Why We Click on Stuff We Know We Won’t Like

December 22, 2023

Why is there a deluge of divisive and negative content on social media? Is it simply that — despite what we’d prefer to think about ourselves — we like this kind of stuff?

After all, research suggests that negativity — especially about our political opponents — is likeliest to go viral online. Maybe the basic explanation is that everyone wants to see content that reinforces their political biases and makes their enemies look bad.

But a new study we’ve published in the journal Perspectives on Psychological Science suggests this couldn’t be further from the truth. Our engagement behavior does not reflect our preferences. We don’t actually like a lot of the content we “like,” share, or click on.

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