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Original Thoughts in the Age of Algorithms: Are We Thinking for Ourselves

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Have you ever felt a way about something, gone to read the comments and seen somebody saying the very same thing that was going through your head?

You're watching a video on a political topic, a movie, a social conflict, a daily situation. You have some ideas. You go and read the comments. Someone clarifies things more effectively than you. Another convinces you of his idea. Someone's comment receives thousands of likes and now you feel, Yes, that's exactly how I feel.

Did you feel it or was it a recognition of yourself in somebody else's idea?

This everyday occurrence provokes a general question: in a world in which algorithms continually present other people's ideas to you, how much of your thoughts is really your own? The problem is not that we are influenced by others. Human beings have always been influenced by other factors. Original thinking does not mean inventing an idea nobody has had before. It can mean taking what we encounter, questioning it, connecting it with our experiences, and allowing it to become something that carries our perspective.[1]

What has changed is the speed, volume and personalisation of the influence surrounding us.

Every time we open a social media platform, an algorithm helps decide what appears next. It learns from what we watch, like, search for, share and skip, creating a personalised stream of content. Algorithms influence many everyday choices, including what information we consume

[1] Feifei, How to Start Having Original Thoughts, Feifei's Substack (Mar. 8, 2026), https://feifeiwrites.substack.com/p/how-to-start-having-original-thoughts.

and which options are presented to us.[2] Personalisation can also create what has been described as a "filter bubble": online environments can become tailored to our previous interests, potentially limiting the information and perspectives we encounter.

The algorithm does not necessarily tell us what to think. It can decide which thoughts we see first, repeatedly, and with the most attention.
Think about viewing a movie. You might start by saying to yourself, "I didn't actually enjoy it that much." Rather than dwelling on this feeling, however, you go to look at the reviews. One person thinks that the movie is overrated. Someone else analyzes its symbols. You're not looking into your own reactions; you're picking between other people's analyses.

This is where independent thought becomes uncomfortable.

Sometimes, we become so accustomed to encountering other people's conclusions that we can confidently repeat an argument without remembering where our own reaction ended and someone else's began. [3] We have also become increasingly comfortable checking what everyone else thinks before deciding what we think ourselves, turning validation into part of forming an opinion. [4]

The issue is not just being exposed to other people's ideas. It is the absence of friction between ingesting an idea and accepting it.
Friction is required in order to have original thoughts: that moment between "I've seen this" and "I believe this." It may involve confronting oneself with a disturbing realization. This doubt is not necessarily a drawback; it can initiate thinking.

If we do not understand something, we can search for an explanation. If we cannot articulate an opinion, we can find someone who has. If we want to know whether our reaction is reasonable, we can open the comments. Someone is almost always ready to tell us what something means, how we should feel, and what the "correct" interpretation is.

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[2] Kartik Hosanagar, A Human's Guide to Machine Intelligence: How Algorithms Are Shaping Our Lives and How We Can Stay in Control (Portfolio 2019).
[3] Eli Pariser, The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think (Penguin Press 2011).
[4] Feifei, supra note 1.

The internet's constant flow of information has also raised concerns about our ability to read and think deeply. [5] Constant exposure can leave little time for reflection.

Perhaps this is what we are losing not originality itself, but the time required for originality to emerge.

There is another layer: social validation. When an opinion has thousands of likes, it can feel reasonable before we examine it. Visible agreement can also make disagreement feel uncomfortable. Repetition makes an idea familiar, while visible agreement can make it appear more widely accepted than it is.

Yet blaming algorithms entirely would be too easy.

Technology can expand our intellectual world. Algorithms can introduce us to books, music and perspectives we would never have encountered. Technology brings both convenience and risks; the question is what we gain and what we allow it to take from us. [6]

Algorithms are not all designed alike. Different platforms can have different goals and recommendation systems. [7] What matters is understanding that these systems influence what becomes visible and recognising that visibility shapes attention.

This becomes more complicated with artificial intelligence.

We can ask an AI system to explain an issue, generate ideas, summarise an argument or provide perspectives within seconds. Used thoughtfully, these tools can support learning and creativity. But convenience creates another temptation: allowing the tool to produce the first thought instead of using it to challenge one we have begun developing.

Its not necessary that technology will make us incapable of thinking; it is making not thinking easier on us.

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[5] Okanlawon Olamiposi, We Forgot How to Have Original Thoughts, Olamiposi's Substack (Mar. 29, 2026), https://okanlawonolamiposi.substack.com/p/we-forgot-how-to-have-original-thoughts.
[6] Nicholas Carr, The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains (W.W. Norton & Co. 2010).
[7] Kathryn, In the Age of Algorithms: What We Gain, What We Risk, Aletheia by Kathryn, Medium, https://medium.com/aletheia-by-kathryn/in-the-age-of-algorithms-what-we-gain-what-we-risk-2059b4ceabea.

Are we becoming unable to think for ourselves?

Not entirely, probably. But maybe we are starting to lose the habit of waiting until our thoughts form.

There is no need to make any drastic moves. Next time anything catches your attention online, wait until you form your opinion before you check out what people say in the comments. Write your opinions down without reading anyone else's first. Try to figure out why an argument makes you change your mind without looking up reviews first.

Those small pauses give you what algorithms never can give you intellectual ownership.

Of course, we cannot and we should not isolate ourselves from everything else that might influence us in terms of our opinions. Other people's opinions can help shape our own. The point is to make sure that what we consume does not automatically become our beliefs.

Maybe an original thought is not one that has never existed. Maybe it is an idea that has passed through enough of our experiences, questions and disagreements to acquire our fingerprints.

In an age where an algorithm can always provide another opinion, perhaps one of the most independent things we can do is pause long enough to discover what we think before everyone else tells us.