

***The revolution
will not be on social media***

Hugh Knowles

**LARGER
US**

About the author

Hugh Knowles is Co-Executive Director of [Friends of the Earth](#), a leading grassroots environmental campaigning organisation, with over two decades working on environmental issues across the not-for-profit and private sectors.

Hugh was a Director at Friends of the Earth for several years working on the senior management team, managing the Policy and Insight team and starting up a new Experiments team. He was Head of Innovation at Forum for the Future, working globally with business and government on sustainability challenges. He has a degree in Zoology and Ecology.

This essay is written in Hugh's personal capacity and does not reflect the views of his employer.

About Larger Us

Larger Us works with change-makers to promote ways of driving change that bridge divides, build broader coalitions, and bring people together.

We do this by drawing on psychology as a source of inspiration and practice - to design psychologically smart campaigns, to prevent burnout and build healthy and collaborative organisational cultures and movements, and to be the change we want to see in the world.

Find out more about Larger Us and our work at www.larger.us.

Introduction

Over the last decade, social platforms became our window into the world and a de facto public square. The Covid pandemic accelerated both their dominance and our dependence. During the Covid-19 lockdowns, our mobile phone use increased to the point where people in many countries were spending a third of their waking hours on their smartphones. The main activity was social media.¹

Forward to 2023 and the world of social media appears to be in a state of upheaval. The role and effectiveness of these digital tools in creating change is up for debate. It is an important moment for those of us invested in societal change to reflect on the role these digital tools have played; and the role they - or something like them - might play in the future.

I loved social media. Well, Twitter specifically. I joined Twitter in 2009 and was hooked. It built a connection to those I would never normally have access to and broadened my horizons. Until it didn't. A sense of unease started in around 2016 and I very reluctantly left in early 2021. I know many good things happen on, or because of, social media, but I now believe the current business model may be one of the greatest barriers to tackling some of the big challenges we face.

In the next decade we must transform our society to stand a chance of tackling the climate and nature crisis. We need buy-in for disruptive and sustained action that will change many aspects of our lives. That requires a big conversation about how this happens, not just debates between activists and politicians.

Where and how we have this conversation matters. Social media as a 'public square' is deeply flawed. In this essay, I have laid out ten reasons why I think it is so flawed. Many of them apply not only to social media, but also to much of our digital world, including generative AI.

1. Social media was not built for us

The great lie about our current version of the internet is that it is about us, connecting us and giving us a voice. It is not. It is about them, the companies who run the major platforms we all use.

These platforms have a business model dependent on advertising and for that to succeed they need to grab and hold our attention. The platforms are designed to monetise our attention and subtle shifts in our behaviour. Our attention has become a “valuable commodity in commercial and political spheres”.² As I will explore later, this has geopolitical consequences, as our attention is also a *territory* that countries try to occupy.³

In this ‘attention economy’ the most successful content “a) appeals to existing biases; b) provides distraction or comfort in an uncertain world; c) reinforces tribal identity; or d) scares or outrages and provokes strong emotional response.”⁴ Studies have shown that the more negative political content is, the more likely it is to go viral,⁵ whereas nuanced messages about difficult choices or complex positions disappear. This alone should persuade us that social media cannot play a key role in what happens next. We have built a system where those who care little for consequences are more likely to win.

Despite appearances, social media is not a ‘public square’. Real public squares come with expectations of public minded behaviour. Historically, we met and interacted more through institutions in our communities where we also had a stake in their ongoing success, such as the local church. With that stake came a moderation of behaviour. Online we can act without many consequences, and we have no real stake in the platform’s success.

Social media is an attention market operated by privately held digital platforms with perverse incentive structures, no transparency, and huge power in the hands of a few Silicon Valley executives and in some cases even authoritarian regimes. We are beholden to the decisions of these executives and the software influences behaviour, embeds values, and chooses what freedoms and privacy we have.⁶ These platforms are not built for us to create change and we often fail to recognise the power they have over us.

2. The medium is the message, and the message is wrong

All too often we think about what a tool can do for us; not what the tool is doing *to* us. In his 1964 book *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan wrote ‘*the medium is the message*’. If a single phrase could shed some light on the impact of social media on everything from Brexit to Trump and Covid, then this would be a good candidate.

McLuhan meant that no matter what you say, it’s *where* you say it that dictates what is *heard* and what happens next.

For example, content on TV must be telegenic and entertaining. Sesame Street may have educated children, but the message to children was that education should be entertaining and to watch more TV.⁷ It was always a TV show first, and that defined the outcome.

McLuhan was dismissive of those who said it is how the medium is used that counts, saying that the ‘content’ is like the “juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind.”⁸

A prime current example is Fox News which has turned politics into entertainment because that is what is required to succeed on television. Fox is not listed as a news channel, so it can avoid scrutiny; and thereby shape how viewers consume and react to “news” with disastrous consequences. Many people now get their news from TikTok, an app with a highly addictive and opaque algorithm.⁹ The long-term consequences of news being delivered through a medium of short attention-grabbing videos is unlikely to be positive.

No matter what we think we are trying to achieve with the medium of social media, that choice already sends a powerful message. The message is, 'attention wins'.

In an 'attention wins' environment, any engagement - whether it is a click, like, or retweet - is attention amplification. Retweet or quote any outspoken pundit on any side of a debate and you are an unpaid intern increasing attention¹⁰ even if you disagree.

For example, when a niche YouTube channel with an audience of hundreds said something controversial about Fracking in the UK, it gained an audience of millions as outrage about the clip spread through social media. Those opposed to fracking shone a massive spotlight on a fringe view and helped it reach an audience they never would have access to otherwise. Attention won. Understandably, we want to use social media to oppose messages we think are wrong. What happens is that the message spreads further. Most of the time when something controversial is trending on twitter, 8 out of 10 tweets are messages in opposition bringing more attention.

McLuhan said the *message* "shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action". Nowhere is this more evident than when looking at the impact of social media on politics. As social media became a dominant force in politics, politicians responded by trying, and in some cases succeeding, to become influencers to gain attention. It elevated the individual above the party and pushed political dialogue to become more reductive and polarised, with soundbite campaigning replacing the details of strategy and policy.

If both sides of a political debate are engaged in simplistic controversy, they get attention. If not, they are invisible. The current media environment is set up to negate serious public discourse, and this shapes how politicians act. In the U.S., we see politicians whose careers have been made entirely by social media and the behaviours required to win in that space. What is shocking is watching the online behaviour become more prevalent in real life political theatres.¹¹ The focus on the individual has given some politicians, particularly populists whose simplistic and divisive framing thrives on social media, huge and separate identities which have ripped political parties apart.

Donald Trump was the definitive politician for the social media age. His success is not about being considered, or even likeable, but was built out of raw attention. Nothing delivers attention like provoking outrage. Without social media, it's unlikely he could have made it so far or caused so much division and systemic damage.

These dynamics do not only apply to politicians. Social platforms skew all users away from representing institutions, organisations, or causes and towards individualistic positioning and personal brand promotion which damages the chances of creating change. The things we post on social media that gain the most attention will be driven by either affirmation from people who think like us or outrage from those who don't. Affirmation and outrage are some of the most destructive forces in the civic sphere, whether in politics or activism. These forces do not engage people outside an opinionated minority, and they do not build consensus or power.

3. The illusion of immediacy

People become activists because mounting frustration with the status quo drives them to organise. This can result in a wide range of actions, most of which require considerable effort and take a long time to deliver change.

One of the greatest traps of social media is that it provides the illusion of immediacy of action and means we have less patience for change that works. For example, thirty years ago, if you wanted to organise a march with 50,000 people you would have to speak to numerous groups who all had networks of maybe 500-10,000 people. That would entail considerable negotiation about what different groups wanted from the march and a hard-won consensus position on demands. This work, which sometimes took years,¹² would refine and strengthen the reasons for the march

and the desired outcomes. The power would not diminish after the march because it had strong foundations and people in power would notice.

Now through networks on social media, it is possible to get 50,000 people who agree with a hashtag on a march with far less effort and in a relatively short time. This is astonishing and can have an impact, but the convenience shortcuts the work needed to make lasting change. The hard work of achieving consensus, key to building power and creating change, is largely absent. Just mobilising those who agree on a rough idea does not shift the dial. It is almost as if there is a rule that the easier it is to organise, the less effective it will be. Get a million people on the streets with hardly any notice and it may look powerful on the surface, but the effect will dissipate quickly - and those in power know this.

The use of these technologies feeds impatience and conditions us to expect the world to respond to our demands instantly.¹³ With a relentless focus on the present moment our actions have shorter and shorter life spans in terms of their relevance and validity.¹⁴

We all feel the pressure for immediate change given the challenges we face. When it comes to climate change, speed of action is critical. Putting something out on social media and seeing it instantly gain attention can feel like action at the speed required. But thousands of people gathering on the back of outrage through social media is not organising. It creates the illusion of progress and a sort of moral safety valve. Some of the will to act is dissipated through the use of social media and rapid mobilisation.

Social media gave us instant access and reach beyond our wildest dreams. But while it may build weak links with thousands of people, it is probably not building the power needed to demand real change.¹⁵

Patience is one of the most powerful, counterintuitive, and underused tools we have. The oft quoted rule about community organising is that it is slow, but it works. If we are focused and strategic, patiently laying the foundations for change, it can lead to sudden change that would have never happened if we continued to be seduced by immediacy.

Instant exposure has another potential downside. To overcome many of the current challenges we need big, radical ideas. Radical ideas need quiet spaces before being launched into the world.¹⁶ They need to be nurtured and made more robust through the right kind of interactions with many others. Radical ideas dumped into social media without this can create their own opposition too soon from those who feel threatened. All too often we are witnessing the rapid rise of an issue only to be met with an equal and opposite reaction. Away from the immediacy of social media, we need to hold on to those radical outcomes but train ourselves to be patient and build power.

4. Your agenda is not your own

Bad actors are manipulating issue agendas and they have far more resources and less morals than those pressing for change. In 2021 a study revealed that about a quarter of tweets on climate change were from bots.¹⁷ It is well known that Russia has targeted divisive issues online - creating and amplifying content, and even manufacturing organisations on both sides of issue debates to sow division.¹⁸ Other state actors pursue online influencing strategies to stoke environmentalist protests that benefit their agenda.¹⁹

The *attack surface* for hostile countries has increased dramatically with the proliferation of digital technologies and trust is now a geopolitical target. This goal is not direct influence but the subtle disassembling of values and societal cohesion that erode trust. Russia created Facebook groups on both sides of the Black Lives Matter issue to sow distrust and provoke outrage. Outrage can

be a powerful and animating force but if it arises from social media can we be certain it has not been catalysed by those with another agenda?

It is not just malevolent state actors that have this divisive impact. It is also a side effect of the algorithms trained to push you in the direction that is most likely to hold your attention. It turns out that what holds your attention can take you on some very strange paths. You can start a Facebook group for organic baby food recipes and the algorithm can shepherd you to a QAnon convention because the algorithm has *learned* this will hold attention on the platform longer.²⁰

It is worth noting here that the version of TikTok in China, called Douyin, has very different algorithms through which different content is prioritised. There is evidence that younger users are shown more educational and inspiring content and have time limits imposed. The influence these apps have on what society is paying attention to should not be underestimated as a geopolitical tool.²¹

We desperately need “freedom of thought to combat climate change, racism and global poverty and to fall in love, laugh, and dream”²² not the pathways chosen for us by algorithms or malicious state actors.

5. The centre cannot hold

Those with more moderate views on a range of issues tend not to be very active on social media. Apart from bots, the most active are people from the extremes of the political or ideological spectrum. The Hidden Tribes Report²³ from the US highlighted that Progressive Activists and Devoted Conservatives – the two tribes found at either end of the ideological spectrum – together comprise just 14 percent of the American population but were by far the most active on social media. The result is that discussion about many issues can rapidly descend into a shouting match between extremes. The so called ‘exhausted majority’ are left out of the conversation. This is exacerbated when the mainstream media and politicians look to this ‘public square’ for the latest issues and amplify those extreme positions. Worryingly, climate polarisation has been increasing on social media in the last few years and this is inevitably being reinforced elsewhere.²⁴²⁵²⁶

These active ‘wings’ of society have high internal coherence, with contradictory positions treated as a direct threat. This results in purity tests, ‘pile-ons’, outrage and impenetrable language that alienates the majority. As discussed, this behaviour is easily weaponised with state actors amplifying content that raises threat perception and widens the gap between poles of argument. There is an endless story war going on online and if you pick a side with all its rules, badges and affirmations then you are part of that war and will find it hard to reach outside those confines.

Culture wars often originate in initial outrage that solidifies the opposition²⁷ and this happens even faster on social media. For this reason, we should avoid organising our own resistance through resolutely holding the most radical positions straight away, even if that might be the end goal. Most people need more moderate positions as an access point, and need empathy and understanding to be brought on a journey – otherwise they can be driven to opposition through discomfort.

The platforms have inbuilt power laws that exacerbate this problem and hinder the ‘middle class’ of outcomes²⁸ that are crucial to stability and politics. If you channel content through a central platform, such as Facebook, with one set of rules, it naturally creates a mathematical power law that results in a small number of winners whose activity fits those rules. These winners have huge followings and influence.

These platforms are supposed to give us all a voice but most activity online is part of an impoverished ‘long tail’ – millions of people competing for small amounts of attention. A tiny fraction of twitter users dominate the follower count with almost half of twitter accounts having

fewer than 10 followers. Interestingly this is not limited to social media. Similar distributions are seen across many other dominant digital platforms - just 1% of podcasts have 95% of listening and ad revenue and 0.01% of bitcoin holders control 27% of the currency.²⁹ In our digital utopia the vast majority have little or no influence or power at all and are left out of both the conversation and the creation of value.

6. Our digital future risks baking in the past

The problem with the algorithms that underpin much of the digital world is that they are trained on the past not on the world we would like to see. Researchers have found evidence of systemic bias built into everything from image sets to large language models.³⁰ There are many people writing and campaigning³¹ about this issue³² and whilst it is of huge significance there is little I can add to their fantastic work apart from to recommend reading it and flagging the systemic risk that presents.

7. Everyone is here but not in a good way

The most common argument for using social media is that everyone is there and so you need to be there to reach them. As already mentioned above the promise of reach is largely an illusion, but regardless, the people you can reach are not present in a way that makes change more likely. Nuance, complexity, compassion and, critically, attention to the problem at hand are needed. But on social media attention is captured and fractured. Nuance and compassion are rare. Complexity does not gain much attention.

In March 2020, as the world locked down, users spent the equivalent of 320,000 years on TikTok – that’s as much time between the Stone Age and the present.³³ What percentage of our captured attention do you think was devoted to the greatest challenges we face? Given the staggering amount of content uploaded every day, there is, just through sheer volume, guaranteed to be gold and this is often held up as a reason to continue. But this *gold* is a tiny, buried signal amongst the cacophony. How often have you gone to your mobile to do something only for one of the many ‘attention pirates’ to take you on a thirty-minute journey of no consequence?

Not only is our attention captured, but it also reduces our capacity to relate and engage with those who don’t think like us. Because we ‘live’ in ideological communities, we can become so closed to other opinions that we are affronted when we do bump into them. This is far less prevalent in offline communities where you must interact with people with different views all the time and must moderate to get on.

Social media also exploits the human desire for attention, and now we want to be seen. Our behaviour is incentivised towards activity done for external reward rather than activity done for its own reward. The world needs far more acts of invisible kindness and compassion than it needs virtue signalling.

8. Our brains are not evolved for this

Our brains were evolved for our ancestral environment. They have not changed much despite staggering changes in context. Our brains are drawn to novelty because reacting to its relatively rare occurrence in the ancestral environment was a survival skill. Something new in the bushes could be a matter of life and death. Now, it has become a severe impediment because we spend up to a third of our waking hours glued to a giant novelty engine. Excessive novelty has left most of us hyper-stimulated and unable to concentrate on one online task for longer than fifty seconds before switching.³⁴

Not only have we become less able to spend time deeply focused on a task, but we also have lost the ability to just let our mind wander free of the distractions of endless scrolling. Without this the

mind cannot do the background processing that helps us creatively solve problems. If we cannot access that potent combination of deep focus and daydreaming, we stand little chance of being able to devote serious mental resource to *what is really going on* and *what we are going to do*.

By creating software that tricks our ancestral brain with novelty and dopamine-driven feedback loops, we have turned mobile phones into highly unusual tools. They are no longer just extensions of our bodies, but extensions of our nervous system, and we cannot cope.³⁵ There is an incentive to keep it this way. If we are in a constant state of anxiety and addicted to being 'up to date' it means more time 'in platform'.

The novelty engine, providing a constant onslaught of threat, bad news, or tribal affirmation, gradually colonises our brains. The news used to be something we watched or read perhaps once a day. Now it is something we consume regularly during the day and relentlessly interact with. We are informed and opinionated but often don't have the mental space for calm analysis.

Even offline, we are no longer fully present but have half a mind on that lure of novelty and the promise of threat or reward. Even having another person's mobile phone in your line of vision can hijack mental resource. This is not going to get better any time soon. Tik Tok, one of the platforms still growing, has an even more addictive algorithm than e.g., Twitter and Facebook.³⁶

This exposure is altering our behaviour in the real world. Just when we need more compassion and understanding, we are more stressed and anxious, more suspicious of others, and angrier.³⁷ This technology erodes our ability to be human when we need to be more human than ever. It is not going to improve as the planet gets warmer; on hot days, anger and hate are even more prevalent on social media.³⁸

9. There is no shared reality for us to act from

A healthy society needs a good dose of scepticism and robust critique of the status quo, but a functioning democracy still needs a rough consensus about reality. One of the consequences of online tribalism and changing consumption of news, is a breakdown of consensus on what's actually happening. In this fractured reality it is hard to get to a shared political will to act on the big challenges we face.

We have reached a point where information is judged on whether it conforms to tribal world views rather than to agreed common standards or to a shared understanding. As the US has shown, this can mean that people on different sides of the political spectrum don't just have different views, but different realities. *The election was stolen from Trump in collusion with the deep state. Donald Trump and his supporters tried to stop the peaceful transfer of power.*

Polarisation in countries like the US and Brazil is leading to societies that do not have a coherent and consistent enough agreed reality to work towards a common good.³⁹ This situation has huge implications for attitudes to real expertise in decision-making and means the civic discourse on the implementation of climate and nature solutions is fraught.

As Hannah Arendt said, we need to remember that "only the experience of sharing a common human world with others who look at it from different perspectives can enable us to see reality in the round and to develop a shared common sense." Instead, we are all occupying our own self-reinforcing reality-tunnels.⁴⁰

10. Nothing is real

The business model of social media is often described as 'surveillance capitalism'.⁴¹ We have welcomed 'big brother' into our lives and everything we do and say is monitored to extract value. This surveillance presents an enormous risk to activism and others have written extensively about this.^{42,43} But Neil Postman, the American cultural critic, reminded us that Aldous Huxley raised an even greater concern than George Orwell's *big brother*. Orwell feared those who would

control our information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much information we would be reduced to passivity – the truth drowned in a sea of irrelevance. As Postman warned...we are amusing ourselves to death.⁴⁴

As far back as 2013, engineers at YouTube discussed the possibility of “the inversion”, the point at which fake content outstrips real. Some have speculated we passed “the inversion” as early as 2018 and that people have already adjusted to the point where there has been an erosion of belief in consensus reality. Steve Bannon built on this when he aimed to “flood the zone with shit,” so no-one knew what was true.⁴⁵ This is also central to the Kremlin communications playbook under Putin.⁴⁶

This is not a new idea. Published in 1997 *The Sovereign Individual* predicted our online world would result in an epidemic of disorientation and fragmentation where “any story true or false can unfold with greater appearance of truth than anything from the BBC.”⁴⁷ If everyone was used to the idea that everything is a lie then the biggest liar wins. The biggest liar came within a whisker of winning or stealing the US election in 2020.⁴⁸

The platforms we use are saturated with false information. In the first quarter of 2022, Facebook acted on 1.6 billion fake accounts.⁴⁹ Some have estimated that the chances of a new sign on to Facebook being a real person is about 1%. Dealing with the scale of this task means much of it must be automated and we have no idea what judgement is baked in, but you can be sure that real content will suffer.

The noise to signal ratio is only getting worse. Content automation using algorithms is increasing false information that has no human origin and advances in AI are only going to exacerbate this situation. The emergence of large language models like GPT4⁵⁰ mean that the cost of producing convincing *bullshit* has almost dropped to zero.⁵¹

Our brains, already struggling with the novelty onslaught are not ready for what comes next. In 2017 AlphaZero learnt chess in four hours and beat the reigning chess computer.⁵² Some of the moves it used were described as ‘alien’ and unlike anything on record from over a thousand years of play. Imagine a far more advanced version of this technology developing and testing viral messaging on billions of humans on social media. Combined with advances in deep fake technology, this will result in an online environment dominated by fake content tuned to make us as susceptible as possible to its message.

Huxley warned us that we would come to love the technology that erodes our ability to think. That has already happened, and we did not heed that warning. We need to wake up to the threat of machines deciding what we think.

What next

There are always going to be great stories that come from social media to reinforce its being a force for good. This is a common rebuttal when setting out this position.

But I am convinced that, for all the reasons laid out above, the current engagement business model means social media is a net negative and a major barrier to societal transformation. To chart a realistic and inclusive (one that includes those whose politics are not identical to our own) way forward means we should not use a medium that by its very nature does the opposite.

Many of the problems laid out here don't just appear in social media but are present in other digital technologies. However, this does not have to be the case. The problem lies in the way they are designed, used and commercialised. We have a choice in what happens next.

We need to have a big conversation about collectively taking some steps away from these platforms - otherwise we will continue to have the collective action issue that no-one will leave until everyone does.⁵³

There is a bigger conversation to have, but here are some principles for how we might go forward.

Invest in offline

A huge amount of time, money and attention is paid to social media and to digital tools more widely. A good principle going forward might be '*human first*' rather than '*digital first*'. Emphasis should be placed on real connection, place-based community work and building social fabric instead. Without this we will all be so atomised on our phones we won't have the civic infrastructure in place when things get harder...which they will. Many of the digital tools that have been so successful in recent years are showing diminishing returns⁵⁴ and perhaps the reliance on these tools has impoverished face to face organising and diminished our abilities to connect in person and build consensus.

I can feel the objection already. We need urgent action, and this is where millions of people are! Going into communities and talking to people just takes far too long! Yes, the alternatives might be slower, but they build longer lasting power and reduce polarisation. If millions of us devoted a small amount of time to having constructive conversations with people who are not in our bubble just imagine the impact. Talking to other people offline forces compromise, listening, empathy, nuance, being exposed to other views and (providing it is not filmed) your words cannot be held on record to be used against you endlessly. Uncertainty is easier to navigate in these situations. There is no need to be so strident and absolute. Away from the novelty engines we can tell stories in these situations that provoke a different reaction in people, one that is far more likely to increase empathy.

Have an information hierarchy

One reason we go on social media is to be informed. But we are drowning in information and in our endless chase to be up to date we spend less and less time asking "what is really going on and what should we do about it". Moran Cerf, an Israeli neuroscientist who has had unique access to the inner workings of the human brain has concluded that our world is now just too complex for our brains to process.⁵⁵ To understand, we have to step back from the maelstrom.

I always remember the advice "if you want to know what is really going on then read books that are more than 25 years old that people still recommend now"⁵⁶. This seems outrageously counter cultural in an era of instant news and information. Surely to be up to date is to be informed. Print, and books in particular, are a far slower, more deliberative, more demanding, more linear domain of ideas that really encourage rational thinking. Reading a book is almost an act of rebellion in our

age of instant information. Books are also one of the few mediums left where your attention is not for sale. A book takes an enormous effort to write and quite an effort to read. Surprisingly, it was from Bill Gates that I heard that the whole point of taking the time to read a book, not a blog post summary,⁵⁷ was to spend the time meditating on the topic. Active reading means deep analysis rather than skimming the information torrent. It does mean asking what is really going on and spending time in analysis rather than reacting to the frenetic pace of information so much of which is devoid of contemplation.

Just enough of the right technology

A wide range of digital technology is going to be fundamental to the transformation that is required but we need to find technology that is human centric and catalyses our 'better angels', and we should only use it just enough. The question is what technology we need to support the transformation in a way that facilitates collective action and does not exacerbate polarisation.

Human interaction is often impoverished through digital mediation because we lose so much of human communication in that medium. That is why it is important to prioritise face to face where possible.

There are interesting examples where digital technology can facilitate but it must be very carefully designed and used. For example, the vTaiwan platform uses the Pol.is system to push towards consensus statements on difficult issues.⁵⁸ But this is just one story when we need thousands.

We need to counter the power of the incumbent platforms and the massive inequality in value and voice that the power laws of these platforms reinforce. We urgently need digital tools and platforms that have a 'middle class' of outcomes and distribute power and value widely.

A good ground rule is to be suspicious of technology offering a short cut to building power. Building power and working with others is full of inefficiency and friction. The absence of it suggests that something crucial is probably missing.

Know yourself better than the algorithms

The engagement business model is based on collecting so much data on us that the companies know us better than we know ourselves and can therefore nudge us towards small changes in behaviour - often to consume. The only way to counter that, if you are not going to leave the platforms, is to be very aware of what the online experience might be doing to you, where it might be taking you and what it is making you feel. Start with the assumption that nothing you read or see online is real and check the sources thoroughly.

Don't be sucked in by the social media imperative to "work on your personal brand" to get reach. In a world where everyone is trying to be seen all the time there is power in choosing another path and being part of collective action rather than us all trying to be prominent individuals.

Final word

To paraphrase Katherine Rundell - attention is the thing we owe most to this precious world.⁵⁹ Many of us spend almost a third of our waking hours using a device of astonishing computing power to distract and amuse ourselves. McLuhan warned us that "once we have surrendered our senses and nervous systems to the private manipulation of those who try to benefit from taking a lease on our eyes, ears and nerves, we don't really have any rights left."⁶⁰

Campaigning and activism, and your mind, have been co-opted by the attention-based business model and it all happens in 'walled gardens' that are not built for what is needed. We cannot build the future where the aim is to monetise your attention no matter what good things happen there.

As Ivan Illich said “a desirable future depends on our deliberately choosing a life of action over a life of consumption. The future depends more upon our choice of institutions which support a life of action than on our developing new ideologies and technologies.”⁶¹ So, delete your social media accounts, put down the phone and go and start a real-life conversation about what we do next.

References

- ¹ State of Mobile 2022 report by App Annie as analysed here <https://www.clickinsights.asia/post/state-of-mobile-2022-major-trends-and-practices>
- ² <https://time.com/6191973/big-tech-freedom-of-thought/>
- ³ <https://www.ribbonfarm.com/2018/11/28/the-digital-magnot-line/>
- ⁴ Frank Luntz, US pollster in conversation with Spectator at Conservative Party Conference 2021
- ⁵ <https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/viralpolitics>
- ⁶ Lawrence Lessig
- ⁷ Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business
- ⁸ Marshall McLuhan in Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man
- ⁹ 1/10 Americans get their news on Tik-Tok <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/10/21/more-americans-are-getting-news-on-tiktok-bucking-the-trend-on-other-social-media-sites/>
- ¹⁰ I think this was originally coined by Jaron Lanier
- ¹¹ <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/house-republicans-lying-revenge-infighting-guide-1234659892/>
- ¹² Rebecca Solnit: The Slow Road to Sudden Change <https://lithub.com/rebecca-solnit-before-the-uprising-comes-the-work/>
- ¹³ Taking Stock of Our Technological Liturgies <https://theconvivialsociety.substack.com/p/taking-stock-of-our-technological#details>
- ¹⁴ Hartmut Rosa. Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity July 2013.
- ¹⁵ <https://growingthegrassroots.civicpower.org.uk/chapters/three-big-consequences-of-where-we-find-ourselves>
- ¹⁶ Gal Beckerman. The Quiet Before: On the Unexpected Origins of Radical Ideas
- ¹⁷ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/twitter-bots-are-a-major-source-of-climate-disinformation/>
- ¹⁸ <https://mashable.com/article/activists-respond-russia-facebook-ads>
- ¹⁹ <https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/06/28/1055093/a-pro-china-online-influence-campaign-is-targeting-the-rare-earths-industry>
- ²⁰ Tristan Harris. Centre for Humane Technology Podcast.
- ²¹ TikTok and WeChat: International Cyber Policy Centre at ASPI.
- ²² Susie Alegre. <https://time.com/6191973/big-tech-freedom-of-thought/>
- ²³ <https://hiddentribes.us/>
- ²⁴ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-022-01527-x>
- ²⁵ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-022-01533-z>
- ²⁶ <https://www.theverge.com/2022/12/5/23494220/elon-musk-twitter-climate-misinformation-rise-analysis>
- ²⁷ Podcast: Things Fell Apart by Jon Ronson <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/brand/m0011cpr>
- ²⁸ Jaron Lanier in conversation with Bari Weiss
- ²⁹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/bitcoins-one-percent-controls-lions-share-of-the-cryptocurrencys-wealth-11639996204>
- ³⁰ E.g the PhD research from Abeba Birhane <https://abebabirhane.com/>
- ³¹ <https://www.media.mit.edu/posts/how-i-m-fighting-bias-in-algorithms/>
- ³² <https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/2/18/21121286/algorithms-bias-discrimination-facial-recognition-transparency>
- ³³ State of Mobile Report 2021 <https://www.data.ai/en/go/state-of-mobile-2021>
- ³⁴ Gloria Mark, PhD, Attention Span <https://gloriamark.com/attention-span/>
- ³⁵ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/everyday-resilience/202306/the-nervous-system-is-not-meant-to-manage-emails>
- ³⁶ <https://turnto10.com/i-team/tiktok-videos-instagram-reels-douyin-youtube-social-media-algorithm-dopamine-screen-time-children-mental-health>
- ³⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/aug/04/britain-angry-abusive-behaviour-staff>
- ³⁸ Temperature impacts on hate speech online [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(22\)00173-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(22)00173-5/fulltext)
- ³⁹ <https://partiallyexaminedlife.com/2018/08/28/epistemic-tribalism-epistemic-chaos-and-epistemic-exhaustion/>
- ⁴⁰ Alan Moore referencing Robert Anton Wilson.
- ⁴¹ The Age of Surveillance Capitalism – Shoshana Zuboff
- ⁴² The amazing work of <https://citizenlab.ca/>
- ⁴³ <https://privacyinternational.org/news-analysis/2816/communities-risk-how-encroaching-surveillance-putting-squeeze-activists>
- ⁴⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amusing_Ourselves_to_Death
- ⁴⁵ <https://bylinetimes.com/2022/03/21/flooding-the-zone-the-bannon-playbook-governing-british-politics/>
- ⁴⁶ Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*
- ⁴⁷ https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/82256.The_Sovereign_Individual
- ⁴⁸ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/>
- ⁴⁹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1013474/facebook-fake-account-removal-quarter/>
- ⁵⁰ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GPT-4>
- ⁵¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/06/podcasts/transcript-ezra-klein-interviews-gary-marcus.html>
- ⁵² <https://www.newyorker.com/science/elements/how-the-artificial-intelligence-program-alphazero-mastered-its-games>
- ⁵³ <https://doctorow.medium.com/how-to-leave-dying-social-media-platforms-9fc550fe5abf>
- ⁵⁴ <https://theconnector.substack.com/p/have-we-finally-hit-peak-email>
- ⁵⁵ <https://www.ft.com/content/06b22337-e862-43e5-8440-d9c225e0c18d>
- ⁵⁶ Despite searching I cannot find the quote but it may have been C.S. Lewis who was often quoted extolling the virtues of old books e.g. “It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between.”
- ⁵⁷ <https://lithub.com/crypto-nerd-sam-bankman-fried-who-just-lost-16-billion-would-never-read-a-book/>
- ⁵⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/27/taiwan-civic-hackers-polis-consensus-social-media-platform>
- ⁵⁹ <https://www.ft.com/content/7bd12f71-24b3-482d-9add-240c966875a8>
- ⁶⁰ Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The extensions of man
- ⁶¹ Ivan Illich: Deschooling society