3rd Place Winner, Yale Undergraduate Essay Contest
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If you want to yell STOP, you need to make sure that everyone can hear you — even if some people don't want to listen.

The digital revolution of the last thirty years has given people an enormous potential for communication. Ideas that were once only expressed by journalists in newspapers or anchors on the radio can now be disseminated by anyone, to anyone through social media. In a sense, the democratic equality that has been a hallmark of political thought since the French Revolution has been achieved (only to an extent, of course) in our freedom of self-expression on the web.

Now, anyone can see, like or dislike, forward, repost, and/or comment on a news story in any part of the world, almost as if we were there in real time. The time for education — and, with it, empathy, understanding, and communication — is imminent.

And yet, why do we feel so lonely?

In this deafening roar of information that now speeds past us, we begin to lose our hearing. Every day, we are inundated with so many facts and figures about everything in our world that, all of a sudden, nothing means anything anymore. Though we fear to admit it, we inadvertently start to deal with the constant chaos of the information age by desensitizing ourselves to the latest wildfire, ignoring the latest instance of gun violence, and turning a blind eye to corruption as it becomes increasingly more obvious.

At the same time, when we try to be active and communicate with others (especially those who disagree with us politically), the opposite happens. Every opinion is tied to some national buzzword that your waterfall of reels and TikToks has told you to avoid, and submitting to "the enemy" — or even interacting with them — is a sign of weakness and danger. You have to fight back, since you are obviously in the right, and they are obviously in the wrong.

When we get to choose what we see, we absorb everything, and when we don't, we reject everything. This makes sense - it's human nature. Today's technology, however, allows us to pursue the first situation and limit instances of the second, meaning that the promise of maximum communication has actually encouraged us to minimize it.

STOP!!! This is not normal.

But what should we do? What can we do in the face of this unfettered technological "progress"? It's not really possible for us to get rid of our phones completely: I, for one, can't remember the amount of times I've deleted Instagram only to reinstall it a few hours or (if I'm lucky) days later. We also can't afford to stop technological development on a grand scale, since current research into AI is vital for various American industries as well as our defense interests.

We need to find a place for us to stay within the technological wave without being overwhelmed. We need to preserve the best of what we can as naturally social animals as we embark on our new digital normal, especially in the political scene. What does that entail?

First: being active, but also modest. Make others hear you, and remind yourself that you have power in your voice, but also remember that there is even more power in knowing when not to use your voice. Our society has lost a certain humility in how we debate with one another, and in a time of clickbait articles and eye-catching reels, we often prioritize being the loudest in the room over being the most respectful. Know how to logically build up an argument, but also understand that patiently waiting for the other side to finish speaking can help you better deconstruct and disprove what they are telling you.

There are many ways to go about this that don't involve studying classical oratory or presidential speeches (though this, surely, would be a fun treat for history majors). It rests within our ability to regulate our attention span and regain our sense of patience. Perhaps this means spending less time on Facebook and more time reading books, or replacing your usual doom-scrolling time to go on a walk outside. Small actions like these can build up into a strong sense of self-esteem and respect for others, whether in debates or otherwise.

Second: listen, and take notes. If you can, do this the old-fashioned way, with pen and paper. When communicating with political opponents, we often feel tempted to jump into the forum without so much as solid evidence to argue against, instead leaning into our emotional reactions and using them to dictate what comes next. Jotting down what the opponent says, on the other hand, provides a rational basis for counterarguments and ensures that the focus of the discussion is not predicated on a wild falsity or internal rage, but on the topic at hand itself.

This kind of action seems rather obvious, especially since essay-writing with "quote sandwiches" was a key part of many of our middle and high school experiences. Nowadays, however, 21st-century technology has enabled students to type up what was said word-for-word, without really processing the new information they were supposed to learn. Our reliance on generative AI, in addition, while useful, has worsened this ability to remember. Writing by hand may be the most effective way to regain this skill.

More reading and writing — basic skills ingrained in every organized society, not just the United States — seem like silly solutions to the problem of overarching progress, but they are actually tremendously effective and necessary. Even before we can consider the question of whether social institutions or sacred historical values will survive this current age, we ought to ask ourselves whether we as a society can even functionally coexist and communicate enough to begin preserving these traditions.

These days, it seems like the answer is increasingly — and alarmingly — no. The brutal killing of Charlie Kirk is a prime example of how far our social and political world has degraded, not only in its violent cause, but in its dramatic partisan consequences: many individuals on the left proclaimed that the shooting of a nonviolent activist was justified, while important figures in power on the right have sought extrajudicial vengeance while exuding an abject 'hatred' for their opponents in the process.

We might begin to weaken that polarized divide if we make others hear ourselves, and if we encourage ourselves to hear others. It sounds simple, even sheepish, but it can be done through small steps and incremental personal action. Besides, if today's technology encourages us to build a higher wall between each party, each group, and even each individual, who other than your own self will care to respond when the next person yells STOP?

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Lukas Koutsoukos is a junior at Yale University majoring in History and Ethics, Politics, & Economics, with a certificate in Spanish. He is primarily interested in the political and economic theory behind international relations, while also investigating how ancient history and present statistical analysis can better inform policy decisions for the future. At Yale, Lukas is the president of the Hellenic Society, serves on the board of Yale Model Congress, and writes for the Yale Review for International Studies (YRIS). In his free time, he enjoys running, soccer, playing guitar, listening to music, and reading. He is originally from Wilton, Connecticut, and is a proud American of Greek and Nicaraguan descent.