Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

I Don't Know What I Think Until I Check the Internet

How to Form Your Own Opinion First, Use the Web to Check and Broaden Your Thinking, and Stop Outsourcing Every Little Decision to a Search Engine



We've got a problem. But relax.
It can be solved—and we'll even have something to laugh about.

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ISBN: 978-83-8483-614-9

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INTRO

It's Friday evening, and your phone lights up with a message from a friend. A group is going out, and you're invited. You like these people. You usually enjoy spending time with them. But tonight, after a week that seems to have lasted approximately nineteen working days, you would rather stay home. You even know what you want to do: order something comforting, put on comfortable clothes, and enjoy a few hours in which nobody expects you to contribute to a conversation. Simple enough. Except that instead of replying, you open your browser and search, "Is it unhealthy to prefer staying home on weekends?" Within minutes, you're reading about introversion, social isolation, burnout, personal growth, and the importance of maintaining friendships. Congratulations. You've turned a perfectly ordinary Friday into an unscheduled investigation into the structural integrity of your personality.

The strange part is that you had an answer before you started searching. You wanted a quiet evening. Nothing about that preference required a panel of experts, a psychological classification, or a public consultation. Yet the moment you encountered other people's interpretations, your original thought began to feel suspiciously inadequate. Perhaps staying home means you're missing opportunities. Perhaps going out would demonstrate emotional maturity. Perhaps the people who enjoy Friday nights in crowded places have discovered something important about life. Suddenly, you're no longer deciding how to spend an evening. You're attempting to determine what kind of person you're supposed to be, using information supplied by

strangers who have never met you and, in all likelihood, couldn't agree on what to order for dinner.

This is the peculiar problem at the heart of this book. We have extraordinary access to information, but access to information and confidence in our own judgment are not the same thing. A search engine can help you understand unfamiliar subjects, investigate claims, compare practical options, and discover perspectives you hadn't considered. Those are remarkable advantages. Trouble begins when you start using the same technology to obtain permission for your preferences, emotions, and ordinary decisions. There's a difference between asking whether a particular road is closed and asking whether you're the sort of person who should enjoy driving. One requires information about the outside world. The other requires some attention to what's happening inside your own head.

Of course, the internet makes outsourcing judgment remarkably attractive. Other people have already assembled rankings, written detailed arguments, produced videos, and delivered confident conclusions. Their answers arrive neatly packaged, often accompanied by attractive graphics and the unmistakable tone of someone who has never experienced a moment's uncertainty. Your own thoughts, by comparison, are messy. They contain qualifications, incomplete reasoning, contradictory feelings, and occasional gaps large enough to accommodate a small delivery truck. It's tempting to assume that a polished explanation must be superior to whatever you've managed to work out yourself. But the quality of the presentation doesn't automatically establish the quality of the reasoning. Sometimes you're comparing your unfinished thinking with someone else's carefully edited performance.

The obvious solution might seem to be gathering more information. If you're uncertain, research harder. If recommendations conflict, read another comparison. If an expert disagrees with your instinct, find out why. And if none of that settles the matter, perhaps there's a fifty-minute video with an unnecessarily dramatic thumbnail that will finally explain everything. Unfortunately, collecting more answers doesn't always bring you closer to a decision. It can introduce additional criteria, unfamiliar risks, and entirely new questions. You begin researching something manageable and finish wondering whether you possess the qualifications to operate your own existence. The problem isn't necessarily a shortage of knowledge. Sometimes it's the expectation that enough knowledge will eliminate every uncomfortable possibility.

You may have tried other solutions already. Perhaps you've promised yourself to spend less time online, stopped following certain accounts, or decided to trust your instincts more often. Those changes can help, but they don't automatically resolve the underlying habit. You can put your phone away and still mentally rehearse what everyone would say about your decision. You can refuse to read reviews and then worry that avoiding them makes you irresponsible. You can even become so determined to think independently that you reject useful advice merely because someone else offered it. That's hardly freedom. It's allowing other people's opinions to control your choices in reverse, which is a surprisingly elaborate way of remaining under their management.

There is another cost to all this checking, and it isn't measured only in wasted minutes. Gradually, you may become less comfortable hearing your own first response.

You hesitate before expressing a preference, apologize for opinions that don't require apologies, or search for support before presenting a perfectly reasonable argument. Decisions feel heavier because you begin treating the possibility of being wrong as evidence that you shouldn't decide at all. Meanwhile, life continues making demands. People need answers, responsibilities don't disappear, and sometimes there are no perfect options. You cannot research your way into a future where every choice is guaranteed to work out. Even if you could, you'd probably spend several hours comparing the available guarantees.

This book offers a more practical ambition: learning to think before searching, search with a purpose, and recognize when you've learned enough to make a reasonable judgment. That means becoming clearer about what you already believe and why, without mistaking your first impression for unquestionable truth. It means learning how to examine evidence, distinguish personal preferences from factual claims, and use disagreement to improve your thinking rather than surrendering it. You'll also encounter the less glamorous realities of decision-making: exhaustion, social pressure, conflicting priorities, mistakes, and situations where no amount of research produces an ideal answer. The goal isn't to develop magnificent confidence in everything. It's to become more capable of explaining your reasoning, recognizing its limits, and acting when action is appropriate.

Some decisions deserve careful investigation. Medical concerns, legal obligations, financial commitments, and safety-related questions can require reliable information and qualified professional guidance. Nothing in these pages should encourage you to substitute personal conviction for

knowledge you genuinely need. Equally, other decisions depend largely on taste, circumstances, or individual values. You don't need independent scientific confirmation that you prefer a particular style of music. And when a choice affects other people, their needs and perspectives matter too. Independent thinking isn't the belief that your opinion should always win. It is the ability to participate thoughtfully without automatically surrendering your judgment to whoever speaks most confidently.

You also won't be expected to become an impossibly disciplined person who evaluates every thought through an elaborate intellectual procedure. That would merely replace one exhausting habit with another. Real life happens when you're tired, distracted, short of money, dealing with responsibilities, or simply not in the mood for philosophical excellence. Sometimes you'll have time to examine a subject thoroughly. Sometimes you'll need a straightforward answer. Sometimes you'll discover you don't have an opinion at all, and that's perfectly acceptable. The skills that matter are flexible enough to fit ordinary circumstances, rather than demanding that you transform every Tuesday afternoon into a private university seminar.

For now, consider one small experiment. The next time you're about to search for reassurance about an ordinary preference, notice what you were thinking before you reached for your phone. You don't have to defend that thought or act on it immediately. Simply allow it to exist long enough to recognize it. Then decide whether outside information could genuinely help. You might discover something important that changes your mind. You might discover several interesting perspectives without needing to

adopt any of them. Or you might realize that you already had everything necessary to make the choice.

And if that happens, you can close the browser.

Not because the internet has nothing valuable to offer, but because the decision never needed an audience in the first place.

Chapter 1 - The Opinion You Had Before You Opened Your Browser

You're walking through a weekend market when you hear a musician playing near the entrance. The melody catches your attention. You stop, listen for a while, and find yourself enjoying it. The performance feels lively, slightly imperfect, and somehow more interesting because of it. You even consider buying the musician's album. Then you notice a small sign identifying the genre, and a question appears in your head: "Is this actually good music?" You reach for your phone. Within minutes, you're reading discussions about technical proficiency, artistic originality, and whether the entire genre has any cultural significance. Someone describes this kind of music as a sophisticated expression of human creativity. Someone else considers it evidence that civilization peaked several decades ago. You look up from your screen, suddenly uncertain whether you enjoyed what you heard. The musician has moved on to another song. You, meanwhile, have accidentally appointed a committee of strangers to supervise your ears.

This is what happens when ordinary preferences become questions requiring external approval. You had an experience and formed an impression. Nobody needed to explain it to you. The sound appealed to you, and that was enough to establish something about your personal taste. Yet the moment you encountered other people's judgments, your initial response began to seem inadequate. Perhaps you were missing something important. Perhaps knowledgeable listeners would consider the performance amateurish. Perhaps enjoying it revealed a troubling

absence of cultural sophistication. A simple preference suddenly became a question about whether you were qualified to possess that preference in the first place.

Of course, learning more about music can deepen your appreciation. Understanding a genre's history or the skill involved in a performance might introduce you to details you wouldn't otherwise notice. You might even change your assessment after hearing a convincing explanation. None of that requires treating your original enjoyment as an error. There is a difference between discovering more about something and asking other people to decide whether you were allowed to like it. The first expands your understanding. The second can gradually weaken your willingness to trust your own experience.

The distinction matters because the internet combines several very different kinds of questions into one familiar action: opening a search box. Whether you need the dimensions of a replacement part, an explanation of a scientific concept, or reassurance that your taste is acceptable, your fingers perform essentially the same movements. You type, search, and receive answers. The convenience makes it easy to forget that some questions have externally verifiable answers, while others depend on your circumstances, priorities, or preferences. A search engine may be excellent at finding information about an object. It has considerably less authority over whether that object makes you happy.

When information turns into permission

Imagine you're considering rearranging your working hours. You prefer starting earlier because you concentrate better before your inbox becomes a competitive sporting event. You know the arrangement would suit your personal

routine, but before discussing it with your manager, you search for the ideal daily schedule. You discover articles praising early starts and others emphasizing the benefits of later working hours. Soon, you're wondering whether your preference reflects productivity, conditioning, personality, or some embarrassing misunderstanding of how successful people organize their mornings. Yet the most relevant questions may be much simpler: Can your responsibilities accommodate the change? Would it interfere with colleagues? Does it actually help you work?

Those are matters worth investigating. The existence of a supposedly perfect schedule for humanity is not. What works for someone managing a different workload, household, or pattern of commitments may have little relevance to your situation. When you consult general advice without defining your specific problem, you risk replacing practical questions with abstract ones. Instead of establishing whether your proposed arrangement is workable, you begin investigating whether it is universally superior. That is an ambitious research project for someone who merely wanted to finish work a little earlier.

There is also a social dimension to this habit. People generally want to be regarded as competent, reasonable, and capable of making sensible choices. Looking foolish can feel unpleasant, particularly around people whose opinions matter to us. Searching for confirmation may therefore be an attempt to protect ourselves from criticism rather than an attempt to obtain missing information. You might know which option you prefer but remain uncomfortable expressing that preference until an apparently authoritative source agrees with you. The recommendation becomes a kind of protective certificate: if someone challenges your

decision, you can point to the expert instead of explaining your own reasoning.

This strategy provides temporary comfort, but it comes with a limitation. Someone can always produce a different expert, another ranking, or a contradictory example. If your confidence depends entirely on external agreement, the next disagreement can unsettle you all over again. You may become excellent at collecting supporting opinions without becoming any more comfortable making decisions. The internet hasn't necessarily made you less capable. It has simply made reassurance so accessible that you can seek it before discovering whether you actually need it.

Recognizing this pattern begins with paying attention to the purpose behind a search. Suppose you're planning to replace an uncomfortable office chair. Checking dimensions, adjustment features, warranty terms, and independent information about construction makes sense. These details can affect whether the chair meets your needs. But suppose you already have a chair that fits, feels comfortable, and works well, yet you continue searching because a popular website considers a different model more impressive. At that point, the question has changed. You are no longer trying to solve a practical problem. You may be trying to establish whether your satisfactory choice is prestigious enough to survive comparison.

The difficulty is that both activities can feel equally responsible. In either case, you're researching before making a judgment. The difference becomes visible when you ask what new information could actually change your decision. If an additional source might reveal a safety concern, a compatibility problem, or an important contractual restriction, checking it has a clear purpose. If the

only possible benefit is discovering that more people approve of the option you've already chosen, the value is less obvious. Approval might feel pleasant, but it doesn't automatically improve the chair beneath you.

Your first impression is allowed to be unfinished

Some people resist relying on their own judgment because they assume that doing so requires complete certainty. They imagine independent thinkers as formidable individuals who enter every discussion with polished arguments and an expression suggesting they have personally reviewed the evidence for existence. Real thinking is considerably messier. You may begin with a vague preference, an incomplete explanation, or a suspicion you cannot yet justify. That does not automatically make your thought worthless. It means the thought is still developing.

Consider a proposed change to a shared project. Your immediate reaction is that the new arrangement seems unnecessarily complicated. You cannot yet explain precisely why. Rather than searching for articles criticizing similar changes, you could examine your reaction. Perhaps the proposal introduces additional approval steps. Perhaps responsibilities become less clear. Perhaps you're simply comfortable with the existing arrangement and dislike disruption. These explanations are different, and they deserve different responses. Your initial discomfort can alert you to something worth examining without being treated as conclusive evidence that the proposal is bad.

This is one reason learning to describe your own thoughts matters more than learning to defend every initial reaction. A useful first statement might be, "I'm not convinced this will save time because the process appears to involve more

handoffs." That sentence identifies a concern which can be checked against the actual proposal. If the additional steps serve an important purpose, you can revise your opinion. If nobody can explain their value, your concern may prove useful. Either way, you've contributed something more meaningful than a borrowed declaration that modern management is either wonderful or a crime against common sense.

You also have permission not to know what you think. Some subjects are unfamiliar, complicated, or emotionally difficult. You may need information before even forming a reasonable provisional view. There is no intellectual prize for producing an instant opinion about an issue you've encountered for the first time. The essential distinction is between admitting that you need knowledge and assuming that someone else's conclusion should automatically become yours. "I don't know enough to judge" can be an independent assessment. In some circumstances, it's the most responsible one available.

A particularly revealing exercise is to notice how often you search for evaluations rather than information. For one ordinary day, pay attention to questions containing words such as "best," "worth it," "normal," or "should." You don't need to eliminate them or record every search in an elaborate tracking system. Simply consider what you're hoping the answer will provide. Are you looking for facts you lack? Are you trying to understand consequences? Or are you hoping someone will assure you that your existing preference is respectable? This distinction may change the search itself. Instead of asking whether an activity is worth doing, you might investigate its cost, requirements, and likely practical demands.

It is equally important not to mistake independence for stubbornness. Once you have identified your first impression, you haven't signed a lifetime contract requiring you to defend it. New evidence may expose an incorrect assumption. Someone with relevant expertise may explain a consideration you overlooked. A conversation may reveal that your choice would create difficulties for another person. Changing your mind in response to those discoveries is not surrendering your judgment. It is exercising it. Refusing to reconsider anything merely because you thought of it first would make your original opinion the least qualified dictator imaginable.

The relationship between personal preference and shared responsibility deserves particular care. You can decide privately that you prefer a certain style of working, but implementing it within a team may require agreement. You can favor an approach to household organization, but the people sharing that household have legitimate interests too. Having your own position doesn't entitle you to impose it. It gives you something honest to contribute to a discussion. Instead of announcing that your choice is objectively superior, you can explain what matters to you and listen to what matters to others. Independence and cooperation are perfectly compatible, provided neither is mistaken for compulsory agreement.

Sometimes your reluctance to form an opinion has little to do with the internet itself. You may have grown accustomed to being criticized for choices, or you may work in an environment where mistakes carry meaningful consequences. You might be exhausted, overwhelmed by responsibilities, or short of money and understandably anxious about wasting what you have. In such

circumstances, advice to "just trust yourself" is far too simplistic. You may need clearer information, additional time, a supportive conversation, or qualified guidance. The aim is not to replace necessary caution with artificial confidence. It is to notice where caution serves a real purpose and where it has become a requirement to obtain permission for every harmless preference.

Return for a moment to the musician at the weekend market. You might eventually discover that the performance was technically ordinary, that critics disagree about the genre, or that similar music has a fascinating history. All of this can enrich your understanding. None of it changes the fact that you stopped walking because something you heard appealed to you. You can appreciate that experience without claiming to be a musical authority. You can also decide not to buy the album because you enjoyed the atmosphere more than the music itself. Either conclusion belongs to you when you understand the reason behind it.

The point is not to make your first thought sacred. It is to let that thought have a place in the conversation before inviting the rest of the world to participate. Sometimes the world will teach you something important. Sometimes it will correct you. And sometimes you'll discover that the strangers on your screen are passionately arguing about a question you never needed them to answer.

You can thank them for their enthusiasm and carry on listening.

Chapter 2 - Why Internet Strangers Sound More Certain Than You

The first person on your screen is sitting in an immaculate home office, surrounded by expensive equipment and books arranged with suspicious precision. He looks directly into the camera and announces, "If you're still taking handwritten notes, you're wasting your time." Apparently, successful people use digital systems, and anyone carrying a notebook has voluntarily returned to the nineteenth century. You find the argument convincing. Then the next video begins. This presenter has an equally impressive office, an equally serious expression, and precisely the opposite message. According to her, typing notes is destroying your ability to learn, and handwriting is the only sensible approach. Both speakers seem extremely knowledgeable. Both have thousands of enthusiastic followers. Both promise to explain the science. You look down at the notebook beside your laptop, suddenly worried that whichever one you touch first will reveal a fundamental defect in your intelligence.

The comedy is obvious, but the underlying difficulty is real. When two people express contradictory opinions with equal confidence, how do you decide whom to believe? You might assume that one must possess superior knowledge, but identifying that person requires more than comparing their tone of voice. Confidence is something a speaker demonstrates. Accuracy is something a claim must earn through appropriate evidence. The two can overlap, but they are not identical. An exceptionally knowledgeable person may speak cautiously because they understand the limitations of available information. Someone with much less

knowledge may sound definitive because they haven't recognized those limitations. Unfortunately, certainty is considerably easier to communicate in a short video than careful reasoning.

This creates an uncomfortable imbalance for the person watching. You experience your own thinking from the inside, complete with doubts, forgotten details, and unfinished arguments. The speaker presents a finished product. You don't see the discarded takes, the questions they struggled with, or the research they may have omitted. Their conclusion arrives with professional lighting, confident delivery, and perhaps some dramatic background music. Yours arrives while you're searching the house for the notebook you were holding approximately thirty seconds ago. It's hardly a fair comparison. Yet when you mistake polished communication for superior judgment, your own tentative reasoning can begin to seem embarrassingly inadequate.

Confidence is a presentation style, not a qualification

Decisive language can make complicated subjects appear wonderfully manageable. Expressions such as "everyone should," "never do this," and "the only method that works" eliminate the irritating business of conditions and exceptions. They're attractive because they promise to reduce uncertainty. If there is one correct method, you don't have to examine your circumstances or make a judgment. You simply follow instructions. The trouble is that many practical questions don't have a single answer suitable for everyone. An approach that helps one person organize a demanding schedule might be unnecessarily complicated for someone with a quieter routine. The recommendation may

be useful, but the universal claim goes beyond what the individual example can establish.

Suppose you're exploring ways to improve concentration. One creator insists that silence is essential. Another recommends background music. A third argues that working in public spaces encourages productivity. These suggestions might describe genuine preferences or experiences, but they don't automatically establish universal rules. The relevant question is what kind of work you're doing, which distractions affect you, and what environment you can realistically use. If you share a small home with several people, advice requiring a perfectly silent private office may be about as practical as recommending a personal observatory for checking the weather. The speaker's enthusiasm doesn't eliminate the constraints of your situation.

Notice how much information disappears when a conditional statement becomes a slogan. "This technique helped me concentrate while completing repetitive tasks" is a limited personal claim. "This technique is the secret to concentration" suggests something considerably broader. "Everyone who doesn't use this technique is doing it wrong" goes further still, implying authority over people whose circumstances the speaker doesn't know. These sentences may originate from the same experience, but each makes a different claim about the world. Learning to spot that expansion helps you evaluate advice without being distracted by the performance surrounding it.

None of this means genuinely competent people should sound uncertain about everything. Some claims are supported strongly enough to justify confident statements. Specialists may reasonably explain established principles

without repeatedly apologizing for having reached a conclusion. The important question is whether the strength of the language matches the strength and relevance of the supporting information. Someone who acknowledges uncertainty where it exists may be demonstrating expertise rather than weakness. Equally, someone who offers a straightforward answer to a straightforward question shouldn't be dismissed merely for sounding decisive.

The authority of appearance deserves similar caution. A professional studio, impressive credentials displayed on screen, or a confident vocabulary can make content easier to follow. They don't independently verify its claims. Even genuine expertise has boundaries. A person who understands one technical subject exceptionally well may have no particular authority on personal relationships, finance, or another unrelated field. Recognition in one area can make audiences more willing to accept statements in others, but professional competence doesn't automatically expand whenever a microphone is switched on.

Follow the argument beyond the microphone

A useful habit is to translate confident declarations into claims you can examine. Return to our competing note-taking experts. Instead of asking which presenter seems smarter, ask what each is actually claiming. Are they comparing memory of information, ease of reviewing notes, speed of recording ideas, or convenience during meetings? Those are different outcomes. One method may be useful for capturing large amounts of information quickly, while another may encourage a more selective approach. Whether either helps you learn depends on how you use it, the task involved, and what you do with the notes afterward. The distinction doesn't settle every question, but it prevents an