

You won't believe how alienated this will make you feel

By [Amy Frykholm](#)

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In her [media column](#) for the *Century* last month, Kathryn Reklis, a theology professor at Fordham University, wrote about the many times a day that social media asks her to watch a video and feel something. “You too will cry after watching this . . . 90 percent of people cry,” the Facebook post tells her. She argues that, while kitschy, these videos contain the power of shared feeling, and shared feeling is a step toward empathy and a further step toward compassion—and so, in essence, a social good. I am not sure I agree.

Kathryn’s post got me thinking about church. In the evangelical churches in which I grew up, shared emotion was our common currency. Sing this song: feel this emotion. Hear this sermon: respond with this program. When I discovered the relatively unemotional experience of liturgy, I wept. The freedom of not being told how to feel gave me the freedom, at last, to feel.

I did not find that what I now consider to be emotional manipulation did, in fact, lead me toward empathy and compassion. Instead, I found that, at first, these experiences stirred my emotions. I sought out this experience again and again, because I liked feeling that same stirring. But over time, being told how to feel cultivated distrust—especially distrust toward my own reactions—and numbness. If I was told to feel joy and instead I felt cynicism, while everyone else was feeling joy, I cultivated a double alienation: one toward myself and my own response and the other toward my fellow feelers, who seemed to have no trouble feeling as directed.

I would argue that these shared internet experiences mimic those in my youth. They do not lead to an increase in empathy, but eventually to an emotional weariness and suspicion that in turn leads, in my experience, to alienation.

Perhaps we seek out these online experiences as empty calories in the diet of feeling—food we eat because it tastes good on the tongue, but it leaves us ultimately empty. I don’t actually learn anything about unconditional love by watching other people discover it (as promised by the video). Instead, I am able to

replace my need to have that transformative experience myself by watching someone else do it. I am momentarily satisfied, and then I move on to the next click.

I appreciate that Kathryn is trying to find a good in these experiences, and she's right to wonder why she is drawn to such clickbait. And I am not saying that the process she describes—of being drawn into an ultimate social good through watching these videos—may not work for other people. Millions of people attend worship services with strong emotional content. Millions read the emotionally manipulative fiction of David Baldacci. Millions click on Upworthy videos. They may be finding some nutrition for the soul that I can't find there. I may be looking at manna and calling it plant lice.

But I would argue that the end result of this click bait is not shared feeling, but further shared emotional manipulation and alienation. And we already have too much of that.