

A guide to digital sovereignty

The tools are not the masters



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Written as part of the ursa.nz creative collective, offered as pay-what-you-can story.

Written on Kurna Country, on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Country in Narm, and on Tūhoe whenua. None of it ceded. My obligations run to Arrarnta Country, west of Mparntwe.

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Out the window

I felt the deepest compulsion to throw my phone out the car window¹. I was with my partner in Narrm at the beginning of 2026 and a gripping sensation took over my whole body. “Just chuck it”, my inner voice said.

By February, I had been off of mainstream social media for nearly three years after developing a much more mild form of the same compulsion, albeit a non-physical compulsion. I fled the metaverse², leaving the door open to re-entry for another two. Finally hitting that permanently delete my account button started a 30 day countdown and liberation was on the horizon. After my thumb-twitching upward swipe addiction eased, that was.

As my phone throwing itch arrive, my 30 days had passed, and meta promised they would delete all my social accounts irrevocably. Naturally, I assume they will keep my data until the heat death of the universe, but at least by this time I can pretend to have no interaction with them. Alas, out with one sense of freedom, in with another sense of dread.

While it settled in me that I wasn’t shackled to a tech-giant for my “social” networking, it also reared its beast-like head on me that I was beholden to another. apple, a mainstay of my computing life for the better part of twenty five years. From the Mac LC II that I learned System 6 on through to the MacBook Pro 16” I used for work, and probably numbers in the three figures in computer purchases, apps and software, licenses and registration fees, and more recently a mass of subscriptions, apple had been my digital life.

The walled garden is well known, even to apple’s fans³. I was a firmly-rooted multi-generational apple tree rooted in the centre of that garden, just as I had been an addict to instagram’s reels, or to fifteen hundred of twitter’s followers. Moreover, I was a developer, someone who had drunk so much of the corporate kool-aid that every orifice had begun to excrete sugars. Every app I made, every app I sold, every piece of work I did, in some regard, touched apple’s ecosystem. Worth noting, at this juncture, I’m not even a programmer by trade, I was just that big of a fan.

My psychologist taught me about a concept called circles of reciprocity⁴. If we pictured my relationship with apple, it was firmly

1 I wasn’t driving, not that it would’ve made a difference for the car behind me suddenly having a \$1,600 phone through their windscreen.

2 editors note: I won’t be capitalising any of the corporations, trademarks, ideologies, nation-clusters or other words which don’t deserve it. The metaverse, for those playing at home includes facebook, instagram, whatsapp, threads, and several other social networks that are lesser known. It is run by the company meta, a zuckerberg invention.

3 of which there are far too many. No corporation deserves fans.

4 Picture three rings next to each other. On the left, you give without counting, so 50:50 looks lovely and 99:1 can be love (a newborn, a mate whose dad died). However, it

a 100:0. The closest to reciprocation was one year when I made an academic utility for safari and earned enough on the app store to pay the annual developer subscription fee. My psychologist's voice in my head: "is this relationship giving you back what it takes from you?"

No. And it's taking a lot. Not just from me, but globally.

apple and google, or "alphabet" as they became, sit squarely in the trillionaire category. They have amassed so much wealth from exploiting people globally that they are more wealthy than most nations on the planet. Yet, they demand a cut of revenue of anything that happens on the platforms they ostensibly "own"; such that most developers never earn any money. This doesn't even start to consider the thousands of child-slave labourers, sweatshop workers, torturous working conditions, and suicides that both company's supply chains demand⁵.

As you may have guessed by this point, there are a lot of angles you could come at the problems of 'tech' from. I've barely touched on how exploitative of attention meta, x, tiktok, snapchat and others are; how they drive those using the platforms towards capitalist ideology, while stripping them of their agency, and so much more. We'll grow this throughout the book, and I'll ask you to think on where you're sitting with things, so I'm not just preaching.

For the sake of completing the story, I did, a very brief time later get rid of my iphone. I sent it to a cousin abroad who needed it to help make movies of their kids' community baseball. I was fortunate at that time to be in a financial position to make an exit on the phone front. I replaced it with a pixel, and we'll get to why in the coming chapters. Suffice to say getting rid of an apple logo from my hand and replacing it with a google one is not the compromise I wished cede to, but it is a tiny step in a better direction⁶.

Being aware and being able to take action are firmly separate things. Making informed choices and being contemplative about the state of technology is action. This book isn't here to chastise you, or tell you what you should have/should be doing. It's here to share my story of exiting big tech. That story is an ongoing story, and I will never claim to be an expert, or to know the answers. But I can share where I am in my imperfect journey.

5 and this is the rub, both say "we have an ethical supply chain" because they outsource their grubby bits to third parties. Hands clean, they continue to assure us that no child is harmed, no forest is cut down, and no carbon is emitted in the name of big tech. Please just ignore all those foxconn factory suicides.

6 please hold your criticism for chapter four. I know, google is now literally evil.

So, given you're here, reading this, you might already, or now, feel something is not quite right in the world of big tech. That alone is a big step, congratulations. If you're already making leaps to exit an ecosystem, and are becoming more aware of what's wrong in others, us-two can still have a good yarn. This book doesn't seek to promise anything, it's just some thinking, but if you're willing, let's work together to untangle some of the crap that's polluting our minds and bodies through its enclosure of our collective tools.

01 • Relations

Sovereignty is not the State's word to give. It sits in relation, and it sits in Country.

This chapter is not written yet. It arrives in a later version of this book, and on the site as soon as it exists.

02 • Obligations

Nothing here is an accident, and nothing here is neutral. Someone is being paid.

This chapter is not written yet. It arrives in a later version of this book, and on the site as soon as it exists.

03 • Refusals

Refusal is not a tantrum and it is not nostalgia. It is a practice, and practices need upkeep.

This chapter is not written yet. It arrives in a later version of this book, and on the site as soon as it exists.

04 • Restorations

The chapter people skip to. Fair enough — but the swaps only hold if you've done the thinking.

This chapter is not written yet. It arrives in a later version of this book, and on the site as soon as it exists.