage negotiators in Doha and whether those attacks endangered the possibilities of a safe return, he sidestepped the question once more and instead lamented, on a personal level, that such strikes might undermine normalization talks with Saudi Arabia. The event concluded with Abu Toameh’s vague insistence that “we have to bring down the volume,” a vapid prescription for a conflict that demands clarity, evidence and courage.

Consider what he did not mention. Not a word about the 700,000 settlers now living in the West Bank on land slated for a future Palestinian state. Instead, he celebrated Ariel Sharon’s “benevolence” in evacuating 9,000 settlers from Gaza’s 21 illegal settlements in 2005 – twice, for emphasis. Nor did he mention the peaceful 2018 Great March of Return, when Israeli forces killed 214 Palestinians and wounded thousands. Instead, he offered an etymological digression on the phrase “Al-Aqsa Flood,” the Hamas codename for the

Oct. 7 attacks, parsing its linguistic ties to the mosque on the temple mount.

Most striking of all, Abu Toameh said nothing about the more than 200 journalists killed in Gaza since Oct. 7. The Reuters and AP journalists Hussam al-Masri, Mariam Abu Daqqa, and Moaz Abu Taha, killed alongside rescue teams at Nasser Hospital just last week, went unmentioned. For someone billed as a “distinguished” journalist under Yale’s Poynter banner, his silence on the slaughter of his colleagues was damning.

Yale could have done better, or simply done nothing. The Poynter Fellowship would have served its mission more honorably by disengaging altogether from the subject of Israel-Palestine than by hosting a state stenographer who dodged questions, and avoided the very truths journalists are supposed to pursue.

If the Fellowship wants to host real voices, it should bring someone courageous who has true convictions that they are ready to defend. They could come from either side of the divide. I would respect a fellow willing to defend the settlements openly and argue for the expulsion of Gaza’s civilians, just as I would respect journalists like Ali Abunimah, or Max Blumenthal who have risked their reputations to challenge the Israeli narrative. At least such figures would force Yale students to grapple with uncomfortable truths and maybe answer some of their questions in the process.

Instead, the Poynter Fellowship chose Khaled Abu Toameh, and students were left with a lukewarm soup of clichés, propaganda and trite one-liners. If this is what Yale passes for “distinguished journalism,” on the issue of our time, then perhaps my fellow Jackson peers and I might skip the next Poynter event and simply tune in to Israel’s Channel 12 News from our apartments.

HEKMAT MATTHEW ABOUKHATER is a public policy student at the Jackson School of Global Affairs. He can be reached at hekmat.aboukhater@yale.edu.



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