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Should you delete your social media? | Oliver Burkeman

Oliver Burkeman

5-7 minutes

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▲ *'The truth is, you could choose, right now, to jettison unfulfilling aspects of your life.'* Illustration: Michele Marconi for the Guardian

Should you delete your social media accounts right now? The title of Jaron Lanier's excellent recent polemic, [Ten Arguments For Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now](#), leaves no doubt which side he's on. His view is that Facebook, Twitter and the rest have sucked us into an addictive spiral of outrage, isolation and extremism, while making it ever harder for those who create the culture off which they leech – musicians, artists, journalists – to make a living.

But as this stance grows more popular, so does an objection: for many, it's impossible. "What #DeleteFacebook tech bros don't get," [writes](#) the activist Jillian York, is that "leaving is, for many, a

luxury they can't afford". Like it or not, people now rely on the network to run a business, stay in touch with friends and family, or even maintain their mental health, thanks to online support groups. Telling them to fulfil those needs elsewhere is unrealistic – precisely because everyone else is fulfilling them on Facebook. Being able to walk away is a matter of “privilege”, a [Slate essay](#) argues. It's also another case of lecturing people about the need for self-discipline, when the [real problem](#) is capitalism and insufficiently regulated corporations bent on profit.

The thorny issue here – when it comes to whether you, personally, should abandon social media – is that the latter viewpoint has plenty of truth to it, yet also serves as a convenient excuse. When you're addicted to something, you're obviously biased in favour of arguments suggesting it's unrealistic to quit. So, while some people may genuinely face social isolation by deleting Facebook, or professional ruin by leaving LinkedIn, chances are you're not among them – even if you feel pretty sure you are. It's more likely you're telling yourself that story to spare yourself being deprived of social media's comfortably sedative effects, and being left alone with your thoughts instead.

Of course, that's easy for me to say. (And a bit hypocritical, since I'm still on Twitter, and just about still on Facebook.) But that doesn't make it wrong. Sometimes the glib advice it's easy for columnists to dispense is the right advice for you, even if you'd rather it weren't.

This is part of a broader hazard, whenever left-leaning people confront the world of self-help: we're so primed to see things in structural terms – as matters of privilege and power – that we convince ourselves we're more powerless than we are. Every individual-level “happiness hack”, from digital detoxes to meditation to therapy, is open to the retort that what we really

need is a fairer, more humane society – and self-help just serves to make us more accepting of the status quo. I don't disagree. But the danger is of what Jean-Paul Sartre called [“bad faith”](#): convincing yourself you lack choices, when actually you don't, because it's less scary than facing your freedom.

The truth is, you could choose, right now, to jettison social media, or indeed many other unfulfilling aspects of your life. You might choose *not* to, concluding that the downsides outweigh the upsides in your case. But you do have a choice. Even telling yourself you don't have a choice is a choice.

Read this

One of Lanier's previous books, 2010's [You Are Not A Gadget](#), makes the prescient case that the web is leading us to “digital Maoism”, a collectivism that undermines individuality and slides easily into mob rule.

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