

# The Privatization of Digital Connection

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"I should really delete TikTok, for like, a week," I overheard a woman tell her friend in a bookstore recently. The friend had just gushed to her about another friend that deleted TikTok and how, "when she needs a fix, she logs in on her computer since that extra step makes it not addicting." The interaction stuck with me. I scoffed a bit—she *should* delete TikTok, but she won't. But then I realized that my reaction came from a self-perceived moral high ground of not having TikTok, and if I'm honest, not having TikTok *does* make me feel disconnected and perpetually "out" of the know. Yet, her language struck me: 'I should have the strength to leave,' instead of, 'that app is designed to exploit us.' We've normalized addiction so thoroughly that resisting has become a personal virtue and lifestyle choice. In that transformation from collective resistance to aspirational lifestyle content, we've stopped threatening the status quo.

The reframing of tech dependence as a personal failure rather than a design failure is an under-considered trend that will shape how people connect online in the coming years. This trend will only strengthen with AI assistance on the rise. The same individualization dynamic applies as AI increasingly acts as a relationship intermediary: we're told to 'use AI responsibly' rather than question whether its incentives align with our well-being. Personal responsibility framing helps keep harmful industry design alive and successful. We commonly recognize tech addiction exists, minimalism is trendy, and people want to disconnect. What we miss: the *acceptance of dysfunction* as default, and how framing resistance as moral strength lets predatory design off the hook.

The data confirms what the bookstore conversation revealed: searches for "social media detox" have spiked dramatically since late 2024, with "how to detox from social media" showing a four-year climb (Google Trends). The problem is individualized from the search bar onward. These trends show the increasing desire to leave digital networks while highlighting the individualization of digital wellness.

Yet, we've seen this script before. The tobacco industry successfully deployed personal responsibility rhetoric starting in the 1970s, shifting blame from corporations to individuals and thwarting regulatory action for decades ([Mejia et al.](#), 2014). But we've changed both the design and narrative surrounding smoking (at least in the U.S.) by: banning smoking in public spaces, requiring warning labels, and acknowledging the industry's predatory intent.

With digital platforms, we're still in the earlier phase of treating addiction as a character flaw rather than a design choice.

[Mackinnon and Shade's 2020 research](#) on internet addiction discourse discusses how addiction narratives "shift responsibility from corporations to individuals, especially youth." This highlights how the accepted narrative deflects attention from corporate practices and places the burden on users to manage their own technology consumption.

We can see a way individuals are trying to manage their own technology in the nostalgia resurgence ([NYT article](#)). The search for "dumbphone" has skyrocketed since late 2023, with top, related queries like "best dumbphone" and "nokia dumbphone." People are actively seeking devices that *can't* do what smartphones do. Forcing the extra step to log into a laptop may be enough to curb some addictive behaviors. I even came across a Substack post recently detailing how a user gave up her iPhone and bought a Nokia for her birthday. The comments were full of learned helplessness: "I wish I could do that." As I celebrated her strength, I, too, found myself thinking, "it's impossible for me, but I wish I could."

Analyzing corporate releases further highlights the trend of personal responsibility. Tech companies' responses reveal their playbook: when accused of addictive design, they "empower" users with tools for self-management. [Apple's 2018 Screen Time](#) feature promised to help customers "understand and take control," a classic example of personal responsibility rhetoric dressed as user advocacy. Since 2018, companies have continued to develop user control and restriction features to help position themselves as advocates for healthy choices. In practice, the "You've reached your time limit on [XYZ]" only ever makes *me* feel bad. Individual weakness takes a seat on my shoulder as I click "Ignore" and keep scrolling.

Clearly, we're still solidly in the "personal responsibility" phase within the digital world.

This creates a divide: digital ascetics vs. everyone else who lacks the willpower. The ascetics feel transitory praise, but sacrifice cultural currency (the memes, the coordination, and other shared knowledge fostered within the silo of social networks). Everyone else feels shame and resignation. Meanwhile, platforms get to happily keep designing for compulsion.

As more people accept tech's harm, but frame escape as individual achievement, we're building a world where healthy digital spaces will only be accessible to those with

exceptional self-control. This isn't pluralism—it's digital elitism. I've experienced the slow erosion myself. For example, friends join one another on weekend runs and plan races together because they see mutual enthusiasm on Strava (which I don't have), bonding over shared stats and route maps. Running comes up occasionally in conversation, and we'll plan something together, but it's an accommodation, not the default. No one means to exclude me, they simply plan where the group exists, and I'm not there. This trend will privatize connection, replacing shared civic space with a patchwork of curated retreats accessible only to those already inside.

We're already seeing the fragmentation: micro-communities are flourishing ([source](#)), "intentional" platforms like Substack and Partiful are replacing broadcast feeds, and increasingly, AI serves as an intermediary. These shifts lead to a greater focus on exclusive, bonding connections, allowing them to strengthen while eroding our ability for bridging, both online and off. The result isn't just fragmentation of spaces, but fragmentation of possibility. Not only will people lose the desire or curiosity to reach out, there's a growing chance people will be entirely unreachable if they no longer belong to a shared site.

If we accept that healthy digital spaces require superhuman willpower to leave unhealthy ones, we've already lost. The design challenge is creating spaces that don't require heroic resistance; Instead, we need to create spaces where the healthy choice is the easy choice. Where participation doesn't require exceptional discipline, and where people can productively come together to work through challenges.