**I cut the 'Big Five' tech giants from my life. It was hell**

A couple of months ago, I **set out** to answer the question of whether it’s possible to a…….. the tech giants. Over the c……….. of five weeks, I blocked Amazon, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, and Apple one at a ………., to find out how to live in the modern age without each one. To end my experiment, I decided to see if I could survive blocking all five at ………… .

Not only did I boycott their products, but I also used a special network tool that **prevented** my devices from communicating with the tech giants’ servers, meaning that ads and analytics from Google wouldn’t work, Facebook couldn’t **track** me across the Internet, and websites h………. by Amazon Web Services hypothetically wouldn’t load. I was using a Linux laptop made by a company named Purism and a Nokia **feature phone**[[1]](#footnote-1) on which I relearnt the lost art of T9 texting.

In preparation for the week, I exported all my contacts from Google, a shocking 8,000 of them. I also **whittled down** the over 1,500 contacts in my iPhone to 143 people for my Nokia, or the number of people I actually talk to on a regular ………….., which is incredibly close to Dunbar’s number[[2]](#footnote-2).

I **ended up** making a lot of phone calls that week, because texting was so annoying on the Nokia’s numbers-based keyboard. I found people often picked up on the first ring **out of concern**; they were not ……….. to getting calls from me.

On the first day of the block, I drove to work in silence because my rented Ford Fusion’s “SYNC” entertainment system is powered by Microsoft. Background noise in general disappeared during the week because YouTube, Apple Music, and our Echo were all banned—as were Netflix, Spotify, and Hulu, because they rely on AWS and the Google Cloud to get their content to users.

The silence caused my mind to **wander** more than usual. Sometimes this inspired a new question for investigation. But more often than not, I **dwelled on** things I needed to do.

Many of these things were a lot more challenging as a result of the experiment. As I realised at the beginning, Amazon’s most profitable business isn’t **retail**; it’s web hosting. Countless apps and websites ……… on the digital infrastructure provided by AWS, and none of them were working for me during that final week.

The tech giants **laid down** all the basic infrastructure for our data to be trafficked. They got us to put our information into public profiles, to carry tracking devices in our pockets, and to download apps to those tracking devices that secretly transmit data from them.

Critics of the big tech companies are often told, “If you don’t like the company, don’t use its products.” I did this experiment to find out if that is possible, and I found out that it’s not—with the e………….. of Apple.

These companies are unavoidable because they control Internet infrastructure, online commerce, and information flows. Many of them specialize in tracking you around the web, whether you use their products or not. These companies **started out** selling books, offering search results, or showcasing college hotties, but they have ex…………….. enormously and now touch almost every online interaction. These companies look a lot like modern monopolies.

Since the experiment ended, I’ve **resumed** using the tech giants’ services, but I use them less. I deliberately **seek out** alternatives to do what I can, as a consumer, not to help them monopolize the market. But the experiment went beyond that for me; it made me reexamine the role of tech in my life more widely. It broke me of that modern bad habit of swiping through my phone looking for a **distraction** rather than engaging with the people around me or seeking stimulation in my real world environment.

I deleted time-wasting apps. I look at Instagram less often, such that I see friends have tagged me in their stories, but don’t see the stories because they’ve already reached their 24-hour **expiration mark**. I turn my phone off around 9pm each night and don’t turn it back on until I really need it the next day. It took two weeks of using my dumb phone, but I eventually lost the **urge** to start my day by reaching for my smartphone on the bedside table.

My iPhone tells me in my weekly “Screentime” reports that my usage is down significantly, to under 2 hours per day. My phone feels less like an **appendage[[3]](#footnote-3)** and more like a tool I use when necessary. I still love using Google Maps or Waze when I’m driving to an unfamiliar place, texting far-away friends and family members, and sharing a beautiful photo on Instagram—but I have regained the ability to put my phone away.

I went through the digital equivalent of a **juice cleanse**. I hope I’m better than most dieters at staying healthy afterward, but I don’t want to be a digital vegan. I want to **embrace** a lifestyle of “slow Internet,” to be more **discriminating** about the technology I let into my life and think about the motives of the companies behind it. The tech giants are reshaping the world in good and bad ways; we can take the good and reject the bad.

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Many people I talk to about this experiment **liken** it to digital veganism. Digital vegans r…………. certain technology services as unethical; they discriminate about the products they use and the data they consume and share, because information is power, and increasingly a handful of companies seem to have it all.

Daniel Kahn Gillmor, a technologist at the ACLU, is an actual vegan. I am surprised by **the lengths to which he’s gone** to avoid the tech giants: he doesn’t have a cellphone and prefers to pay for things ……. cash. He hosts his own email and avoids most social media networks (he makes exceptions for Github and Sourceforge, because he’s an open source developer who wants to share his code with others). He r……….. to joining social networks as being “bait” that lures other people into “surveillance traps.” He thinks people will have better lives if they aren’t ……….. data-mined and **monetized** by companies that increasingly control the flow of information. “I have the capacity to make this choice. I know a lot of people would like to **sign off** but can’t for financial reasons or practical reasons,” he tells me. “I don’t want to **come across as** criticizing people who don’t make this choice.”

And there are definitely **costs to** the choice. “How things are structured determines the decisions people can make socially,” he says. Gillmore wants people to think about their own **data trails** but also when they are creating data trails for other people, such as when a person uploads their contacts to a technology service—sharing information with the service that those contacts might not want shared. “Once the data is out there, it can be misused in ways we don’t expect,” he says.

But he thinks it’s going to take more than actions by individuals. “We need to think of this as a collective action problem similar to how we think about the environment,” he says. “Our society is structured so that a lot of people are trapped.” Gillmor wants **lawmakers** to step in, but he also thinks it can be addressed technologically, by pushing for **interoperable systems** like we have for phone numbers and email. You can call anyone; you don’t need to use the same phone carrier as them. And you can take your phone number to a different **carrier** if you want (thanks to lawmaker intervention).

When companies can’t **lock** us **into** **proprietary** ecosystems, we have more freedom. But that means Facebook would have to let a Pinterest user RSVP for an event on its site. And Apple would need to let you Facetime an Android user. No one wants to give the keys out when they have customer **lock-in.**

**SOME FACTS**

* the total market value of the Big Five tech firms is nearly €6tn (more than France, the UK and Italy’s combined tax income in a year;
* over the past 20 years, Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google have swallowed up more than 500 companies;
* 9 of Google’s services (including Android, Chrome, Maps and Google Drive), have over a billion users;
* A third of the world population uses Facebook at least once per month;
* Apple has **sole say** over what software can and cannot go on 1.5 billion of the world’s electronic devices;
* Amazon single-handedly **accounts for** half of all online purchases in the US;
* corporate and governmental institutions alike are chained down to Microsoft OS.

**DISCUSSION**

1. Would it be possible for you to switch to a feature phone?
2. Look at the charts included in the article “Digital power: How Big Tech draws its influence”: <https://techmonitor.ai/boardroom/power-of-tech-companies>
3. With the push of a button, a tech company can make

* a news story inaccessible (Twitter),
* make a politician pay twice as much for advertising as his opponent does (Facebook),
* or delete a popular account (YouTube),  
  without ever being held to any real accountability for doing so.

Should this power be legally limited?

1. A **feature phone** is a type or class of mobile phone that retains the **form factor** of earlier generations of mobile telephones, with press-button based inputs and a small non-touch display (*telefon podstawowy*) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. **Dunbar’s number** – the cognitive limit to the number of people with whom one can maintain stable social relationships: 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A limb (arm or leg) or another body part [↑](#footnote-ref-3)