

USER ERROR: DEMOCRACY



A REPORT BY KAIROS FELLOWSHIP



So you thought this was going to be yet another report on disinformation and elections. In some ways, you're not wrong. But wait, wait, don't stop reading. **We have to talk about the internet.**

Democracy around the world is in a precarious position and has been for a long time. Authoritarianism, right-wing extremism, and political violence are on the rise globally. When it comes to American democracy, risks are heightened in part due to institutional racism and structural economic inequality, both of which make it hard for the majority to even participate in the democratic process. From voter suppression to a literal insurrection bolstered by an outgoing president, we're fighting for a functioning democracy that will actually serve the majority of people in the United States.

And all of this is on particularly difficult terrain.

This terrain is not just a physical one—it is online. Unlike our physical world, the internet has no borders and no government. It is dominated by profit-driven private companies led by CEOs who have made it clear that they value padding their pockets over people's safety. They have unfettered control and set the stage and terms for democratic discourse and movement building.

We have to see our online and digital spaces as a part of the terrain we're fighting on. This report will dig into Big Tech's influence on democracy and what a strategy for taking on pro-democracy fights online looks like.

DEMOCRACY AND THE INTERNET

When we talk about Big Tech’s influence on democracy, we are not just talking about Election Day. What happens on the internet absolutely can and has influenced the outcome of elections all over the world. **But elections are just one piece of the political agenda that the tech industry is shaping.** Our online spaces can be manipulated to align with an authoritarian agenda, leaving it open for this type of ideology to spread faster than movements for liberation. Big Tech’s decisions can drive policy debates, encourage or halt activism and determine the success or failure of authoritarian propaganda.

If we move away from seeing the internet as just a set of tools, and start to see it also as a place where people live, work, play, fall in love, make and maintain lifelong friendships and organize movements, we can better appreciate the profound ways in which the online space influences our lives offline, whether or not we personally use it. When we talk about the internet, we aren’t just talking about platforms like Instagram or TikTok or X (formerly known as Twitter), we are talking about all the technologies enabled by the internet that facilitate—and rely on—a constant exchange of data.

Amazon, for example, is not just an online store with questionably fast delivery; it owns nearly a third of internet real estate. Thousands of websites that people use on a daily basis, like Netflix, are [hosted by Amazon Web Services](#) (AWS). The bigness of this is best illustrated by an example of when [AWS goes down](#) and everything stops working. When [AWS has an outage](#), people can’t buy plane tickets because the Delta website is offline, delivery drivers can’t work because their apps are broken, sending money via Venmo is halted, and finding the potential love of your life is even more impossible because Tinder is down.

COMPANIES USING AMAZON WEB SERVICES



NETFLIX



venmo



DELTA

NASA

Meta

...and over 1,325,000 more

Big Tech companies control and organize the flow of a lot of information, including our own data in the form of name, age, location, and interests. Companies require that we give them our information in exchange for access to their platforms. Some companies even [track users \(and non-users\) across the internet](#), sending information about what you do or buy back to Facebook (in particular, but others as well) so they can sell it to advertisers. Users can't give consent on how their information is being used. Hidden and complicated opt-out processes create a fiction of meaningful user choice, but in fact discourage users from taking back control of their personal data.

Most often, personal data is used as a commodity by Big Tech. Platforms like YouTube sell companies space before or after videos to advertise to you based on the information YouTube knows about you. The amount of data Big Tech holds can also be weaponized. In early 2023, for example, a Catholic group in Colorado bought location data from a gay dating app to [track down and ultimately out LGBTQ+ priests](#). It's not just anti-LGBTQ+ groups. Police, anti-abortion groups, and anyone willing to pay can turn to data-rich social platforms for our personal information because Big Tech's business is selling it.



HOW DID WE GET HERE?

John Perry Barlow, in a [Declaration of Independence for the Internet](#), said "We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth...Your legal concepts of property, expression, identity, movement, and context do not apply to us."

What Barlow's statement suggests is that the internet is separate from the "real world" and it is also unable to be controlled by the government. And in cyberspace, none of our wordly biases, -isms, and systemic oppressions exist. Barlow's statement also represents the foundation of false neutrality on which internet companies have built their products on since the 90s.

In the early 2000s, Silicon Valley CEOs started to see the value of a space where there is little to no regulation, a lot of interest, and an incredible potential for amassing wealth. Through [hundreds of acquisitions](#), companies like Google expanded from hosting search engines, to being a video platform, advertising host, email, phone, and internet service provider. Their one purpose: making a profit.



Five companies (Apple, Amazon, Google, Meta, and Microsoft) emerged as the power players we now refer to as "Big Tech" and built what we know as the internet today. These companies have defined how to be a tech company and control the spaces that host much of what we do, see, or say online. They make the rules with little to no input from us, their users, even though we are the foundation of their

business plan. And they have avoided regulation by [being big and rich enough](#) to influence lawmakers and regulatory agencies to ignore their market power game. The business plans of these companies, designed to maximize their own profits, drive not only how their business evolves, but how the internet itself grows and reshapes our overall culture, politics, economy, and democracy.

Instagram, which is part of Meta, for example, is free to use. But that is only because it sells space to advertisers that use Instagram data to target specific user groups. The majority of Instagram's revenue comes from advertising. This dynamic creates a perverse incentive where platforms do everything they can to keep as many users glued to their platform as possible, in order to show them more ads and collect more of their data, so they can show them more ads in the future. The type of content that keeps users coming back isn't always the "good" type (cute kittens and positive news). In recent years, extremism—all those things Barlow said the internet would be free of—has flourished on social platforms. And it keeps users coming back. We're hooked, even if we disagree.

Today's online world is one where violence is louder than solidarity, disinformation drowns out fact, and a handful of CEOs can influence political agendas. Meanwhile, the U.S. Congress has not been able to pass a law regulating the internet since they passed [minimal protections for kids online in 1998](#). The federal agencies designed to regulate the tech industry or protect consumers (that's us) haven't kept up with how much technology has evolved, much less what it would require to adequately regulate it.

BIG TECH'S INFLUENCE ON DEMOCRACY

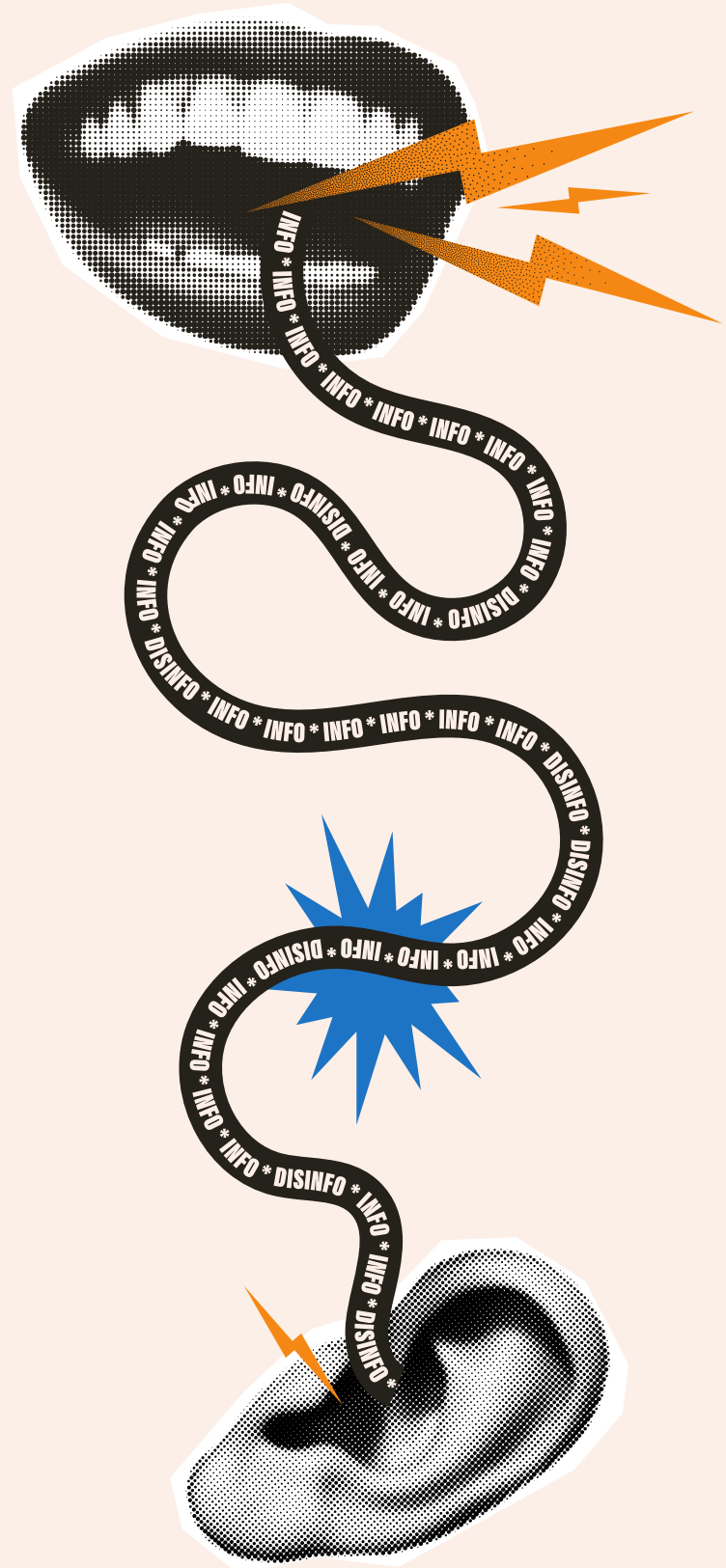
The tech corporations that govern our digital spaces are a part of the problem when it comes to failing democracies. These companies make choices and deploy tactics that facilitate anti-democratic behavior online, with real offline consequences. Here are some of the ways Big Tech facilitates the breakdown of democratic systems:

1 DISINFORMATION IS A FEATURE, NOT A BUG.

Tech and internet regulation is often focused on disinformation as the problem, but it's actually just a symptom of a much bigger issue. Despite how tech companies talk about it, disinfo is not a "bug." Tech companies make billions from drawing people into online spaces. Nothing does that better than polarizing content. The right in particular takes advantages of the profit-driven nature of the internet to ["\[flood\] the zone with sh*t."](#) as Steve Bannon put it.

So what for democracy?

Disinformation is designed to sow distrust, confusion, and apathy in our democratic processes, in our institutions, in each other. It is meant to discourage people from voting or participating in pro-democracy movements. When people don't know what is true, they are less likely to make choices that benefit them or even make a choice at all. Disinformation aids in the erosion of trust in government and governance. All of this happens faster online, especially if Big Tech does nothing to curb it and instead fosters it to fuel profits.



2 DRIVING “INNOVATION” AT ALL COSTS

In the last year, Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), including chatbots like ChatGPT, have become the latest tools in a corporate race, with every company trying to put out AI-driven products that will one-up the competition. But AI isn't a new piece of technology. Big Tech companies [realized it was the next new thing that would hook users](#) and figured out how much money they could make with it.

Big Tech makes choices about content moderation and guardrails around what the AI can say and respond to. Tech can decide how accurate or reliable their products are before they are publicly released. But oftentimes, products are rushed to the public without user input and little testing for harms. It's "move fast and break things" all over again.

This approach has led to some disturbing outcomes:

- Microsoft's AI, which acts combatively and once suggested a user respond ["heil Hitler"](#) when engaging in a conversation.
- A [Seinfeld parody was banned by Twitch](#) after making transphobic jokes.
- [Semi-autonomous drones make life or death decisions based on very new and unreliable technology.](#)

Meanwhile, the right is [decrying current AI models as "woke"](#) when developers attempt to put limits on what generative AI products can do or say. Rallying people against "Woke" AI is a strategy that pits people against each other by stoking their fears of a tech that will spread "dangerous" ideologies. Despite the right being loud about claims of "woke" and censorship [studies show](#) content amplified by Big Tech skew conservative.

So what for democracy?

Big Tech is moving fast. Congress and regulatory agencies haven't been able to keep up. Big Tech companies and the internet are not an isolated sector of the economy to regulate. Tech is in nearly every part of life and an increasingly major part of our economy. Absent regulation, companies are setting the rules for what are acceptable uses for their products, and often falling short to live up to the public commitments they get applauded for making. Lack of moderation and regulation of technologies like AI generators are beginning to lead to new problems for platforms. Experts have been [warning about fake or manipulated videos](#) of presidential candidates as we lead up to the 2024 elections. And the [Republican National Committee has already started using AI](#) to create attack ads against opponents in ways that we have not seen before—using the technology to depict dystopian futures.



3 TAMPING DOWN ON RESEARCH ABILITY

In February 2023, Elon Musk [gave notice that free access to X's APIs would be removed](#). APIs (application programming interfaces) are essential to research efforts that [reveal facts](#) about platforms and help us understand harms on social media platforms. Unlike Big Tech CEOs, APIs can't lie or spin talking points: they hold datasets that tell stories about how people act on the internet or feel about events like presidential candidates. For example, X's old, free API policy [facilitated the discovery of election meddling](#) by fake accounts in the 2016 U.S. presidential election as well as in several African countries in 2019.

Until Musk started charging \$42,000 per month for API access, Twitter held the standard for transparency. It allowed researchers to take a peek under the hood of Twitter to understand how it ran and how users interacted with the platform. It's not just Elon Musk. Big Tech executives have been tamping down on access to the backends of their platforms for years. In 2022, Meta [shut down support for Crowdtangle](#), a fact-checking tool used to keep track of posts' disinformation and misinformation on Facebook. In 2021, [Meta blocked NYU's researchers from collecting data](#) about political ads and COVID-19 disinformation.

So what for democracy?

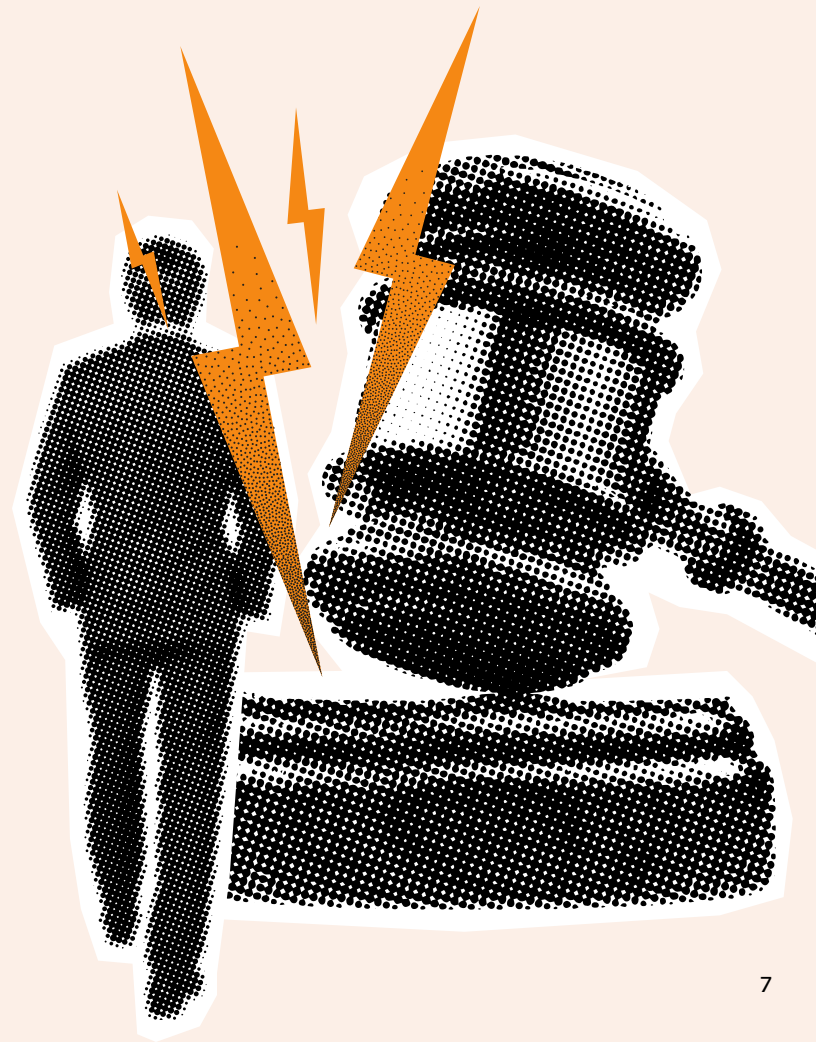
Cutting off research ability is an effort to hide what's actually happening on social media platforms from the public. Without this knowledge, users, organizers, and lawmakers are not able to hold Big Tech accountable for the impact of their bad decisions on us and democracy at large.

4 SUING ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS

The same advocacy groups that have been fighting for tech accountability are being attacked by Big Tech CEOs. Recently, [Elon Musk took legal action against Center for Countering Digital Hate \(CCDH\)](#), blaming the group for lost advertising revenue because CCDH exposed just how much violent and false content remains on Twitter. Big Tech would rather attempt to punish organizations telling the truth instead of taking responsibility for failing users.

So what for democracy?

Our pro-democracy movements are made up of the fights that advocacy groups take on. Starting legal battles with these groups only serves to slow the movement, divert resources, and discourage organizers, campaigners, and researchers from continuing their work.



5 DELAYING REGULATION WITH EMPTY COMMITMENTS

A year before the 2020 elections, Meta [said it would](#) "identify new threats, close vulnerabilities, and reduce the spread of viral misinformation and fake accounts." But immediately after election day the company let thousands of posts questioning results flood feeds and groups, which ultimately led to the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

Despite recognizing its pivotal role in the 2020 elections, Meta still [cut its election integrity team by 80%](#) and fully [shut down its Responsible Innovation Team](#), which was put into place to address the very concerns that led to January 6th. And it's not just Meta. Elon Musk and X are following in Mark Zuckerberg's footsteps by [ditching their election integrity team](#) ahead of 70 elections around the world that will happen in 2024. Big Tech companies do nothing to self-regulate because it's in their financial interest to let the drama happen and drive clicks.

So what for democracy?

Tech companies position themselves as the only experts on tech so they can make voluntary commitments instead of facing government regulation. This allows them to avoid regulation or accountability by lawmakers, who don't know how to put policies in place that would stop Big Tech from continuing to inflict harm.

6 BIG TECH SPENDING & LOBBYING

Leading up to the 2022 midterm elections and for the first time ever, the tech industry spent [more money on political ads than the pharmaceutical industry](#) does. Groups backed by major tech companies spent \$120 million on political ads in 2022 and an additional \$90 million on lobbying efforts focused almost exclusively on killing anti-monopoly legislation like Senator Amy Klobuchar's (D-MN) "American Innovation and Choice Act"

So what for democracy?

Tech companies have enough money to guarantee their influence on federal policy regardless of who is elected into office.



CONCLUSION:

STRATEGY FOR A WORLD WHERE TECH WORKS FOR ALL



UNDERSTAND THAT THE INTERNET IS NOT JUST A TOOL

Acknowledging that the internet is a place that we occupy is the first step to winning a world where tech works for all. We can't cede anymore of our digital terrain to the right wing or continue to let corporations make all of the rules.



RECOGNIZE TECH AS A CONNECTIVE TISSUE

Our movement tends to work in issue areas like elections and voting, climate and reproductive justice. But without considering the internet as a part of these issues, we are only seeing part of the terrain. As shown in this report, tech accelerates inequities, and obstructs regulations and efforts to bring about change.

We can also see tech as an opportunity. Adding it to our power analysis broadens our targets. For example, urging state lawmakers to enact pro-abortion legislation is only one part of the puzzle. We could take on companies like Google to change their data collection practices, so that police can't get information on people looking for abortion information.





INVESTING IN GOOD ONLINE ORGANIZING

Taking the fight online goes beyond sharing memes or hopping on the latest TikTok trend. We need to invest in organizing wherever our people are able to contest for power—in real life AND the digital realm. To build real power and community online, digital organizing must be relational and rely on a full suite of organizing tactics.

Good online organizing has several aspects:

- Seeding the field with skilled organizers who are able to deploy sound strategy online as well as offline.
- Considering tech targets as part of your influence strategy—tech both shapes the terrain and accelerates existing issues.
- Experimenting with outside-the-box digital tactics that reinforce your core organizing strategy.
- Take online relationships into real life to build your base and grow your movement.

As we imagine the movement needed and what is possible in the fight for liberation, we need to move together towards governance of the internet and fight to be a part of technological innovation. Change isn't going to come overnight, but we can build the movement we need—a **movement towards a world where tech supports democracy, and works for us all.**

