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The Desensitization Epidemic: How Social Media is Stripping its Users of Emotion

The attacks on September 11, 2001 were one of the worst incidents to hit the United States in its history. The attacks have taken thousands of lives and affected tens of thousands more, physically and mentally. It's sensible to assume that the events of 9/11 have affected people differently, but a recent trend on social media introduced a new reaction, particularly among younger users: one of humor. Finding a 9/11 joke is just a few search queries away, especially on generally unmonitored social media sites like Instagram and TikTok. This disturbing accessibility highlights a huge contrast between reactions: there are people genuinely traumatized from the collapse of the Twin Towers, and people that choose to make jokes about it and post it online. This kind of dark humor can clearly be viewed as inconsiderate, but it also reflects a growing desensitization fueled by social media's endless supply of violence, which could both decrease empathy and further the divide between generations.

With violence and tragedy increasingly present in media, people have grown accustomed to seeing it, but even though it's valid to assume that crime has dramatically increased, the truth is in fact the contrary. Despite the belief that society is becoming more dangerous to live in, [since the year 2000, crime rates have dropped from 506 cases per 100,000 of the population to 363.8 in 2023, an approximate 30% decrease.](#) Yet at the same time, exposure to violence has increased: a survey conducted with 10,000 participants showed that [about 70% of teenage children have encountered real-life violent content on social media, and 25% have reported that such is even being recommended to them.](#)

Furthermore, the barrier of entry into social media is very low, as the minimum age requirement for most platforms such as Instagram, Discord, Snapchat, and Facebook is just 13; anyone above the age of 12 can have unlimited access to the unfiltered majority of the internet. To cope with constant exposure to violence, people start to develop unnatural responses, even going so far as to make jokes or memes about them. Desensitization to violent incidents is so normally widespread due to social media's recommendation algorithms affecting so many people, which can lead to serious consequences.

Eventually, people's emotions stop keeping up with the bombardment of violent content; the completely horrifying response and reflection is now replaced with either a repost with a few words of reaction or blatant humor. As these reactions become popular, the reactions of firsthand witnesses become invalidated; survivors of 9/11 would have to relive that trauma every time someone makes a joke about it. The recommendation algorithms of these social media platforms are pushing even more content, even further worsening these effects. They can even affect other people, with such exposure leading to bouts of violent outbreaks in younger children, such as bullying, and a growing tendency to offend others without remorse. [A study from the Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology states that exposure to high levels of violence at a young age predicted more violent behavior in later years.](#)

Some might argue that social media isn't entirely the culprit and other forms of media and communication, like television and video games, are also dangerous for desensitization. While this could also be possible, the content you are exposed to on both platforms is controllable; there isn't a personalized algorithm showing you what TV channel to watch or what video game to play. Others might also argue that exposure to violence online can also increase awareness, which can outweigh the risk of diminishing empathy, as social media has made it

infinitely easier to witness real-world events. They also say as a result, people could even start engaging in activism. However, the rarity for actually becoming involved is quite high; it's difficult to become an activist if one isn't empathetic enough about the issue to begin with.

Combating desensitization will be difficult since it's so widespread throughout social media that it's normalized. However, a safe start can involve social media platforms creating boundaries between users and violent content, especially through firmer restrictions for users with younger, developing minds. Algorithms should also be reprogrammed not to introduce violent content as a source of engagement. Additionally, parents, guardians, and teachers need to take up the responsibility to properly educate students about the historical events behind the content they see online. That way, they'll be able to understand that the content is in fact a representation of real traumatic events like 9/11, further restoring empathy among individuals.