

When Crisis Meets Controversy

In the aftermath of a tragedy, differing beliefs cause tension instead of unity

By Channing Sidders, Staff Writer

Political intolerance has woven its way through history, and now it is heavily present online.

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the term “political intolerance” refers to the unwillingness to extend basic rights and civil liberties to individuals or groups who hold different political views. Often stemming from perceived threats to one’s beliefs, values, or identity, it can lead to distrust and outright refusal to engage with certain people. In many cases, political intolerance opens the flood gates to dehumanization, which makes it easier to justify harmful actions towards certain people. Social media gives people an opportunity to express their values and opinions to people all around the world. Because of this, political intolerance finds a broader reach on the Internet.

“We have to be open to other people’s opinions,” civics teacher Sean Murphy said. “It’s your First Amendment guaranteed right to have free speech, but do it in a way that’s going to benefit people, not cause issue or problem.”

Camp Mystic is a private Christian summer camp for girls located in Kerr County, Texas near the Guadalupe River and was directly affected by the floods on July 4. Campers and counselors were unaware of the danger when storms started and water rapidly rose in the early morning. The campers were evacuated by counselors and staff after water began to overtake cabins. At least 27 young campers and teenage counselors were found dead and one girl has still not been found. This tragedy has been extremely politicized online, becoming yet another example of American society’s political intolerance.

Commenters blamed the deaths of the children on their parents voting to cut funding to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and National Weather Service (NWS).

As one commenter wrote on Threads, “They need a taste of their own medicine to see what voting to dismantle FEMA and NWS does.”

The National Weather Service issued their first Flash Flood Watch at around 1:00 in the afternoon on July 3. The second and most dire alerts for flash floods went off at 1:14 a.m. on July 4th, which many say they never got. According to CNN, counselors at Camp Mystic were also told to turn in their phones, which contributed to the unawareness of and unpreparedness for the floods.

“A natural disaster doesn’t happen depending on your political affiliation,” sophomore Knox Bossert said. “There’s no reason to attack someone over the tragedy of losing their child because of whether you identify as a Republican or a Democrat.”

In three years, many of today’s teens will be able to vote for the 48th President of the United States.



A full wall is missing from a Camp Mystic building after the Texas floods. The building is located near the Guadalupe River, where water rose over 20 feet during the flooding and affected many other buildings on camp property. Photo courtesy of Julio Cortez and AP Photo.

“It’s good to be educated,” sophomore Lennon Johnson said. “But if [kids] are talking about politics, they should have more of an open mind, because they still have time before they can vote.”

Making sure facts are accurate is important when making judgements on certain events as well.

“There’s biases between all news networks, some lean left, some lean right; same thing on social media,” Bossert said. “So the best thing is to just see the raw, unbiased facts of what’s going on and then that gives you the best way to go about your decision of who you vote for, who you want to vote for; who you agree with and who you disagree with.”

An article by Stanford University suggests negative emotions are what feeds intolerance. They propose that the way to reduce political tensions is actually quite simple, take a detached perspective. To take a detached perspective means stepping back from an issue to be unconnected emotionally or intellectually, which can dampen bad feelings and increase tolerance for different sides. Disconnecting from personal feelings relating to the person’s beliefs can make it easier to show empathy for the person themselves.

“A tragedy is a tragedy, and a death is a death,” Bossert said. “It doesn’t matter who you voted for.”

The Luxury of Outrage

The Starbucks Bearista cup reveals skewed priorities

By Channing Sidders, Staff Writer

Customers line up at 4 a.m. outside of a local Starbucks for a cup while 47 million people in America face food insecurity. This is the jarring and unforgivable disconnect that modern consumerism normalizes.

The Bearista cup craze is more than a harmless trend; it is a moral crisis, demonstrating a collective indifference where the fear of missing out on a collectible far outweighs the urgency of human suffering.

Launched on Nov. 6 as part of Starbucks' holiday merchandise, the glass bear wearing a green hat and holding a coffee cup sold out almost immediately in stores across the nation. But, selling out in mere minutes wasn't just based on customer desire. Most locations only received one to three cups, with the exception of those located in Target or Kroger, with reports of some receiving 10-12.

Even Elkhorn North's nearest location at 186th and Maple streets wasn't spared from the cup controversy.

"I thought we were getting a whole shipment of them," Starbucks employee senior Maddy Brettman said. "When I realized we only had one and it sold that morning, I was kind of surprised."

Brettman worked the closing shift on Nov. 6 and said the location received more than 20 calls about the sold-out bear-shaped merchandise.

"When things go viral, they go really viral, and ultimately companies play a role in that," personal finance teacher Brittany Ballou-Barton said. "They under-manufacture products they know are going to go viral to create artificial demand."

Artificial demand is the demand for a good or service that is created through external manipulation, like advertising and social pressure, rather than a natural need. Another factor that contributes to this social pressure modern consumers face are influencers.

A study by CivicScience found that 20% of U.S. adults have purchased a product based on an influencer's recommendation. The study also found that Gen Z, as well as women and middle-income households, were the most likely to be influenced. More recent data also suggests that groups most likely to make a purchase based on an influencer recommendation are lower income U.S. adults and those concerned about a recession.



The Starbucks Bearista cup launched on Nov. 6 for \$29.95. The cup has sparked anger from customers about the limited supply and is being resold for over 500% of the original price. Photo courtesy of Starbucks

In relation to the Starbucks Bearista cup, social media played a large role in its popularity. Accounts on Instagram and TikTok posted throughout the morning of release day “taking viewers along” as they searched multiple stores for the tumbler and showing their seasonal sugar cookie latte served to them in their purchase.

“I think influencers glorify these cups,” sophomore Makenzie Webster said. “The people who watch them are like, ‘Oh my gosh, I should glorify these things, too.’”

This pattern of short-lived trends has shown up throughout the years, but most of the objects subject to trends aren’t kept and used long-term.

“They (Stanley Cups) are in the thrift stores,” Ballou-Barton said. “People aren’t using them, they’ve given them up.”

These fleeting obsessions not only hurt consumers’ wallets, but the environment as well.

“These things are just pieces of plastic that hold no value and they’re just going to be replaced with more plastic,” Webster said.

When people buy and produce mass amounts of goods, it leads to more waste, emissions, and pollution.

The same internet that preaches “zero waste” and “going green” also includes unrealistic bathroom restocks that include acrylic containers filled with five of each product and accounts dedicated to “must-haves” at Target. This hypocrisy doesn’t just exist on the screen, it exists in the real world.

It is a privilege to showcase a ‘major Target haul’ to thousands of followers when over 50 million people have turned to food banks and pantries for help.

It is a privilege to buy new decorations for Christmas each year when homelessness increased 18% in 2024 with 771,480 people in America.

It is a privilege to be upset about not being able to buy the \$30 Bearista cup when over 13 million kids in the U.S. don’t have enough food to grow up strong.

“People are really unaware of what’s going on,” Webster said. “They choose to look at different fun topics, like the bear cup, instead.”

As easy as it is to sit comfortably in our own affluent lifestyles, we must consciously choose to step outside its confines to truly understand the world we share.

The Thneed of the 21st Century

AI isn't a "Fine-Something-That-All-People-Need"

By Channing Sidders, Staff Writer

Dr. Seuss's "The Lorax" (1971) is a classic children's book that follows the Once-ler as he tells the story of his demand for wealth through a Thneed, his invention made from the tufts of Truffula Trees. The product destroys the once bountiful and joyful Truffula Valley, and causes more problems than it "solves."

The Once-ler claims a Thneed is a "Fine-Something-That-All-People-Need." Its potential uses include shirts, hats, sweaters, swimsuits, towels, carpets, and even jump ropes. The functions of a Thneed are not only vague, but entirely questionable, as they often contradict themselves. The same object that can be used as a sweater on a cold winter day also has the ability to magically become a stylish swimsuit for a pool party.

AI itself shows alarming parallels to the fictional knitted object in more ways than one. Today's consumption of the technology is rapid and uncontrolled, with AI tools popping up almost everywhere in the digital landscape.

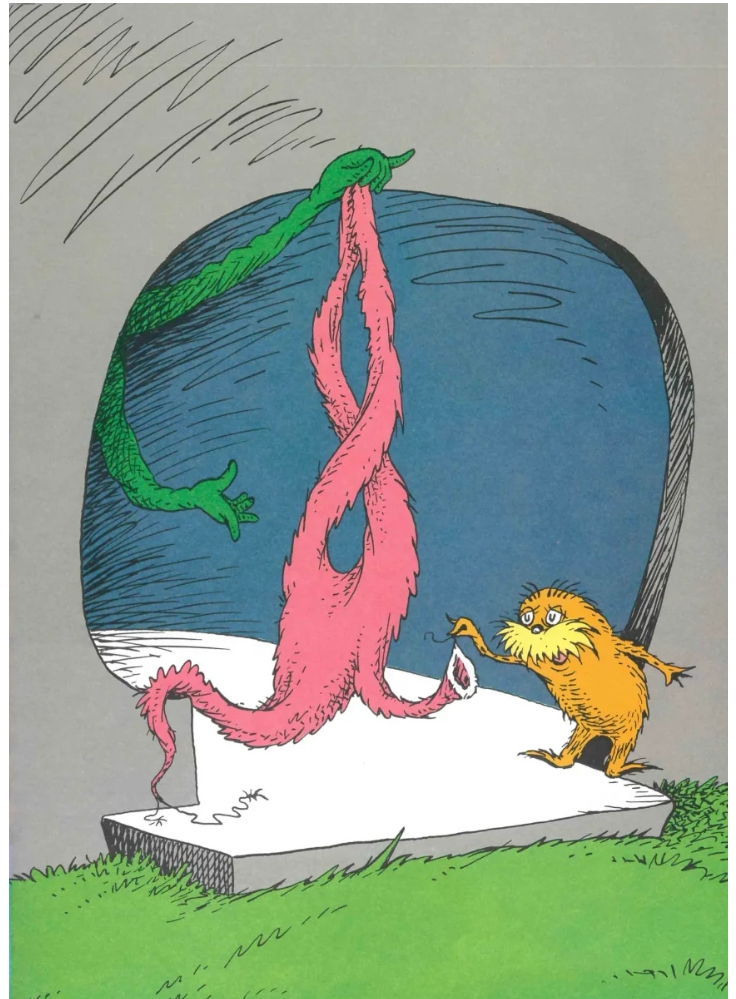
AI Overviews powered by Google Gemini appear at the top of search results to provide quick generated summaries. Spotify's "Made For You" playlists and "Wrapped" year overviews use AI to analyze listener data and create personalized summaries and mixes for each user.

Unfortunately, AI isn't just a useful tool that can make life easier or more fun, the negative impacts of becoming overreliant on AI far outweigh the benefits.

AI uses significant amounts of water to cool data centers as the models generate immense amounts of heat. Large facilities consume hundreds to millions of gallons of water per day varying based on location, technology, and the workload. According to scientists at the University of California, Riverside, every 100-word AI prompt entered into an AI model like ChatGPT uses around one bottle of water, or 519 milliliters. It doesn't seem like much, but billions of people around the world enter questions or prompts into AI models every minute.

AI also emits significant amounts of greenhouse gases including carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide. According to Climate Impact Partners, researchers estimated that training GPT-3, a single AI model, emitted around 500 metric tons of carbon dioxide, the same amount as driving a car from New York to San Francisco 438 times.

The overconsumption of Thneeds in "The Lorax" led to all of the Truffula Trees being cut down, the environment polluted, and the animals forced out of their homes. Today, this environmental chaos isn't a potential outcome, it is reality. Greenhouse gases already pollute Earth's atmosphere, and AI adds to the load.



The Lorax examines the Once-ler's invention, the Thneed. The Once-ler chopped down a Truffula Tree to create the Thneed, lighting the fuse for environmental destruction. Photo courtesy of The Art of Dr. Seuss.

“The general public doesn’t realize the environmental impact and will ignore it,” biology teacher Jordan Fuglestad said. “Anytime something makes life easier, the general population is not going to want it to go away.”

While AI models like Google Gemini and ChatGPT can help explain challenging topics and reword answers, easy access can also lead students to cheat.

Since the introduction of ChatGPT in November 2022, student self-report surveys by Emmanuel College have shown that 70% to 80% of high school students and 50% to 70% of college undergraduates have cheated on assignments. While AI isn’t the only method of cheating for students, it is one of the most prevalent and easily accessible options.

“Some people could graduate high school with all A’s and a 4.0 GPA using just AI,” sophomore Polly Davies said. “That’s going to impact how a lot of leaders are shaped in the future because they didn’t do their research for their professional career.”

The future depends on society not becoming entirely reliant on AI technology. Learning and creativity shape the world because AI can’t on its own.

“[Writing] is based on your actual experiences and people’s actual emotions, which AI doesn’t fully comprehend,” sophomore aspiring author Amala Golej said.

AI gets its data from the public internet, Wikipedia, user interactions, YouTube, and digital libraries. In short, AI models are trained on human works.

Hundreds of thousands of literary works across all genres have been used by major companies in technology to train their AI models. The problem lies in the fact that authors are usually not asked or even told that their work is going to be used by AI, nor do they get any form of compensation or credit.

As AI continues to copy instead of create, many are beginning to stand up against the rapid rise of the technology, just like the Lorax. These activists are driven by concerns over job displacement, loss of human creativity, and existential risks; just as the Lorax was driven by concerns over animal displacement, deforestation, and society as a whole.

The reign of the Thneed ended with a destroyed ecosystem and a society no longer aware of the bright and hopeful world of the past. Our society isn’t yet devastated by the effects of AI, but as it continues to progress and take over more and more of daily life, the light at the end of the tunnel continues to dim.

The environment cannot handle the overuse of water and emission of harmful gases that AI brings. Society cannot survive AI’s takeover of all aspects of life.

The Lorax spoke for the trees because the trees had no tongues. As AI begins to speak for all of us by writing our emails, creating our art, and changing our environment, we must ask: who is speaking for AI’s ‘trees’? Who is protecting the creativity, the truth, the labor, and the environment that built this technology?

AI is not a character with a conscience, but a mirror of its maker. If we want a future that flourishes, we must make sure that it is our hands planting the forest, rather than harvesting for the machine.

“Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.” – “The Lorax”, Dr. Seuss