

THE OPIUM IS THE INTERNET

Like opium, argues Lottie Moggach, "the internet functions as an unedifying way to kill time"

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We mustn't romanticise intellectual life before the internet. Procrastination did not begin with YouTube. Novels have always been abandoned. There is no evidence that the Victorians who spent their evenings pinning dead insects into mahogany cases were better nourished mentally than their descendants, live-tweeting "Strictly Come Dancing"¹.

There are even those, like Clive Thompson, the author of "Smarter Than You Think", who claim that the internet is improving our minds. But that's not how it feels to me. This is a medium that has shredded our ability to concentrate, discourages reflection and panders to our base instincts for trivia, and a lot of people are in thrall to it.

"Who is Kim Kardashian and why am I reading about her trousers?" asked a writer friend when first he ventured onto Mail Online. He was, however, powerless to resist and now, several years on, he is as familiar with the goings-on of the Kardashians as he is with those of his own family. I used to spend hours on Facebook every day, Hoovering up minor details of distant acquaintances' lives like krill. The Facebook account had to go. But now I'm hooked on Rightmove, the site that enables you to gaze at houses you will never be able to afford.

There must be some who use the internet for its best purposes—broadening horizons, disseminating vital information, forging life-enhancing connections. But, day to day, most of us tend to stick to e-mail and a small circuit of websites, like animals let loose on a plain who choose to scratch around in a few square yards. We may occasionally learn something, and it's exciting when our gags are re-tweeted by a C-list celebrity, but like opium the internet essentially functions as an unedifying way to kill time. Humans may have always sought ways to dodge work and avoid thinking too hard, but never before has the solution been so accessible, or so addictive.

¹ Émission sur BBC One où des célébrités viennent s'affronter lors de compétitions de danse de salon. Les téléspectateurs votent pour leur préféré.