

# The Ethics of Quitting Social Media

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*Abstract.* There are *prima facie* ethical reasons and prudential reasons for people to avoid or withdraw from social media platforms. But in response to pushes for people to quit social media, a number of authors have argued that there is something ethically questionable about quitting social media: that it involves—typically, if not necessarily—an objectionable expression of privilege on the part of the quitter. In this paper I contextualise privilege-based objections to quitting social media and explain the underlying principles and assumptions that feed into these objections. I show how they misrepresent the kind of act people are performing in quitting, in part by downplaying its role in promoting reforms in communication systems and technologies. And I suggest that this misrepresentation is related to a more widespread, and ultimately insidious, tendency to think of recently-established technological states of affairs as permanent fixtures of our society.

Even a spate of sternly worded articles called ‘Guess What: Tech Has an Ethics Problem’ was not making tech have less of an ethics problem. Oh man. If *that* wasn’t doing it, what would?

Patricia Lockwood, ‘The Communal Mind’

## 1. Introduction

‘It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.’ So said the late philosopher and critic Mark Fisher (2009: 02), echoing remarks by Slavoj Žižek. Fisher uses the word *imagine* advisedly. He isn’t saying that Armageddon is in fact *more likely* than the end of capitalism. He is saying that when our culture tries to imagine the near future, in speculative fiction and elsewhere, any post-capitalist society that it can envision is simultaneously a state of

apocalyptic ruin. Sociopolitical structures whose origins are still very recent, relative to humanity's long history, and whose radically globalised incarnations are mere hatchlings, have become, in our minds, integral pillars of human existence.

Something similar has been happening with social media. We are drifting into a mindset on which social media in something like its current form is just a fact of life, and where it's a given that social media companies will organise our relational and informational networks. Pundits say it is a waste of time trying to trigger a social media exodus to change this technological state of affairs. Instead, they say we should 'embrace the future. At least it won't be boring' (Cox 2018). Or they allow that a user exodus *could* transform the landscape, but then immediately pour cold water on that possibility. Change seems possible, 'until you realise every single one of these users are just clueless individuals who want to post cat pictures.'

They are not, and never will be a unified mass... even a company that debatably owns the internet [Google] couldn't pull off enough of a critical mass [with its Google+ service] to make it work... what can individual users do to compel Facebook into behaving properly? Quick answer: sweet fuck all.<sup>1</sup>

Such thinking is new to our culture, and it probably doesn't yet have as tight a grip on our imagination as the capitalism-or-bust mindset. But its grip seems to be tightening. Technologies and practices that bubbled-up into existence less than two decades ago are being imaginatively reified as nailed-in, load-bearing structures in humanity's housing, as opposed to movable cultural furniture. To say that it doesn't have to be like this is, increasingly, to sound like a hopelessly naïve Luddite.

In this paper I examine how this idea colours debates around quitting social media. People can and do move away from using social media. If large numbers of people were to do this it would undermine the power of the major platforms (and the sector as a whole), and interrupt the network effects that compel reluctant users to carry on using social media. But regardless of this potential, advocates of quitting are often ethically criticised. They are told that their stance involves an objectionable expression of *privilege*. The people voicing this complaint generally agree that social media has genuine costs. But they worry that people in disadvantaged positions cannot afford to leave social media, on balance of considerations, and they find it problematic for others to flee the social media arena so long as this is the case.

There are major weaknesses in this kind of objection to quitting social media, although below I will highlight some grains of truth in it too. But what I am most interested in, is how this critique helps to make a self-fulfilling prophesy of the

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<sup>1</sup> 'The ethics of... deleting Facebook,' *The Ethics Of*, 13th April 2018, [theethicsof.com/2018/04/13/the-ethics-of-deleting-facebook](http://theethicsof.com/2018/04/13/the-ethics-of-deleting-facebook).

idea that social media is an inescapable fact of life. Mass quitting would unravel the network effects that make it costly to avoid using social media. And that would make it easier for disadvantaged people to quit social media in turn, if they wanted to. The privilege-based objection to quitting only makes sense if one assumes from the get-go that none of this is possible. The idea that social media just is an inescapable fact of life is thus functioning as a premise in arguments that rebuke and deter the very acts that could make it the case that social media *isn't* an inescapable fact of life.

In what follows I survey the main reasons for quitting social media (section 2), before explaining the privilege-based objections to quitting (section 3), and then criticising those objections, in a way that expands on the above (section 4). My analysis has broader implications for the ethics and politics of technology. Many popular technologies remain widely-used in part due to forces of convention. Roughly, people's reasons for using a given technology, *x*, owe partly (sometimes predominantly) to the fact that many others are using *x* too. Where conventions strongly favour using technology *x*, there are always going to be some individuals who dislike *x* and who are willing to flout convention by rejecting *x* and absorbing the costs of that. The bigger lesson to be learned, in dissecting privilege-based objections to quitting social media, is that it is wrong to automatically view this kind of preference-driven technological abstention as being inimical to a public-spirited agenda of trying to make communications technology work in the interests of people, rather than the other way around. Tech Refuseniks are not necessarily being selfish, naïve, or politically obtuse. In at least some cases, rather, they are piloting alternative ways of communicating and using technology, with the potential to ultimately benefit everyone. This is how we should think of the anti-social media vanguard, at any rate.

## 2. The Case for Quitting

I will use the term *Quitting* to mean totally refraining from posting content on social media or reacting to other people's content with comments, likes, shares, etc. In short, you can Quit either by not having social media accounts, or by leaving your accounts dormant. Quitting is in essence a matter of not actively participating in communication or other social interaction through social media platforms.

Of course there are plenty of stopping places between being an intensive user of social media, on one hand, versus being a full-blown Quitter, on the other. Some people have strong ethical concerns about using social media, but also strong practical reasons to use it for specific purposes, and these people may – quite reasonably – look to limit their usage of social media, or to use alternative social media platforms that are less susceptible to ethical objections. I am focusing on Quit-

ting because, as we will see, a number of authors have argued that Quitting involves an ethically objectionable expression of privilege. My aim is to counter those arguments.

In my definition of Quitting I make no distinction between withdrawing from social media after using it for a time, versus never using it in the first place. Having said that, by Quitting I do not mean simply migrating from one social media platform to another. The privilege-based objections to Quitting that I examine in sections 3-4 do not apply to those users who tour around different social media platforms. The choice that is (allegedly) a problematic expression of privilege, is to position oneself outside of the whole communicative ecosystem of social media.

## 2.1 General Reasons for Quitting

Quitting shouldn't be seen just as a trivial lifestyle preference. It is (at least, it can be) a weighty choice—the kind of choice that it makes sense to seriously wrestle with. To see why, we first need to recognise social media's transformative potential, and the visionary agenda driving it. Social media has had a huge impact on how people acquire information, conduct their relationships, and manage their public lives (see e.g. van den Eijnden et al. 2016, Aalbers et al. 2019, Allcott et al. 2019). And industry leaders tend to champion these changes, rather than viewing them as a regrettable by-product of their business models. Consider Mark Zuckerberg's statement to investors, in the run-up to Facebook's stock market IPO in 2012.

Facebook was not originally created to be a company. It was built to accomplish a social mission—to make the world more open and connected... we're inspired by technologies that have revolutionized how people spread and consume information. We often talk about inventions like the printing press and the television—by simply making communication more efficient, they led to a complete transformation of many important parts of society.<sup>2</sup>

Companies like Facebook are partly guided by this kind of lofty techno-revolutionary agenda. They aim to 'rewire the way people spread and consume information', to again use words that Zuckerberg put to potential investors. Various insidious undercurrents around these agendas have become more widely recognised, for example in Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) analysis of tech-facilitated systems of 'surveillance capitalism', or in countless think-pieces tying social media to the rise of reactionary populism. Quitting social media can be a way of resisting or opposing these agendas of social transformation. It can be a way of voting *no* in our society's ongoing *de facto* referendum on whether to embrace some sort of Zuckerbergian vision.

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<sup>2</sup> See [techradar.com/news/internet/mark-zuckerberg-outlines-facebook-s-social-mission-1059550](https://www.techradar.com/news/internet/mark-zuckerberg-outlines-facebook-s-social-mission-1059550).

To appreciate the weightiness of Quitting we also need to recognise the power of the behavioural technologies that Facebook and others are using in pursuit of their agenda. Jaron Lanier (2019) has coined a term to describe these technologies and the business models around them. He calls it *Bummer*: Behaviours of Users Modified and Made into an Empire for Rent. Most social media platforms have a fairly simple set-up at the surface level. They provide a free, public-facing site through which users can post content and interact with other users. The companies make money through advertising and by gathering and selling data. But beneath this surface level set-up most social media platforms also purposefully filter the content that users are exposed to, in order to elicit greater user engagement (thus generating more data). And this filtering is potentially malign. Sites algorithmically monitor the content that elicits more user reactions—quite often, polarising or inflammatory content—and then show users more of this material. Mark O’Connell neatly summarises Lanier’s worries about this set-up and its commercial exploitation.

Social-media platforms know what you’re seeing, and they know how you acted in the immediate aftermath of seeing it, and they can decide what you will see next in order to further determine how you act... we, as social-media users, replicate [this] logic at the level of our own activity: we perform market analysis of our own utterances, calculating the reaction a particular post will generate and adjusting our output accordingly. Negative emotions... tend to drive significantly more engagement than positive ones. (O’Connell 2019)

The point of this is that compulsive behaviour and increasing acrimony is not “an epiphenomenon of social media, but rather the fuel on which it has been engineered to run” (O’Connell 2019; see also van den Eijnden et al. 2016, Alter 2018). Quitting social media can be a way of resisting the compulsive pull of this behavioural technology. It isn’t just a trivial lifestyle preference, then, but a choice about guarding oneself against potentially overwhelming psychological influences.

Even setting aside worries about compulsion or addiction, there are plenty of other prudential reasons for Quitting, i.e. reasons that are just about the user taking care to look after their own needs and interests. There is evidence that social media makes users unhappy, by spurring status anxiety and similar feelings, and that Quitting alleviates this (e.g. Tromholt 2016, Shakya and Christakis 2017, Hunt et al. 2018). There is evidence that social media usage increases one’s risk of falling into delusional beliefs, through the effects of echo chambers and filter bubbles (for extended discussion, see Settle 2018). And there are a range of worries about how social media usage can compromise the user’s privacy (see section 2.2, below).

These are only *pro tanto* reasons to Quit. There are obviously some *pro tanto* prudential reasons running the opposite way as well. As Zeynep Tufekci (2019) says, in some regions ‘Facebook and its products simply are the internet’, and there are certain segments of public life ‘that are accessible or organized only via Facebook’.

For work purposes, then, and for certain kinds of ‘life administration’, people may have strong prudential reasons to use social media. And on a more run-of-the-mill level, some people just find social media to be more convenient than any other tool for keeping in contact with people, or for engaging in various kinds of group organising, including for purposes of political activism. The difficulties of maintaining relationships via other channels are often exaggerated, but social media wouldn’t have become so widely-used if it didn’t offer at least some benefits on this front.

## 2.2 *Overtly Ethical Reasons for Quitting*

How someone weighs up the prudential costs and benefits of using social media will depend upon her personal situation. My point in surveying the prudential reasons for Quitting is to orient our thinking as to why people Quit. Generally, people seem to Quit for sensible self-interested reasons, mixed in with a hazy anxiety about their complicity in various social problems to which social media contributes.

The key ethical question, for our purposes, is whether the Quitter, acting on the basis of these sorts of prudential reasons, is thereby abjuring some putative ethical obligation, such that her Quitting can be viewed as somehow wrongfully selfish.<sup>3</sup>

Note that in the discussion to follow, relating to ethical arguments for and against Quitting, I will not be presupposing any particular normative theory or framework. The kinds of ethical considerations that I will be adverting to – the attainment of good or bad outcomes, worries about fairness and disadvantage – are ones whose ethical significance can in principle be accounted for within any ethical framework, including deontological, consequentialist, and virtue ethical frameworks.

Given the long rap sheet of ethical problems that have been identified in debates around social media, it may seem odd to view prudentially-motivated Quitting as a selfish choice. After all, any qualms about Quitting’s selfishness are likely to be outweighed by ethical worries that favour Quitting. Or so one may think. In fact things are a little more complicated. Existing debates on the ethics of social media are generally concerned with bad outcomes that are caused or made more likely by social media’s very existence, or by its core operational strategies, e.g. the *Bummer* model. Therefore most of the ethical prescriptions that are offered in these debates are actionable, if at all, not by social media’s individual users, but by *Power Players*, i.e. actors who can directly affect how social media companies operate,

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<sup>3</sup> For a broader overview of the motivations that people have for Quitting, and for engaging in other forms of ‘digital detox’ behaviour, see Syvertsen and Enli (2020).

like senior executives and officers at the companies themselves, and lawmakers and regulatory agencies that impose operational constraints on these companies. Indeed, these debates normally position individual users not as perpetrators of the relevant ethical problems, but as the victims if and insofar as the Power Players fail to intervene.

Consider debates about privacy on social media, for example. These typically begin with observations about the unusually intrusive ways in which social media companies gather and exploit users' data. They then raise question about what our underlying reasons are for caring about privacy, and whether a right to privacy prohibits social media companies' data-management practices (Tucker 2014, Acquisti et al. 2015, Quinn 2016). But if we conclude that these practices do infringe the right to privacy, what follows, from a user's perspective? The upshot is not an ethical injunction, but another prudential recommendation: if you care about your privacy, avoid social media or take special care to guard your privacy in how you use it. Granted, the user has ethical reasons to act prudentially, so this can also be understood as an indirect (banal) ethical injunction. But this is all secondary to what is naturally seen as the main ethical upshot of the privacy worries. And these apply to Power Players. If the privacy concerns are well-founded, the upshot is that Power Players should institute reforms in social media practices in order to better protect users' privacy.<sup>4</sup>

The same sort of analysis applies, more or less, to all of the other major ethical issues that are canvassed in the social media ethics scholarship to date. There are discussions about whether social media undermines meaningful friendship (Sharp 2012, Elder 2014), whether it results in problematic forms of alienation (Wandel and Beavers 2011, Bakardjieva and Gaden 2012), and whether it impairs people's competence as democratic citizens (Helbing et al. 2017). For each consideration, to the extent that the worries are well-founded, the primary implication for the individual user is that she has prudential reasons to avoid social media, or to use it warily lest she incur the relevant adverse consequences. Again, as with the privacy worries, the implicit addressees of these arguments are Power Players: actors with the power to directly and significantly influence how social media operates, in order to mitigate its alienating, friendship-jeopardising, or democracy-undermining effects.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This assumes that privacy is essentially an individual good. But if privacy is in fact a public good—if we have a duty protect our privacy not just for our own sake, but for the sake of others, as Véliz (2019) argues—then the worries about privacy can be seen as addressed to not just Power Players, but individual users as well. Even so, much ethical criticism about privacy issues around social media positions the individual social media user not as the culpable perpetrator of the problem, but as the potential victim of the problem.

<sup>5</sup> One may argue that we have ethical reasons, not just prudential reasons, to be good democratic citizens. However, our civic duties are about meeting a threshold of democratic competence, rather than optimising or maximising democratic competence. Nevertheless, the user who meets this threshold still has *pro tanto prudential* reasons to Quit, in virtue of social media's negative effects on his democratic competence.

### 2.3 *The Argument from Complicity*

But this brings us back to worries about complicity. Maybe individual users should Quit to avoid being complicit in the problems noted above. Matthew Liao (2018) considers whether Facebook users are complicit in Facebook's facilitation of antidemocratic speech, e.g. hate propaganda against the Rohingya in Myanmar. He recognises that most users do not actively collude in these wrongs, but nevertheless, he says, they may still be 'failing to participate in a collective action (that is, leaving Facebook) that would prevent the deterioration of democracy.' Ultimately Liao thinks that in order to be complicit in these wrongs the user has to keep using Facebook while knowing that Facebook intends to facilitate antidemocratic actions. And his read on things is that while Facebook engages in some antidemocratic practices of its own (e.g. hiring PR-firms to push news stories seeking to discredit their critics), it doesn't intend to sponsor the more egregious antidemocratic acts that it facilitates. Thus, Liao concludes, Facebook does not cross any 'moral red line' which obliges users to Quit, on pain of complicity in an antidemocratic agenda.

Bracketing off Liao's judgements about that specific issue, we can ask whether this sort of complicity-based rationale for Quitting is compelling in principle. Against this rationale one may argue (e.g. Henry 2015) that social media is just a tool. The fact that a tool is used for invidious ends does not forbid us from using it for good. But this is over-simplistic. It fails to acknowledge that technologies have affordances in a given context—'they make certain patterns of use more attractive or convenient for users' (Vallor 2012, section 3.4)—and that they are thus susceptible to predictable forms of misuse. If social media is a perfect tool for antidemocratic propaganda, then to insist, in reply to calls for stricter regulation, that it can also be used for good, is like arguing against gun controls because M16s can be used by good guys to shoot bad guys. Moreover, the 'social-media-is-just-a-tool' reply ignores the way that all social media usage increases the scope of the wrongful ends to which social media can be turned. The power of the major networks derives in part from the fact that people feel they have to use them because everyone else is too. 'Good users' reinforce these network effects much the same as any other users (Lanier 2019).

So: the 'social-media-is-just-a-tool' reply to the complicity argument is unpersuasive. But it helps us see that consequences, in addition to intentions, are important for any assessment of how the individual user is implicated in bad outcomes borne of social media. If you have good reason to believe that your Facebook usage makes a real albeit small contribution to bad ends, you cannot nullify the ethical ramifications of that simply by arguing that neither you nor Facebook's directors intended those ends. This is a particularly dubious instance of reasoning based on the doctrine of double effect, i.e. the doctrine which says that it's okay to do something that has a foreseeable, bad side-effect, as long as you



don't consciously *intend* to bring about the bad side effect. We can see how dubious this reasoning is, as applied to the “complicity with the evils of social media”-type argument, by noting that the same reasoning could completely nullify any ethical objection to a carbon-intensive lifestyle, or to the consumption of products manufactured by indentured workers. In short, the risk of making a small contribution to seriously bad outcomes, through a collective activity with many other people, has some bearing on how you ought to act. Any plausible ethical theory—deontological, consequentialist, virtue ethical, or otherwise—assigns some normative weight to the consequences of people's actions, including unintended and merely contributory consequences.

In general, then, whether an individual user has an ethical reason to Quit, in order to avoid being complicit in problematic outcomes borne of social media, will depend on the extent to which her Quitting will actually have (or can reasonably be expected to have) a tangible impact in changing those outcomes. But then this is precisely why it is difficult to formulate a strong complicity-based ethical argument for Quitting. It is difficult for any individual to say whether and how her Quitting *will* affect the problems that she is hoping to address, given her tiny individual influence, and given the many other unpredictable factors, including other people's actions, which causally mediate between her actions and the problems. Quitting in order to mitigate social media's democracy-eroding effects (for example), is a bit like buying organic fruit in order to mitigate colony collapse. It may have a very small positive impact, or it may achieve literally nothing, given all the other causal factors in play. The individual may still have some *pro tanto* reason to act, then, but her actions are not responsible for the problem in the right way—the causal relationship between her actions and the outcome for the sake of which they are being done is too remote—for her to be under any kind of binding obligation to act.

### 3. Privilege-Based Objections to Quitting

Let's take stock. The idea that we are positively obliged to Quit is implausible, because the major ethical problems with social media are mostly ones for Power Players to address, and insofar as individual users bear some responsibility for those problems, via an argument from complicity, it is hard for any user to tell whether her Quitting is likely to even infinitesimally improve things. Conscientious motives may still be in play for the individual Quitter. She may think of her Quitting as expressing opposition to the problems borne of social media, or to the questionable political agendas that social media is serving. But for most Quitters, prudential reasons for leaving social media—the aim of safeguarding one's privacy, time, or happiness—are likely to carry more weight. This is not to deny that

for many people, on balance, there are net prudential benefits in using social media. But at least for some people, these benefits will be outweighed by the countervailing costs.

The #DeleteFacebook movement that arose in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018 saw large numbers of people Quitting—seemingly driven by a mix of prudential and conscientious motives, as just described—and calling for others to follow. But the movement quickly generated a raft of vigorous criticisms, whose main ethical theme was privilege. For instance, April Glaser argues that

Deleting Facebook is a privilege. The company has become so good at the many things it does that for lots of people, leaving the service would be a self-harming act. And they deserve better from it, too. Which is why the initial answer to Facebook's failings shouldn't be to flee Facebook. We need to demand a better Facebook. (Glaser 2018)

Along similar lines, Steph Mitesser argues that

Simply telling consumers to avoid a product demonstrates the inherent privilege required to abandon a technology. Calls to leave the Facebook don't reckon with the thorniest ways it has entrenched itself in our lives. (Mitesser 2018)

This is not the first time anyone noticed that privilege can tilt people towards an anti-technology mindset. In discussing 'digital detox retreats' and related fads a few years earlier, Casey Cep (2014) argues that people buying these fads are expressing a bourgeois, pseudo-spiritual impulse. 'Like Thoreau ignoring the locomotive that passed by his cabin at Walden Pond or the Anabaptists rejecting electricity,' she says, these people 'scorn technology in the hope of finding the authenticity and the community that they think it obscures.' But the post-#DeleteFacebook objections to Quitting are more pointed. They are not just cocking an eyebrow at the hippy-ish vanity that motivates some neo-Luddites. They are criticizing the way that wider political circumstances apparently fail to register in the Quitters' motives, and they are pointing to identity-based inequalities to explain this insensitivity, and to explain why it is ethically troubling. Jillian York is especially forthright in this regard.

A certain demographic—namely, white men—love to argue that people worried about data privacy violations should 'just leave' Facebook and other social networks... what these tech bros don't offer are viable alternatives. This is fundamentally an argument made from a position of privilege. Those suggesting that we should simply walk away... fail to understand why leaving is, for many, a luxury they can't afford... for people with marginalized identities, chronic illnesses, or families spread across the world, walking away means leaving behind a potentially vital safety net of support. (York 2018)

Rashad Robinson, the President of the civil rights organisation Color of Change, adds an incisive twist to this analysis. He links social media privilege to broader issues of identity-based injustice, by likening Quitters to upwardly-mobile residents who move from poor school districts to affluent ones, without doing anything to help those left behind. Quitting is ‘like people opting out of bad schools,’ he says: ‘some people are still going to be there and can’t opt out’ (Ingram 2018).

Before turning to criticism I want to run through some points in these kinds of arguments that seem well-founded. First, note that the privilege-based objections are not always condemning Quitting *per se*, so much as the act of advocating for Quitting while ignoring the unequal costs of Quitting for different people. For instance, Mitesser (2018) objects to those ‘telling people to stop using Facebook, while ignoring the foundational problems that led us here.’ This also looks like the best way to read Glaser’s claim that the #DeleteFacebook movement insults people for whom Quitting is costly. To preach the gospel of Quitting—when it is easier for the sermoniser to Quit than the sermonisee—does seem a little insulting, because it unfairly implies that the sermonisee lacks the preacher’s moral fibre.

Second, the key descriptive premise in these arguments—that Quitting is generally easier for privileged people and costlier for disadvantaged people—seems plausible.<sup>6</sup> Identity-based hierarchies are correlated with inequalities in social capital. Having an affluent upbringing, attending college, and being geographically mobile, all tend to result in a wider network of relationships that help in gaining employment and other competitive goods. Social media can compensate for deficits in social capital, by enabling easy access to a large (if relatively low quality) network of connections. Members of disadvantaged groups are more likely to rely upon this compensatory source of social capital. Moreover, relatedly, sustaining a wide social network without social media is time-consuming. Inequalities in leisure time, correlated with demographic privilege, increase the relative costs of maintaining offline social networks for members of disadvantaged groups.

Third, I also want to endorse, at least for argument’s sake, the normative principle that underpins privilege-based objections to Quitting. Call this the *Privilege Principle*: a person who enjoys a position of unmerited privilege relative to others sometimes ought to act in ways that (i) manifest appropriate recognition of, and (ii) where possible, try to compensate for, the unfairness. Consider a person, A, planning to meet a co-worker, B, who has a physical disability. Suppose A suggests meeting somewhere that is harder for physically disabled people to access. But also suppose that matters play out fortuitously for B, such that in practice he

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<sup>6</sup> Note that a number of authors who defend Quitting nevertheless readily concede this premise, e.g. Helfrich 2018, Johnson 2018.

is unexpectedly benefited by meeting at this location. The Privilege Principle captures the intuition, liable to be elicited in such a case, that A's conduct still involves an ethical failing. A acts in a way that fails to manifest appropriate recognition of the disadvantage that B faces, compared to herself, and neglects an opportunity to correct or compensate for the positional inequity between herself and B.<sup>7</sup> This seems either wrong in itself, or vicious, or liable to result in bad consequences in the long run.

Robinson's analogy between Quitting and opting out of bad schools draws our attention to another important aspect of the social dynamics governed by the Privilege Principle. Some privileged acts do not only fail to remedy unjust inequalities but in fact amplify them. The upwardly mobile family which contributes to *de facto* segregation in the education system, by moving to live and study in an affluent community, is not just taking advantage of their privilege to confer a benefit on their children that is unavailable to many others. They are also making an incremental contribution to the concentration of wealth and resources in educationally privileged communities, thereby increasing the magnitude of the positional disadvantages experienced by families who are unable to exercise the same kind of autonomy over where they live and where their children go to school.

This brings us to a fourth point that seems compelling in the privilege-based objections to Quitting. These objections partly express a concern that Quitting detracts from the goal of creating better—less privacy-infringing, happiness-inhibiting, or democracy-undermining—communication systems. Whether this counterproductivity thesis is correct is a further question (see section 4, below). But the idea that we have some kind of participatory responsibility, for trying to make key parts of our society better, seems reasonable. Most of us are not Power Players, who can directly act to improve society's communication systems. But still, plausibly, we should try to be active participants in making those systems functional, fair, and respectful of their users' rights. We should all do our bit in trying to foster communicative practices that are good for society, because if we don't then unscrupulous corporations will construct our communication systems in ways that prioritise the interests of the few over the many. The argument can be made by analogy with other social systems. You may not control the school system, but you shouldn't educate your children in a way that inhibits beneficial education reforms. You may not be a Power Player in the structures of government, but you should vote and stay informed. If you are wealthy and secure then maybe you would be better off totally opting out of political engagement as democratic

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<sup>7</sup> The way I have formulated the Privilege Principle incorporates two kinds of requirements. Early work on privilege, particularly McIntosh (1988), stresses the importance of cultivating sensitivity to privilege its concrete manifestations. More recent work on privilege (e.g. Dunham and Lawford-Smith 2017) puts more stress on the importance of practical action aimed at compensating for the unfair implications of privilege. Some recent work (e.g. Podosky 2021) suggests how these two kinds of requirements can be brought together: the active cultivation of certain patterns of awareness and thought, related to identity-based privilege, can conduce to social changes that rectify the injustices borne of privilege.

institutions are being torn down. But this seems selfish, and especially so if your retreat makes it harder to repair anything.

The charge against Quitting is that it involves something like this indulgence of privilege. Many of us would be better off not using social media—at any rate, not using the platforms that currently dominate, which infringe upon our privacy, prejudice our information sources, fuel status anxiety, and so on. But people in disadvantaged groups and social positions—relating to their economic status, geographical location, physical abilities, or field of employment—incur greater short-term costs if they Quit, e.g. related to the loss of social capital. Relatively privileged people can more easily compensate for these and other proximate disadvantages borne of Quitting. But if privileged people simply retreat from social media, they fail to manifest due recognition of, or in any way compensate for, the unfairness that allows them to do so. And as Robinson's school analogy suggests, they may increase the unfairness, by nudging us towards a two-tiered communicative society, of immiserated Morlocks who cannot afford to unplug from the social media machine, and carefree Eloi who can do as they please. That is the crux of the objection.

#### 4. Individual Action and Systemic Change

The first point to make, in addressing this charge, is that Quitting doesn't necessarily mean abjuring the responsibility I identify above, i.e. to be an active participant in making our communication systems better. It is at least *possible* for the Quitter to promote progressive reforms in social media. The Privilege Principle doesn't condemn the bare fact of a person being privileged. It condemns blithely enjoying the fruits of privilege without trying to improve other people's lot. The fact that someone Quits doesn't automatically entail that he is doing this. The more charitable way to interpret the argument, then, is that it's making a claim about typicality, rather than necessity. *Typically*, Quitters are not doing anything to try to improve the communication systems from which they are distancing themselves. Rather, so the charge goes, they are (typically) just furthering their own immediate interests, and consigning other social media users to their less fortunate fate.

I have already granted that most Quitters will Quit primarily for prudential reasons. But this does not mean they should be thought of as blithely leaving others to an unhappy fate. In all sorts of contexts people acting to benefit themselves may be simultaneously changing background conditions that adversely affect others. To take one example, consider how improving safety standards in the car industry generate prudential reasons for motorists to buy state-of-the-art vehicles with enhanced safety features. This is costly, of course, and the costs can be more easily borne by the well-off. But does that make it an unethical indulgence of privilege for well-off people to buy safer cars? No, because these purchases are

not condemning the less-well-off to driving unsafe vehicles forever. They are expanding the market for safer vehicles and helping to drive industry reforms that ultimately make safer vehicles more affordable for more people. The prudential choices of well-off people in this case do not worsen the position of the badly-off. Rather, they contribute to a shift away from the technological conditions that make being badly-off so bad.

We can observe similar dynamics in play with social media. The more people who leave social media – to protect their privacy, or to break out of echo chambers – the more we will see alternative practices and technological choices that allow us to communicate and organise our lives without generating the bad effects of the current leading social media platforms. Jaron Lanier argues that it is actually incumbent upon privileged users to Quit, then, because they can more easily bear the short-term disadvantages involved in precipitating this kind of change.

If you're privileged enough to have the option of walking away from social media, and yet you don't, you're failing to use your privilege to defeat a system that traps other people who are less fortunate than you... You have even more of a responsibility to see if you can get out of it than someone who genuinely is dependent on it. (Johnson 2018)

Thus, he argues, privilege-based objections to Quitting have things backwards. Being a privileged individual actually gives you additional ethical reasons to Quit.

We're wealthier than ever. We have more options. That puts a moral onus on us to make some decisions that do what little we can to help those who are less fortunate, and [leaving social media] is one of those things. (Johnson 2018)

The moral logic Lanier is appealing to here is in fact more persuasive in the social media case, compared to something like the automobile safety case, given how conventional forces are involved in promoting social media usage. By *conventions*, here, I mean regularities of conduct that people have reason to conform to primarily because others are also conforming.<sup>8</sup> To act against a widely-followed convention can be costly. But if conformity around some once-conventional practice breaks down, then each individual's primary reason for carrying on in the practice dissolves. And while conventions can be resilient in some cases, they can be surprisingly fragile in others. Sometimes a small number of conspicuous non-conformists are enough to unravel a convention (Bicchieri 2017).

To see how this applies to our context, consider that many of the major downsides of Quitting that crop up in debates on this issue—e.g. missing out on information about social events, or not having a searchable web presence—are only disadvantageous if a majority of other people are taking advantage of the putative

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<sup>8</sup> This roughly encapsulates the main distinctive feature of a convention, as per the philosophical understanding of convention that has been widely espoused since Lewis (1969).

benefit that the Quitter is foregoing. If social media use were much less commonplace, then the default expectation that any person will have an easily searchable web presence will dissolve, and so too will most of the putative disadvantages of not having an easily searchable web presence. Similarly, if social media use were much less common, people would be less likely to think that posting information about an event on Twitter and Facebook was enough to inform most people about it. This would lead people to advertise events via other means, and therefore one's not being on social media would be less likely to result in one missing out on such information.

Given the role that forces of convention play in social media networks, it is wrongheaded to complain, as several authors do, that those who endorse Quitting are treating essentially political problems as individualistic ethical quandaries. Mitesser (2018) objects to the way that pro-Quitting movements 'emphasize personal choice and discipline as solutions to systemic problems caused by the profit motivations of large corporations.' She suggests that this framing is adopted because a structural perspective on social problems is harder to grasp. Glaser (2018) expresses similar worries about framing the problems of social media as if the whole thing is 'an issue of individual consumer choice.' So far as they want communication systems to improve, Quitters think the issue is essentially about users making bad choices. 'But it's really a problem in search of a solution either from Facebook itself—changing its service so that its users really can feel safe—or from the government, which may need to step in and blow the whistle on Facebook's entire business model.'

These are false dichotomies.<sup>9</sup> Individual and collective ways of addressing social problems are not essentially opposed, especially when the problems are borne of practices that are partly conventional. Consider the way that individual consumer activism dovetails with collective action in relation to renewable energies. Some of the impetus driving growth in renewable energies has come from individual consumers demanding, and thus incentivising the provision of, renewable options from home electricity providers. The shift towards renewables would obviously be going slower if this were the only mechanism driving change. Collective political action, via parliamentary democratic processes and various kinds of group campaigning, has been a powerful driver of change. But individualised drivers of change have helped as well. Individuals who install solar panels on their house and pay a premium for renewably-sourced energy are not undermining collective political action. They are creating parallel streams in a tide of social change. The same is true with Quitting social media. Each individual that Quits weakens the conventional forces that compel others to continue using social media. It seems worse than futile for someone to stay on social media because of

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<sup>9</sup> Notice also the false dichotomy in Vaidhyanathan's (2018) op-ed piece on Quitting: "Don't delete Facebook. Do something about it." This tendentially presupposes that deleting Facebook isn't itself *a way of* 'doing something about it'.

worries about ‘individualising’ structural problems. This actor is worsening their own lot, and helping sustain social media’s hold on others, while awaiting a top-down intervention to achieve the same sort of changes that they themselves could be acting now to help precipitate.

What about the worry that Quitting is one of those ‘acts of privilege’ that not only fails to remedy inequality, but in fact amplifies it? Consider again Rashad Robinson’s suggestion that Quitters are like affluent people who opt out of disadvantaged public schools. Part of what’s occurring in the education arms-race scenario is that the advantage acquired by the affluent family is *ipso facto* a positional disadvantage for those unable to move. The public school quitter is not *just* enjoying the fruits of privilege while failing to help others. They are contributing to a concentration of resources in privileged pockets of the education system, and thereby entrenching divides in that system that stand in the way of a fair, across-the-board realisation of our educational aims. One way to understand the wrong is in terms of something like a Kantian formula of a universal law. The public school quitter cannot universalise the maxim they are acting on, because what they are trying to do—give their children a better-than-average education—is of its essence something that isn’t universally-willable. But Quitting is unlike this. Quitters are not chasing an advantage whose attainment necessitates a positional disadvantage for others. What they are doing is more aptly likened to norm entrepreneurship: absorbing some short-term costs in order to try to upend harmful conventional practices. Quitters are seeking to withdraw from a system that is harmful, and whose *pro tanto* upsides are reliant upon a convention-driven expectation of universal participation. In this the Quitters are acting on a maxim that is fairly straightforwardly universalisable.

Why, then, have so many progressive critics reached for a tenuous interpretation of the social significance of Quitting, which casts it in such a negative light, and downplays its positive potential? As I suggested above, I think this has happened in part because critics have prematurely concluded that social media is irreversibly a permanent fixture in our society, and therefore that leading-edge Quitters will simply be unable to precipitate a shift in the communications landscape. They have assumed that social media in something much like its current form is already a fact of life, and that Quitting will thus always be prohibitively costly for most people. At least some of the critical responses to Quitting come right out and say this.

Perhaps you joined the #DeleteFacebook movement to deal a blow to multi-billionaire Mark Zuckerberg’s sprawling enterprise. You might have hoped that by joining a collective crusade you’d be partially responsible for slaying the beast, and making the world a fairer place. It’s a nice idea, but it’s unrealistic. Facebook has over two billion users, and even if a throng of disgruntled



westerners appalled by the prospect of their data being shared decides to sulkily throw in the towel, that won't offset the daily wave of new subscribers, particularly stemming from parts of Asia and Africa. (Cox 2018)<sup>10</sup>

As I suggested in opening, we should try to retrieve our sense of the contingency of social media's present-day position and influence. Facebook and Twitter are enjoying a longer ascendance than the online platforms that they succeeded, and as Cox rightly observes, they are working hard to cement their place in the global communications terrain. But the future—technologically, socio-politically, and culturally—is uncertain. For one thing, telecommunications technology has developed rapidly in recent years. As it becomes possible for tech hardware to be more biologically integrated into our bodies, this is likely to have an impact on people's choices and preferences around telecommunication software platforms. And whether this will reinforce the pre-eminence of leading social media services, or instead trigger a migration to other services, or perhaps even a wider backlash against the escalating system of hyper-connectedness, is, at this point, anyone's guess.

This uncertainty should make us averse to confident claims about the permanence of the status quo. If we can predict anything, about how the world will appear to our descendants, it is that it will not look the same to them as it looks to us now. In the years ahead new communicative technologies have as much potential to supersede today's leading technologies as those technologies themselves had before they starting making landline telephones and fax machines obsolete. Of course it is possible that today's tech giants will manage to 'lock in' their position in the telecommunications landscape. But any such stasis seems unlikely, so long as we are viewing things from a moderately sceptical, historically-minded vantage point.

## 5. Conclusion: The Machine Stops

The arguments I have been considering are all premised on a negative view of social media. Those who make privileged-based objections to Quitting tend to agree with Quitters that what Facebook and others are doing and facilitating is, on balance, bad for users and for society. The dispute is about how we assess avoidance and retreat as responses to this. I have argued that Quitting should not be seen as a way of consigning people for whom it is costly to Quit to an unhappy fate. Instead, it can be understood as a way of increasing the likelihood of structural change in a system that has costs for most of us, however privileged. We are not obliged to Quit, but we should be doing our part—whether we are working in-

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<sup>10</sup> Related to this point, here is another example of a revealing headline, namely, Heather Kelly's (2018) op-ed piece on Quitting entitled: "Here's how to delete Facebook. (It won't help)".

side or outside of the social media ecosystem—to try to make our communications technology and practices better in the future. Quitting can be a way to push in this direction, and while the impact of any individual's Quitting is tiny, it is, by the same token, commensurate with each individual's rightful share of control over our shared conditions. The critics who see Quitters as selfishly ducking away from a problem that calls for a collective remedy cannot make this allegation stick unless they prematurely conclude that individually-precipitated change is unachievable. But we have no grounds for being doggedly sceptical about the possibility of change, or credulous about the idea that social media in its current form is here to stay, with all its problems. There is no conclusive reason to believe that change in this area is unachievable. But an ongoing widespread *belief* that it is unachievable will mean that it may as well be.

It is easy to deride people who reject the ascendant technologies of the day. We can psychologise their justifications, and ascribe to them various kinds of dubious motives: nostalgia, pastoral romance, wishfulness, vanity. But the ones doing the deriding can be psychologised as well. E. M. Forster's 1912 story *The Machine Stops*—a prescient if ultra-pessimistic depiction of an internet-like technology—is an illuminating touchstone here. Forster envisages a dystopia in which humanity lives in a giant mechanised network of self-sufficient, single-occupancy living pods. These are wired up for instantaneous screen-and-audio communication with other pods—a function that's mostly used for discussing culture and ideas—with the occupants rarely venturing outside their pods. Eventually the maintenance system for the entire world-machine starts to falter, and it transpires that humanity is doomed because all know-how for mending the 'mending apparatus' has long been lost.

Forster is a little heavy-handed in some of his remarks about the alienating nature of technology. But he succeeds in illustrating how people who become reliant upon a technology can start to begrudge any effort to get by without it. The protagonist, Vashti, has a son who sets out on dangerous and unauthorised explorations outside the machine. Vashti feels her son is being not just foolish and uppity, but somehow treacherous in his ventures. More than anything else she resents his dogged refusal to accept the reality of the machine's central position in human affairs, for good or ill. In Vashti we see a portrayal of how people who have lost all perspective on the technologies that rule their lives can convince themselves that it is in fact those who are trying to regain perspective—recapturing a sense of the possibilities for acting contrary to the machine's affordances—who are being unrealistic or naïve.

There probably is a dash of bourgeois piety in the motivational stew that's fuelling some Quitters. But there may also be a dash of piety, with a different flavour profile, in the anti-Quitters' stew of motives too. No-one is claiming that Quitting will enable us to magically wind back the clock on communications technology. The point is that we should be trying to make communication technology work

in humanity's collective interests, more than it is currently, and that withdrawing from social media is one way to spur change—at least as good a way as petitioning Power Players to benevolently intervene. Quitters are not *ipso facto* opting out of the collective task of trying to improve our communicative systems, and in their Quitting they are weakening the network effects that have enabled certain platforms to acquire a momentary stranglehold on society. There is nothing untoward about taking steps that help to ready the soil in which a new—and we may hope, less centralised, uniform, and destructive—set of communicative systems can take root.<sup>11</sup>

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