

# The Anti-SNARF Manifesto

**SNARF content is breaking the internet and frying our brains, here's how BuzzFeed is fighting back.**

**Jonah Peretti**  
Founder & CEO



Most anxieties about the future are really about the present. We worry about a future where AI takes away our human agency, devalues our labor, and creates social discord. But that world is already here and our meaning, purpose, and agency has already been undermined by Artificial Intelligence technologies.

In the US, this began with the launch of TikTok. In 2017, I met with ByteDance founder Zhang Yiming before he created TikTok. He explained to me that he wanted to launch an app in the US, but he needed a source of video content. I asked what kind of content and he said it didn't matter, he just needed tens of thousands of videos each day. He explained that Chinese universities produce more Deep Learning PhDs each year than the total number employed in every Silicon Valley company combined. He explained that this talent allowed him to make his AI so good that the content didn't matter. He just needed raw tonnage of content so the AI could create a personalized experience and get the flywheel going. He subsequently bought Musical.ly, evolved it into TikTok by adding advanced AI, and the rest is history.

Similar to Zhang Yiming, [Mark Zuckerberg](#) doesn't care very much about the content on his platforms and is much more interested in technology and AI. As TikTok exploded in popularity, Meta did everything it could to achieve parity with ByteDance. They went all in on the same kind of deep learning AI that powers

TikTok. Meta had to rebuild their data centers by racking billions of dollars worth of GPUs, years before the current Gen AI mania. These efforts have gotten Meta very close to parity with ByteDance and successfully slowed the growth of TikTok. But this shift also meant that employees working at Meta no longer knew why content was being recommended by their algorithms. The deep learning approach leveraging massively parallel computation made the metrics go up, but the teams at Meta didn't know why one piece of content was winning over another because the decisions were being made inside the deep learning black box.

**the internet  
is broken**

- **addictive content has led to growing dissatisfaction**
- **toxic masculine vibe (now more overt than ever!)**
- **algorithms make it hard to express your identity authentically and just for fun**

The judgement of the deep learning AIs became more important than the judgement of employees working at these tech companies. TikTok was successful launching in countries where the team building the apps did not even speak the local language or have any understanding of the content that was getting distributed. Meta employees who used to be involved in shaping content policy have effectively been replaced by AI, undermining their sense of purpose as human judgement becomes less important in designing these systems. More recently, Zuckerberg has said he will start using AI agents as “mid-level engineers.” Having a job at Meta is beginning to feel like being a UBI recipient, where you are lucky to be a citizen that gets some trickle down compensation from the value-creating AIs.

But the bigger loss of human agency comes from the billions of people that use these apps. These deep learning AIs are designed to maximize the time we all spend on these apps. While you are reading this memo, you are probably jonesing to switch over to Instagram or TikTok. It turns out when an app company **doesn't care about content** and **asks an AI to maximize usage** the result is a service that incentivizes content that maximizes addictiveness. The type of content that gets created and recommended is not the best content, but the content that elicits the most compulsive and predictable response from the human brain. When the platforms don't care about content and ask the AI to maximize usage, the content evolves into what I call “SNARF.”

### The Rise of SNARF

SNARF stands for **S**takes/**N**ovelty/**A**nger/**R**etention/**F**ear. SNARF is the kind of content that evolves when a platform asks an AI to maximize usage. Content creators need to please the AI algorithms or they become irrelevant. Millions of creators make SNARF content to stay in the feed and earn a living.

The infographic features a central white box with a black background on the left containing the text "social media has become overrun with SNARF!". To the right of this box is a vertical list of five items, each with a letter in a yellow circle followed by a bolded term and a brief definition:

- S** **STAKES**  
exaggerate stakes to make content urgent and existential
- N** **NOVELTY**  
manufacture novelty and spin content as unprecedented and unique
- A** **ANGER**  
manipulate people's anger to drive engagement via outrage
- R** **RETENTION**  
retention hacks by withholding info and promising a payoff at the end of a video
- F** **FEAR**  
take advantage of fear to make people focus with urgency on their content

We are all familiar with this kind of content, especially those of us who are chronically online. Content creators **exaggerate stakes** to make their content urgent and existential. They

**manufacture novelty** and spin their content as unprecedented and unique. They **manipulate anger** to drive engagement via outrage. They **hack retention** by withholding information and promising a payoff at the end of a video. And they **provoke fear** to make people focus with urgency on their content. Every piece of content faces ruthless Darwinian competition so only SNARF has the ability to be successful, even if it is inaccurate, hateful, fake, ethically dubious, and intellectually suspect.

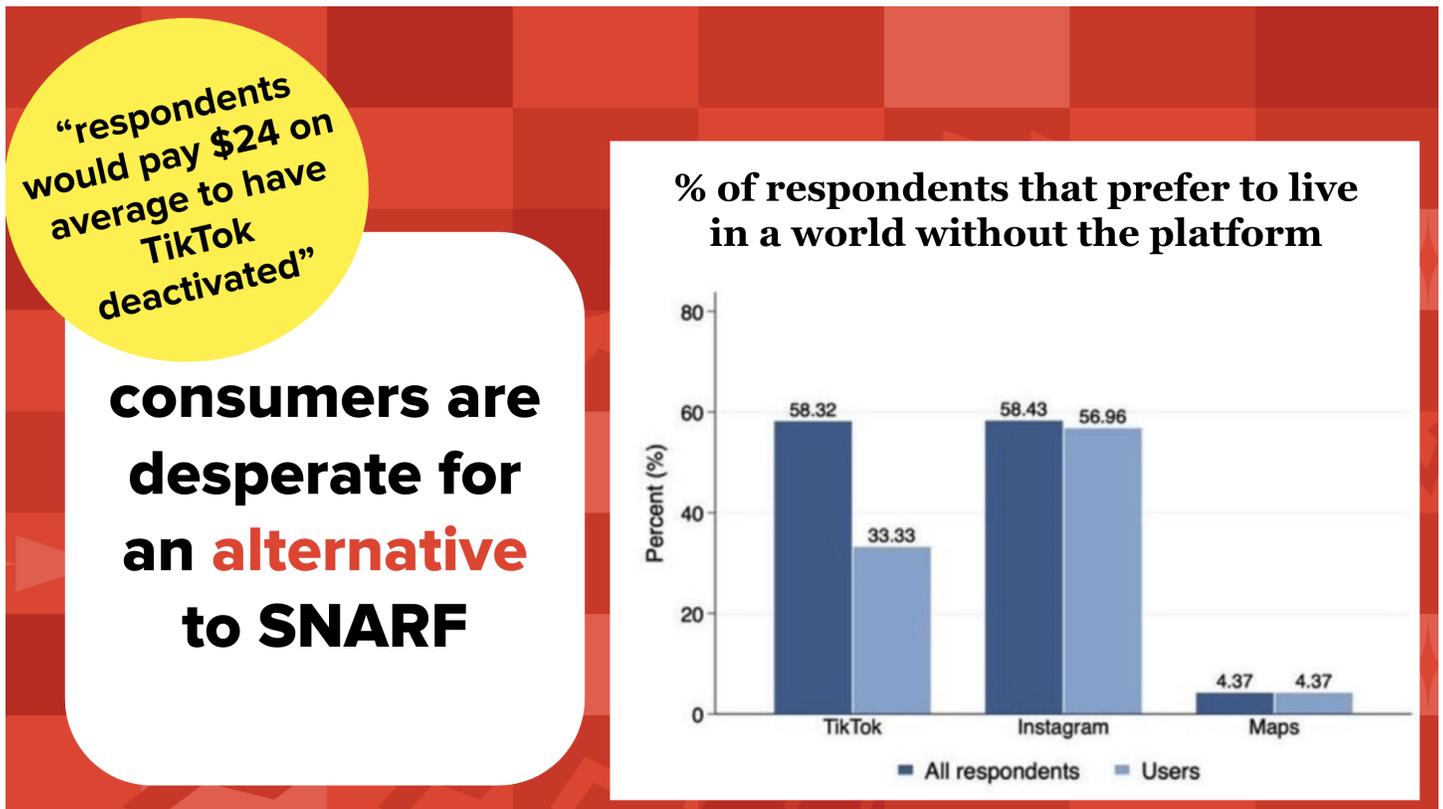
This dynamic is causing many different types of content to evolve into versions of the same thing. Once you understand this you can see how much of our society, culture, and politics are downstream from big tech's global SNARF machines. The political ideas that break through, from both Democrats and Republicans, need to be shaped into SNARF to spread. Through this lens, MAGA and "woke" are the same thing! They both are versions of political ideas that spread through raw negative emotion, outrage, and novelty. The news stories and journalism that break through aren't the most important stories, but rather the stories that can be shaped into SNARF. This is why it seems like every election, every new technology, every global conflict has the potential to end our way of life, destroy democracy, or set off a global **apocalypse**! It is not a coincidence that no matter what the message is, it always takes the same form, namely memetically optimized media that maximizes **stakes** and **novelty**, provokes **anger**, drives **retention**, and instills **fear**. The result is an endless stream of addictive content that leaves everyone feeling depressed, scared, and dissatisfied.

Back in 2018, I explained this dynamic to Facebook's head of NewsFeed, warning him that when BuzzFeed creates "meaningful content, it doesn't get rewarded...the content that is working isn't our best content" and I explained that the "entire digital media industry is faced with this dilemma. Do you make negative and polarizing content to win on Facebook? Or do you make positive social content and see your business and traffic decline?" Leaked quotes from my email were read before Congress by Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen, but the problem got worse, not better. As I explained earlier, competition from TikTok made all the major US social platforms double down on SNARF.

It was hard for platforms to resist because SNARF is highly addictive and makes engagement metrics and revenue go up. Addictive behavior is the most predictable type of consumer behavior and the easiest to exploit for profits. Meta has more than quadrupled its market capitalization since I sent my warning in 2018 and is now worth over \$1.7 trillion. I'm sure Zuckerberg is happy he didn't take my advice. And now that Trump is in power, a candidate who masterfully used SNARF to win the election, there is tremendous pressure for all platforms to allow the free flow of SNARF content. Every major platform is capitulating to Trump, saying they will end "censorship" which is an euphemistic way of saying they will let politically charged bullshit and conspiracy theories run wild on their platforms. For the foreseeable future, SNARF will continue to be the most ubiquitous form of media, shaping the way business, politics, and media work.

## Growing Discontent

But there is some hope, despite the growing revenue and usage of the big social media platforms. We are beginning to see the first cracks that suggest there might be an opportunity to fight back. A [recent study](#) by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that the majority of respondents would prefer to live in a world where TikTok and Instagram did not exist! There was generally a feeling of being compelled to use these projects because of FOMO, social pressure, and addiction. A large portion of users said they would pay money for TikTok and Instagram to not exist, suggesting these products have negative utility for many people. This challenges traditional economics which posits that consumers choosing a product means it provides positive utility. Instead, social media companies are using AI to manipulate consumer behavior for their own ends, not the benefit of the consumer. This aligns with what these researchers suspect is happening, namely that “companies introduce features that exacerbate non-user utility and diminish consumer welfare, rather than enhance it, increasing people’s need for a product without increasing the utility it delivers to them.”



AI undermining human agency is breaking classical economic theories and also undermining the established theories about the tech industry and competition. Leading analysts like Ben Thompson have missed this major shift and continue to argue that the big tech companies are consumer friendly and winning market share by delivering utility to customers. In his view, the social media companies are “aggregators” that provide a phenomenal benefit to consumers by providing a product they love at zero cost. He claims that this consumer-centricity is why most

anti-trust efforts are misguided. But he is missing that this was only true in the early years before the platforms used more advanced AI to maximize the addictiveness of their services. If the early internet was serving beer and wine that brought people together, today's internet is dealing crack and fentanyl that tears people apart. The consumer isn't winning when they are addicted to a product that makes them unhappy, and when they are spending hours each day using products they would pay money to make disappear. Any theory of business competition needs to be updated with deeper analysis drawn from addiction psychology and behavioral economics.

People haven't realized it yet, but the AI-powered platforms have already shipped the dystopian AI future many people are worried might come in the future. They've already delivered a MAGA President that spews SNARF and a woke counter-culture that celebrates the assassination of a health insurance executive — big stakes, lots of novelty, and plenty of anger, retention, and fear! They've already delivered an information ecosystem where you can't get basic information in a crisis like the recent LA fires, but instead get endless fights about identity politics, fake images, and conspiracy theories. It is hilarious to me that so many people still blame "The Media" when the behaviors of the media are largely shaped by the much larger tech platforms, who distribute most of the world's content, despite being mostly disinterested in the content itself. These tech companies are worth literally trillions of dollars, control the flow of information, and sit next to the President during the inauguration ceremonies. Nevertheless, they love to blame the media and take zero responsibility for the media ecosystem that they were instrumental in creating, almost by accident as a byproduct of the AI wars. But the public is beginning to catch on. Everyone is beginning to realize that the system is broken. People are beginning to crave something different.

### **Time To Fight Back**

Unlike the platforms, we care about internet content and know that it moves culture and the world forward. We have an opportunity to fight back against SNARF and bring some joy and fun back to the internet. People are craving the "beer and wine" era of the internet and we can bring that back on BuzzFeed, HuffPost, and Tasty. We can make content that gives you a little buzz, helps you relax, have a good time, and connect with your friends. But we can't be naive about how hard it is to sell beer when your competitors are offering hard drugs free of charge. We need to be maniacal about packaging our content so it can compete in the social media feeds against SNARF. We need to select stories where the stakes and novelty are actually high, and not fake it. We need to cover stories where anger and fear are justified, but also balance it with joy and entertainment, and prove that positive and truthful content can also perform if we give it the right care and attention. We need to tell great stories that keep people engaged, without annoying retention hacks, but still be savvy about what makes people want to stay until the end. Put simply, we need to inject some truth, joy, creativity, and positive entertainment into the social web so people have better alternatives in the sea of SNARF.

Here is how we will do it...

**BuzzFeed** will provide human curation of the best of the internet, providing an alternative to algorithmically recommended SNARF. We do the doomscrolling for you, so you can follow the biggest trends, find the hidden gems, and be in the loop without wasting your time and risking your mental health. We will also counter the anger and fear with a sense of humor, laughing at the buffoonery and ridiculousness of the most powerful people. We will counter the increase of gaslighting and misinformation by speaking to our diverse audience in ways that other institutions, media, and platforms clearly won't, and no matter the external pressures, we will ensure that our community's joy and humanity are preserved and celebrated. SNARF drives engagement, but if we do our job we can still break through with humor, with joy, and with a small dose of righteous anger. And we will bring more fun and playfulness back to the internet with low stakes content that is pure entertainment, from celebrity stories to shopping to personal advice.

**HuffPost** will break through by zeroing in on topics where the **stakes** are legitimate, the **novelty** is real, and the **fear** and **anger** are justified, and we won't be above using clever **retention** tactics, all while maintaining high journalistic standards. You might call this using "SNARF for good," but we need to be savvy about how to spread our important work in a tough information environment. Audiences are getting more sensitive to content that fakes the stakes, manufactures novelty, and manipulates **emotions** for engagement, and HuffPost can stand out by telling it like it is and having higher standards. At a time when establishment, billionaire-owned publications are succumbing to power and softening their coverage, HuffPost will be loud, direct and honest. And HuffPost will continue to counter-program with Life, Voices and Personal stories where the journalism provides an escape from SNARF, because living a good, joyful life means taking breaks from politics, culture wars, and existential fights about the future of society.

**Tasty** will fight SNARF with utility and social connection, as the leading food entertainment brand, on the forefront of food trends, bringing audiences entertaining formats with beloved creators and famous faces. Tasty provides an alternative to a sea of terrible engagement bait food content, that manipulates the audience into watching disgusting and pointless videos. The Tasty brand is trusted, our creators are beloved, and our scale is massive, across audiences both young and old, so we are a rare food brand that can still attract an audience without resorting to toxic engagement bait tactics. And the Tasty app will give us our own platform to grow usage and loyalty by integrating capabilities such as AI recipe remixing, community tips and challenges, and creator-led content.

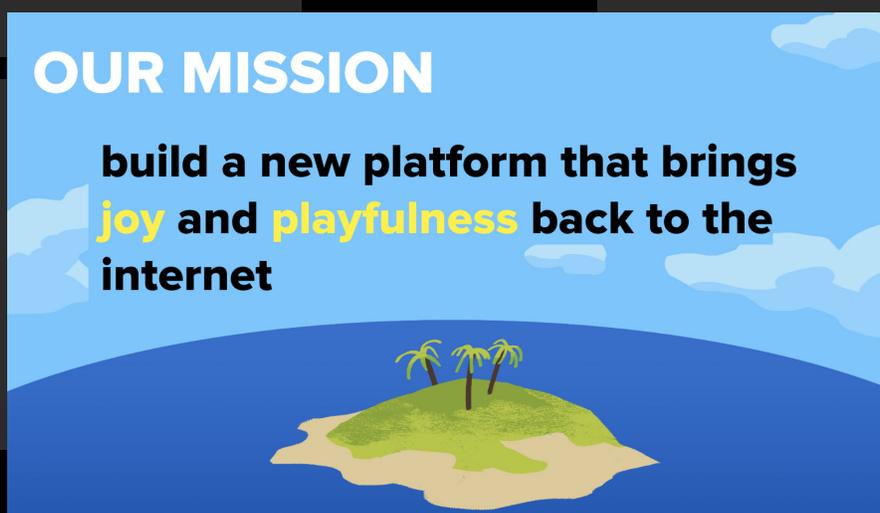
**BuzzFeed Studios** will escape SNARF by creating well-developed, quality longform video and premium content that is distributed on streamers and platforms that do care about what they air. In only a few years, we've released 19 original movies and TV shows, and countless digital series that have driven billions of views and entertained global audiences across genres. We will continue to produce beloved video formats, TV series, docs, films and podcasts, and offer opportunities

for creators and talent to create with us. Our audience-first approach to development allows us to create IP that can stand on its own, and transcend any deep learning algorithm.

We know we are swimming against the tide, the platforms don't care or understand content, and they have all surrendered to a depressing form of AI-powered recommendation that gives SNARF a structural advantage. But I know we can still have success, and look forward to counter-programming with our human creativity fighting against the machine. The tide is starting to shift and we will benefit from the growing dissatisfaction with the big platforms.

Before I go, I want to tell you about something big we are starting to build. **We are creating a new social media platform built specifically to spread joy and enable playful creative expression.**

This social media platform will use AI to give users agency instead of stealing their agency. I'm fed up with giving the platform companies advice about how to fix the internet, if we want this done right, we have to do it ourselves!



I can't share much more yet, but I am very excited, after years of being beholden to other platforms, to take the big step of making our own.

We are in the lab developing it now! [Sign up here](#) if you want early access and reach out to [buisland@buzzfeed.com](mailto:buisland@buzzfeed.com) if you want to collaborate with us.

**Jonah Peretti**  
Founder & CEO