

WHAT THE FUTURE ATTENTION

Rewriting the rules
of **mass attention**
PAGE 7

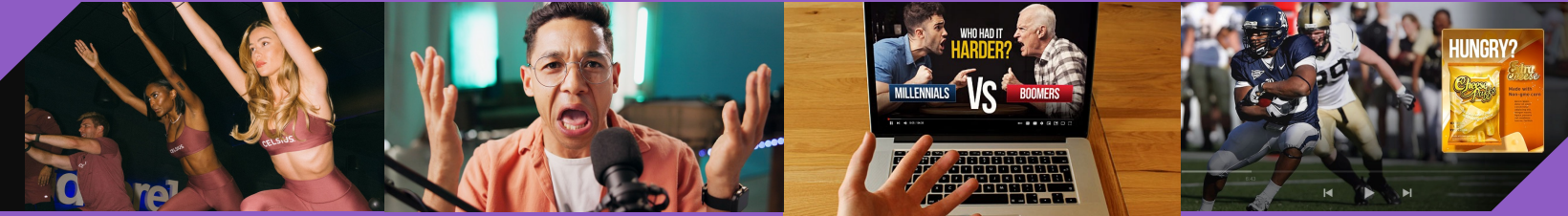
Disarming '**conflict
entrepreneurs**'
PAGE 12

Surviving tomorrow's
content revolution
PAGE 16



How brands can **win attention** in
an **AI-driven era**, from a **brand chief**,
a **conflict journalist** and a **media analyst**

CONTENTS



3

INTRODUCTION

Attention is marketing's hottest commodity. Here's how to get it in the fractured, AI-dominated future

7

HOW AN ENERGY DRINK UPSTART IS REWRITING THE RULES OF MASS ATTENTION

Celsius Chief Brand Officer **Kyle Watson** explains how to scale niches into masses

10

HOW DISINFORMATION AND 'CONFLICT ENTREPRENEURS' THRIVE

Here are ways credible research can neutralize their influence.

12

CONTENT IS FULL OF CHEAP CONFLICT ATTENTION GRABS. IT'S TIME TO CRAFT A NEW NARRATIVE

Author and journalist **Amanda Ripley** reveals how brands can overcome 'conflict entrepreneurs'

16

WHAT CONSUMERS WILL WATCH AND BRANDS WILL FACE IN TOMORROW'S CONTENT REVOLUTION

USC media analyst **Jeffrey Cole** shares how brands can hold positive attention in contexts they don't control

19

TENSIONS

Today's tensions, tomorrow



ATTENTION IS MARKETING'S HOTTEST COMMODITY.

HERE'S HOW TO GET IT IN THE FRACTURED, AI-DOMINATED FUTURE.

In an age of infinite content and infinite distractions, brands get attention by telling people something they don't know about something they care about.

What the Future is not prone to hyperbole nor overly apocalyptic. We didn't use the word "hellscape" until we did an issue on shopping?!? We've never said that X will kill Y. This topic, Attention, might change that.

Now that I have your attention, I'll acknowledge that I look at this from the perspective of a marketer and also as a parent. In the first role, I value the attention you're paying by reading these words. As a parent of three teenagers, I know how hard it is to keep attention.

Whatever your thing — cats, cooking or Minecraft speedruns — we will consume limitless content about our favorite topics. And therein lies the central tension in this issue of What the Future. We keep hearing that attention spans are infinitesimal. We also hear and witness that people will endlessly scroll short-form content or binge eight 30-minute episodes of a streaming show. Both require attention; lots of it.

AI is going to shift this tension even further. It will quickly and tirelessly generate content as fast as data centers can get built, lakes drained and electricity generated. I kid. Kinda. Younger adults, especially, want to connect, give their attention and build community around these increasingly niche fan communities.

91%

of Americans are confident that something they saw with their own eyes is true.

(Source: Ipsos Future of Attention survey conducted Jan. 28-29, 2026, among 1,120 U.S. adults.)

Redefining trust and engagement

We talked to Kyle Watson, the chief brand officer for the energy drink Celsius, who said, “What I see as important is brands creating their own ecosystems and connecting the dots between these communities, but also establishing those people in those communities who are going to be the brand's voice because they're so authentically connected to those humans.”

At the same time, there's a backlash in the form of a cottage industry focused on ... focus. This includes everything from notebooks and energy drinks to wellness retreats, where you can unplug and be mindful and center yourself.

Everything and everyone is vying for your attention *and your data*, which has been deemed the most-prized commodity by marketers and policymakers and platforms alike. Attention is essentially just a fancy way of saying time. You have a finite amount of it and marketers

want to grab it to, let's be honest, sell you things. AI is just getting started and already we are bombarded by information. We don't know what to trust, other than ourselves, what we see with our own eyes and hear with our own ears. And one of the only lines in this chart that's gone up since 2020 is messaging from brands who have leaned into values alignment and authenticity this decade.

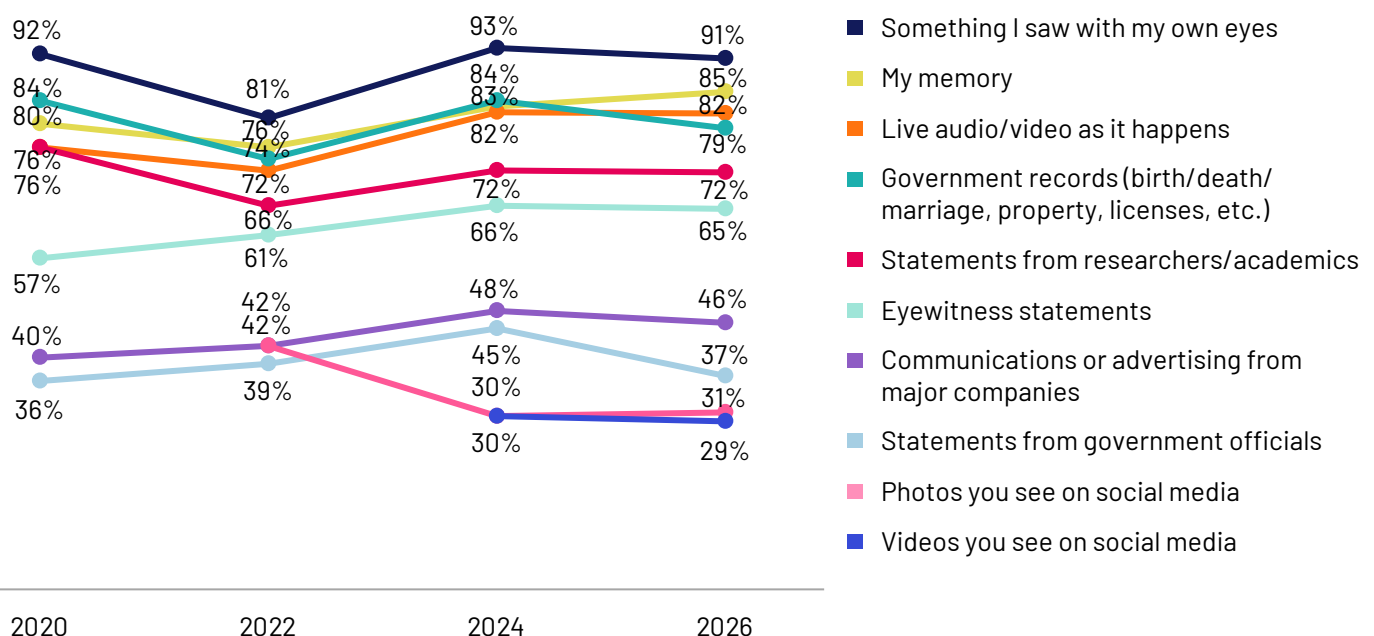
Trust and journalism's evolving role

Attention to news and information, not entertainment, is an especially important focus. There are so many ways for us to get news — and the ones we tend to turn to, social media — aren't ones we trust.

There's also a notable increase since 2020 of people saying journalism can take a side, as long as that's rooted in good reporting. That's it. That's the job. But reporters have also been taught for decades that conflict is a way to get attention, maybe even the key way.

People's trust in direct experiences stays strong while trust in institutions and media slips

Q. How confident are you, if at all, that the content or information you receive from each of the following sources is true? (% Confident)



(Sources: Ipsos Future of Attention survey conducted Jan. 28-29, 2026, among 1,120 U.S. adults; Ipsos Consumer Tracker conducted Oct. 1-2, 2024, among 1,085 U.S. adults; Ipsos surveys conducted Jun. 30-Jul. 1, 2022, among 1,120 U.S. adults; and Aug. 25-26, 2020, among 1,003 U.S. adults.)

In the issue, we talk to Amanda Ripley, journalist and author of “High Conflict.” She teaches journalists how to reduce the conflict in their reporting while still telling good stories. That conflict gains attention but erodes trust and makes communication and cooperation difficult. While AI is going to cause lots of problems for us in disinformation and such, she sees a big positive from AI. She told me:

“AI is shockingly good at coaching humans to be better communicators in conflict. If we start from the premise that most of us are not well-skilled in intelligent, healthy, smart-conflict skills, we never get that training. We certainly don’t see it modeled in our politics or our culture, right? To thrive in the modern age, you’re going have to get much better at it, much more quickly. That’s the only hope we’ve got. We have found AI tools to be very, very good at helping humans, for example, get better at listening.”

At the outset, I hinted at a death. Is there a world where AI kills email marketing? AI tools are already at a point where they can generate endless, seemingly personalized content tailored just for you. That’s going to happen at scale any moment now. Your email software, meanwhile, is going to be better at figuring out what communications are worthy of your attention and keeping the rest from you.

Looking ahead

So there’s a plausible future, where the only way to break through and get people’s attention — or at least show up in the daily AI summary — is by having something unique and owned, and something the LLMs won’t find on the internet. One solution? Trustworthy data and research. Tell your customers something they don’t know about something they care about, and you’ll get their attention.

Keeping all of this in mind, you’ll note What the Future has evolved and streamlined. Spend your attention as you choose, in whatever order you like. We have content for you to read. We have charts if that’s your thing. We have a new format for the webinar that includes a live conversation with guests who weren’t interviewed for the issue. Scroll, click, watch, learn away. And we’ve already been picked up for another issue, so stay tuned for What the Future: Success later this summer.



Matt Carmichael is editor of What the Future.

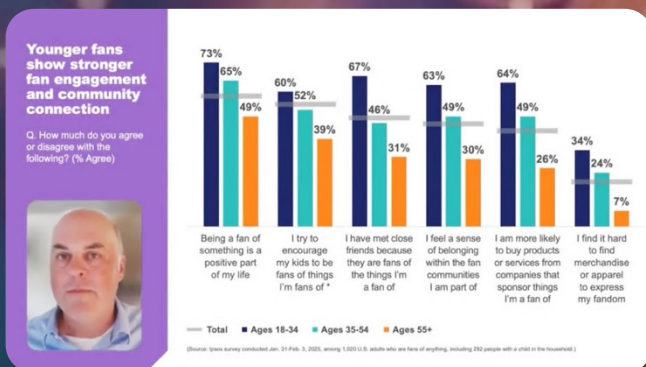
9 points

is the increase since 2020 in Americans agreeing that news organizations can take a side on an issue and still be truthful.

(Source: Ipsos Future of Attention survey conducted Jan. 28-29, 2026, among 1,120 U.S. adults; and Ipsos survey conducted Aug. 25-26, 2020, among 1,003 U.S. adults.)

SEE BEYOND THE HORIZON

Ipsos **What the Future** complimentary webinars give you **personalized insights** for your business

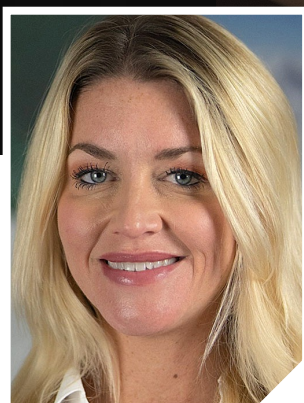


When you imagine possible tomorrows,
you ask better questions today.

**BOOK YOUR CUSTOM
WEBINAR NOW**



HOW AN ENERGY DRINK UPSTART IS REWRITING THE RULES OF MASS ATTENTION



Kyle Watson

Chief brand officer, Celsius

At the confluence of many trends across everything from gaming to wellness sits a market that is both mature and also flourishing with start ups: energy drinks. One of the former upstarts, Celsius, is now a category leader.

Fueled by investment from PepsiCo it has grown organically, through expansion into overseas markets as well as through acquisitions of Alani and Rockstar. Like many brands, Celsius has used a wide range of attention-grabbing means, ranging from niche guerrilla marketing to Super Bowl ads.

How does a brand get, and just as importantly, keep an audience's attention these days? Kyle Watson, Celsius' chief brand officer, says the job is a lot of things, but it's definitely not easy. Here's how this fast-growing brand tackles the attention problem.

71%

of Gen Z adults say they feel a sense of belonging within the fan communities they are part of, 21 points higher than the average adult.

(Source: Ipsos Future of Attention survey conducted Jan. 28-29, 2026, among 1,120 U.S. adults.)

Matt Carmichael: There aren't many mass audiences anymore. Does that affect our cultural unity and identity?

Kyle Watson: Yes. Social media has become so key, and that's really amplified for brands to speak to audiences in the right way, have that relevance and speak to them in a way that feels authentic. People are out there trying to find their tribe that have shared interests. Of course, those big cultural moments like the Super Bowl are still important, but it's really more how you approach it from a content, community and subculture perspective.

Carmichael: How do you get the attention of relevant subcultures and invite them into your brand?

Watson: It takes a lot of work. Social media is this fast-moving feedback loop where the algorithm becomes part of the conversation. What I see as important is brands creating their own ecosystems and connecting the dots between these communities but also establishing people in

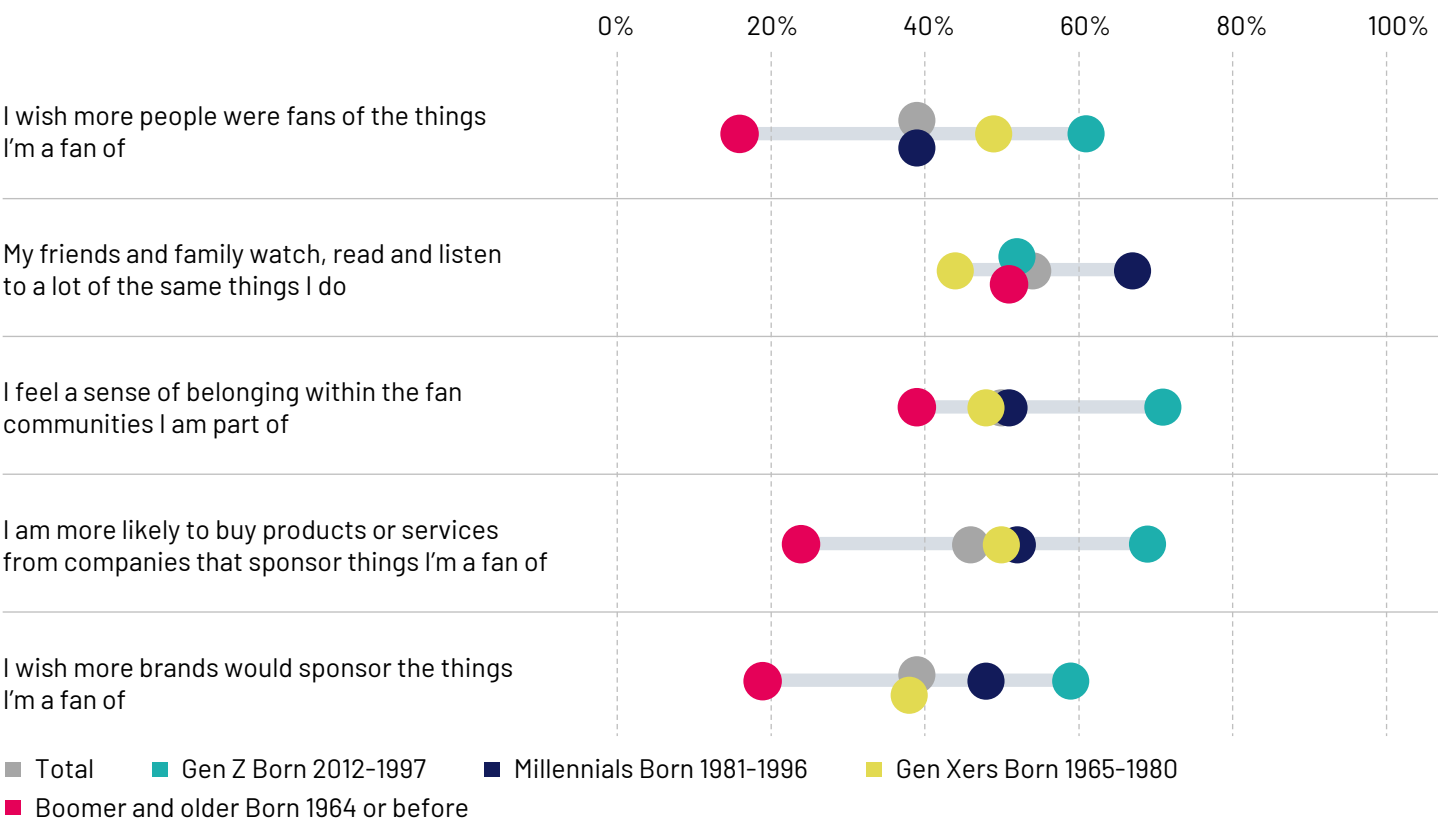
those communities that are going to be the brand's voice because they're so authentically connected to those humans. We did that with our brand ambassador program. Obviously, that takes a lot of social listening. It's understanding where these audiences are living, working and playing. As a brand, you have to have a team that has a pulse on cultural conversations as they're happening.

Carmichael: Do you ever just wish you could go back to, "Oh, we just ran a commercial on all three networks and we captured 80% of our audience"?

Watson: In a way, yes, because there's some top funnel where you just want to be able to get this message out there efficiently, and you want to have the consumers in that audience segment understand that top-down message. But the value is not the same as it used to be because of the way that message is hitting consumers. Consumers are looking for something different. They're looking for something that feels a little bit more relatable. That's where there is this shift in content being less buttoned-up and less production-heavy.

Younger adults have a higher desire for connecting in fan communities

Q. How much do you agree or disagree with the following? (% Agree)



(Source: Ipsos Future of Attention survey conducted Jan. 28-29, 2026, among 1,120 U.S. adults.)

Carmichael: Your growth really started from a niche differentiation.

Watson: As a challenger brand in the energy category, we were positioned more as a fitness beverage. What was interesting is, at the time, that was really niche. It was an amazing time for us to be so differentiated because there were these trends around better-for-you brands and health and wellness. Being this fitness brand gave us that edge. Fitness wasn't just going to the gym; fitness was becoming a lifestyle. But it doesn't mean you're being inauthentic if you start reaching a larger, more mainstream audience.

Carmichael: To continue growing, does that involve getting the attention of new audiences or expansions of those initiatives as they become more mainstream?

Watson: 100%. That is where a lot of our insights come in, understanding white space and opportunities for growth. We do need to continue to bring new consumers into our brand outside of just Gen Z. Gen Z is, at this point in their life, where they're entering into the category after they turn 18. They're going to college, studying, they have sports, intramurals,

Greek life. But we also want to make sure we're hitting other people. There's a shift happening in the category, meaning as people enter into different stages of life, they're looking for something that aligns differently with their lifestyle.

Carmichael: With the tension between lots of tools for getting attention but also lots of channels competing for attention, is your job getting easier or harder?

Watson: It's definitely getting harder for brands to grab that attention because it's not just plug-and-play, it's not just a big media buy. It requires a lot more work and a lot more insights.

Marketing is a complete mix of art and science, and to be successful, you need to have a nice balance of that mix. But the insights piece is critical — understanding those white space opportunities, evolution in consumer trends and preferences and shifts in how people's daily lives unfold. Brands need to show up not just where they live, not just where they work, not just where they play — all of it. We need to meet them in those occasions, and we have to understand how to speak to them in those occasions.

Matt Carmichael is editor of *What the Future*.



Consumers are looking for something different. They're looking for something that feels a little bit more relatable. That's where there is this shift in content being less buttoned-up and less production-heavy."

– Kyle Watson, *Celsius*

HOW DISINFORMATION AND 'CONFLICT ENTREPRENEURS' THRIVE IN THE MODERN ATTENTION ECONOMY

Since April 2020, Ipsos has surveyed American consumer attitudes on topics like the economy, artificial intelligence (AI) and current events via the biweekly Consumer Tracker.

Sometimes, questions build on prior What the Future questions. Here's what we learned when we resurveyed a 2020 question from our Truth issue on the Consumer Tracker.

WHY WE ASKED: As brands battle for people's attention, they no longer control their brand messages nor the ecosystem they exist in. Their worlds are continually shaped by user-generated content, disruption and declining trust.

Couple that with growing competition among content creators for people's attention and the environment is ripe for hyperbole, misinformation and disinformation to thrive.

In the interview with journalist and author Amanda Ripley, she discusses how in polarized markets, "conflict entrepreneurs" inflame polarity for profit, importance, attention, among other reasons. This breed of influencer thrives on crafting high-conflict narratives in uncontrolled, trust-deficient spaces.

There are plenty of unintentional ways that brands get drawn into conflict or misinformation, but when a conflict entrepreneur gets involved brand messages can spiral out of control. The challenge is universal, affecting both consumer and business-to-business environments. Marketers on both sides recognize the need for trust. To arm brands against these unchecked narratives, information and truth are the best defenses to remain resilient, understand the message impacts and manage trust effectively.

WHAT WE FOUND: More than three in four people across 20 countries identified that spreading disinformation to influence public opinion as the top global threat, and 82% of Americans agree, according to an Ipsos poll for the Halifax Security Forum. So strategic insight is critical to navigate these challenges.



The Ipsos Consumer Tracker showed that nearly two in three Americans (62%) are confident in their own ability to tell news content from opinion content. That’s not necessarily encouraging because behavioral science tells us that people tend to be overconfident, rather than have a healthy skepticism in an environment where we know disinformation exists and flourishes.

Meanwhile, more than half (52%) feel that all media is biased. These opinions didn’t veer far from those in Ipsos’ 2020 What the Future: Truth survey. This could explain why people feel less concerned about disinformation compared to other threats than their global peers. Interestingly, American perceptions of news organizations’ ability to remain truthful even when taking sides has improved to 54% from 45% in the Truth survey.

Businesses need to identify and monitor potential conflict entrepreneurs, starve them of the fuel for conflict, prevent them from fueling drama and set boundaries rather than trying to convince them. (You can read our Q&A with Amanda Ripley on page 12.)

Kate MacArthur is managing editor of *What the Future*.

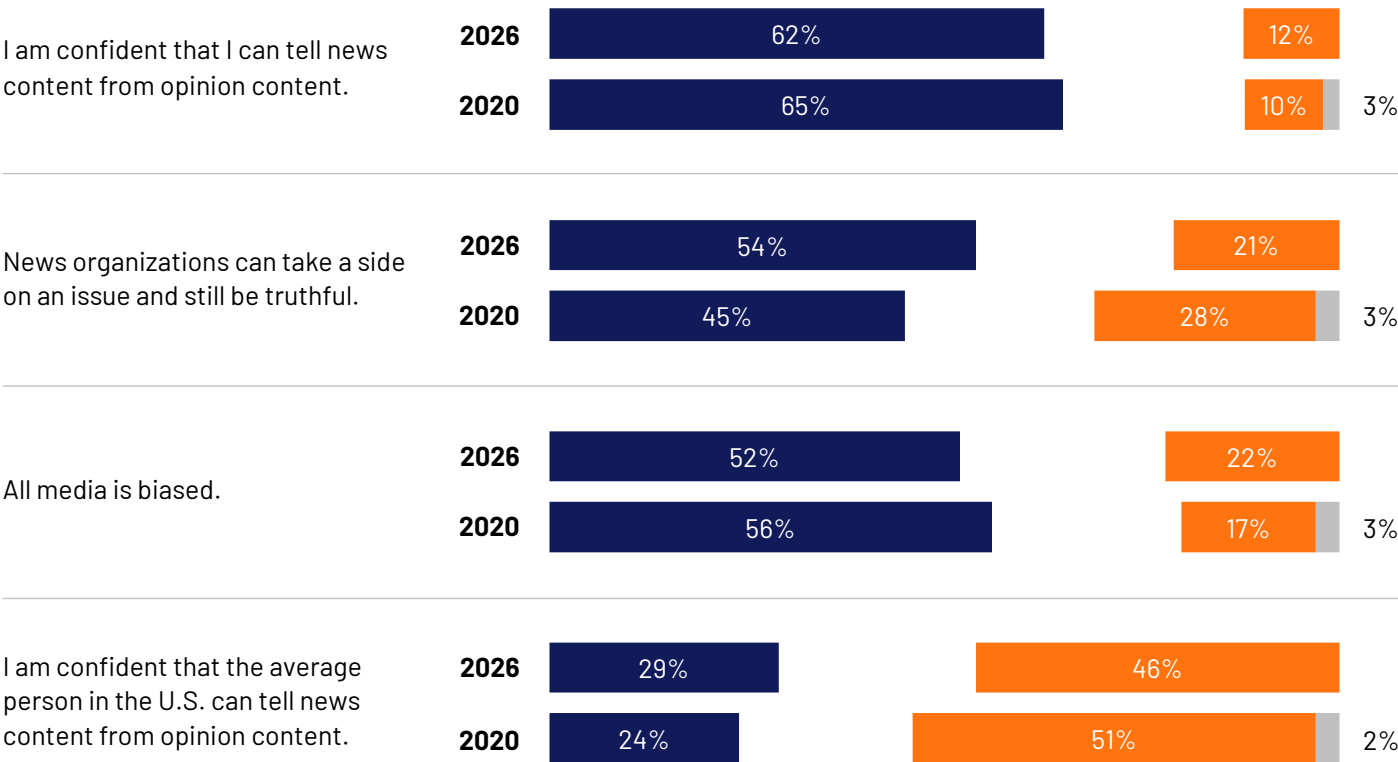
To disarm or limit conflict entrepreneurs' influence, companies can turn to a variety of trust-focused research tools to understand:

- What are the overarching drivers for trust in your sector and specific drivers for your company
- The impact of media messages and their credibility
- How large language models portray a brand and the associated key attributes and themes
- Which sources influence how a brand is described by large language models
- Where misinformation is occurring
- Which creators are most influential about a message or brand

By understanding a brand’s sources of trust and how customers connect to them, companies can be more resilient to disruptions from both conflict entrepreneurs as well as less intentional misinformation.

More people believe news can be truthful, even if biased

Q. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (% Total)



■ Agree □ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree ■ Don't know

(Sources: Ipsos Consumer Tracker survey conducted Oct. 22-23, 2025, among 1,085 U.S. adults; and Ipsos survey conducted Aug. 25-26, 2020, among 1,003 U.S. adults.)

CONTENT IS FULL OF CHEAP CONFLICT ATTENTION GRABS. IT'S TIME TO CRAFT A NEW NARRATIVE



Amanda Ripley

Journalist and author, "High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out"

Journalists (and marketers) are taught that conflict is a great way to get and keep attention. That's certainly what journalist and author Amanda Ripley's first editor, the legendary newspaper editor, David Carr, taught her. But she wonders if journalism and other forms of storytelling have come to define conflict too narrowly.

For instance, internal conflict or the tension of the unexpected can both be gripping. Instead, the focus is almost always on some sort of fight. This conflict can be intentional (disinformation campaigns, for instance) or unintentional. It can be constructive conflict that leads to progress, or quite the opposite. The fight-centric narrative has helped lead us into a period of high conflict, the titular subject of Amanda Ripley's book, and the center of her current work.

What is all the conflict about, can we get attention without it and is there a way out of it? How can we dial it down so we can have conversations that align with our values and don't just create more conflict? Can you get attention without it today? And will AI make this all better, worse or just different?

83% of Gen Xers express concern that the personal data they provide for tailored ad messages make them a target for spam or phishing.

(Source: Ipsos Future of Attention survey conducted Jan. 28-29, 2026, among 1,120 U.S. adults.)

Matt Carmichael: How does conflict get attention and keep it?

Amanda Ripley: If we go back to the science of storytelling, we know that the thing that rivets the human imagination is unexpected change. That's why mysteries and science stories are interesting. When you're constantly bombarded with dysfunctional conflict, functional conflict is unexpected, mysterious and intriguing in a way that it would not have been 20 years ago. I did a story for the *Washington Post* about a congressional committee that was half Republican, half Democrat, and they got a bunch of stuff done. If I had pitched that story 10 years ago, my editor would be like, "Are you kidding? It's incredibly boring." But because this is now unexpected, you can write it that way. The brain wants to know, "How did they do it?" Because in the beginning it looked impossible.

Carmichael: Let’s back up. What is high conflict?

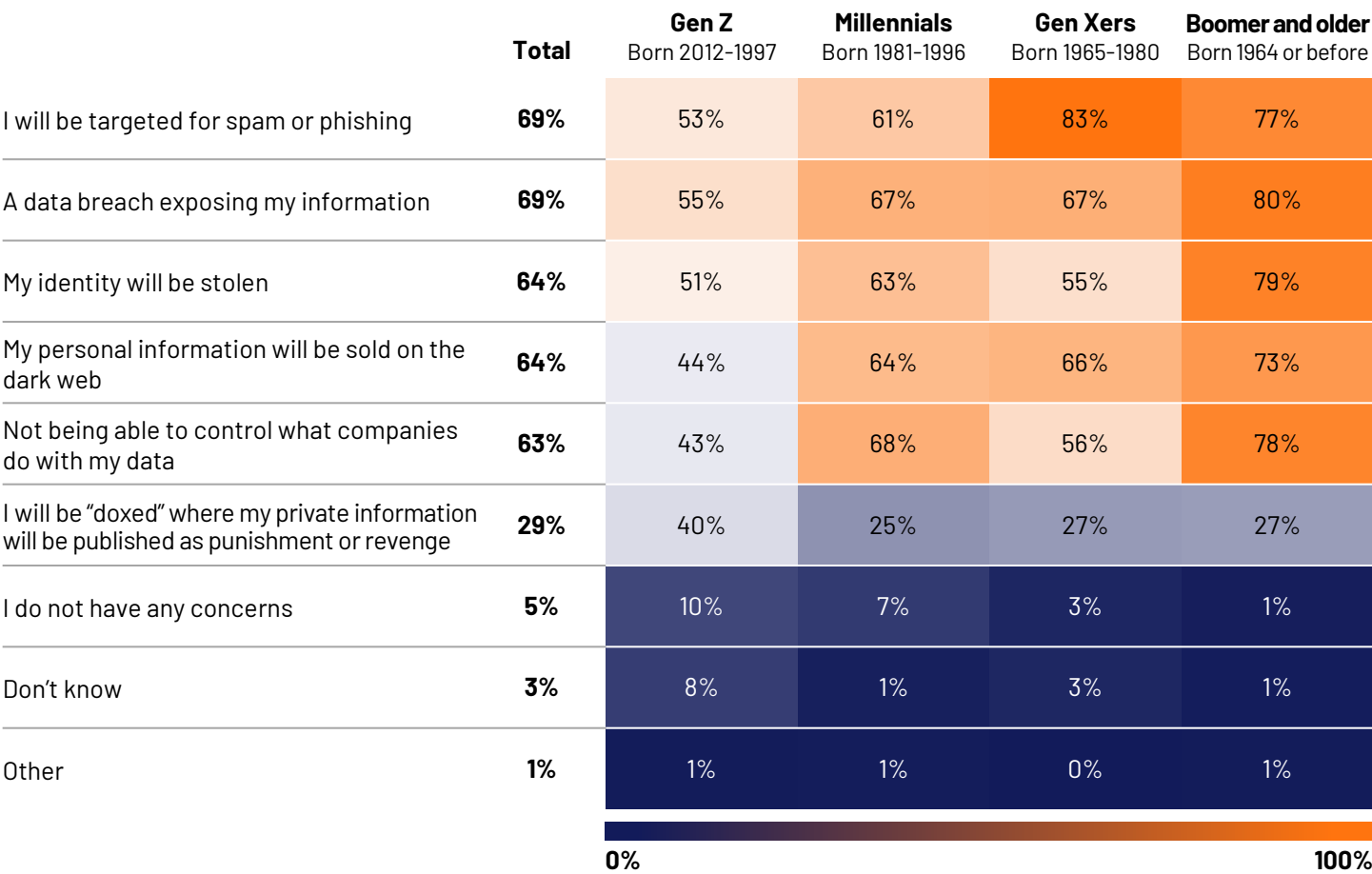
Ripley: High conflict is sometimes called intractable or malignant conflict. It escalates to a point where our behavior and perception get extra distorted. Whatever the conflict started to be about, it's now about something else. It fuels itself like a negative feedback loop. Every intuitive thing you do tends to make things worse. You have to do quite counterintuitive things, which we don't have a lot of experience or training for.

Carmichael: And in politics?

Ripley: The same is true in high-conflict politics. You might think impeaching a president would make him less popular. That's not how high conflict works. You might think that overturning *Roe v. Wade* would lead to fewer abortions in the United States. That's not what happened.

Most Americans are concerned about their data privacy, especially women and older adults

Q. What concerns, if any, do you have about the personal data you provide being used to tailor advertising messages to you? (% Total)



(Source: Ipsos Future of Attention survey conducted Jan. 28-29, 2026, among 1,120 U.S. adults.)

The nature of polarization is that each action leads to a corresponding action. It's important to understand that this kind of conflict does not react the way you think it will.

Carmichael: What are the conditions for high conflict?

Ripley: One is the presence of corruption. Institutions aren't trusted to do what people count on them to do, which is when people take matters into their own hands.

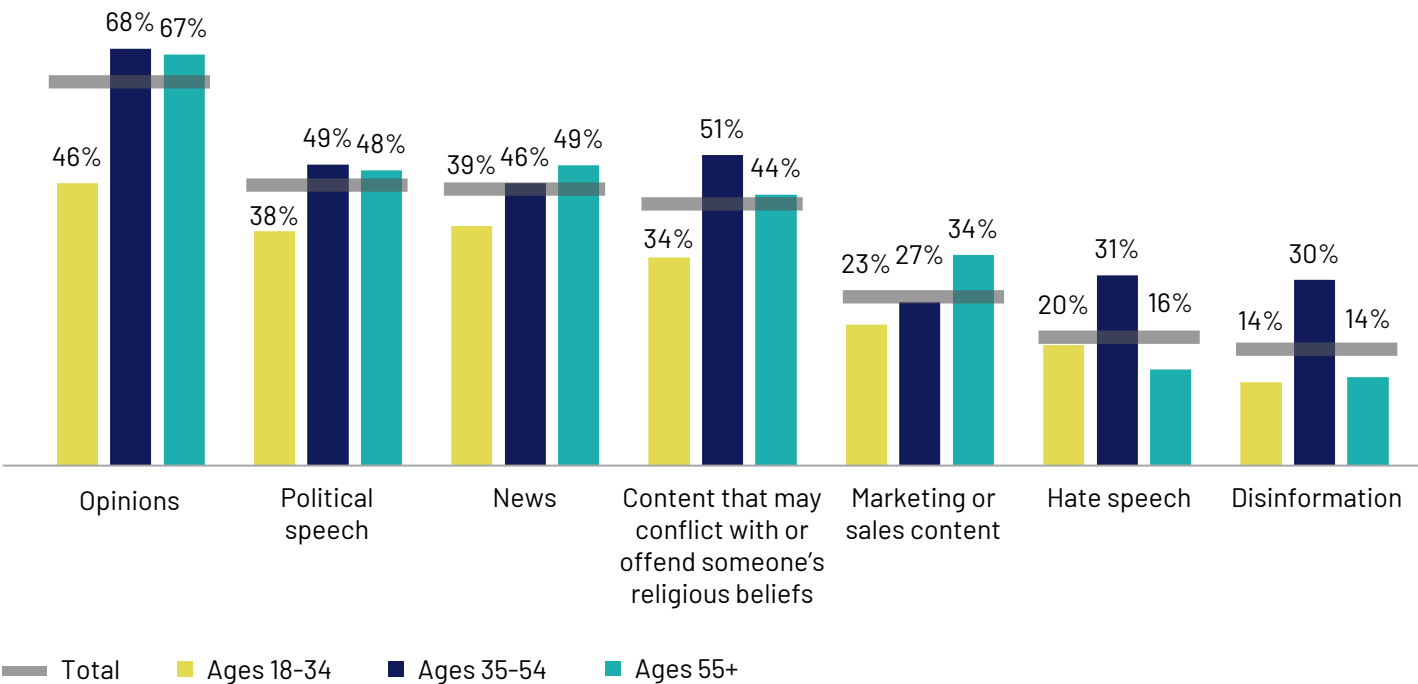
Another condition is the presence of conflict entrepreneurs. These are people or companies that exploit and inflame conflict for their own ends. One difference between now and the high-conflict time of the Nixon administration is that we have a bunch of institutions that really reward, celebrate and manufacture conflict entrepreneurs, from social media to my own profession of journalism to politics. There has never been a better time to thrive as a conflict entrepreneur in human history.

Carmichael: Former representative Marjorie Taylor Greene was a conflict entrepreneur, but kind of recanted as she retired from Congress. And she was great at garnering attention. Could that situation help diffuse some of the high conflict she stoked?

Ripley: She was on CNN being interviewed by Dana Bash, and she apologized for her role in polarizing the country. Immediately, Dana Bash did what we journalists always do, which is basically call her a hypocrite by pointing out her past actions. I wish she had just said what she was probably thinking: "I don't believe you. Show me why I should believe you. What actions could you take in the next six months so Americans like me can believe that you're serious?" That would've been a great response, as opposed to, "Well, in 2020, you said this on Facebook." When people are starting to exit high conflict, it's a very lonely, difficult thing to do. If you just do the intuitive thing and look tough for your audience. It doesn't change this dynamic that we're in.

Older adults are stronger advocates for speech free from government regulation

Q. Should the federal government be able to regulate the following types of speech online, or not?
(% Should not be able to regulate)



(Source: Ipsos Future of Attention survey conducted Jan. 28-29, 2026, among 1,120 U.S. adults.)

Carmichael: You're actually doing something about this with your organization, Good Conflict.

Ripley: We've trained a couple thousand journalists in how to cover conflict differently. A couple of things we've learned give me hope. First, there are a lot of journalists, especially younger local journalists, who are absolutely desperate to do this differently.

They understand that this is broken. Second, there is a business reason to do it differently because four out of ten Americans are now often or sometimes avoiding contact with the news.

Carmichael: That sounds like a market.

Ripley: It's a big market. That's roughly 100 million Americans. This avoidance problem is a paradox. A minority of people are deeply engaged with the news because high conflict is so magnetic. They are sending signals to the business that they want more high conflict, controversy, and outrage. At the very same time, you have this much larger group of people who are becoming allergic to the news. They literally cannot metabolize it. Big marquee national media are probably never going to accept this, and they may go down with the ship.

But for newer, more innovative local media, I think there's still a chance they will fundamentally revisit how they do journalism because it is in their business, spiritual, and moral interest to do so.

Carmichael: So it's more content than news?

Ripley: Yeah, I think that's right. Or sometimes journalism-adjacent content.

Carmichael: AI is clearly going to allow and already is allowing disinformation at scale. Bots are like artificial conflict entrepreneurs. But can AI be part of the solution, too?

Ripley: We have played a bit with AI and found it to be shockingly good at coaching humans to be better communicators in conflict. Most of us are not well-skilled in intelligent, healthy conflict skills — we never get that training, and we certainly don't see it modeled in our politics or culture.

To thrive in the modern age, you're going to have to get much better at it quickly. We have found AI tools to be very good at helping humans, for example, get better at listening.

Matt Carmichael is editor of *What the Future*.



We have played a bit with AI and found it to be shockingly good at coaching humans to be better communicators in conflict."

- Amanda Ripley, journalist and author

WHAT CONSUMERS WILL WATCH AND BRANDS WILL FACE IN TOMORROW'S CONTENT REVOLUTION



Jeffrey Cole

Director of the University of Southern California's Center for the Digital Future

Brands increasingly operate in contexts beyond their control. Advertising, marketing and the business of attention are disrupted not only by technology and new platforms, but the multiplying effects of eroding trust, booming AI and misinformation in media.

Jeffrey Cole, director of University of Southern California's Center for the Digital Future, studies how companies in media and digital technology across entertainment, sports and streaming networks prepare for future disruptions. He compiled lessons from this work for his forthcoming book, *Disruptors At The Gate: When Visionaries, Trailblazers, And Two Guys In A Garage Turned The World Upside Down*. These lessons are especially relevant for the Attention economy and how companies and brands can navigate its disruptive change. A key conclusion in his book is that we've lived through three massive disruptions, and some of the biggest in history in 25 years: the rise of the internet, COVID, and now, AI. "Until recently, I thought AI was the biggest disruption since the printing press," he says. "Now, we really can make the case it's the biggest disruption in human history." He believes brands can weather these challenges by anticipating disruption, fostering trust through authenticity, and consistently delivering transparent communication to connect with consumers in the shifting digital market.

49% of Americans say that seeing a brand's advertisement or content near AI-generated content does not affect their perception of the brand.

(Source: Ipsos Future of Attention survey conducted Jan. 28-29, 2026, among 1,120 U.S. adults.)

Kate MacArthur: What's the evolution of how we're watching content and how brands are interacting with it?

Jeffrey Cole: It's not the content that's changed so much. It's the platforms that have really changed. Movie content isn't going anywhere. The thing that's hurting movie theaters is streaming. And yet on streaming, we want that same content. The thing that's going to spell the end of broadcast networks is not technology, it's the loss of programming and the loss of sports, in particular to the big tech companies. We're seeing Amazon, Apple and YouTube become big in sports.

MacArthur: Hasn't the content itself changed?

Cole: AI is certainly going to add new, cheaper methods. What's happened in parallel is that the barrier to being a creator has almost disappeared. That shift has created a whole

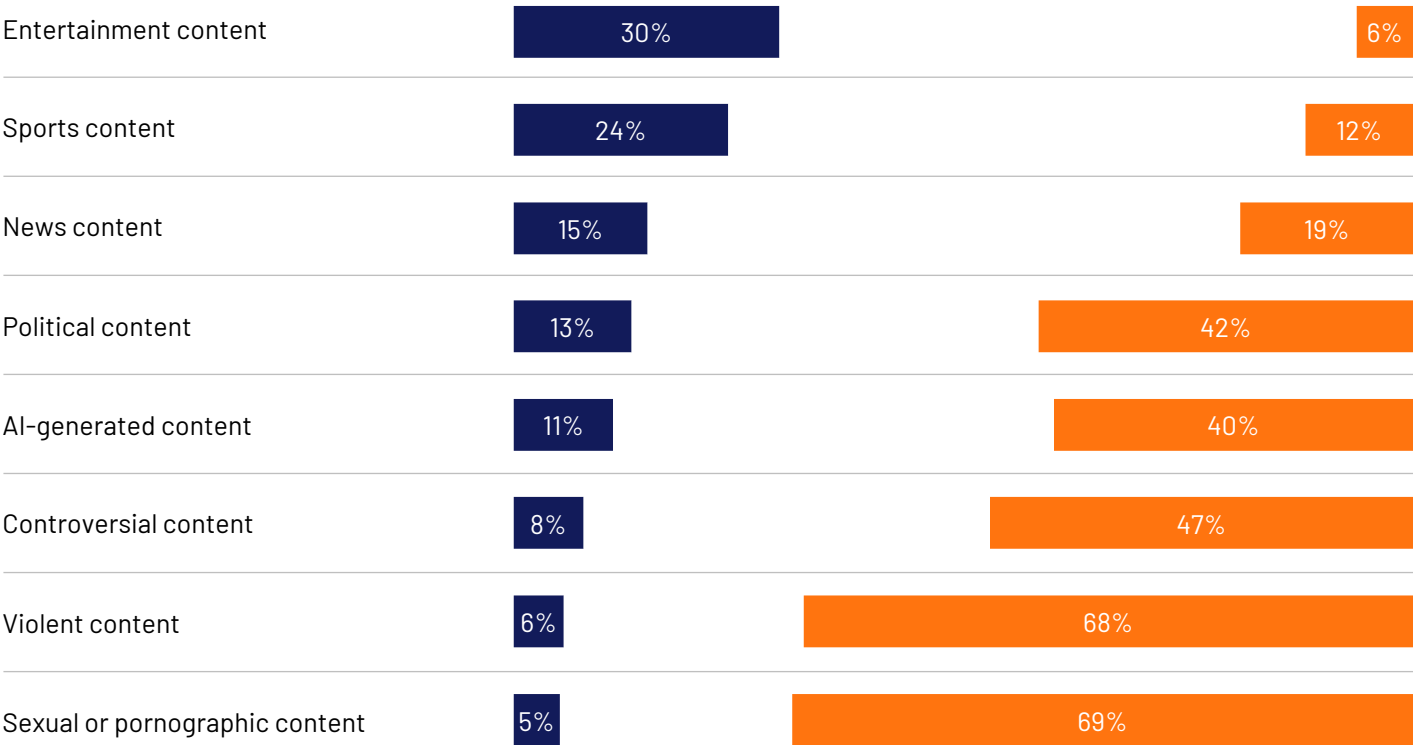
different type of content that's not really challenging traditional media, and traditional media is still existing within all this new media.

MacArthur: How important then is the shift of what we're watching and where and what does it mean for brands?

Cole: For brands, life used to be easy. To reach your audience, you only had to go to ABC, NBC, CBS. Now, brands have to work so much harder. To reach customers is so much more difficult, requires more channels, different types of content, content geared to their older audience who are more likely to be watching and giving it undivided attention to their younger audiences who may be doing three things at the same time. It is a much more difficult world to navigate, and it takes a lot more effort and a lot more different types of programming to get to them. And that's the world we live in and we're not going back.

Nearly 70% of Americans feel less favorable toward brands when content appears near sexual or violent content

Q. Would seeing a brand's advertisement or content near the following make you feel more or less favorable toward a brand, or would it make no difference? – AI-generated content (% Total)



■ More favorable □ Would have no impact on how I feel about the brand ■ Less favorable

(Source: Ipsos Future of Attention survey conducted Jan. 28-29, 2026, among 1,120 U.S. adults.)

MacArthur: What can brands do to ensure they're not being harmed when facing content they don't control?

Cole: What we're really talking about is classic disruption. First, expect to be disrupted. It means a tremendous amount of tracking. It means being in close communication with your customers. We saw during COVID many customers rejected advertising from brands that were doing what advertising always did: selling the product. And we're back to promoting the things that brands make and sell. But people expect more than just the hard sell. People want to have some kind of a relationship with brands.

MacArthur: In this environment of digital content and declining trust, how can brands build solid connections with audiences?

Cole: This is a pretty extraordinary time where not only is there so much misinformation, but our faith in the institutions we have trusted are really being challenged. There's no one that we trust. I would argue that the best-liked person in America is Dolly Parton. We're talking about a singer with great authenticity that people really believe is exactly who she says she is. The word authenticity can't be overused. There is a place for companies talking about their mission as a company and why they do the things they do. But that can't be every message they share.

MacArthur: How should brands prepare for future changes?

Cole: Understand your strengths and weaknesses. Look at your relationships within the company, with competitors. In particular, understand your relationships with your customers. Is there loyalty? Not all brands command loyalty, some do. Understand where threats and change may come from to be as ahead of it, and when it does come to make an honest assessment.

Kate MacArthur is managing editor of *What the Future*.



Expect to be disrupted. It means a tremendous amount of tracking. It means being in close communication with your customers."

- Jeffrey Cole, University of Southern California's Center for the Digital Future

TENSIONS

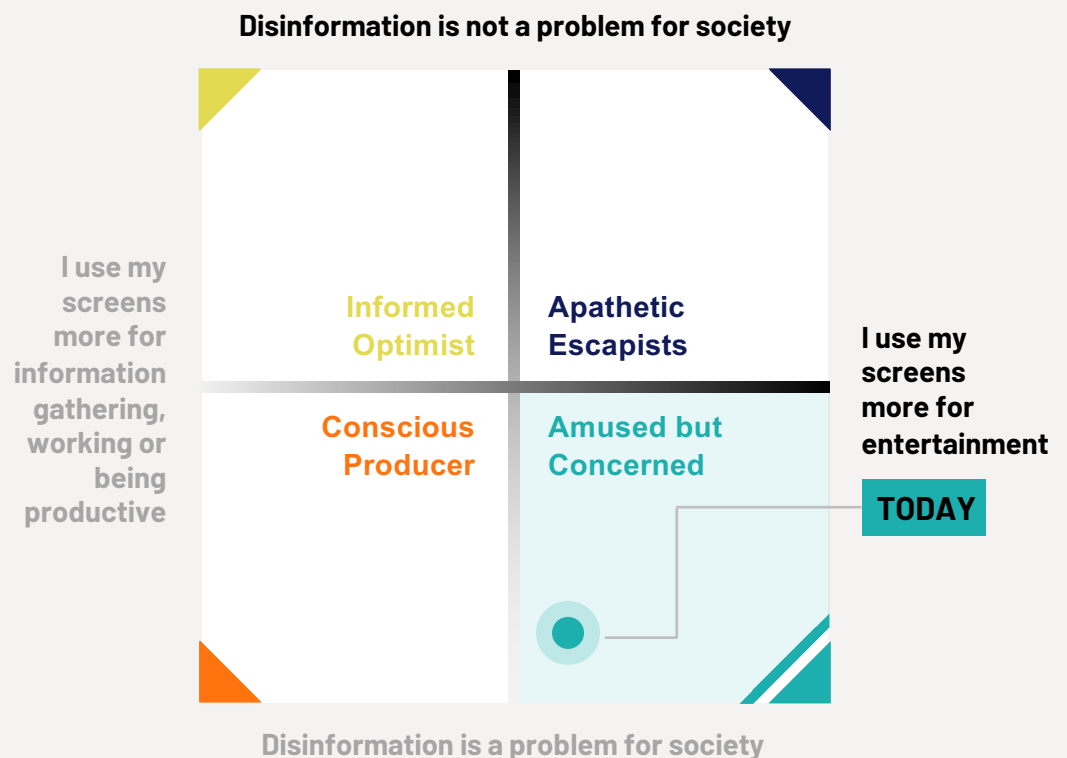
The future is always in tension. We can measure those contradictions today with forced-choice questions.

We plotted two responses against each other in a classic 2x2 grid. If nothing changes, we'll stay where we are. But this way, you can see how far opinion would have to shift to move us into a different quadrant in the future.

Q. For each of the following pairs of statements, please select the one that comes closest to your view, even if neither statement is exactly right. (% Total)



1. MANAGING FUN AND WORK ONLINE IN A DISINFORMATION ENVIRONMENT



Amused but Concerned:

Today, Americans use screens more for entertainment (58%) than for work (42%), yet 89% worry about disinformation. Depending on their habits, they could shift into the three other quadrants.

Conscious Producer:

As remote work grows, people may prioritize productivity and tolerate disinformation risks for valuable information, moving them to the lower-left box. Here's where AI fact-checking tools can build trust.

Informed Optimist:

If media literacy grows, people could shift to the mindset where they rely on screens for knowledge and see disinformation as manageable instead of overwhelming.

Apathetic Escapists:

If users surrender to misinformation as they seek entertainment, they may move here. But they risk exploitation by unscrupulous creators, further eroding trust.

Kate MacArthur is managing editor of What the Future.

TENSIONS

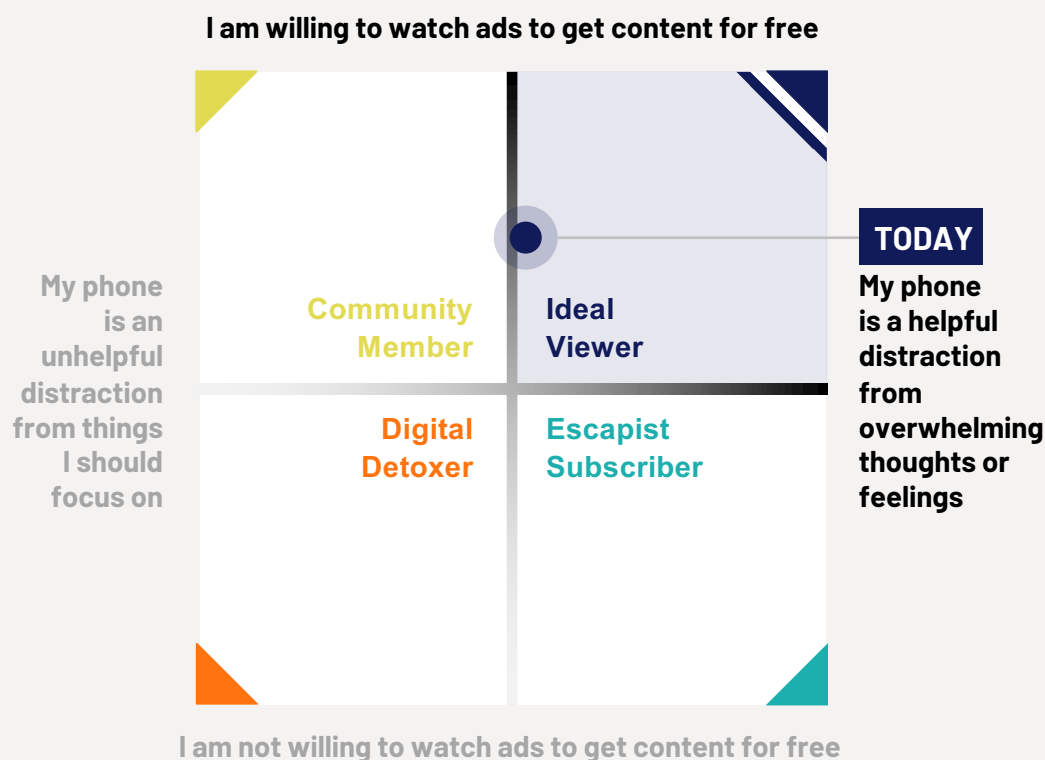
The future is always in tension. We can measure those contradictions today with forced-choice questions.

We plotted two responses against each other in a classic 2x2 grid. If nothing changes, we'll stay where we are. But this way, you can see how far opinion would have to shift to move us into a different quadrant in the future.

Q. For each of the following pairs of statements, please select the one that comes closest to your view, even if neither statement is exactly right. (% Total)



2. BALANCING SPONSORED DISTRACTION AND DIGITAL ESCAPE



Ideal Viewer:

Currently, 52% of Americans see their phones as a helpful distraction, while 75% watch ads for free content. This barely places them in the upper right block. If habits change, they'll drift into new territory.

Escapist Subscriber:

People seeking well-being want ad-free viewing, which creates opportunities for premium subscriptions. But rising costs could push them away.

Digital Detoxer:

If people cut ad exposure and phone dependency, they would shift to the lower left box. Marketers would need to pivot from traditional ads to community-driven events and experiences to appeal to this group.

Community Member:

Those who find their phones unhelpfully distracting but are more open to ads would move to the upper left quad. Brands that balance usefulness and connection could find long-term loyalty with them.

Kate MacArthur is managing editor of What the Future.

For full results, methodology and data tables, visit future.ipsos.com and [subscribe to our newsletter](#) to receive our next issue of **What the Future**

Editor

Matt Carmichael

Managing editor

Kate MacArthur

Staff writer

Christopher Good

Art director

Stephen Geary

Graphic designer

Kahren Kim

Newsletter

Ben Meyerson

Web

James De Los Santos

Survey design

Mallory Newall

Johnny Sawyer

Survey execution

Melissa Kordik,

Rachel Franz,

Loren Mastracci



www.ipsos.com/en-us