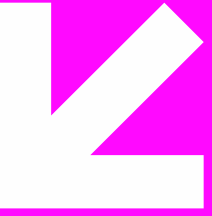


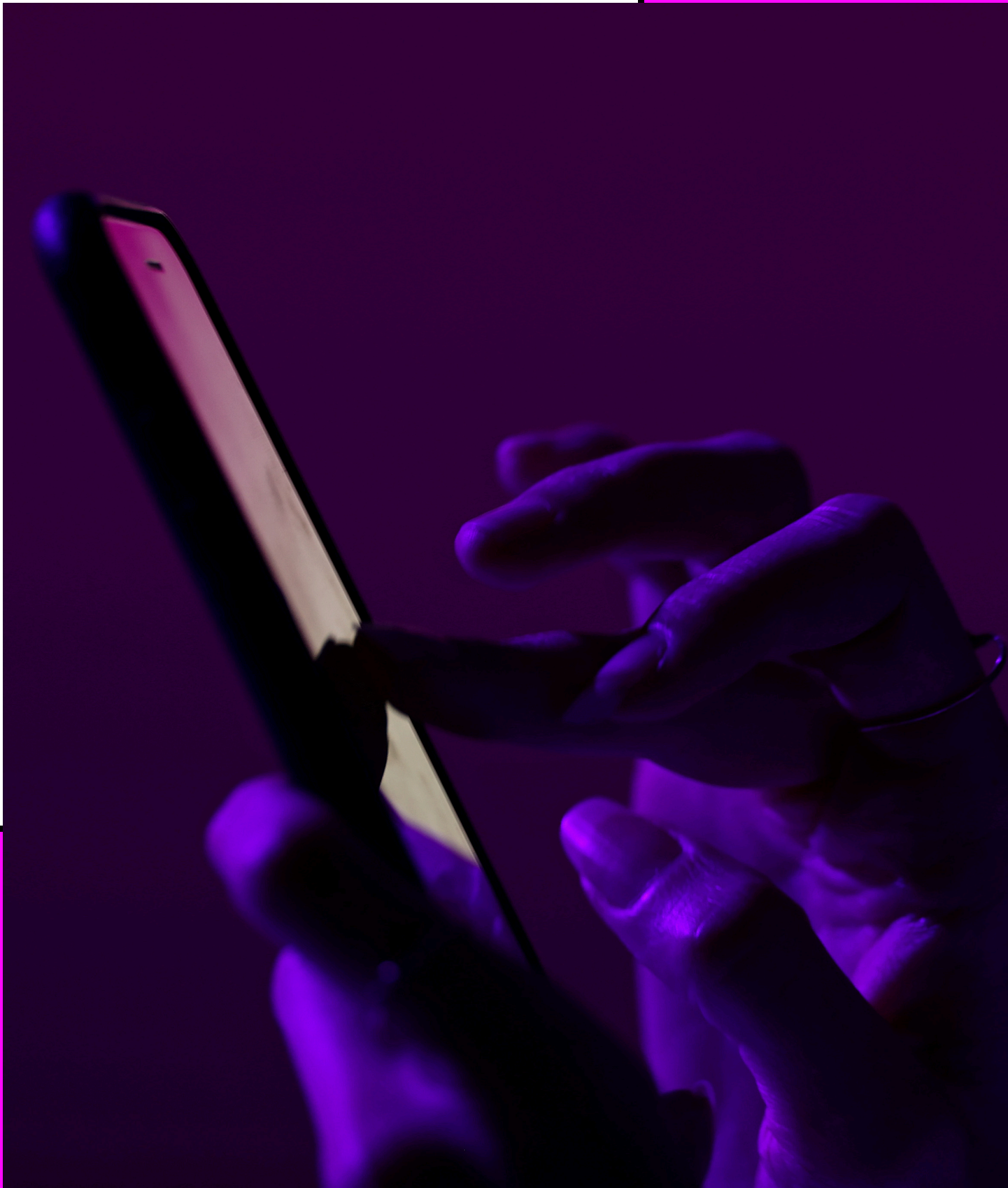
SXSW 
LONDON
2026

Shape the future.



THE INTERNET IS BROKEN. WHERE DO WE GO NOW?

SXSW LONDON IS COVERING **AI AND THE NEW POWER STRUCTURES** AND **SOCIETY REWIRED** IN TALKS FEATURING THE LIKES OF **NICK CLEGG**, TAIWAN'S CYBER-AMBASSADOR-AT LARGE **AUDREY TANG**, IOANNIS ANTONOGLU, CO-FOUNDER & CTO AT REFLECTION AI, AND MORE. FOR OUR **TREND REPORTS** SERIES, JOURNALIST HANNAH EWENS ASKS: **WHAT WOULD A NEW INTERNET LOOK LIKE?**



Ever get the feeling that none of your social media apps work properly anymore? You come for life updates from friends. Instead, you're locked into an hour-long scroll through fake news, affiliate marketing and irate educators of every description.

THIS IS ENSHITTIFICATION.

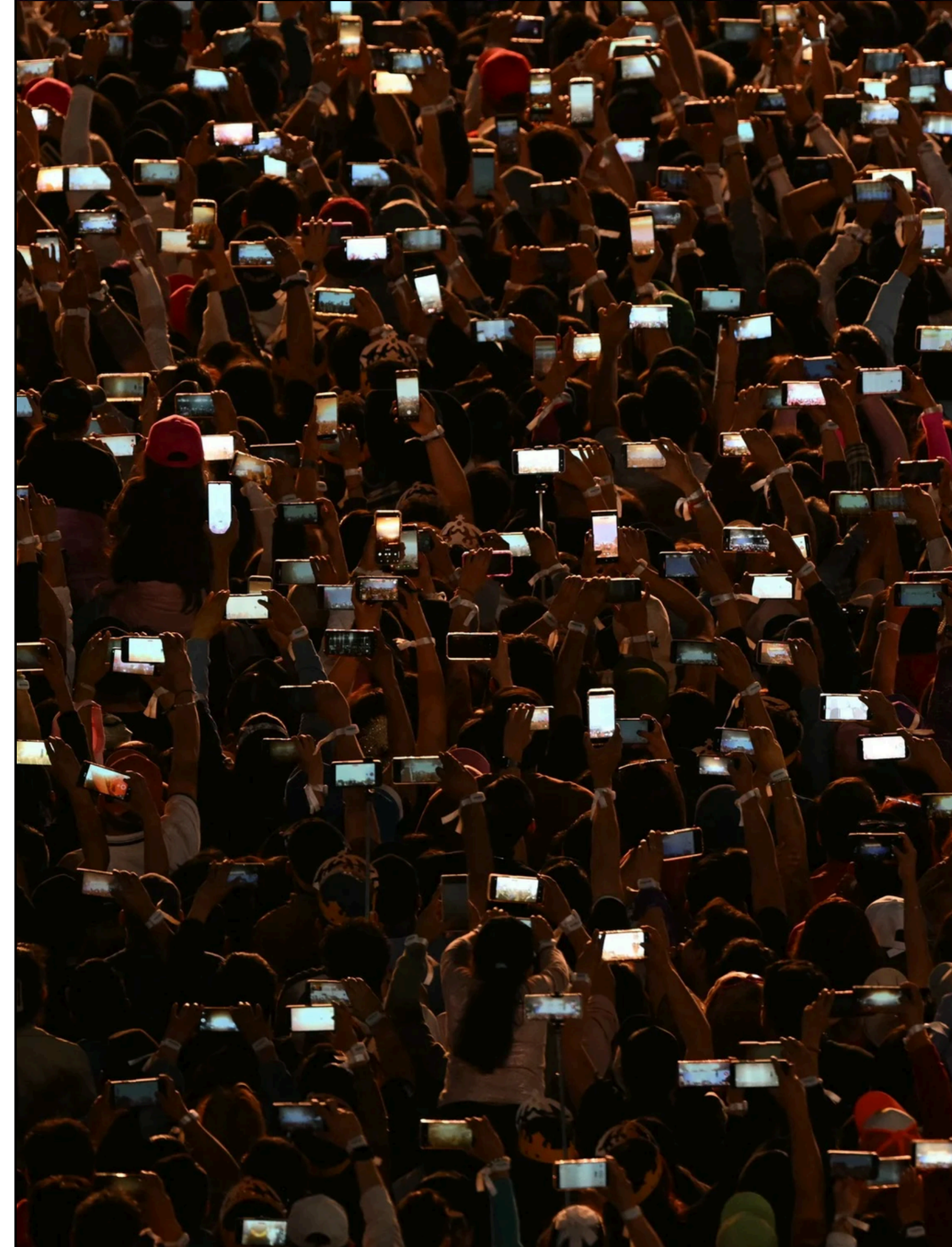
The term was coined by author Cory Doctorow in 2022 to describe how online platforms self-destruct at the hands of insatiable tech owners focused on money rather than user enjoyment. Or, as Doctorow puts it:

“Here is how platforms die: first, they are good to their users; then they abuse their users to make things better for their business customers; finally, they abuse those business customers to claw back all the value for themselves.”

In practice, enshittification has never been more prevalent. If we want to find a way back to each other online, to find human connection, can a new internet help? How would it look?

Johannes Ernst, engineer and organiser of FediForum, explains that people know about the problems with social media but they don't yet know of the solution.

“THE MERE POSSIBILITY THAT THE [ONLINE] WORLD COULD BE DIFFERENT IS BEGINNING TO EMERGE IN PEOPLE’S MINDS – BUT THAT DOESN’T MEAN THEY’RE ENTIRELY READY TO BELIEVE IT. AND THAT DOESN’T MEAN THEY NECESSARILY TAKE ACTION YET. BUT THERE IS A YEARNING FOR ALTERNATIVES.”



ENTER THE FEDIVERSE:

A network of independent, self-governing social platforms that communicate seamlessly with one another. Imagine one space where you have versions of Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr and more, gathered around in one singular interface. No single entity owns this network. It's just a collection of servers that are linked together, with a set of platforms that mirror our current networks. Instead of YouTube, you have PeerTube. Instagram's equivalent is PixelFed.

These servers are run by different admins and democracies. Mastodon is the biggest and most well-known open-source software on the fediverse. Founder Eugen Rochko compares our current social media to a telephone company, where you get given a mobile number but can only call people who are with your provider. The fediverse is more like email. If you have an email address, you can email anyone on the internet. In the fediverse, your Mastodon account can follow users on fediverse networks like PixelFed, and vice versa.



Rochko began imagining this alternative in 2016, when he first started experimenting with decentralised social media. Social media as an experience? “It’s deteriorated beyond what I could have foreseen in 2016.” He gestures witheringly to how dramatically user control has eroded. **“Back then, even on Twitter, you still had some semblance of control over what you saw. The interface wasn’t cluttered with ads. If a friend sent you a link, you could actually view it without being forced to sign in.”**

When Rochko began building Mastodon, he recognised that the corporations dominating social media were constructing what he calls “walled gardens”, enclosed ecosystems designed to make leaving difficult.

“We should never be confined to a single corporate garden,” he says, “where one person in the US decides what we see, what we can say, and what we cannot say.” Freedom of movement is important to Mastodon and the fediverse. You don’t need an account to browse all of the public information on it, as you do with most major platforms now, all effectively locked down. Rochko says they’re even considering adding a feature where you can subscribe to a profile without making an account, just receiving their posts through email.

IF YOU'RE ALREADY GETTING DEJA VU IT'S BECAUSE THIS "NEW" "FUTURISTIC" INTERNET IS PRETTY MUCH THE OLD INTERNET. IN THESE REVOLUTIONARY IDEAS ARE ECHOES OF HOW THINGS USED TO BE ONLINE.

A return to form sounds delightful and nostalgic, but how can you convince people to leave Instagram or TikTok, where all their friends technically are, for this elusive place? How do you teach people about this alternative when you don't have the advertising spend of Meta – or indeed, believe in linking your venture to advertising at all? There are no ads on the fediverse, and never will be. Where he lives in Silicon Valley, FediForum organiser Ernst drives the 101, every day. and watches one big ad after the next fly by him, promoting whatever is the “technology trend de jour”. Funding for the fediverse comes from private donors who care about the fediverse’s vision and the unpaid labour of many people like Ernst – developers, activists, organisers, tech workers – who want a more free internet.



One of the reasons Ernst is running an event like FediForum, focused on skill sharing and socialising around the open social web, is to try to collectively answer this question:

“How do we get from approximately 0.1 per cent market share that these kind of technologies have today in the overall social media market into something more?”

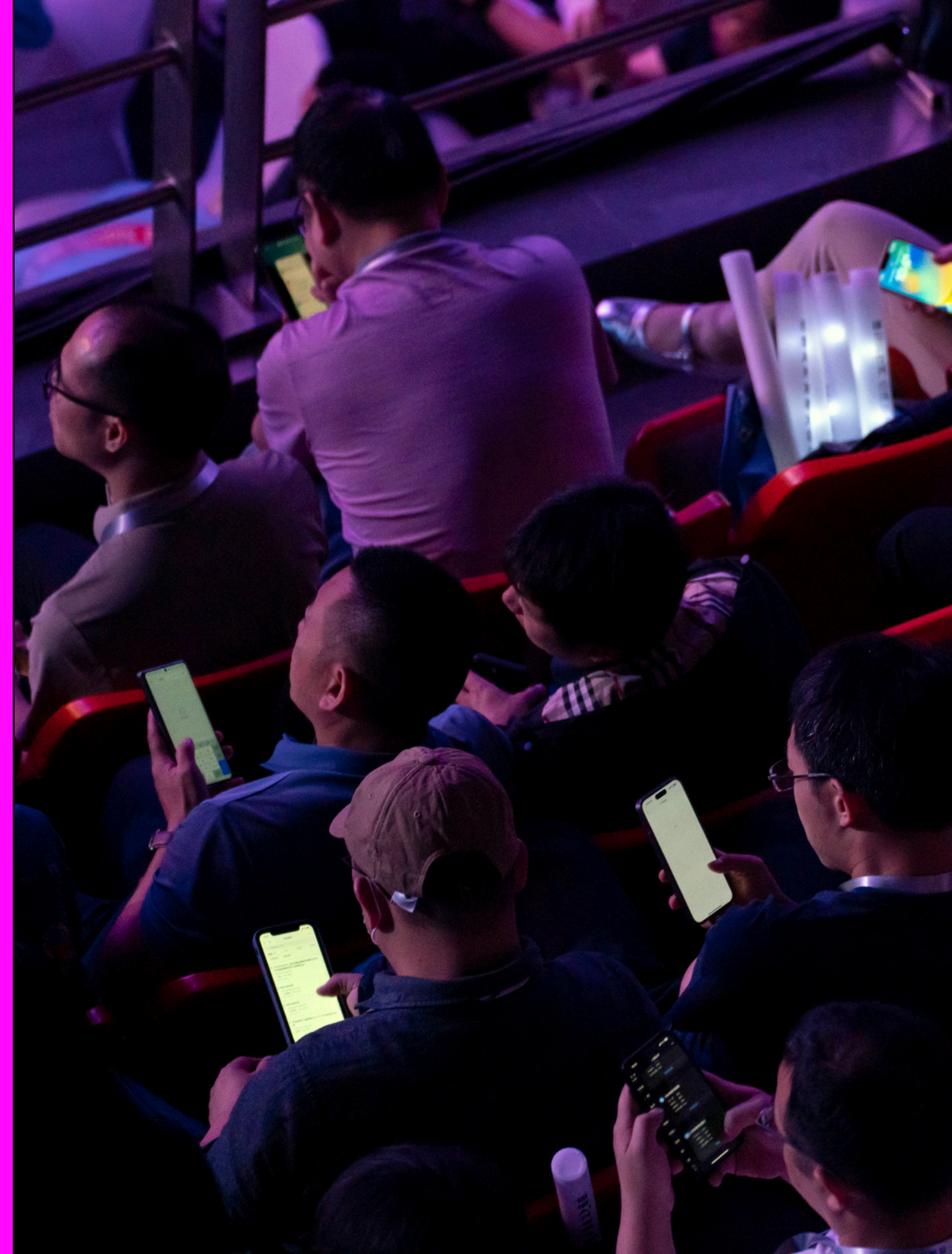
It’s a serious problem. The vast majority of people only join a social network when it reaches a critical tipping point of mainstream recognition.

EVEN WHEN THE MASSES UNDERSTAND WHAT THE FEDIVERSE IS, WHAT IS IT DOING DIFFERENTLY ENOUGH TO WARRANT PEOPLE JOINING?

When this is put to Rochko, he admits there is a sense that Mastodon is tech-oriented but those with niche interests like beekeeping or knitting are thriving as part of that 0.1 percent.

“Niche communities thrive on Mastodon because it’s not dominated by the algorithm. You don’t have to beat an ever-changing oracle that decides what’s popular today or not – you just post what you’re interested in and the people who follow you will see it,” he explains. He’s heard stories from photographers who met at physical meet-ups and go to follow one another on Instagram but find they already are – they just never see each other’s content because the algorithm has decided neither of them are interesting enough.

Forget true infinite scrolling, where the algorithmic, randomised timeline psychologically locks you in. When Rochko built Mastodon, he wanted it to be the antithesis of this kind of addictive model. “In the design philosophy of Mastodon, we try not to do things that would be considered a ‘dark pattern,’” he says, citing examples of Instagram using the red dot on your notifications when half the time you don’t actually have a real notification, or getting an email that someone has viewed your profile, but they’re just trying to pull you back onto the platform. On Mastodon, your feed is chronological so you are less tempted to keep scrolling and if you do, you’ll eventually meet where you left off, much like bulletins on Myspace or the original Twitter timeline. “The most stark difference between Mastodon and other platforms is it gets out of your way,” Rochko says, “it allows you to do what you wanna do, and then it just allows you to move on with your life.”





During the pandemic, hemmed-in teens, nerds and adults of all descriptions flocked to Discord, another platform that feels more aligned with a future internet. Savannah Badalich, Discord's Global Head of Product Policy, says that on Discord you "build a space, you decide who's in it, you set the rules, and you make it look and feel like yours" (that old internet idea again). They've even created a Teen Advisory Council where teen users are directly brought into the product design process to make the platform more useful for them.

Discord's popularity in 2020 and the way users brought their offline lives online surprised even Discord. "That period clarified something important for us," says Badalich, "the features that held up weren't the flashy ones. They were the ones that made you feel present with each other: voice channels, persistent servers, spaces you could actually make your own. The platform grew because it gave people control over how they connected, and it turned out that mattered a lot when everything else felt out of control."

The popularity of Discord and Substack offer hope that interest is slowly building in alternatives. A Substack spokesperson tells SXSW London that Substack regularly builds with writers and creators, taking their feedback into account, and only makes money when creators do – which, in this equation, makes the creators the corporate overlords (sort of). In an online post Substack's cofounder Hamish McKenzie shared that unlike other social media platforms, Substack doesn't want to recreate the walled garden trap. If writers choose to leave Substack, they take their mailing list – and paid subscriptions – with them.

CREATING AN ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL MEDIA SOUNDS LIKE A PHILOSOPHICAL CALLING. IT'S MORE THAN THAT,

Ernst insists, totally serious. He thinks about his children and the sort of world he wants to leave for them, one where truth is truth, and easily accessible. Faith is required when, as he admits, no one – not even he – knows exactly how to get there. He and his fediverse building friends are Marco Polo trying to create a trade route to China.

“You have some idea that there’s this thing called China, and roughly they have these kinds of products, but you don’t know the exact route,” he says, smiling from his home in Silicon Valley. “You encounter things you’ve never heard of, you’re making the best of it. And something exciting will come out of it.”





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