Who you gonna follow?

an anarchist take on social media

Anna Mercury

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I remember the first time people started calling me *cool*. It was in 2016, I was living on a narrowboat in London, partying too much, and suddenly all these people I was meeting through a new school program kept telling me how *cool* they thought I was. It was flattering, but also weird. I've never been a particularly *cool* person, nor a particularly popular one. Not in school, not at work, not in life, and definitely not on social media. My philosophy towards popularity is: *fuck cool; be warm.*

Still, it felt validating. When people called my van (pictured above) *cool*, it felt validating. The Instagram likes felt validating.

I like likes, because I like feeling validated. I think I'm pretty caring, interesting and authentic. I genuinely work really hard to keep becoming a better person by every standard I have for what that means. I think my tattoos look pretty fly. But my guess is, the *cool* factor came more from the weird living situations and the tattoos than it did from being compassionate or thoughtful. The way I've been called *cool* has never actually validated what I value most about myself.

The thing is, we all seek attention. We all need validation. When we criticize those qualities in others, especially when it comes to others' use of social media, we are mostly talking about ourselves and shaming ourselves for having desires for attention. Everything is a mirror.

But we *all* need attention. As members of a tragically self-aware and **interdependent** species, we cannot survive if our needs are not attended to and met by others. So, let go of your bootstraps, bucko; your rugged individualism is a fantasy.

I think social media has given us a convenient approximation of actual attention and validation, and we've come to rely on it to a point of detriment to our ability to find actual attention and validation. The classic example of checking Facebook while having dinner with someone comes to mind.

But I think there is more to it than just this inverse relationship. There was *something* we were craving, when the first social media platforms took off, that made them so wildly popular. Perhaps none of us were receiving the validation and attention we needed from other humans, due to emotionally incompetent parents or emotionally corrosive institutions across government and culture or a society rooted in an understanding of what's valuable that regularly invalidates us for liking to do anything that doesn't easily turn a profit (usually, a profit for someone else).

We're craving *authentic* connection and community. Authenticity withers in the face of coercion and force. Connection feels contrived and obligatory. We're craving *authentic* validation and attention, for who and what we are, as full people with unique interests and needs and lives. This requires us to be allowed to express ourselves fully and freely.

No wonder we've chosen options that give us more of what we crave. Even though harmful and oppressive ideals are perpetuated through social media, we at least have some power to represent ourselves, and choose for ourselves from a diversity

end of the day, both kinds of following are about power: what we have, what others have, and who gets to decide.

of options whom to follow, when, and to what extent to listen to them.

Typically, when we talk about a **follower**, the opposite term is a **leader**. I think it's interesting that on social media, we talk about **influencers** instead.

What standard would we hold our influencers to if we thought of them as *leaders*? Having influence is having power. What accountability would we expect? What code of ethics, and who would decide upon it? Public Lands Hate You would say influencers need to be more accountable and take more responsibility for their power. Its detractors would not.

What standard would we hold our leaders to if we thought of them as *influencers*? Would we ever accept their rule as absolute or their hierarchical power as moral? Would we accept not really having other options to switch to if our consent to their rule wanes?

It's funny how we like candidates for emotional reasons more than rational ones. It's almost like our emotions matter more to us than our thoughts. Just look at the entire phenomenon of people actually liking Beto O'Rourke because they think he's cool and he stands on tables a lot.

I don't like Selena Kardashian Grande Frappuccino or whatever either, but at least people *choose* to listen to what they have to say and to consume awareness of their lives, rather than having no other viable option. I don't follow them. I follow some influencers who I deem make my life better for whatever reason, and if I don't like what Beige Cardigan or Contrapoints is up to, I can always unfollow them.

I suppose *this* is social media, too. You can always unfollow me.

We don't vote for one social media influencer once every four years from a narrowly-derived list of rich and powerful people that rich and powerful people deemed appropriate candidates for us.

The Internet is, in some ways, an *approximation* of Anarchism: the political philosophy of non-hierarchy, horizontalism, free association, mutual aid and self-determination. It is *not* indicative of an anarchist society. First, Internet-based companies and ISPs are still monopolistic in society and undemocratic in structure. Second, governments keep making repeated efforts to police and control bodies and minds on the Internet the way they try to in physical reality.[1] Third, we cannot take ideas of "anarchy on the Internet" as a basis for what anarchism would look like in human community. The whole point is *community* —how the human relationships we have with one another shape our decision-making. Dispersed power within physically-close communities looks very different than dispersed power across an infinite non-physical space.[2]

What social media does retain of an anarchist society is *free association*: we can choose whom to follow and when and why, and we can unfollow and ignore and block. We cannot do this with our governments.

Though paid advertisement and public voice beyond social media limit this, social media popularity, and therefore power, is also *democratic* and largely *consensual.*

The most important feature of an anarchist society that social media upholds is *self-determination*, and self-representation. We have the ability to choose what of ourselves to put forwards, and determine for ourselves if, when and how to do so. We have the ability to choose whom

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[1] I wrote my undergraduate thesis on the U.S. government policing whistleblowing and activism on the Internet, and if any nerds want to chat hacktivism and the CFAA, hit me up. I haven't delved into it much in the past few years and would be interested in hearing what's new in that conversation.

[2] For more about dispersing power by keeping it held at the grassroots within communities of people who can actually talk to one another, I recommend that you google Murray Bookchin.

to follow and for what reasons. We have a diversity of options, and the ability to choose for ourselves which ones to take.

If all social media platforms had democratically-elected moderators and consensual community agreements made with the input of all involved in the community, and multiple options for which platform to use to get your needs met, they might look more like an anarchist society.

I think the fact that platforms like Twitter, Youtube and Instagram became so wildly popular shows that what we're craving is far more than just validation and attention. We're craving sovereignty, self-determination, and free association too.

What happens when self-determination meets community? Authentic mutual aid.

As more and more people turn away from social media and back to their in-person lives for connection, validation and attention, we're also seeing a rise in people fed up with any system that doesn't allow them to represent themselves and disassociate from leaders whose rule they find abhorrent. I do not think these trends are coincidental.

We're craving a democratization of access to power. We need to have our needs met and the power to meet them. This includes the power to be validated as *ourselves*, and more agency over how that happens. Real, direct democracy is all about seeing everyone's needs and perspectives as valid, and giving everyone the chance to figure out how to meet them in community.

What interests me so much about the "accountability of influencers" conversations are that they're *exactly* the kinds of conversations we need to be having about our political structures, about if and how those structures meet our needs, and how directly accountable they should be to us.

Understanding the intersections and differences between the two kinds of being a "follower" can help us to understand our needs and how to meet them together more broadly. At the