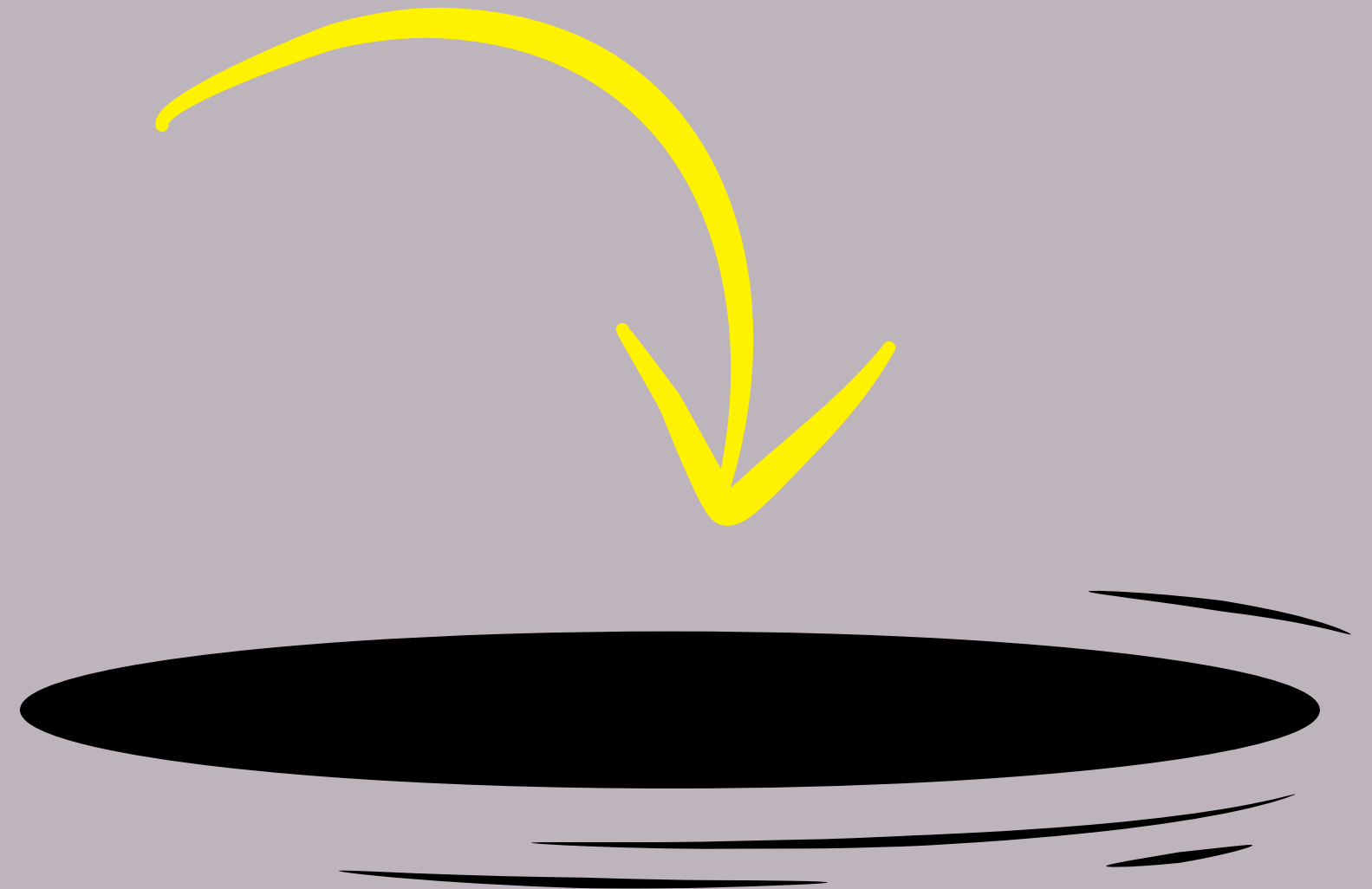


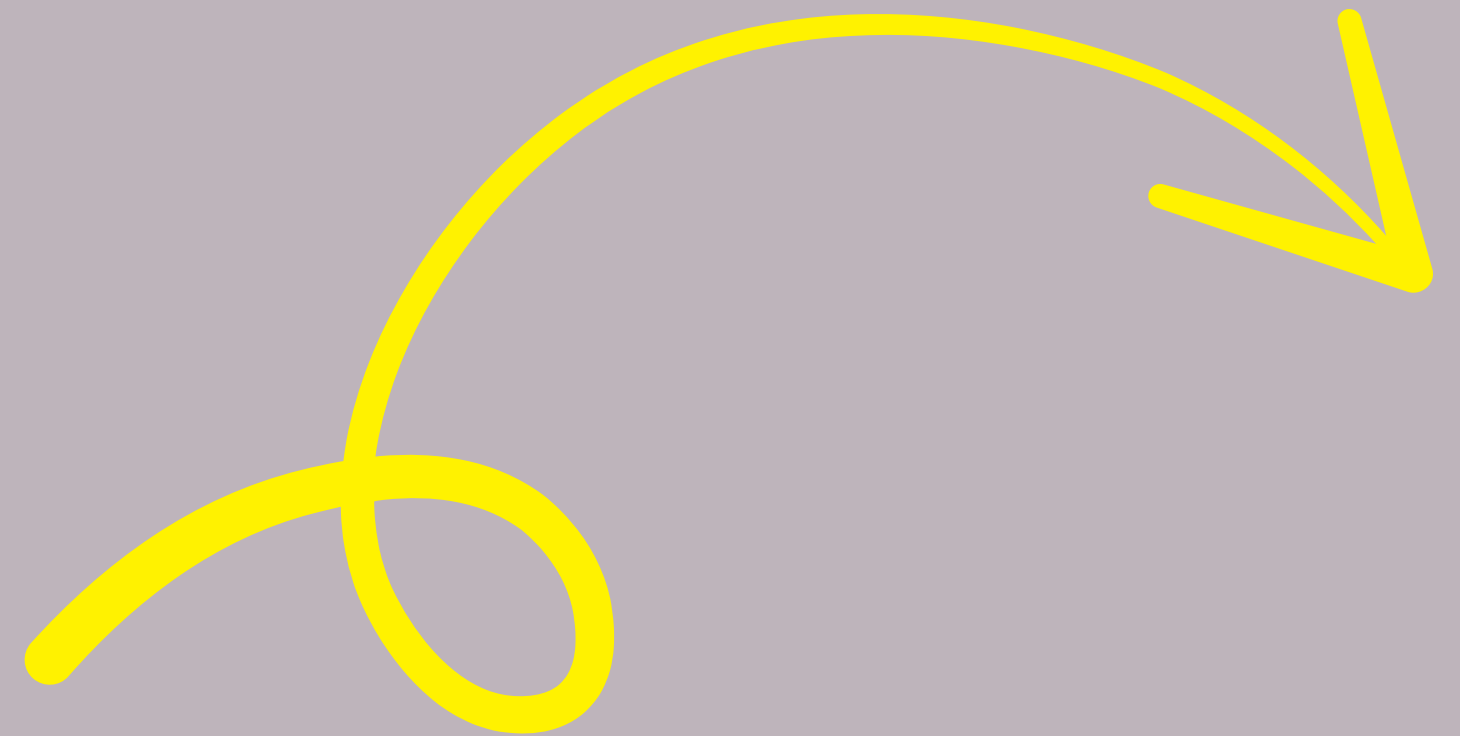
map of a rabbit hole.

curiosity, exploration, and
discovery still matters.



I love a rabbithole. The stranger the twists and turns of it, the better. But increasingly I feel like we're losing the will (and the means) to go exploring online. I decided to map just one of my recent rabbitholes, which started with a viral tiktok, and wound up weeks later at the end of a journey through power, gender, belief, and the economics of the internet. This is a field guide to that journey – a visual essay about the way our online systems transform curiosity into conviction, and an encouragement to go exploring again.

Let's dive in.



a youtube star gets cancelled.

This journey starts with a enormously successful youtuber I'd never heard of getting cancelled in a series of tiktoks calling her an abusive mother. So who was Ruby Franke? Why was she so popular? And why did her viewers suddenly turn on her? (cw: child abuse)

The short answer is that Franke was a **family vlogger** who created the 8 Passengers youtube channel, which at its height had more than 2m subscribers. She posted about her life with her husband and six children in Utah. Over time, her increasingly-strict parenting style started to cause alarm among viewers.

When one of her children approached a neighbour's house, malnourished and wounded, Franke was arrested and subsequently tried and convicted.

Dive deep:

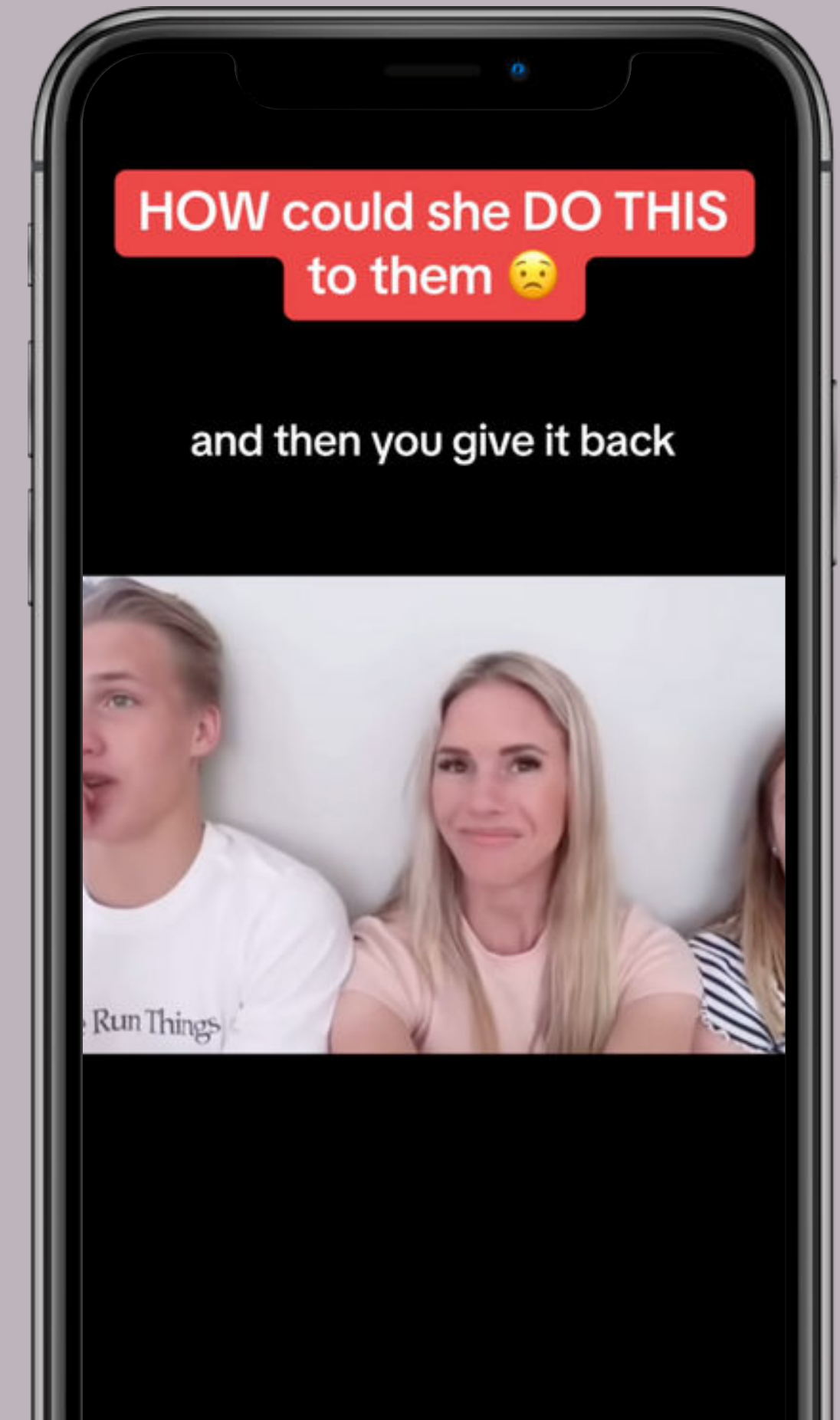
- [Who is Ruby Franke, the parenting influencer jailed for child abuse?](#)
- [The Devil in the Family documentary series](#)
- [The House of My Mother, by Shari Franke](#)

sidequests.

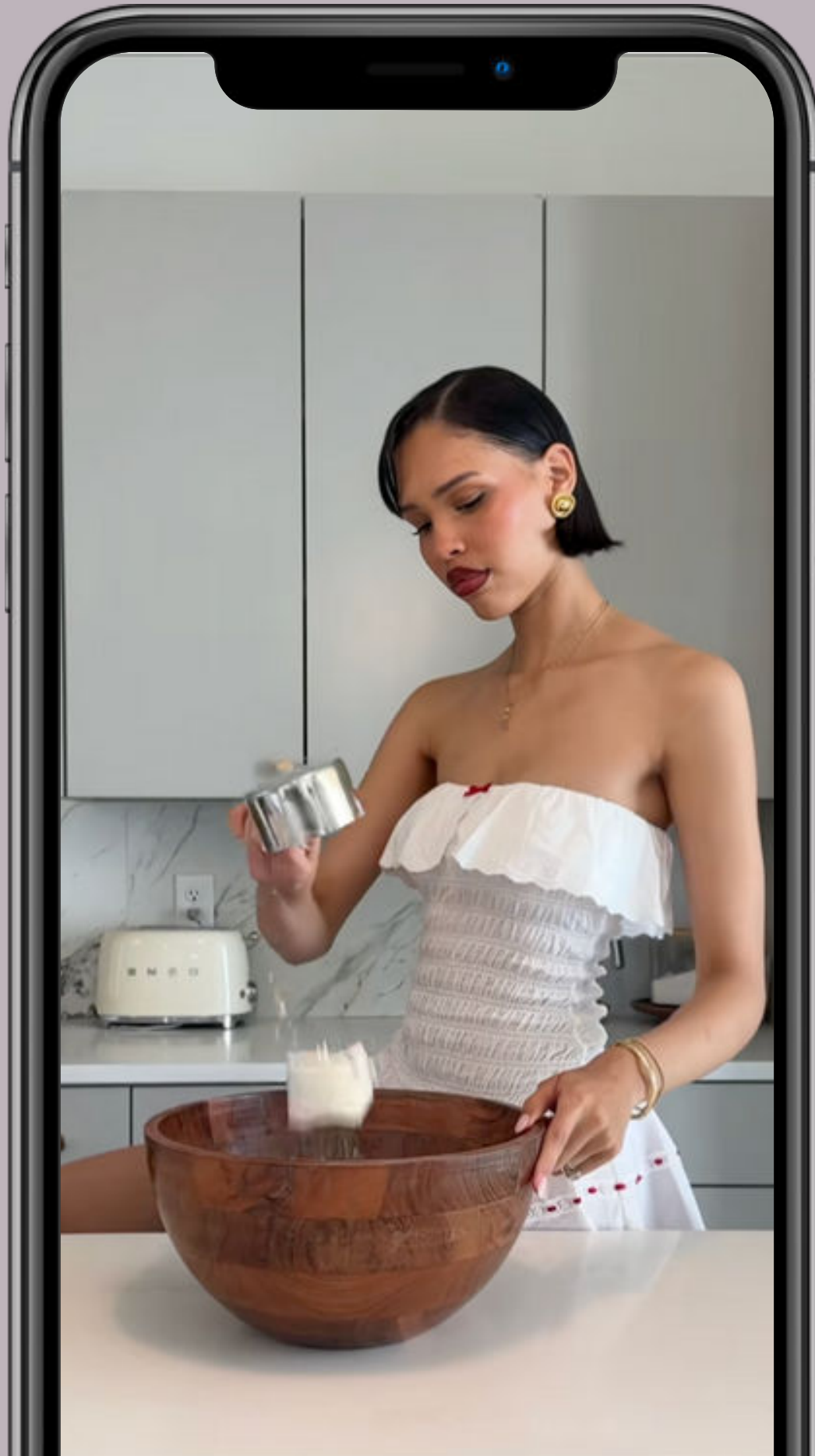
[Parasocial relationships](#)

[The dark side of family vlogging](#)

[Large families on reality tv](#)



what is it with mormons and vlogging?



Franke's popularity felt familiar because we've been living through the rise of the **tradwife**: modest dresses, perfect homes, divine femininity. Mormon families pioneered this aesthetic years before it had a name. They blended "testimony" – stories about how their faith positively affected their lives – with generic lifestyle content (recipes, parenting advice, aspirational homes).

Aesthetic domesticity is the curated performance of home life that thrives on social media. It's the opposite of the messy, realistic emphasis of the mommy-blogging era characterised by writers like Dooce. Instead, these women have spotless countertops, linen dresses, natural light, and obedient children. The look borrows from 1950s homemaker iconography but updates it with affiliate links. Its appeal lies in how it translates stability into content; in a chaotic world, there's comfort in perfect laundry folds and sourdough starters.

Dive Deep:

- [The Rise and Fall of the Tradwife](#)
- [Every Mother a Missionary](#)
- [Momfluencers](#)



sidequests.

[What do Mormons believe?](#)
[Tradwives and the alt-right](#)
[Cottagecore](#)
[Mormon MomTok](#)

what's the connection with mlms?

Multi-level marketing (**MLM**) is the sort-of respectable cousin of the pyramid scheme – technically legal, but running on the same basic principles of desperately trying to convince your friends and family to become sellers of an average product. Brands like *LulaRoe*, *doTERRA*, and *Young Living* flourished through overlapping Mormon networks where church life, friendship, and family already provided the perfect structure for recruitment. Women are traditionally discouraged from working outside the home, urged instead to build lives centred on motherhood. MLMs slot neatly into that framework: they let women earn money from the kitchen table while keeping faith with church expectations. The sales pitch – *work without leaving your family* – lets you tell yourself it's not capitalism. It's what you're called to do.

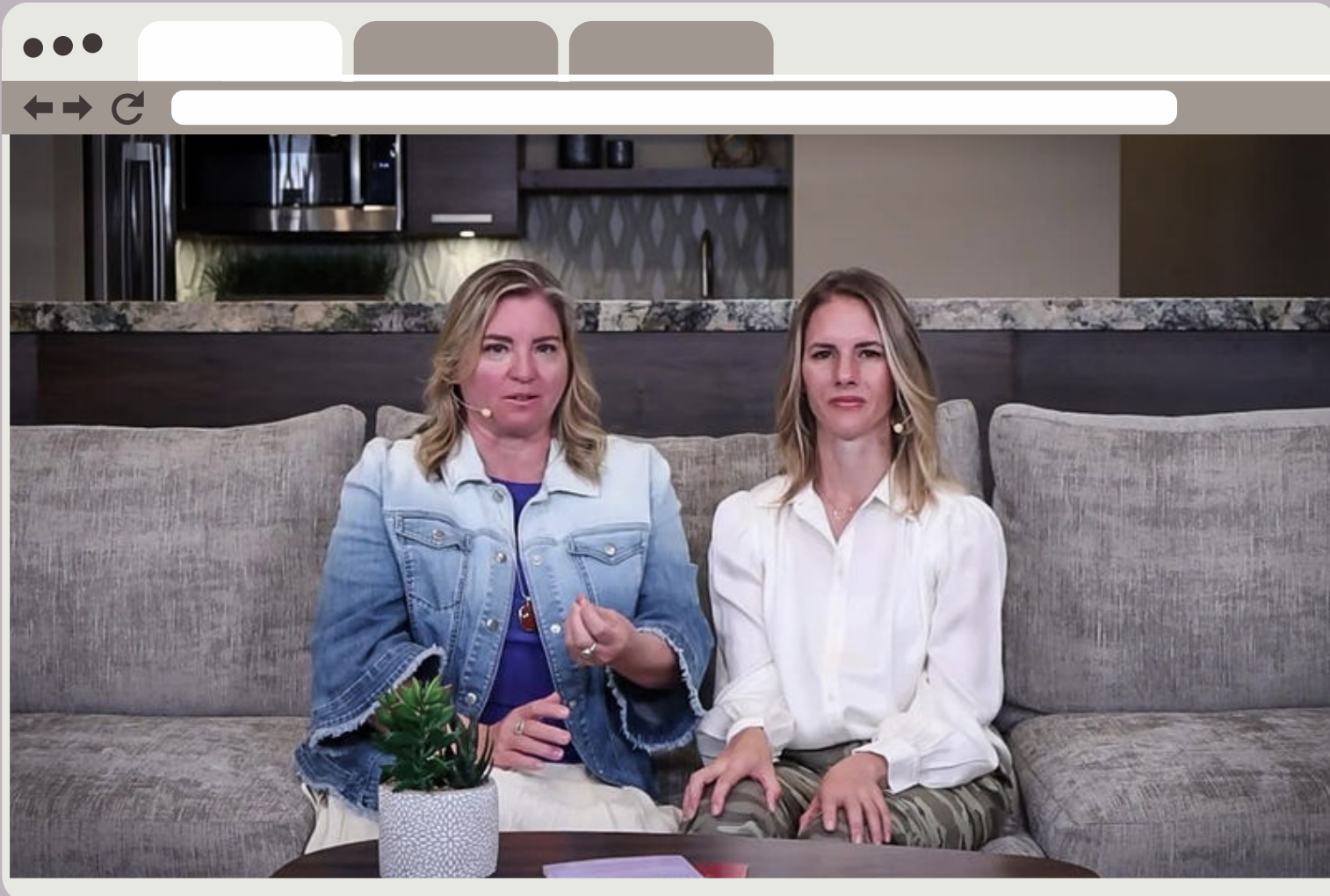
That same dynamic helped give rise to Mormon family vlogging, which offered another way for women to monetise their home life while staying within prescribed gender roles. In both cases, belief itself becomes the business model: showing off your salvation through side hustle.

Dive deep:

- [The allure of companies like LuLaRoe to Latter-day Saint women](#)
- [How MLMs target women and minorities with an "unwinnable lottery"](#)



what's the connection with cults?



sidequests.

Digital courses as get rich quick schemes

The cult-like language coursing through business

I'm fascinated by cult dynamics. And the Ruby Franke story has those in spades. Ruby Franke gradually became more and more influenced by **Jodi Hildebrandt**, a "counsellor" that operated more like a self-help guru. Her methods read like a checklist of undue influence: isolate, redefine reality, punish doubt, reward confession.

It's a reminder that the line between coaching, counselling, and coercion can be thin, and professional rules and ethics in these disciplines exist for a reason. We trust that the people we turn to for help have our best interests at heart, and aren't just trying to exert power over us or make a buck.

Dive deep:

- [Jodi Hildebrandt pleads guilty](#)
- [Hildebrandt's life-coaching ruined lives](#)
- [Therapist disciplined for telling church about client](#)





why are cults interesting?

Cults are fascinating to me because they exaggerate something deeply human: our need to **gather**. They're extreme expressions of our constant search for community. High-control groups exploit the same instincts that hold families and fandoms and workplaces together – the drive to belong, to find meaning in shared language, to feel part of an in-crowd. They take things we find familiar and everyday, and somehow ratchet them up to eleven in a way that can produce really dangerous results.

Online, those same dynamics power conspiracy movements like **QAnon**, where cryptic “drops” and shared decoding create these shared crusades. The tools of belonging have become scalable, networked, and monetisable. Cults aren't just hippies in the wilderness anymore. They're deep in **hustle-culture**, selling you the latest self-improvement course that's going to change your life.

Dive deep:

- [The BITE model](#)
- [The rise of self help cults](#)
- [What is QAnon and where did it come from](#)

sidequests.

[How NXIVM was the ultimate wellness scam](#)

[Inside Lighthouse, the life coaching cult](#)

[Andrew Tate's get rich quick cult](#)

why is this about the apocalypse?

It always comes back to the end of the world! Jodi Hildebrandt wasn't just a moral crusader; she was an **end-times believer**, steeped in a strain of apocalypticism that sees every social failure as proof of an approaching reckoning. That logic—the world is falling apart, but we are the ones who see it clearly—is catnip for online audiences.

Dive deep:

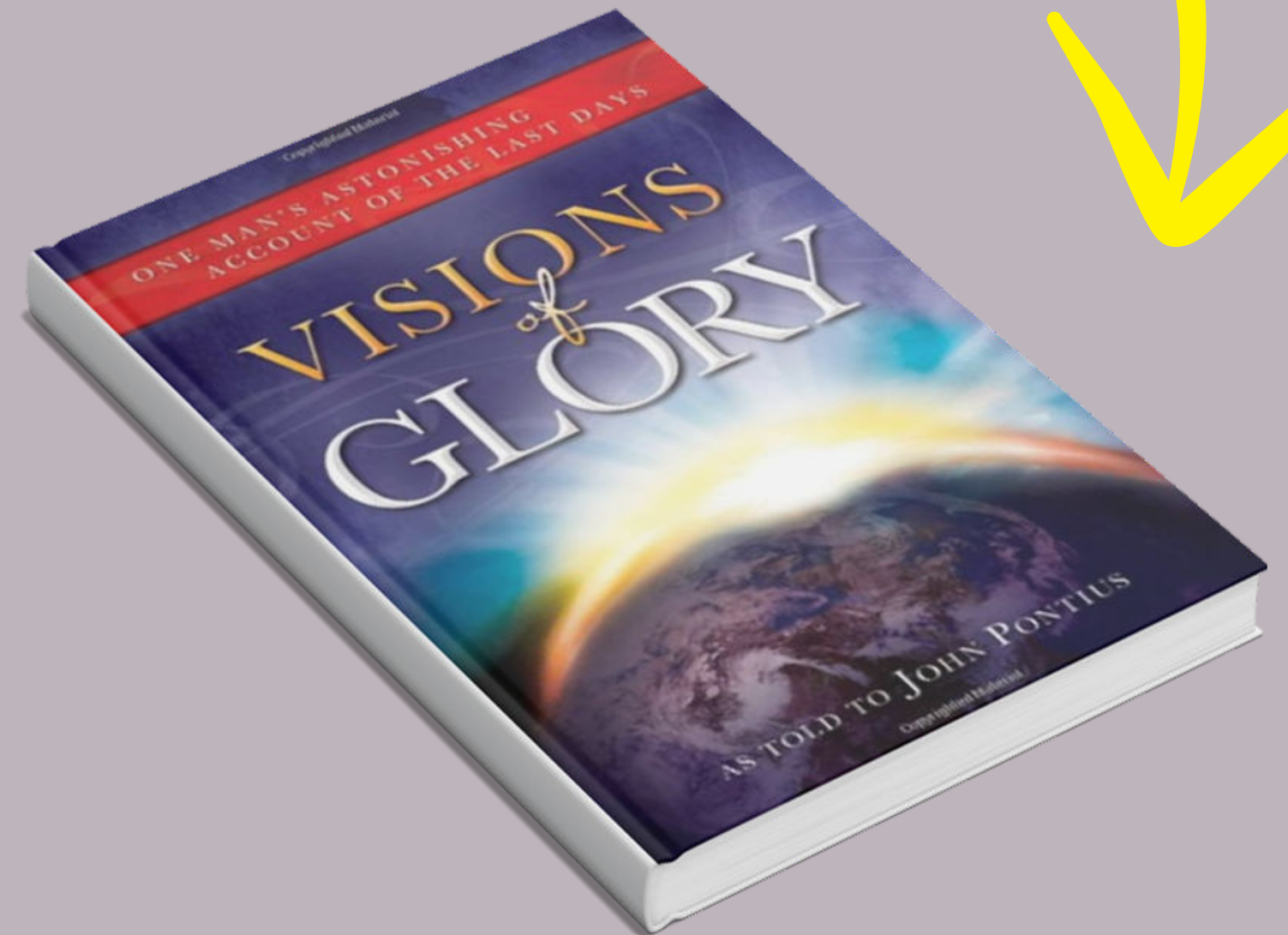
- [The religious extremism of Jodi Hildebrandt](#) (cw: descriptions of child abuse)
- [Doomsday performs well on social media](#)
- [God in the machine](#) (rapturetok and AI)

sidequests.

[Prepping means building community](#)

[The appeal of apocalyptic literature](#)

[Accelerationism - apocalypse and the alt-right](#)



sidequests.

[An update on our family \(child adoption as content\)](#)
[Korea passes law to protect Kpop teen idols](#)
[Child labour in high performance sport](#)



should we be monetising kids?

Family content has always been sold as wholesome, but behind the scenes, it's an industry built on **child labour** in everything but name. The Ruby Franke case made that impossible to ignore. When a child's life becomes a storyline, their privacy and safety are no longer fully their own. Every tantrum or milestone or heartbreak becomes potential content. After the trial, Utah passed new laws protecting children of online creators, requiring parents to set aside earnings and respect future rights to privacy. It's a start, but the attention economy still rewards exposure over care, and the pressure to "share everything" hasn't gone away.

Family vloggers trade in intimacy; the more "real" the footage feels, the better it performs. That's what draws audiences in and what keeps creators trapped, even when they know it's too much. Whether it's branded content, birthday unboxings, or "relatable" family chaos, the boundaries of childhood are being rewritten in real time and monetised along the way.

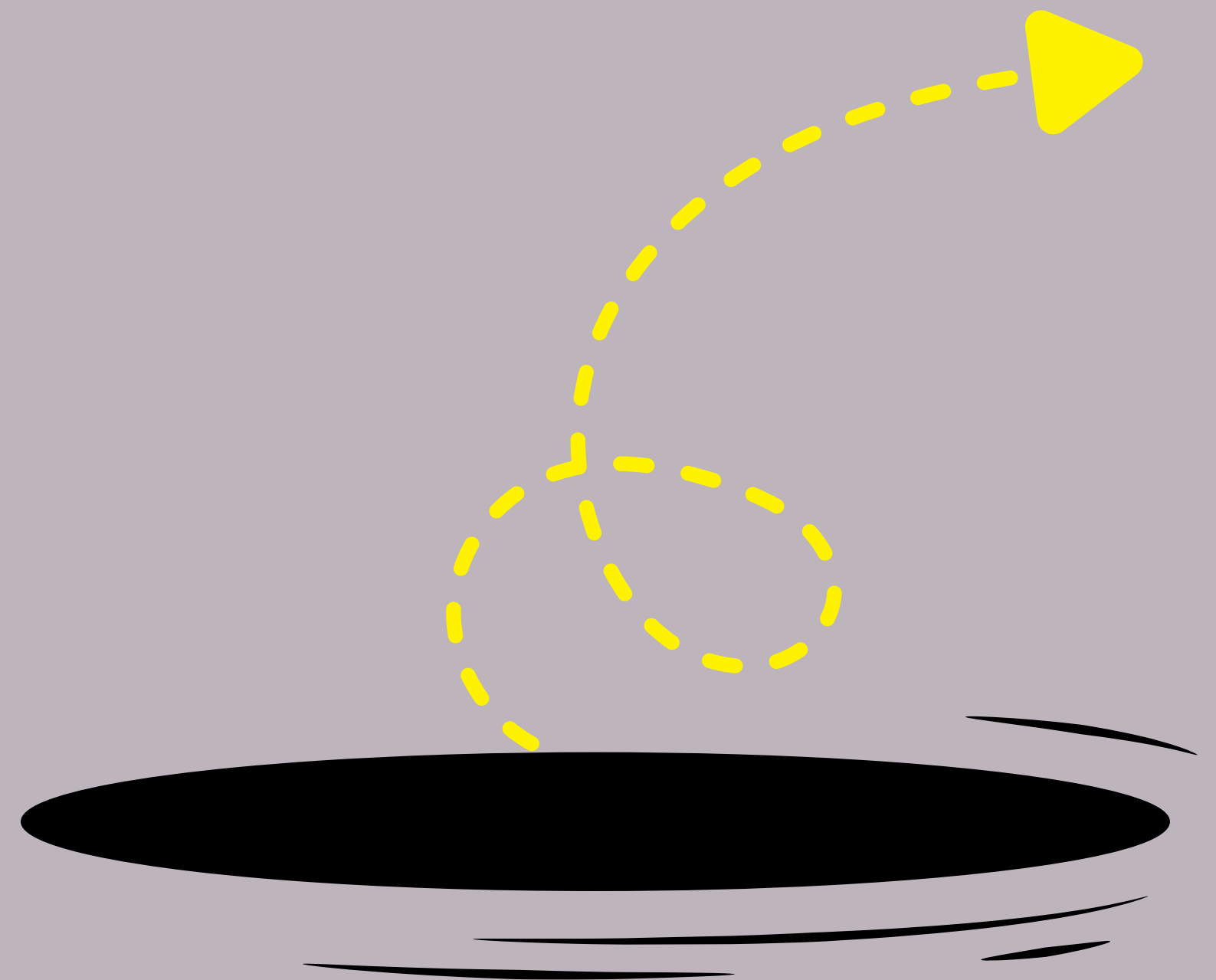
Dive deep:

- [Utah passes new law to protect child influencers](#)
- [The kids of reality stars didn't choose this life](#)
- [Child influencers make big money - who gets it](#)

This was a messy, imperfect, fascinating journey. Who would have thought when we started with a cancelled mom in Utah, we'd wind up in our final sidequests reading up on Kpop trainees and Olympic hopefuls?

Every rabbit hole tends to end up the same way: with a tab you finally close, a few too many late-night words jotted cryptically in your notes app, and the feeling that you've probably learned more than you set out to. This one wound through faith, family, commerce, and control – a mess of contradictions that don't resolve neatly because they never do. The real value is the journey.

So this isn't a warning against going deep. I want you to do it **on purpose**. Exploration is still the best form of digital literacy we have, and curiosity is a survival skill online. The point isn't to avoid the rabbit holes. The internet is still strange and astonishing and *worth* getting lost in. And then, leave a trail for the rest of us.



**What
you
love
matters.**

Sign up for more here:

Sacha Judd.