This essay needs to be written in an objective academic style and organised accordingly, with a proper introduction, paragraph structure and conclusion. There is no need to give numbers or titles to sections.

Arguments should always be backed up with logical reasoning and/or facts, quotations and statistics from the source materials.

You should use these materials as sources to help you answer the question. Your essay should contain a roughly equal balance of your own arguments and comments on materials from the articles, which should be clearly signposted. Use paragraph numbers when referring to the articles.

You should avoid lengthy direct quotations from the articles. It is preferable to use indirect quotations or to build short direct quotations into your answers.

You should also aim to smoothly integrate the views of the article(s) with your own, for example through link phrases such as: As the author of the article observes, …; According to The Economist (2018a),…

Make it clear at all times what you are talking about. Repeat names, institutions, corporations, and so on, as often as necessary so that the reader knows what it is you wish to say (about what).

500-550 words maximum, 110 minutes maximum.

Practice essay topics:

1. With regards to technology, why might being able to mute certain sounds and content be beneficial for the individual? To what extent could this be a danger?

2. Are we becoming increasingly intolerant—of noisy children, of conversational taxi drivers, of other people having fun when we're not? And what can be done about this?

3. To what extent can we trust social media companies to solve the problems of social media?
4. In Text 3, Chris says that she disagrees with those who say, 'I can't believe this happened—it's 2019' (this is the so-called 'current year argument'). To what extent do you agree with her? To what extent do you agree that "this attack and the ensuing media circus are par for the course in 2019"?

5. In Text 3, Chris describes herself as having 'privilege' due to her "race, health, education, and conventional gender presentation"—even though she had recently been assaulted because of her sexuality. In that context, what does she mean by 'privilege', and to what extent is it possible to use that privilege to draw attention to those without such privilege?

6. In Text 3, Chris says that she disagrees with those who say, 'I can't believe this happened—it's 2019' (this is the so-called 'current year argument'). To what extent do you agree with her? To what extent do you agree that "this attack and the ensuing media circus are par for the course in 2019"?

7. Social media are often used to glorify difficult and challenging situations; they tend to gravitate towards ever-more sensational content. Discuss.

8. While social media can be excruciatingly boring or impossibly toxic, it can also have a positive effect on mental health as it allows the user to feel connected to others in similar situations, rather than leaving them to feel alone. Paying particular attention to issues of mental health, to what extent do the advantages of social media outweigh the disadvantages?

9. "For a growing number of users and mental health experts, the positivity of Instagram is precisely the problem, with its relentless emphasis on promoting 'perfect' lifestyles. Should everyone just stop scrolling?" (Text 1, subtitle). To what extent do you feel Instagram, compared to other social media platforms, has a negative impact on mental health?

The following texts were used:

1st article:

Instagram is supposed to be friendly. So why is it making people so miserable?

*For a growing number of users and mental health experts, the positivity of Instagram is precisely the problem, with its relentless emphasis on promoting 'perfect' lifestyles. Should everyone just stop scrolling?*

Adapted from *The Guardian*, 17 September 2018 by Alex Hern (link to original)

**[§1]** When 24-year-old fashion blogger Scarlett Dixon posted a picture of herself having breakfast, the internet turned nasty. "The best of days start with a smile and positive thoughts. And pancakes. And strawberries. And bottomless tea," Dixon wrote on her scarlettlondon Instagram feed, under an image of her looking flawless on a freshly made bed flanked by heart-shaped helium balloons. The sponsored post—for Listerine mouthwash, a bottle of which is visible on the side of the shot—was swiftly reposted on Twitter. "Fuck off this is anybody's normal morning," wrote Nathan from Cardiff. "Instagram is a ridiculous lie factory made to make us all feel inadequate." His post, which has garnered more than 111,000 likes (22 times as many as Dixon's original) and almost 25,000 retweets, prompted a wave of criticism, with the more printable comments ranging from "Fakelife!" and "Bunny-boiler" to "Let's pop her balloons" and "Who keeps Listerine on their bedside table? Serial killers, that's who."

[According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a 'bunny boiler' is a woman who acts vengefully after having been spurned by her lover. It is a reference to the film *Fatal Attraction* (1987), in which a rejected woman boils her lover's pet rabbit.]

[§2] That hostility feels par for the course on Twitter. The social network is a notorious hotbed of abusive strangers hurling abuse at other abusive strangers, who then all occasionally come together to bully a celebrity off the internet over some minor failing, such as being a woman in a Star Wars film. Instagram, by contrast, looks like the friendliest social network imaginable. It's a visually led community where the primary method of interaction is double-tapping an image to like it, where posts that go viral tend to do so because of positivity rather than outrage and where many of the biggest accounts are famous dogs and cats. What's not to like?

[§3] But, for a growing number of users—and mental health experts—the very positivity of Instagram is precisely the problem. The site encourages its users to present an upbeat, attractive image that others may find at best misleading and at worse harmful. If Facebook demonstrates that everyone is boring and Twitter proves that everyone is awful, Instagram makes you worry that everyone is perfect—except you.

[§4] In the days following her initial Instagram post, Dixon pointed out the irony that this fear—that the unreality of social media is harming people—was itself being used to justify the thousands attacking her. […] My feed isn't a place of reality," Dixon added. "I mean who spends their time in such a beautiful city, perched on a ledge, ice-cream in hand and smile permanently affixed to her face? It's staged, guys. "I personally don't think my content is harmful to young girls, but I do agree Instagram can present a false expectation for people to live up to."

[§5] But whether or not Dixon's feed is harmful, there is growing support for the idea that Instagram isn't great for its users' mental health. In 2017, the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH), an independent charity that seeks to improve people's wellbeing, conducted a UK-wide survey of 14- to 24-year-olds, asking them about the big five social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat and Instagram. Users ranked how their use of the platforms affected everything from the quality of their sleep to their FOMO—the fear of missing out on what others are enjoying. Instagram came last, scoring particularly badly for its effects on sleep, body image and FOMO. Only Snapchat came close in its overall negativity, saved by a more positive effect on real-world relationships, while YouTube scored positively on almost every metric—except its effect on sleep, for which it was the worst of all the platforms.

[§6] "On the face of it, Instagram can look very friendly," says the RSPH's Niamh McDade. "But that endless scrolling without much interaction doesn't really lead to much of a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing. You also don't really have control over what you're seeing. And you quite often see images that claim to be showing you reality, yet aren't. That's especially damaging to young men and women." The risk of developing an unhealthy body image is often highlighted, but McDade emphasises that this is just one aspect. "Some people may be looking at feeds full of cars, and it's giving them anxiety and depression as they can't afford them." […]

[§7] Almost every user adds fuel to the flames. Even as we're being made miserable by the unreal lives that we follow, we share an unreal version of our own lives. "I have been on Instagram since 2013 and in the beginning I enjoyed it," says Adnan, a 25-year-old Syrian who lives in Cape Town. "But, as the years passed, it changed from being a friendly environment, where most people posted food pictures, into a competitive social platform where everyone filters out their lives to represent a life that does not exist. Nobody looks good all the time, nobody is always happy. When things get tough, I get really upset when I see other people having the 'perfect' life." And yet, Adnan says, "I am also guilty of trying to show the best side of my life to people."

[§8] But Instagram has always been about looking flawless. What has changed to spark such a backlash? Among users I spoke to, one event was cited time and again: the introduction, in mid-2016, of Instagram's algorithmic timeline. It was one of the largest changes to the platform since it was bought by Facebook in 2012. Rather than presenting users with a cross-section of what the people they were following were up to at any given moment, Instagram began populating feeds with the most noteworthy posts from those accounts, often reaching back days or even weeks to pull in particularly compelling content. In effect, the service began promoting a curated, unrealistic version of an already curated, unrealistic feed.

[§9] Talya Stone, a parenting blogger at Motherhood: The Real Deal, went cool on Instagram shortly afterwards. "For a long time, Instagram was one of the only places where the interaction felt real," she says. "Then the algorithm came along and blew that out of the water. The whole point of these social platforms is that they are supposed to enhance social connectivity—yet, bizarrely, they are based on an algorithm that seems to be working against this very notion." […]

[§10] I stopped using the app earlier this year, when I realised that I reliably felt worse after opening it than I did before I started. But my Instagram—a locked account, with just a couple of hundred followers and posts—is almost exclusively for keeping in touch with people I got to know in other ways. The closest I get to following influencers is the pop star Carly Rae Jepsen and an Instagram-famous husky. Still, every time I open the app, I'm presented with an endless feed of my friends and family doing incredible things, having a wonderful time, without me. There's the friend whose wedding I wasn't invited to; I found out about it through the app. There's the friend who is looking fantastic after every workout and lets us all know. And there's the friend who lives in New York, apparently over in London for the weekend without telling me. Meanwhile, I'm doing nothing of note—except sitting on Instagram. […].

[§11] When I tell friends about my dissatisfaction with the app, their responses are mixed. Some cite conventional wisdom, telling me to unfollow the influencers with a commercial imperative to sell me a perfect life and devote the app to keeping up with the friends I care about. Rob, for instance, follows "fewer than 100 people, all family and friends". But I don't follow any influencers, and the friends I care about most are the ones most likely to create that familiar pang of FOMO. Others offer exactly the opposite advice, arguing that my problem is not following enough influencers. I should focus less on using Instagram to find out what people I care about are doing and more on using it as a source of information and inspiration. One friend, Lynsey, cites Present and Correct, which sells exquisitely designed

office supplies, as her go-to happy place. Another, Marie, recommends her personal mix of "roughly one-third friends, one-third MPs and one-third drag queens".

**[§12]** It's true that there is a whole world of information best communicated in a visual medium. While some fitness-focused Instagrams leave you feeling like a fat blob of plasticine, others are sources of useful advice, laser-targeted at people in your situation.

**[§13]** But I've tried that version of Instagram, too, and I worry that it provides only a veneer of engagement, while forever hovering on the precipice of impossibly perfect breakfasts eaten by impossibly perfect people. Even Facebook, Instagram's owner, warns against using its products in this way. "In general," the company wrote on its corporate blog last year, "when people spend a lot of time passively consuming information—reading but not interacting with people—they report feeling worse afterward".

**[§14]** Of course, Facebook's answer was that everyone should post more. But it would say that, wouldn't it? Another option is to follow the guidance of the RSPH. As part of "scroll-free September" the charity is encouraging users to aim for anything between complete cold turkey and simply stopping at certain times, such as in the bedroom or during meals.

**[§15]** There is one final possibility, proposed by a few others when I shared my own Insta-woes: don't give up on Instagram, just give up on people. There are enough dogs, cats, birds, otters and ferrets to fill a social network of their own—from Jiro the otter to Gotcha the cockatoo—and it's very hard to scroll through pet Instagram and feel bad about yourself. Though you may start wishing for a more photogenic labradoodle.

2nd article:

The hospital selfie is the dose of reality social media needs

*So much of what we share online is fantasy, but posting pictures from a hospital bed helps people feel less isolated and can demystify disability and illness*

Adapted from *The Guardian*, 30 January 2019 by Dawn Foster (link to original)

[§1] Social media is often accused of presenting an airbrushed fantasy rather than a slice of realism, so it is refreshing to see the likes of Kate Beckinsale and Nicky Campbell embrace the "hospital selfie", which involves tweeting photos from their hospital beds. (Alas, the Daily Mail's Sarah Vine isn't a fan, writing in her latest column: "Why the rest of us have to suffer I don't know.")

[§2] In the past two months, I have spent four days in hospital, and tweeted selfies on both occasions. There were many reasons: I tweet and post on Instagram a lot; I enjoy it; my friends interact with me; it's how we keep abreast of each other's lives. It helps us feel connected. They know how I'm feeling and, because I am juvenile, they also know when my blood pressure is 69/100—nice.

[§3] Illness, especially chronic illness, can be very isolating. Not only does it limit how and when you can socialise, it causes you to feel unattractive. There's more to life than being considered sexually desirable, but while there have been plenty of campaigns about weight, few—bar the #hospitalglam hashtag—challenge the idea that only healthy is sexy. I'm learning to believe that my epilepsy doesn't disbar me from being considered attractive, so if I think I look palatable in A&E I'll damn well Instagram it.

[§4] But most importantly, hospital selfies demystify disability and illness. I've had grateful messages from people thanking me for being open about health on social media: from others with epilepsy who feel less alone; from a man who shows his daughter my tweets and Instagram pictures, and says she feels much less of a pariah knowing others are in the same boat; and from people asking for coping mechanisms and tips.

[§5] I want to know when my friends need help, as well as when they're happy; when they're vulnerable, as well as when they feel strong. And they want to know I'm on the mend. Plus, I look like Hellraiser when I'm having an EEG: it's funny.

3rd article

You saw me covered in blood on a bus. But do you get outraged about all homophobia?

*The photo of me and my date went viral after our attack—but only as we're white, feminine and cisgender. Sympathy and action must be for all*

Adapted from *The Guardian*, 14 June 2019 by Chris (link to original)

**[§1]** On 7 June, characters from distant chapters of my life decided that my sudden trajectory into the headlines was an opportune time to reintroduce themselves, sending a torrent of misguided good vibes alongside the picture, asking had I seen it. Had I seen it? Had I seen it? Of course I had, as soon as it was taken.

**[§2]** I was weeping bitterly, head ringing in pain as I sat next to my lovely date, Dr Melania Geymonat, who was calmer than I but dripping blood down her shirt front. We photographed the trail of our blood down the bus, ending at our still-bleeding faces as we awaited the police. I watched in real time as our faces—white, feminine, draped in pretty hair—circulated on every continent. Melania protected my name and information because I am a private individual without an online presence.

**[§3]** I guffawed the first time I read the not-quite-accurate, titillating headline: "Lesbians beaten for refusing to kiss." For starters, I'm bisexual, but that's besides the point. My memories of the fight are addled by adrenaline. Maddeningly, I don't remember exactly how it started. My persisting anger is directed not towards the idiots on the bus but the reduction of my battered face to cheap clickbait.

**[§4]** For several days, a graphic, triggering photo of our bloody faces satisfied voyeurs and enriched companies whose values counter my own, such as News Corps and Sinclair Broadcast Group. Many of the outlets publishing my face without permission endorse racist, misogynist and xenophobic platforms and politicians. One world leader on her last day in office concluded a long career voting in favour of anti-gay, racist, colonial policies by expressing her condolences to us. We were Instagrammed by celebrities, vacuously retweeted by politicians, itemised on a BuzzFeed listicle. Despite so much inane coverage, Melania energetically leveraged her platform to highlight the misogyny embedded in the violence and today's hate crime rates. She has inspired queers everywhere to share their own stories of abuse.

**[§5]** A refrain I've heard ad nauseum is "I can't believe this happened—it's 2019". I disagree. This attack and the ensuing media circus are par for the course in 2019. In both my native United States and here in the United Kingdom, it always has been and still is open season on the bodies of (in no specific order) people of colour, indigenous people, transgender people, disabled people, queer people, poor people, women and migrants. I have evaded much of the violence and oppression imposed on so many others by our capitalist, white supremacist, patriarchal system because of the privileges I enjoy by dint of my race, health, education, and conventional gender presentation. That has nothing to do with the merit of my character.

**[§6]** The press coverage, and timely law enforcement response, was not coincidental to our complexions. Neither was the disproportionate online reaction over the victimisation of a pretty brunette and blonde. The commodification and exploitation of my face came at the

expense of other victims whose constant persecution apparently does not warrant similar moral outrage.

**[§7]** Make the extraordinary reaction to our attack the norm. I beg you to amplify and channel this energy to hold accountable the intersecting web of elected politicians, government agencies and corporations who have reinforced a status quo of clearly delineated inequality long before this single attack in 2019. Redirect your money from rainbow capitalism to people-of-colour-led organisations striving for justice. I donated to the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, Trans Women of Color Collective and Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund. Question why the photo of two attractive, white cisgender women compelled you to post about Pride for the first time.

**[§8]** Learn the names and stories of Muhlaysia Booker, Dana Martin, Chanel Scurlock. Elevate those who have been advocating for the basic rights and safety of communities marginalised by our existing political, economic and social structures long before I got punched in the face. Finding the right leaders takes some research and real-world activity. Their frequent absence from today's headlines is not coincidental to their crusades. Stand up for yourselves and each other, and fight back.

4th article

Hit the mute button: why everyone is trying to silence the outside world

*Uber is trialling a feature that allows customers to stop their drivers from talking. But there's growing evidence that cutting ourselves off like this isn't healthy*

Adapted from *The Guardian*, 12 June 2019 by Richard Godwin (link to original)

**[§1]** The mute button was invented in 1956 by Robert Adler, an Austrian-born engineer working for the Zenith Radio Corporation in Chicago. It was one of the four buttons on his Space Command 400, the first commercially viable TV remote control. […]. "He hated commercials," Adler recalled in 1987. McDonald feared these constant intrusions would kill the new medium of TV. So Zenith boasted that the mute button would allow viewers to "shut off the sound of long, annoying commercials". Still, McDonald couldn't have predicted the pop-up ad, petrol pumps trying to sell you nachos or the ravages of the distraction economy. It is only now, in an age of incessant interruption, that we are beginning to grasp muting's full potential—not only when it comes to our gadgets, but in real life, too.

**[§2]** Last month, the taxi company Uber began trialling a suite of new features for users of its Exec service—including a button you can activate if you want to mute your driver. "Quiet preferred" is the euphemism Uber is using (you can also toggle it to "happy to chat"—lucky driver). But it appears to bring the dream of being able to choose who and what we listen to a step closer.

**[§3]** "From a driver's perspective, it's quite rude," an Uber driver from east London tells me. "And offensive, to be honest. It's like saying: 'Shut up.' It says a lot about Uber." Uber claims it is responding to concerns from customers that drivers will give them low star ratings if they don't want to chat; drivers meanwhile often fear entering into conversations with passengers for the same reason.

[§4] But let's be honest: who among us hasn't fantasised about being able to mute an annoying colleague, a screaming toddler or an over-friendly waiter? Mute promises a snake-free garden, a world where you can curate your content and silence dissent. And it is proving irresistible online.

[§5] Twitter introduced a mute function in 2014 and it has proved to be the social network's most popular feature, a sort of automatic talk-to-the-hand. Instead of "blocking" someone objectionable (which they will know about) you can now discreetly "mute" them (which they won't know about). Part of the appeal is the thought of trolls screaming and @-ing and wondering why you're not replying. Twitter followed it up with a subject-based mute feature in 2017: so, if you don't want to hear about Love Island, or TERFs, or the Champions League final, or Dominic Raab, for ever if need be, you don't have to. If you want a glimpse of happy Twitter, type "mute button" into the search box: "Just wanna thank my 'mute' button for never giving up on me <3"; "Mute button is top 10 most powerful things in the universe"; "I thank @instagram for creating their mute posts and story buttons" etc.

[§6] Instagram added its own mute function last year, inspired by what it called "complex social dynamics". Now you can avoid your friend's nauseating Ibiza selfies and tasting menu stories without fear of causing offence. "I'm happy for my friends who are achieving great things, but Instagram makes it too easy to start getting bitter about why that's not me," one muter explained. "I'm looking forward to living in a self-imposed creative bubble for a little while."

[§7] The clinical psychologist Paul Gilbert, author of Living Like Crazy, sees such responses in Jungian terms. "We're becoming more persona-dominated," he says. "We all put on an act about how people want to see and hear us. We do it all the time on social media." For him, the Uber shush feature is a welcome chance for us to rest those personas for a few minutes. "Human beings evolved in small hunter-gatherer groups where everyone knew one another," he says. "We aren't necessarily adapted to be interacting with strangers all the time. People find it incredibly tiring. At least in a taxi, you have an opportunity to sit and be quiet."

[§8] Well, yes, that is true. But what I find disturbing about the Uber silence feature is precisely that it cuts off any possibility of human connection. It is a way of automating a function that we might once have negotiated in human language. The Uber driver points out that it's not hard for him to gauge who might be up for a chat and who isn't. "You say: 'What's your name? Where are you going?' And the way they respond is a fairly clear indication of whether they want to talk or not. Most people have their earphones on anyway. I usually have my Bluetooth earphone in too." […]

[§9] But you could see that this retreat into our own discrete sound worlds is its own form of muting. Looking around the office in which I am typing these words, at least half of my co-workers are wearing earphones or headphones, and the younger they are, the more likely they are to be plugged in—or out. The wider trend is known as the "privatisation of auditory space", says Dr Tom Rice, a lecturer in sonic anthropology at Exeter University. "It's often said in sound studies that we don't have earlids. We don't have any control over what drips into our ears and collects in them. Earphones are the closest we have to that."

[§10] It is generally accepted that our audio environment is becoming more cluttered—even at home, since our microwaves and washing machines are now more likely to bleep at us

(and, in some cases, talk to us). But most people do not mute the world because they find it overwhelming or confusing. “It’s also that they consider it boring,” says Rice. “People will often think that the sounds that they’re exposed to aren’t worth listening to.” The dawn chorus, after all, is famously not what it was, and general human patter is being drowned out by pneumatic drills, lorries and Ed Sheeran’s Galway Girl blasting out of the supermarket public address system […].

**[§11]** “In the best case, you can say headphones are a way to gain control of your environment,” he adds. It was striking, when Spotify users shared their most-played songs at the end of 2019, how many of the titles included “waves” or “rain noise”, suggesting that many listeners simply wanted to block distractions. “But the worst case,” Levitin says, “is that young people are listening to music and thinking that they can increase their concentration and performance that way. There are thousands of studies that show that listening to music is incredibly bad for your concentration. It’s just more enjoyable.”

**[§12]** Meanwhile, our capacity to tune out whatever we want is increasingly catching up with our desire to do just that. “Hearables” are now touted the new “wearables” in Silicon Valley. Amazon, Apple and Google are all working on in-ear technology. The start-up Doppler Labs has developed products that promise to cancel out background noise, amplify the voices of particular speakers and even provide live, real-time translation. We often imagine a virtual-reality future will involve some sort of interface over our eyes, but it might just as easily work through our ears. Soon we might literally be able to mute people we don’t want to hear.

**[§13]** But who knows what else will be silenced? “The argument is that this is damaging to the quality of public space and to the social fabric—we all just become atomised individuals,” says Rice. If we are listening to podcasts or music or white noise all the time, we are removing ourselves from society and the chance to interact, help, experience delight […].