‘Doomscrolling’ can break your brain. It can also be a force for good

The world as we knew it is ending. A global pandemic has killed 404,000 people worldwide, including 114,000 in the U.S. The lockdown to prevent the coronavirus’s spread has resulted in at least 36 million people losing their jobs. And amidst this chaos, widespread protests are once again exposing the rot of structural racism in the United States.

If you’re not on the front lines, whether by choice or necessity, how do you respond to the unprecedented collision of these events? Maybe you organize local aid for people affected most by the coronavirus. Maybe you donate to organizations helping to get protesters out of jail. Or maybe you just spend hours “doomscrolling,” scanning through an endlessly refreshed feed of news, commentary, images, and video until you lose track of time and it’s suddenly 2 a.m.

Whether you’re scrolling through your social media site of choice, such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, or Instagram, or simply engaging with all the bad news on your favorite news source’s website for long periods of time, doomscrolling isn’t platform specific. And its roots extend back past the internet to the rise of the 24-hour cable news cycles, where it first became possible to gorge on depressing news on an endless loop.

After being first mentioned on Twitter in 2018, the term doomscrolling has become an increasingly popular way to describe the obsessive perusal of social media or news that for many has been sparked by the fear and anxiety around the coronavirus. The word’s close cousin, “doom surfing,” dates back to the late 2000s, when it was used in reference to the game Dino Run (the term described the act of running next to the game’s “Wall of Doom”). In many ways, the concept of doomscrolling—which more specifically refers to scrolling on your phone—has become the word of the moment, at least according to Merriam-Webster, which featured both terms on its Words We’re Watching blog at the end of April.

Behind on sleep?
Lots of tough news today; I know.
My gentle advice: stop doomscrolling. Rest up for tomorrow.

— Doomscrolling Reminder Lady (@karenkho) June 4, 2020

The word’s apocalyptic tone feels accurate to Karen K. Ho, a reporter at Quartz who began tweeting out nightly reminders that encourage people to stop doomscrolling starting in early April. “We’re in a pandemic that is historic. The recession is historic. And we have
these protests that are historic,” she says. “It’s about feeling a loss of a sense of active control over the time you’re spending gathering this information or observing content. I think calling it ‘doom’ is pretty fair.”

**Scrolling to make sense of the world**

As our collective attention has shifted toward the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbury and the resulting international protests, the role of social media in amplifying injustice has become even clearer. But for many of us, the habit of doomscrolling hasn’t stopped. When the protests began, Ho says she asked her followers if she should continue tweeting her reminders to stop doomscrolling, and dozens responded, imploring her to continue. Now, *others* who similarly tell people that it’s okay to stop doomscrolling have popped up on Twitter.

Why do we do this in the first place? It’s natural during a time of stress and turmoil to look to the media for more information, says Dana Garfin, an assistant adjunct professor who runs the Resilience, Epidemiology, and Community Health Lab at UC Irvine and studies the way that people respond to crises. That includes both traditional media and social media. But due to the nature of social platforms, where snippets of information are provided without context, images of graphic violence can sit next to harmless cat pictures, and outrage-driven algorithms decide what you see, putting together a clear narrative of what’s happening is increasingly difficult.

“There’s so much information, it’s so chaotic, and we’re denied our social routines for helping us make sense,” says Nicole Ellison, a professor of information at the University of Michigan. “And the tech itself is shaping the information and the ways we engage with it in a specific way.”

The feeling of helplessness has also translated to a fear of missing out on new information. The technology in question? The algorithms that assess what content you’re most likely to engage with, and then serve you up more of that content in an infinite scroll. That content is often the most outrageous or horrifying. “Doomscrolling is . . . aided by similar algorithms that will continue to deliver you fire and brimstone-style coverage,” says Allissa Richardson, an assistant professor of journalism at the USC Annenberg.

According to Ellison, the infinite scroll presents the illusion that more, better information that can help you finally make sense of things is just a scroll away. We’re constantly “trying to find that one piece of information that would make everything clear,” she says. But there’s no single answer to the current state of the world. With the coronavirus especially, guidance from health officials and scientists has changed so often that it is hard to keep track of the latest updates, and the underlying nature of the pandemic is simply hard to grasp.
“There’s not really one grand narrative that many of us would look at and say, ‘Yes, this is a cognitive structure where every piece of information I get fits neatly into this grand narrative,’” Ellison says.

This gap between a desire for more information and the information that’s actually available can lead to more overconsumption. “Doomscrolling became this way to cope with what was unknowable and terrifying at the time,” says Richardson, who is the author of the recent book *Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, and the New Protest #Journalism*. “We have no experience of a pandemic of this scale and of a global shutdown. So doomscrolling in that sense encouraged people to get educated. But there was nothing for us to do in many ways.”

That feeling of helplessness has also translated to a fear of missing out on new information. Whereas before the pandemic, FOMO usually referred to feeling left out of social situations, Richardson thinks a new kind of headline-based FOMO has now set in. “Doomscrolling is an outgrowth of that because nobody could really go anywhere,” she says. “The fear of missing out then became, what if I miss a headline? What if I don’t know something about this virus that could save my life?”

**The hidden power of doomscrolling**

If doomscrolling was a means of information-seeking during the early days of the pandemic, the term has taken on a different meaning during the police brutality protests.

Richardson points out that doomscrolling is not a term she’s heard African American people use—instead, she says the conversation in the Black community is more about how videos of graphic violence against Black people are retraumatizing. “There’s an active movement among many African Americans to look away,” she says. “The doomscrolling in this context is really unwelcome. You see a backlash against activists who are trying to raise awareness by posting graphic videos without a disclaimer.”

She explains that it’s important to consider the position of people who are doomscrolling within the context of the protests—many of whom previously “had the privilege of looking away.”

“They’re waking up out of a slumber to realize this is a persistent issue,” Richardson says. “The videos are so shocking.”

— It’s easy for graphic images to become overwhelming, especially when they’re played over and over again on a loop.

She thinks that after months of being cooped up and obsessively scrolling through the news about the coronavirus without significant, tangible ways to help, the protests have provided a clear way for people to fight back against structural racism. “I think that’s why
we see this huge eruption of people flooding the streets,” Richardson says. “For 10 weeks, they were fighting a battle against an invisible monster that they didn’t know how to fight. But racism? We kind of have a blueprint for fighting that. We get out, we march, we have hard conversations.”

As protests sparked by the death of George Floyd at the hands of police spread across the country, so too did the widespread sharing of videos on social media that depicted his death in horrific clarity. While this surge of social media sharing is only one element of a years-long movement to bring Black Lives Matter into the mainstream, it’s undeniable that these videos, along with video documentation of police violence against peaceful protesters, has helped to sustain the demonstrations. In turn, the protests have resulted in a dramatic swing in public opinion in favor of Black Lives Matter.

“The fact everyone is risking their lives, being in close quarters, it speaks volumes about the power of doomscrolling to educate and galvanize,” Richardson says.

**How to stop scrolling**

Even if people’s greater attunement to the news has helped them get off their couches and into the streets, doomscrolling presents a challenge to mental health. According to Garfin, too much exposure to media during times of crisis—in other words, too much doomscrolling—can have a detrimental impact on physical and mental health.

It’s easy for graphic images to become overwhelming, especially when they’re played over and over again on a loop. “People have to be careful about the diet they’re consuming,” Richardson says. “It’ll traumatize people of all races. That’s why we see this multiethnic coalition right now.”

The pressure to stay informed and online is particularly potent right now. Richardson says that some activists in particular “feel guilty if they look away for a day or two. They feel they’re going to miss out, they’ll miss a nugget of news that’s important.”

However, Richardson advocates taking longer breaks and actively seeking out content that makes you laugh and brings you joy. But this should be “a mindful looking-away, not an apathetic looking-away,” she warns.

Garfin recommends that people limit the amount of time they spend scrolling by picking three times during the day when they’ll check the news, and then logging out afterward. And Ho’s daily doomscrolling reminders have a similar motivation—to help people remember that they can always look at social media later. “I’m always trying to remind people that doomscrolling . . . is still within a measure of control, even though so many things are uncertain and chaotic right now,” she says. “Just remember, you can stop.”
To combat her own doomscrolling, Ho has decided to actively log out of Twitter more often, which adds more friction to the next time she has the urge to scroll. She also recommends getting your news from newsletters instead of social media, and turning on grayscale mode on your phone so that your colorful Instagram feed becomes far less appealing.

hey, are you doomscrolling?

I know things are hard right now. You can still take care of yourself and your mental health.

Take a break, and get some sleep. You'll feel better with a good night's rest.

— Doomscrolling Reminder Lady (@karenkho) June 5, 2020

Ultimately, doomscrolling is a coping mechanism in extraordinary times, a simple action that we hope will help us make sense of a fast-changing world where old norms have been upended. But in a time of information overload, there are few answers for the hard challenges we face as a society.

“We’re not going to find that one thing that makes everything make sense,” Ellison says. “We’ve got to do the hard work. More information isn’t going to get us there.”

Neither will algorithms that prioritize extremism and push our discourse toward simplistic conclusions without allowing the space for necessary nuance.

“People prefer a simple narrative: Tell me what this is and how to get rid of it. We didn’t have the answer with coronavirus. We don’t have that answer with racism,” Richardson says. “There’s going to be a considerable amount of ongoing conversation about both epidemics.”