

Now in College, Luddite Teens Still Don't Want Your Likes

Three years after starting a club meant to fight social media's grip on young people, many original members are holding firm and gaining new converts.

Alex Vadukul

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From left to right, Jameson Butler, Biruk Watling, Logan Lane and Sasha Jackson, in Prospect Park, Brooklyn.

Credit: Ye Fan for The New York Times

Biruk Watling, a college sophomore wearing a baggy coat and purple fingerless gloves, walked the chilly campus of Temple University in Philadelphia on a recent afternoon to recruit new members to her club.

She taped a flier to a pole: “Join the Luddite Club For Meaningful Connections.” Down the block, she posted another one: “Do You Desire a Healthier Relationship With Technology, Especially Social Media? The Luddite Club Welcomes You and Your Ideas.”

When a student approached, Ms. Watling dove into her pitch.

“Our club promotes conscious consumption of technology,” she said. “We’re for human connection. I’m one of the first members of the original Luddite Club in Brooklyn. Now I’m trying to start it in Philly.”

She pulled out a flip phone, mystifying her recruit.

“We use these,” she said. “This has been the most freeing experience of my life.”

If Ms. Watling had a missionary's zeal, it was because she wasn't just promoting a student club, but an approach to modern life that profoundly changed her two years ago, when she helped form the Luddite Club as a high school student in New York.

But that was then, back when things were simpler, before she had embarked on the more independent life of a college student and found herself having to navigate QR codes, two-factor-identification logins, dating apps and other digital staples of campus life.

The Luddite Club was the subject of an article I wrote in 2022 — a story that, ironically, went viral. It told of how a group of teenage tech skeptics from Edward R. Murrow High School in Brooklyn and a few other schools in the city gathered on weekends in Prospect Park to enjoy some time together away from the machine.

They sketched and painted side by side. They read quietly, favoring works by Dosztoevsky, Kerouac and Vonnegut. They sat on logs and groused about how TikTok was dumbing down their generation. Their flip phones were decorated with stickers and nail polish.



From left to right, Logan Lane, Lucy Jackson, Sasha Jackson and Jameson Butler hang out at Central Library in Brooklyn.
Credit: Ye Fan for The New York Times

Readers inspired by their message responded in hundreds of emails and comments. Reporters from Germany, Brazil, Japan and elsewhere flooded my inbox, asking me how to reach these students who were so hard to track down online. Snarky Reddit threads and think pieces sprouted. Ralph Nader endorsed the club in an opinion essay, writing: “This is a rebellion that needs support and diffusion.”

Two years later, I’m still asked about them. People want to know: Did they stay on the Luddite path? Or were they dragged back into the tech abyss?

I put those questions to three of the original members — Ms. Watling, Jameson Butler and Logan Lane, the club’s founder — when they took some time from their winter school breaks to gather at one of their old hangouts, Central Library in Brooklyn’s Grand Army Plaza.

They said they still had disdain for social media platforms and the way they ensnare young people, pushing them to create picture-perfect online identities that have little do with their authentic selves.

They said they still relied on flip phones and laptops, rather than smartphones, as their main concessions to an increasingly digital world. And they reported that their movement was growing, with offshoots at high schools and colleges in Seattle, West Palm Beach, Fla., Richmond, Va., South Bend, Ind., and Washington, D.C.

The Luddite Club is better organized these days, they said, with an uncluttered website to help spread the word. Ms. Lane, 19, is in the last stages of turning it into a registered nonprofit organization.

“We’ve even got a mission statement now,” said Ms. Lane, who is studying Russian literature at Oberlin College. “We like to say we’re a team of former screenagers connecting young people to the communities and knowledge to conquer big tech’s addictive agendas.”

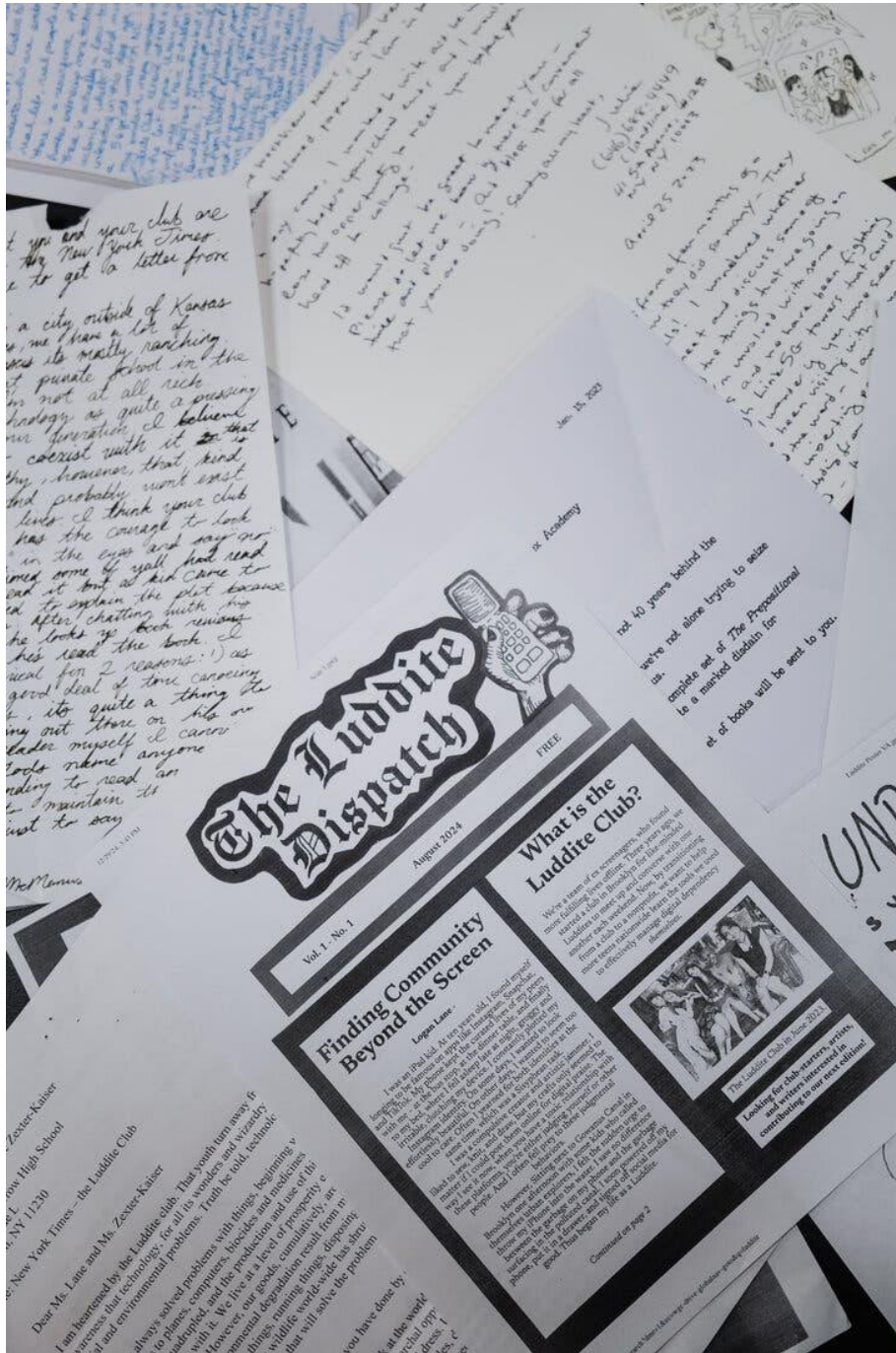
The club also publishes a newsletter, available only in print, called The Luddite Dispatch. An article in the first issue, headlined “Recent Luddite Wins,” highlighted a recommendation by the United States surgeon general Vivek Murthy that social media platforms should carry warning labels to inform users that they are “associated with significant mental health harms for adolescents.”

“For our next issue, I’m planning to travel to France to this town outside Paris, Seine-Port, that’s trying to ban smartphones,” Ms. Lane said. “I want to see if it’s working and if something like that could exist in America. I hope to interview the mayor.”

While Ms. Lane had started a branch of the Luddite Club at Oberlin, Ms. Watling, 19, reported that she was having some difficulty getting hers off the ground at Temple, where she is majoring in sociology. “Sometimes I think I sound a little crazy to Philly people,” she said. “Because I’m always like, ‘I’m alive. You’re alive. It’s beautiful. That’s why we shouldn’t be consuming life through technology.’”

Unlike her fellow students, who do their banking on their smartphones, Ms. Watling uses A.T.M.s. like a baby boomer. She said her biggest challenge was navigating dating and nightlife.





Credit: Ye Fan for The New York Times

“Raves are big in Philly, and it’s a big part of student life at Temple,” she said. “You can end up in the middle of nowhere in some abandoned building for the rave everyone’s going to. I can’t go if I don’t know I’ll get home safely.”



Biruk Watling, right, and Masai Matale post fliers outside a building at Temple University in Philadelphia.

Credit: Ye Fan for The New York Times

She slowly pulled something from her satchel — a second phone, an Android.

“I own this now with a sense of inner torture,” Ms. Watling said, “but I have to look out for my well-being as a young woman. It’s too risky for me to put my life in the hands of a flip phone.”

She stressed that the smartphone was not part of her everyday life: “I use it only when I need to, mostly for Uber,” she said. “I’ve tried Hinge, too, but always delete it.”

Another founding club member, Odille Zexter, who wasn’t able to make the reunion, agreed in a phone interview that dating apps were a formidable impediment to the Luddite way.

“I’ve successfully resisted technology since high school, but sometimes I feel left out of things,” Ms. Zexter, who is studying studio art at Bard College, said. “Dating apps

are one of them, because everyone at Bard uses them. Then I remind myself they're just another form of scrolling and social media. That they go against my values."

In a recent art class, Ms. Zexter, 19, explored the Luddite worldview by creating a bronze sculpture of a battered flip phone. "Flip phones are seen as relics now," Ms. Zexter said, "but by freezing mine through sculpture, I wanted to preserve that era people used them, to highlight they're more important now than ever."

Not every original Luddite Club member has been able to adhere to its anti-tech ideals since going off to college. Lola Shub, who is studying creative writing at the State University of New York at Purchase, said in a phone interview that she had walked away from the Luddite path with some ambivalence.

"I started using a smartphone again pretty much the day I started college," she said. "I kind of had to. It's really hard to navigate the world without one. But there's been something nice about it, if I'm going to be honest."

The last time we met, sitting side by side on a log in Prospect Park, Ms. Shub told me she had been inspired by "Into the Wild," Jon Krakauer's 1996 nonfiction account of a young man who died while trying to live off the grid in the Alaskan wilderness. "We've all got this theory that we're not just meant to be confined to buildings and work," she said at the time. "And that guy was experiencing life. Real life. Social media and phones are not real life."

Now, at 20, she is back in the digital world.

"It's constant access again," Ms. Shub said. "It's the relief of knowing I can do things easier. I got Instagram, too, and it's been nice reconnecting with people on it.

"But then you get used to it all, is the problem," she continued. "I feel like I'm not trying as hard anymore. When I had the flip phone, I had to put in effort to get to places, to talk to people. Everything was a task. Now it's easy to do things. I guess I still don't like needing the crutch of a smartphone, though I couldn't figure out how to go on without one."

I asked what she thought of "Into the Wild" these days.

"I still think that book is amazing," she said. "I feel the same way about it. I still believe phones are a big problem. I'm always aware now, when I'm hanging out with people, how everyone is just looking at their phone. It's an epidemic. It's sad, really."

She added: "My life is just in a different place than it was in high school. It sucks I got back into this head space, and maybe I'll go back to a flip phone one day, but I need the smartphone for now."

While many original Luddites have been navigating campus life, Ms. Butler, a high school senior, has become a leader of the club's New York presence. Seated at the library table with a worn copy of Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's "Random Family," she provided a report.

The club had died out at Murrow, she said, shortly after it found itself in the media glare — the attention had obliterated its street cred. But now a new Luddite chapter, with Ms. Butler at the head, is thriving at Brooklyn Tech. To recruit new members,







Credit: Ye Fan for The New York Times

she sits at a table at school fairs next to a poster that reads, “The Truth Will Set You Free.”

Three high school initiates to the Luddite Club had accompanied Ms. Butler to the library: Lucy Jackson, Sasha Jackson and Téa Cuzzo. They sat quietly as the more senior members talked.

“It’s sort of the cool kids club now,” Ms. Butler, 18, said. “It’s been great for my high school life socially. No one thinks I’m a freak. We do improv, rap battles and make zines together.”

“Many of us have decided we don’t want to be in bed, doom-scrolling and rotting our lives away,” she continued. “Youth is being wasted on those of us who are constantly on our phones. We’re only young once.”

Her boyfriend, Winter Jacobson, who was in town from Colorado to visit Ms. Butler, was sitting next to her. He started a Luddite Club at Telluride High School last year. He said it has a dozen members.

“Colorado is very different from New York,” Mr. Jacobson, 17, said. “There’s not as much to do in Telluride. People are reliant on their phones as their connection to the world, so some of my friends think the club is a joke. I’m still trying to spread the message, though.”

He took Ms. Butler’s hand. “She inspired me to get a flip phone,” he said, “because I saw all the superpowers it was giving her.”

After the summit, the teens headed to Prospect Park. Trudging across leaves, they traded critiques of the new Bob Dylan movie. On arriving at their old gathering spot, Ms. Lane grew pensive.

“This isn’t just a dirt mound to me,” she said. “We found ourselves here. This is where we took back something that was taken from us.”

“I don’t attend the club meetings here now because I’m in college, but this space isn’t for me anymore,” she added. “It’s for others to discover. I’m not a kid anymore. I’m about to turn 20.”

Ms. Lane has lately become a public face of the movement. In April, she delivered a talk at a symposium examining technology’s effects on society at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan.

Speaking before a crowded auditorium, she painted a bleak picture of her pre-Luddite life. “Like other iPad kids I found myself from the age of 10 longing to be famous on apps like Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok,” she said. “My phone kept the curated lives of my peers with me wherever I went, following me to the dinner table, to the bus stop, and finally to my bed where I fell asleep groggy and irritable, often at late hours in the night, clutching my device.”

Then, at age 14, she had an epiphany.

“Sitting next to the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn one afternoon, I felt the sudden urge to throw my iPhone into the water,” she told the MoMA audience. “I saw no difference between the garbage on my phone and the garbage surfacing in the polluted



From left to right, Jameson Butler, Winter Jacobson and Lucy Jackson. “She inspired me to get a flip phone,” Mr. Jacobson said, referring to Ms. Butler, “because I saw all the superpowers it was giving her.”

Credit: Ye Fan for The New York Times

canal. A few months later, I powered off my phone, put it in a drawer, and I signed off social media for good. Thus began my life as a Luddite.”

“For the youth of today,” she said in closing, “the developmental experience has been polluted; it’s been cheapened. ‘Who am I?’ becomes ‘How do I appear?’”



Members of the Luddite Club gather outside Central Library in Brooklyn. From left to right: Téa Cuozzo, Lucy Jackson, Logan Lane, Jameson Butler and Winter Jacobson.

Credit: Ye Fan for The New York Times

A week after the gathering at the library, I visited Ms. Lane at her workplace. She had taken a winter-semester internship with Light Phone, a startup that manufactures a minimalist phone that allows for texting and calling and not much else. The company occupied part of a cavernous co-working space in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Workers in cubicles tapped on laptops and dashed off Slack messages.

The boss, Joe Hollier, a shaggy haired man in a Mazzy Star T-shirt, described the demand for his device. “Our customers are freelance creatives, people with internet-heavy careers, Bible-Belt families, even recovering pornography addicts,” he said. “Most

Light Phone users still use technology, though our design helps them use it as little as they can.”

Hunched in her cubicle, Ms. Lane considered office life.

“I’ve been reading up on work-life balance in America, the reality of corporate jobs,” she said. “It sounds like you pretty much need to be on all the time. It sounds awful.”

Her task that day was to test a new prototype with features like an MP3 player, a voice recorder and a camera. As she demonstrated the device, I couldn’t help but notice that she seemed intrigued by these conveniences. But she quickly disabused me of the notion that she was straying from the Luddite path.

“This phone allows for what I’d call a ‘neo-Luddite’ lifestyle,” she said. “The thing is, I have my flip phone because I still need to have one, whether that’s for school or staying connected with my parents. But I think the dream for me is to be unreachable one day. To have no phone at all.”

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‘Luddite’ Teens Don’t Want Your Likes

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