

# The Good Fight Against Big Tech

Charting the next ten years

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*The State of Big Tech Report invites you to take up the mantle of unpacking the misdeeds of tech behemoths, chronicle their role in the political economy of development, and formulate a clear and strong vision for the future towards global digital justice.*

In the past decade, Big Tech companies were able to convert their first-mover advantage into near totalizing market control, thanks to a huge regulatory vacuum. Offering consumers many goodies — tools to navigate the city, personalized recommendations for entertainment, the convenience of one-click shopping, and radically different possibilities for social interactions — they garnered traction as [disruptors](#) who have transformed how we live, work, and play.

The first cracks in this narrative appeared when the [Cambridge Analytica](#) revelations — proof of the company's unauthorized use of Facebook data to manipulate US polls — were brought to light. With the US authorities finally looking into the data collection excesses of Facebook, and a string of litigation across Europe (from the European Commission's finding of [Google's](#) abuse of its dominant position in 2017 to [Max Schrems'](#) GDPR complaints against 10 tech companies in 2018), a political consensus about the need to check Big Tech's juggernaut has rapidly galvanized in the recent past. In fact, it has been [estimated](#) that trust in tech companies globally has fallen from 77% in 2012 to 68% in 2021. The drop is even more significant in the US, with trust falling from 78% to 57% during the same time period. Over the last year, [Facebook's woes](#) have continued, with whistle-blower Frances Haugen's disclosures to the US Senate and the UK Parliament on how the social media company ignored the harmful impact of its algorithmic apparatus in the proliferation of misinformation and hate speech.

'[Techlash](#)', or backlash against tech companies, has encompassed issues of [data extraction](#) and [privacy](#), [antitrust practices](#), [worker rights](#), and [data colonialism](#). Recent court decisions have paved the way for legal protections to be introduced to level the playing field, like in the case of [Uber drivers](#), where courts in the UK

and in [the Netherlands](#) declared them to be employees of the platform. The US also joined the foray, when a Californian superior court [struck down Proposition 22](#), a ballot initiative that sought to exclude ride-hail drivers and delivery personnel from the ambit of labor law protections. [China also came down severely](#) in the past year on its tech giants.

These developments indicate newer solidarities among workers in the first case, and the state stepping up in the second, to challenge Big Tech's hegemonic control in the digital economy. However, these movements, while encouraging, have not seen any significant impact on the Big Tech paradigm and the co-option of digitalization into neoliberal capitalism. With the Covid-19 pandemic, and a large scale move to the digital — be it the increased reliance on online shopping or virtual education — companies with network-data advantage have only benefited more. The five global tech behemoths — Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft — have [increased their year-on-year revenues](#) in 2021 as compared to 2020, proof that where smaller organizations struggled to make ends meet, Big Tech companies consolidated their position.

This scenario is also exacerbated by the fact that the policy discourse has been less than effective in enabling actual deterrence of Big Tech's modus operandi. Proposed laws across jurisdictions have been insufficient in curbing predatory and exploitative practices— a hallmark of the unequal platform economy. For instance, the EU introduced a flurry of laws including the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act to regulate anti-competitive practices in the technology sector, but both have their [limitations](#). Where the former fails to make services and platforms liable for 'illegal content' (left undefined in the text), or [dismantle](#) the surveillance advertising model, the latter restricts member states from [enacting legislations on gatekeeper platforms](#), severely limiting existing laws and proposals on the same at the national level. EU's draft regulation on Artificial Intelligence dangerously reinforces management by [algorithmic bosses](#), with critical decisions on promotions, termination of work contracts, and task allocations being relegated to data-driven models. The bi-partisan laws introduced in the US to regulate anti competitive practices [fail to ban](#) self-preferencing practices, instead requiring companies to only justify them. In essence, the powers that be continue to adopt double standards in respect of the digital economy and its governance. The G7's recently adopted [rules for digital trade](#) constitute only the latest of many moves to sustain an already unjust international status quo through undemocratic global rule-making in which people of developing countries will have no control over their data. Evidently, despite the diagnosis about Big Tech needing a makeover, the political-economic status quo at play prevents any real change towards global digital justice.

## **What is the ‘State of Big Tech’ report?**

The State of Big Tech is an IT for Change project, that will periodically:

- Map the maneuvers and machinations of Big Tech
- Take stock of the adequacy and appropriateness of institutional-political responses to rein in Big Tech excess
- Assess the agenda and strategies of peoples’ mobilizations against Big Tech power
- Provide clear and bold perspectives on course corrections and what more must be done to move the needle towards democratic governance of the digital economy in an unequal digital world order

State of Big Tech thus seeks to contribute a vision and blueprint for national and global pathways to reclaim the society and economy for the 99%, providing a scorecard of tech corporations’ misdeeds, and a constructive and critical cartography of policy and political action based on what is not working.

## **What do we aim to accomplish with the first State of Big Tech edition?**

Our essays for this first edition of the State of Big Tech will focus on the following questions:

- What exactly has been the shift during the pandemic in terms of Big Tech market control and what does this imply for global justice?
- How have policies and political institutions responded? What is the political economy of the policy scenario?
- What do we see as urgent agenda for action? Have people’s mobilization against Big Tech made a dent? Where is civil society action lacking?
- What frames and outcomes should inform a new governance vision and action plan in the immediate future and in the next decade that builds from the victories and wantings at this juncture?

## **What we expect from our expert contributors**

For our opening edition of the State of Big Tech, we wish to spotlight reflections rooted in the Covid-19

moment and the urgent imperative for concrete and radical change. Contributors to the collection will focus on specific episodes and instantiations, teasing out the above questions in a contextual and historically rooted way.

Your story/ies will focus on local, national and/or international issues or happenings. They will look at specific misdeeds of Big Tech, take stock of the shifting institutional context and present a clear critique of what is at stake for equity and justice, articulating what needs to be done now. You may wish to reflect on the maneuvers and machinations of Big Tech through a policy specific tale — such as in trade, tax, finance, IP, financing-for-development, competition, innovation/digital industrialization, labor, etc. — capturing national, regional or global threads. Or you may choose to build a story of Big Tech and its creeping takeover of social and economic systems — the future of food, the natural commons, health systems etc. You may want to unravel the trajectory of a specific Big Tech company in different countries, or decide to instantiate the above questions through the story of your country.

Deploying storytelling as the central trope to crystal gaze for digital justice, you will undertake situated analysis, outlining in your essay the road-map for both immediate and decadal change for appropriate and adequate governance of Big Tech in the global digital economy.

Your unique perspective will give this first edition of the State of Big Tech the required gravitas, and set the stage for a critical study and comprehensive vision.

We look forward to featuring your essay in a final compendium that IT for Change will release by April 2022.