

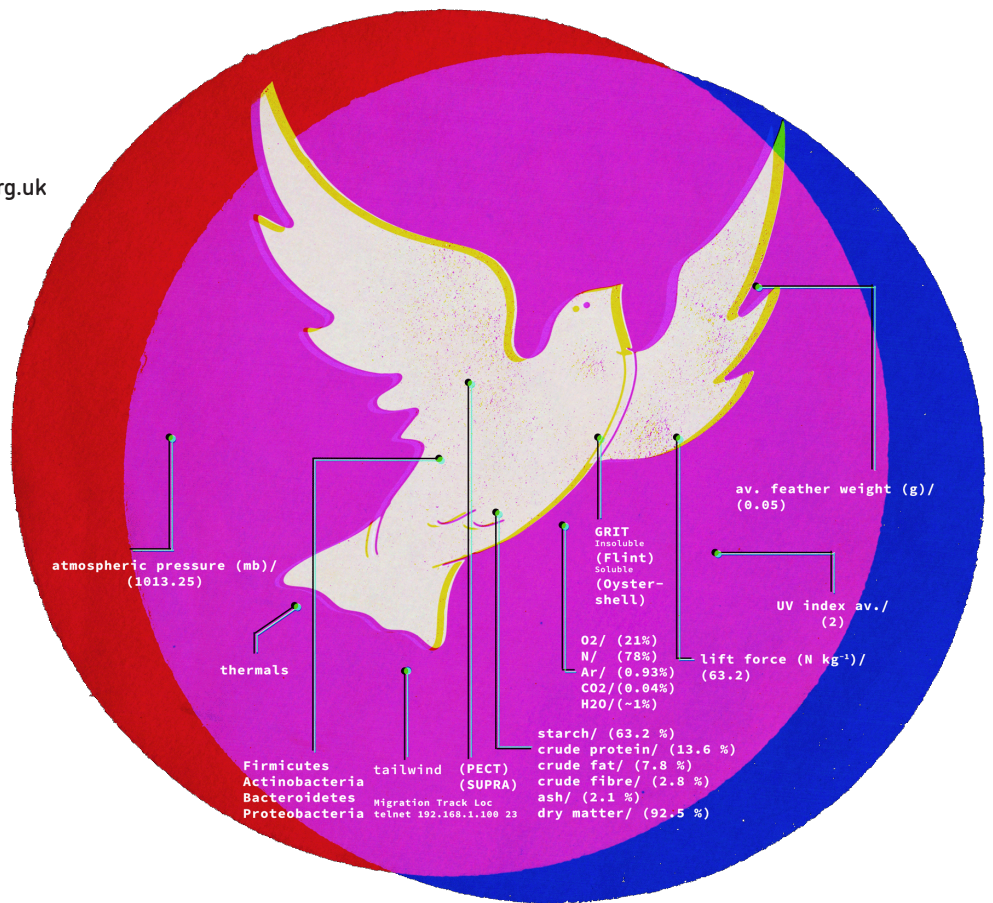


# TAKING LIBERTIES: CONFRONTING BIG TECH'S FALSE FREEDOMS

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***Big tech's dominant business model is built on surveillance, theft and manipulation - yet perversely, tech leaders proclaim themselves our freedom fighters. As an antidote we must understand the nature of false freedom, reclaim our human autonomy, and foster 'the power to think for oneself'.***

Mark Zuckerberg has a lot to say about freedom and the voice of the people. 'Giving everyone a voice empowers the powerless and pushes society to be better over time', he proclaimed in a significant speech in 2019.<sup>01</sup> This golden belief in free expression, in all of the beautiful things humanity does with this right, he says drives his focus of 'building services to do two things: giv[ing] people voice and bring[ing] people together'.

His vision and pursuit of it is nothing short of messianic: 'As long as enough of us keep fighting for this, I believe more people's voices will eventually help us... write a new chapter in our history — where from all of our individual voices and perspectives, we can bring the world closer together.' Those who don't join him on this journey to world freedom and harmony (and, by pure coincidence, ongoing escalation of his super-wealth) are part of a 'counter-trend' – engaging in knee-jerk reactions that pull away from this arc of progress that the Tech Bros have boldly set us on.

For these men, 'freedom' is the answer – whatever the problem. Following Trump's 2024 electoral victory, Zuckerberg stated it was 'time to get back to our roots around free expression on Facebook and Instagram'<sup>02</sup> (having supposedly moved away from these because Meta's platforms were moderating hate and the like). Similarly, Elon Musk promotes freedom of speech as 'priceless',<sup>03</sup> and Peter Thiel<sup>04</sup> claims, in typically overblown fashion, that 'the fate of our world may depend on the effort of a single person who builds or propagates the machinery of freedom.'<sup>05</sup>

The assumption that big tech is on the side of Freedom implicitly holds sway in many ways across society. Attempts at tech regulation and accountability are routinely decried as 'censorship', 'invasive', 'stifling' and the like. The ambition to prevent online harms is weighed against the lofty, abstract ideal of 'freedom of speech' and loses traction in the process. And those pushing back and doing the holding to account tend to frame their arguments in terms of things like Safety and Protection – aspirations portrayed to be in tension with Freedom (when they are in fact fundamental to it).

This is a maddening place to be in. For the last twenty or so years, big tech's dominant business model has been based on surveillance, theft and manipulation, all of which has entrapped us all in a web of meta-crises and compromised autonomy. Children and young people have particularly suffered, these tactics insidiously exploiting and interfering with their developmental vulnerabilities and needs.

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01: <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/10/mark-zuckerberg-stands-for-voice-and-free-expression/>

02: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7y28SCzUhl>

03: <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1719631280688464010>

04: Influential tech billionaire who co-founded PayPal and Palantir technologies (a company that specialises in big data analysis). Thiel was also Facebook's first outside investor. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter\\_Thiel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Thiel)

05: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2023/11/peter-thiel-2024-election-politics-investing-life-views/675946/>

All this is tying us up in chains, yet in an Orwellian sleight of hand, those responsible proclaim themselves our freedom fighters.<sup>06</sup> So clear-sightedness is more urgent than ever: on the nature of big tech operations and what lies at the root of their hurt and harms, and on true freedom – all the rich forms it can take and the journey to claiming it for ourselves and our children.

## TERMS OF 'ENGAGEMENT'

A critical place to begin, or refresh ourselves on, is big tech's journey into what is variously termed surveillance capitalism, technofeudalism, or the attention economy,<sup>07</sup> and understanding what exactly this involves.

Following a period of excited investment in the internet in its early days, the dot-com bubble burst spectacularly at the turn of the century, leading to investor losses of approximately \$5 trillion.<sup>08</sup> In its wake, tech companies had to come up with ways of monetizing what they did, and fast.

Google was the first to spot the financial opportunities afforded by gathering and harnessing people's data without their informed consent. Information about people (gleaned from their online activity) could be used to precisely target them with ads, and this targeting meant that ads were more successful (measured by their click-through rate), in turn attracting masses of advertisers to Google and ramping up its ad revenue.<sup>09</sup>

More data meant better predictions and so the company set about developing numerous 'free' online services, from which it could scrape more and more as people went about their daily lives: Google Shopping, Gmail, Google Maps, Google News, Google Calendar (etc.), and now including its own mobile

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06: The powers of George Orwell's 1984 dystopia achieved their oppression via various ministries, including the Ministry of Truth whose role was deception, the Ministry of Peace who worked for constant war, and the Ministry of Love whose focus was torture. Brazenly stating you achieve the precise opposite of what you actually do can be a highly effective disguise, in part because we can struggle to face that others (especially those in power) have so completely stepped out of the social contract, which runs on a level of truth and honesty.

07: Zuboff, S. (2018) *The age of Surveillance Capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. Profile.

Varoufakis, Y. (2023). *Technofeudalism: What killed capitalism*. Vintage.

Wu, T. (2016) *The Attention Merchants: From the daily newspaper to social media – how our time and attention is harvested and sold*. Atlantic.

Williams, J. (2018). *Stand out of our light: Freedom and resistance in the attention economy*. Cambridge University Press.

This model has also been termed by Jaron Lanier 'BUMMER' standing for 'Behaviours of Users Modified and Made into an Empire for Rent'. Lanier, J. (2018). *Ten arguments for deleting your social media accounts right now*. Bodley Head.

Each of these terms focus attention on different core elements of this dominant business model within Big tech and its problems. For ease this essay generally uses the term Surveillance Capitalism, whilst also recognising the merits of the other terms.

08: <https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/career-map/sell-side/capital-markets/dotcom-bubble/#:-:text=The%20bursting%20of%20the%20bubble,estimated%20at%20around%20%245%20trillion>

09: Google's evolution as summarised here is discussed at length in Shoshana Zuboff's (2018) *Surveillance Capitalism*. For a briefer overview of Google's development of these practices and how they spread see Nicholas Carr's review of this book: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/thieves-of-experience-how-google-and-facebook-corrupted-capitalism/>

operating system Android and much more besides. Within three years, the company's revenues increased by 3,590%.<sup>10</sup>

Central now to how online business operates is the complex and opaque system of Real Time Bidding, in which your data is continually used in millisecond auctions of online ad-space. Thousands of companies harvest your data, providing it to numerous middle-men and advertisers who use it to guide their bids to be the ad you see as you load a webpage.<sup>11</sup> The fundamental goal in the millions of tiny bidding battles that form a vast hinterland around your online activity is to use all that is known about you (mostly illegitimately) to predict and shape your behaviour towards corporate profit.

But these core practices of big tech, of surveillance, theft, steering, and shaping, determine far more than the content of the ads we see. In 2008, Sheryl Sandberg moved from Google – where she had led the development of its advertising engine – over to Facebook, where she and others swiftly spotted the potential of the troves of personal information on social media for these surveillance operations. Beyond your data being directly used to determine your ads, social media can also be used to discover what material will keep you online for longer. When the platform then serves you more of this content and your time there increases, it gets to serve you more ads and gather more of your data – this data is then further analysed in calculations of what will keep you scrolling, and so on and on in a sinister downwards spiral.

And so it was that in the late noughties, Facebook birthed 'engagement-based algorithms', trained to capture our attention, so as to know more about us, and further capture us. These have since come to be used to a lesser or greater degree by all social media platforms and a multitude of other interactive platforms, with some – namely TikTok, X, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube – in particularly fierce competition as they fine-tune themselves to these tasks of human colonisation and commodification.<sup>12</sup>

## THE METHOD AND THE MADNESS

On the face of it, an 'engagement-based algorithm' sounds innocuous, even helpful: it provides me with more of what 'engages' me, so that sounds like more of the people I care about and the topics that interest me. But engagement is a flexible, ambiguous term, which can be used to mean, at one end, a state of flow in an activity aligned with one's deepest will, or at the other, more a state of entrapment, bound to do something that does not satisfy but is hard to unhook from. And it is this latter state that these algorithms work to foment: they are not guided by what we say we care about or are interested in (indeed their disinterest in finding this out is striking), but rather by our instincts and impulsive reactions in situations of sensory and information overload – conditions far from those in which we evolved. Here our immediate impulses are prioritised over our intentions – destabilizing the delicate dance between them, and skewing us away from valuable parts of ourselves.

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10: <https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1288776/000119312505065298/d10k.htm#toc10062>. As cited by Shoshana Zuboff, for example: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jul/02/facebook-google-data-change-our-behaviour-democracy>

11: <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2020/03/google-says-it-doesnt-sell-your-data-heres-how-company-shares-monetizes-and>

12: Narayanan, A. (2023). *Understanding social media recommendation algorithms*. Part of essay series 'Optimizing for what? Algorithmic amplification and society'. Knight First Amendment Institute, Columbia University. <https://knightcolumbia.org/content/understanding-social-media-recommendation-algorithms>

The results of these algorithms confirm lessons from human history: we have our heads turned by things that are shocking, arousing, or incendiary, as well as by things that raise our suspicions and insecurities, make us feel superior, or engender feelings of tribal belonging.<sup>13</sup>

The algorithms, interplaying with other platform design features, amplify content that triggers us in these ways, feeding us more and more of it to entrap us in an endless scrollscape. This also works to prompt our own content creation – whether we do this to express outrage, seek validation, or court attention and status.<sup>14</sup> And as we scroll and post, our vulnerabilities are used to drive the ads we see.

Some groups have particular vulnerabilities, and there is evidence indicating that Meta has had a particular focus on identifying teenage emotional pressure points (such as when they feel 'anxious', 'worthless', 'silly' or 'useless') and leveraging these for profit.<sup>15</sup> TikTok and others operate similarly.<sup>16</sup>

The surveillance capitalists are best served by a situation in which we are always gifting their app with our attention, the raw material that is basis of their value. As Shoshana Zuboff, Yanis Varoufakis and Jaron Lanier point out, here we are serfs and they are feudal masters, taking rent from human existence itself. These companies have built convoluted systems to divert the rivers of human attention down waterways that constantly run under their mills.

And it's eerie how close they are to their goals – time spent on these apps is sky high, even while many find them dissatisfying. A recent survey in the US found that 47% of young adults spend 2-4 hours on social media every day, despite many wishing that these platforms had never been invented (50% wishing this of X, 47% about TikTok). This contrast between people's actions and their desires speaks to experiences of psychological addiction and dependency, and indeed, in the same survey, 82%

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- 13: Lanier, J. (2018). *Ten arguments for deleting your social media accounts right now*. Bodley Head.  
Williams, J. (2018). *Stand out of our light: Freedom and resistance in the attention economy*. Cambridge University Press.  
Wu, T. (2016) *The Attention Merchants: From the daily newspaper to social media – how our time and attention is harvested and sold*. Atlantic.  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doomscrolling>  
<https://buzzsumo.com/blog/most-shared-headlines-study/#section-25>
- 14: Of course not all content on social media results from these motivations (to view, engage or post) – far from it – rather, 'engagement-based' algorithms together with other design features lead to a disproportionate amount that is. Some platforms avoid these effects by gearing their algorithms more towards networks and subscriptions, and having features that encourage deeper thinking and positive social norms.
- 15: A Meta report aimed at advertisers leaked in 2017 claimed that 'by monitoring posts, pictures, interactions and internet activity in real time, Facebook can work out when young people feel 'stressed', 'defeated', 'overwhelmed', 'anxious', 'nervous', 'stupid', 'silly', 'useless', and a 'failure.'  
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/01/facebook-advertising-data-insecure-teens>  
Chiming with this disclosure, in recent testimony to the US Senate, the company's former director of Global Public Policy Sarah Wynn Williams said that it saw teen users as 'the most valuable segment of the population'. She reported that weight loss ads were served to teenage girls when they revealed to the algorithm body concerns, and if a girl deleted a selfie, this might be seen as a good time to serve her a beauty product ad. In her book, *Careless People*, she further discusses Facebook's knowledge and use of "addictive-by-design" features specifically targeted and tailored to exploiting the vulnerabilities of young users, while hiding the risky and harmful nature of such features.  
<https://techcrunch.com/2025/04/09/meta-whistleblower-sarah-wynn-williams-says-company-targeted-ads-at-teens-based-on-their-emotional-state/>
- 16: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/11/tiktok-risks-pushing-children-towards-harmful-content/>  
<https://counterhate.com/research/youtube-anorexia-algorithm-uk/>

associated social media with the word 'addicting'. When we are addicted we lose the ability to align our behaviour with our deepest will, our actions instead reflecting temporary preferences.<sup>17</sup> We are blown about by winds that throw us off course, impeding our ability to step towards and achieve our intrinsic goals. As we discuss below, this represents the loss of the most profound of human freedoms.

The term 'engagement-based algorithm' is then a confusing misnomer – these are better described as trigger- or impulse-based. Let's look a little further at how they play out. Imagine you are in a busy town square filled with the hubbub of people's lively chatter. But this is no normal town square, because the Mayor is enforcing a set of strange rules. Whenever someone says something that turns the head of someone else (maybe a hostile comment, or something outrageous, surprising, or sexual), they are given a megaphone. No-one is ever given a megaphone because they are speaking the truth.<sup>18</sup> And whenever someone argues against a person with a megaphone (indeed a lot of the time, outrageous things are outrageous because they're untrue), then the volume of the original speaker's megaphone increases. This then leads their challengers into a no-win situation – if they engage the speaker in debate, the speaker's megaphone just gets louder, their reach increasing. Sometimes people are so outraged by what someone is preaching that they insist the Mayor removes their megaphone – which the Mayor sometimes does (in a process called 'content moderation') but he is reluctant as he says it's against free speech, and anyway by that stage, the preacher has already had the advantage of a very loud voice.

This metaphor captures one of the ways in which platforms that run on these algorithms skew and distort our attention, our social interactions, and our means of finding out about the world. Under these rules of 'engagement', truth is one of the many human goods that fare badly (alongside things like kindness, nuance and depth). Lies can bend to whatever the algorithms say they need to be, because the algorithm will never ask them to be the one thing they aren't. And so in turn, this state of play favours those people who find truth an inconvenience in their pursuit of ego, profit, or power. They are free to game the algorithm however they see fit in their pursuit of ever bigger megaphones. Andrew Tate's advice to his followers '*what you ideally want is a mix of 60-70% fans and 40-30% haters. You want arguments, you want war*'<sup>19</sup> sums up one approach to this game, and arguably this strategy, dubbed 'rage-baiting' and now adopted by many,<sup>20</sup> is the prime reason we know who he is.

Shame is one of the most primal human emotions – we experience it when we feel ourselves devalued



17: Levy, N. (2006). *Autonomy and addiction*. Canadian Journal of Philosophy, 36(3), 427-447. Also see section 'Autonomy and self-determination' in Hanson, E. (2021) *Pornography and Human Futures*, for a fuller discussion of what addiction entails, and its conflict with autonomy. <https://fullyhuman.org.uk/pornography-and-human-futures/>

18: This is what Shoshanah Zuboff terms big tech's 'radical indifference' to meaning – '*it means that neither the machines nor their owners care if your messages are fact or fiction, malicious or angelic, fashioned to produce violence or joy... radical indifference is an economic imperative because corrupt information is good for business. Recent research demonstrates that Facebook amplifies misinformation because it drives EEPR*' (engagement – extraction – predictive – revenue). Zuboff, S. (2022). Surveillance Capitalism or Democracy? The death match of institutional orders and the politics of knowledge in our information civilisation. *Organization Theory*, 3, 1-79 (p. 24).

For an example of research demonstrating big tech's amplification of misinformation see:

Edelson, L., Nguyen, M. K., Goldstein, I., Goga, O., McCoy, D., & Lauinger, T. (2021, November). Understanding engagement with US (mis) information news sources on Facebook. In *Proceedings of the 21st ACM internet measurement conference* (pp. 444-463).

19: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/aug/06/andrew-tate-violent-misogynistic-world-of-tiktok-new-star>

20: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4gp555xy5ro>

or rejected by others (or sense the threat of this).<sup>21</sup> Shame often works pre-emptively: we fear shame and so avoid the behaviour that would bring it on. Whilst shame can so often be destructive and maladaptive (for instance, when we are shamed for nothing we've done wrong), it has also been critical for the development of positive social norms over millennia that drive cohesion, cooperation, belonging and trust.<sup>22</sup>

Healthy shame signals our desire to belong and to respect the needs of others in that process. We generally don't do things that would provoke judgement and opprobrium, and a lot of the time that is a good thing. But trigger-based algorithms create a very different system of contingencies: when people who feel less shame (or can suppress it) say things that are hateful, distorted or divisive, they are rewarded with greater fame, influence and profit, versus being avoided or down-ranked as would happen in most other social contexts.

## HARMS UPON HARM

The decision of tech leaders to profit through surveillance, theft and manipulation has been aided and abetted by the failures of governments to curtail this, and compounded by those willing to use tech's tools for their own manipulative purposes.<sup>23</sup> All this has led to numerous personal, societal and planetary problems – Surveillance Capitalism is one of the root causes of the aptly named 'meta-crisis' we now find ourselves in. Not only has it led to the rise of cognitive and attentional difficulties, disinformation, and hate speech, it has also promoted social division, violence and abuse, sexual objectification and commodification, self-harm and suicide, and body image problems, amongst other things.

Children and young people have been disproportionately impacted, their mental health particularly suffering,<sup>24</sup> and their development (cognitive, social, sexual) thrown off course. Each of these and

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21: Gilbert, P. (1998) What is shame? Some core issues and controversies. In P. Gilbert & B. Andrews, (Eds.), *Shame: Interpersonal behavior, psychopathology, and culture*. Oxford University Press.

Gilbert, P. (2019). Distinguishing shame, humiliation and guilt: An evolutionary functional analysis and compassion focused interventions. In C. Mayer & E. Vanderheiden (Eds.), *The bright side of shame: Transforming and growing through practical applications in cultural contexts*, 413-431.

22: Gilbert, P. (2021). Creating a compassionate world: Addressing the conflicts between sharing and caring versus controlling and holding evolved strategies. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 582090.

In this paper Paul Gilbert brings together theory and research indicating that 'care and share [interpersonal strategies] are less common in non-human primates, but evolved radically in humans during our hunter-gatherer stage when our ancestors lived in relatively interdependent, small, mobile groups. In these groups, individualistic, self-focus, and self-promoting control and hold strategies (trying to secure and accumulate more than others) were shunned and shamed. These caring and sharing hunter-gatherer lifestyles also created the social contexts for the evolution of new forms of childcare and complex human competencies for language, reasoning, planning, empathy, and self-awareness.'

23: This includes numerous examples of tech giants' 'tools' and platforms being used to undermine democracy. See for example, revelations about Russian bots, Cambridge Analytica and the use of targeted messages to suppress voting by Black Americans.

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/30/facebook-russia-fake-accounts-126-million>

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/series/cambridge-analytica-files>

<https://www.channel4.com/news/revealed-trump-campaign-strategy-to-deter-millions-of-black-americans-from-voting-in-2016>

24: Haidt, J. (2024) *The Anxious Generation*. Penguin.

<https://www.globalactionplan.org.uk/online-climate/safer-socials/body-image>

many others can be charted out as logical consequences of the dynamics described above, and much research and analysis now attests to this.<sup>25</sup>

The picture is even more disturbing when we consider that this isn't a simple case of cause-and-effect. Rather it is a complex system – each effect interacts with others, and there are multiple ripple effects, which can trigger tipping points. Disinformation undermines democracy and slows action on critical problems like the climate; hate speech selectively silences, attentional problems undermine achievement; and so on. And, just as with climate change, we can't look around ourselves and say, 'OK, well this is what Surveillance Capitalism looks like', because it is always moving, we are always just at a point on its adverse trajectory.

This trajectory is made all the worse by big tech's doubling down on this business model – competition for attention and technological advances are fuelling a race to the bottom, and a well-thumbed playbook is being used to keep regulators confused, ineffectual and at bay.<sup>26</sup> Initial revelations about the extent to which these companies can influence behaviour sparked a wave of public concern, and have now given way to tight secrecy, save for the periodic leaks, that lay bare, again and again, the parasitic operations at play. Unsurprisingly, independent researchers have been locked out of the goldmines of data these companies hold,<sup>27</sup> and so have been unable to provide the granular picture of exactly what is influencing who and how – knowledge that our societies both vitally need and have a right to.

At the heart of surveillance capitalist operations lies manipulation. This fundamental practice both underpins all the various harms that ripple out from it but also exerts a more primary, profound cost – to our very autonomy, which is to say our deepest freedom. To explain this point, let me unpack the things at play here (autonomy, freedom, manipulation) and look at how they connect.

## THE RIGHT, THE BEAUTY AND THE FREEDOM OF AUTONOMY

Autonomy is both the feeling and the reality of driving oneself and one's life – it is the right and condition of self-government.<sup>28</sup> Not to be confused with independence or an individualistic approach to

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25: For reviews of these harms see for example:

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of Surveillance Capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. Profile.

Zuboff, S. (2022). Surveillance capitalism or democracy? The death match of institutional orders and the politics of knowledge in our information civilization. *Organization Theory*, 3, 1-79.

For a discussion of the surveillance and attention economics at play in the free online porn industry and its impact on sexuality and relationships, see the Pornography & Human Futures report: <https://fullyhuman.org.uk/pornography-and-human-futures/>

26: <https://www.humanetech.com/podcast/weaponizing-uncertainty-how-tech-is-recycling-big-tobaccos-playbook>

Wynn-Williams, S. (2025) *Careless People: A story of where I used to work: Power, greed, madness*. Macmillan. [https://www.afterbabel.com/p/careless-people?publication\\_id=1221094&post\\_id=159696310&isFreemail=false&r=324ywe&triedRedirect=true&utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://www.afterbabel.com/p/careless-people?publication_id=1221094&post_id=159696310&isFreemail=false&r=324ywe&triedRedirect=true&utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email)  
<https://maxread.substack.com/p/were-in-our-slop-era>

27: González Bailón, S., & Lelkes, Y. (2023). Do social media undermine social cohesion? A critical review. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 17(1), 155-180.

28: Oxford English Dictionary (2005).

oneself, the large and growing literature on relational autonomy shows how autonomy richly connects to our social nature and interpersonal relationships.<sup>29</sup> Autonomy is there in all the ways in which we own, value and choose our care and commitment to one another, and we grow in our autonomy when it is supported by others – when we are loved, respected, valued and cared about.<sup>30</sup>

Philosophy and international agreements consistently recognise autonomy as core to the human experience, a fundamental human right, and psychological research is continually adding to our understanding of how central it is to human wellbeing and flourishing.<sup>31</sup> When there is a sense of alignment between our deepest values, our will, our thoughts, and our actions, we are fundamentally more energised and satisfied with life, and we experience a sense of freedom. In fact, autonomy and freedom are impossible to imagine without one another.

We can think of autonomy as a set of nested circles, starting deep inside us and expanding outwards into our actions and our lives. At its core is our will, our ability to create our own thoughts and to direct our attention to the things that matter to us. Interwoven with this is the ability to identify what it is that matters to us, and to own this for ourselves.

Former Google strategist, now philosopher James Williams charts out three lights of our mind which help explain core elements of this mental autonomy. We have:

- the spotlight of our immediate attention
- the starlight of our longer term goals
- the daylight of clarity and reflection that enables us to work out our most deeply held ambitions and values.<sup>32</sup>

These three lights gift us with the freedom to find and know ourselves, our values and our ambitions, and to think, learn and act in tune with that knowledge.

We need certain supports and protections to arrive at this autonomy and live by it. How other people treat us is key: for example, are we taught that our will, beliefs and thoughts are valuable and worthy of attention? Are we taught to reflect and listen to ourselves? And is 'our right to sanctuary', as coined by Shoshana Zuboff, respected? This is the privacy to think for oneself without interference from others. As Virginia Woolf writes, 'a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself'.<sup>33</sup> The profound

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29: Mackenzie, C., & Stoljar, N. (Eds.). (2000). *Relational autonomy: Feminist perspectives on autonomy, agency, and the social self*. Oxford University Press.

Veltman, A., & Piper, M. (Eds.). (2014). Introduction in A. Veltman & M. Piper (Eds.) *Autonomy, oppression, and gender*. Oxford University Press.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. Guilford Publications.

30: Mackenzie, C. (2014). Three dimensions of autonomy: A relational analysis. In *Autonomy, oppression and gender* (pp. 15-41). Oxford University Press.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2014). Autonomy and need satisfaction in close relationships: Relationships motivation theory. *Human motivation and interpersonal relationships: Theory, research, and applications*, 53-73.

31: Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017c). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. Guilford Publications.

32: Jeffrey, N. K. (2024). Is consent enough? What the research on normative heterosexuality and sexual violence tells us. *Sexualities*, 27(3), 475-494

33: Woolf, V. (2001). *A Room of One's Own*. Broadview Press.

significance of this sanctuary to what it means to be human is recognised in various human rights frameworks which speak of rights to privacy, to freedom of thought, and to mental self-determination.<sup>34</sup>

These supports and rights are clearly of most importance to children and young people, given that minds in rapid development are particularly open, malleable, and vulnerable to influences, both supportive and detrimental. Again we see this recognised in human rights agreements, with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) naming children's right to an education that develops their personality, talents and abilities to the full; their right to privacy; their right to have their best interests prioritised in decisions that affect them; and their right to freedom of thought and belief. Each of these rights, amongst others, can be seen as safeguarding both their autonomy and its development. Indeed, it might be argued that there is an overarching right implicitly conveyed here: children's right to be supported in their development and to be protected from actions which would undermine it.

## BREAKING THE LOCK ON THE DOOR

There are several major ways in which our autonomy and its development can be threatened – we can be deprived of the things we need to develop or live by it (say for example, the respect of others, or opportunities to develop our thinking skills); we can be oppressed and coerced; and, perhaps most nefariously, we can be manipulated. Manipulation involves underhanded efforts to shape our thinking and behaviour towards another's ends, typically without us realising it. We lose authorship of our thoughts, beliefs and feelings – the lock on the door is broken, our sanctuary is invaded, and the lights of our mind are occluded.<sup>35</sup> And so it comprises the loss of our innermost autonomy, the crux of our freedom.

Academics don't always agree on the practices that count as manipulative. Some, for example, see the necessity of a hidden element, whereas others emphasise its disregard of a person's rational mind.<sup>36</sup> This is essentially a debate about borderline cases (akin to when does red become orange), but when a behaviour ticks all or most of the boxes, it can be widely agreed as archetypal (i.e. a deep red). And so it is the case with big tech's human capture and commodification: these practices are covert, extensive in their scope and influence (on us as individuals and as a collective), exploitative of psychological

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34: Faraoni, S. (2023). Persuasive technology and computational manipulation: Hypernudging out of mental self-determination. *Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence*, 6, 1216340.

<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/artificial-intelligence/articles/10.3389/frai.2023.1216340/full>

McCarthy-Jones, S. (2019). The autonomous mind: The right to freedom of thought in the twenty-first century. *Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence*, 2, 480879.

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frai.2019.00019/full>

35: Of course we are intricately and intimately shaped by social forces, in this sense self-authorship is 'part authorship'. As Susser et al. (2019) reflect, '*autonomy is not the absence of influence, but the presence of self-government... it is this authority of one's own reasons that manipulation subverts*'. There is a fundamental difference between natural social influences, whose influence we can rightly own, and underhand influence intended to shape us to another's ends.

Susser, D., Roessler, B., & Nissenbaum, H. (2019). Online manipulation: Hidden influences in a digital world. *Geo. L. Tech. Rev.*, 4, 1.

Raz, J. (1986). *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford University Press.

36: Klenk, M. (2022). (Online) manipulation: sometimes hidden, always careless. *Review of Social Economy*, 80(1), 85-105.

Susser, D., Roessler, B., & Nissenbaum, H. (2019). Online manipulation: Hidden influences in a digital world. *Geo. L. Tech. Rev.*, 4, 1.

vulnerabilities, deceptive, and pursuant of their authors' own ends, irrespective of those of their users.<sup>37</sup>

As we have explored, surveillance capitalism gleans our thoughts, feelings and vulnerabilities from invisible data trails to then leverage them against us, shaping us towards their interests and, much of the time, away from our own. We find ourselves distracted from our thoughts, from our goals, from our values. We are constantly guided to spend time on things that don't matter to us, and we lose the time to determine the things that do. The disconnect often shows up in feelings of mental conflict, dissatisfaction and addiction, which at its heart is a disjuncture between wanting and liking something – we are drawn to something that ends up not fulfilling us.<sup>38</sup>

Sometimes however the manipulation works deeper – we lose sight of what it is we used to want, or even more tragically, never find out what it is that we would have wanted – a particular risk for children and young people. This happens, philosopher Sylvie Delacroix argues, when manipulation is especially obscured, precise and extensive, as in the case of the attention economy.<sup>39</sup> In these circumstances, we can be pushed and pulled through a million tiny nudges to become the person that suits big tech's purposes (say an extremist, porn addict, or conspiracy fictionalist) and lose sight of our 'shadow self' – who we were or could have been without this influence.

This manipulation works on both an individual and collective level. So even if we personally find ways to unhook, log-off or otherwise escape its clutches, we are not free of its collective influence. If, for example, a young person's peers are guided towards seeing sex through the lens of objectification, this compromises her or his freedom to enjoy a healthy sexuality rooted in connection. And if some people's voting decisions result from manipulation, we all lose our democratic freedom. In those iconic words of Martin Luther King, we are not free until we are all free.

## FREEDOM FOR A PIKE, AND FREEDOM FOR A BIRD

Let's now turn to the two other major threats to our autonomy that I mentioned: oppression and coercion, and a lack of rightful supports. It is a type of freedom from oppression that Mark Zuckerberg and the tech bros are speaking of when they defend and celebrate freedom of speech – the freedom to share our views even when these conflict with those of others, to speak without censure or curtailment. However, when these leaders protect this freedom only narrowly, ignore the other freedoms with which it interplays, and in parallel adopt practices which undermine it, the freedom of speech we are left with is a pale version of itself.

Historian R. H. Tawney observed that '*freedom for the pike is death for the minnow*' – if there is no attention to power dynamics and rights to live free from violence and abuse, then one group's freedom of speech can effectively mean the control and silencing of others. And as we've seen, big tech's perverse management of its town squares ramps up power dynamics and hate. As bullies and haters are given ever louder megaphones (notwithstanding these being taken away from the worst offenders

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37: This is also true of those who have deployed big tech's computational abilities and vast knowledge about us for their own manipulative activities.

38: Robinson, T. E., & Berridge, K. C. (2001). Incentive sensitization and addiction. *Addiction*, 96(1), 103-114.

39: Delacroix, S. (2020). Social Media Manipulation, Autonomy and Capabilities. *Autonomy and Capabilities* (October 13, 2020). <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3710786>

every now and again), their freedom of speech is elevated far and above those of others. We now have numerous examples of the violated freedoms this leads to – whether it be the violence and ethnic cleansing that engagement-based algorithms are thought to have fuelled,<sup>40</sup> or the silencing of women and girls by pervasive online misogyny.<sup>41</sup>

More subtly and pervasively, we've seen how the business model is based on what triggers us and exploits our vulnerabilities. By virtue of their stage of development, children and young people are most vulnerable and their feeds are often quickly awash with violence, sexual objectification, and content that makes them feel bad about themselves and others.<sup>42</sup> The harms that ensue each represent a lost freedom. The girl with poor body confidence who as a result loses the freedom to do gymnastics, the boy whose objectification and suspicion of girls puts romantic relationships out of reach, and so on and on.

Lastly, just as freedom of speech cannot be understood without reference to other freedoms, so too human freedom as a whole cannot be understood without reference to other human goods. It is an emergent state, coming to fruition through our support of one another. Imagine a tree is given a whole desert and told 'you are free to grow!' – what does that mean without the rain to water it, the sun to shine on it, the soil to nourish it, the breeze to strengthen it, and all the many other living creatures that live in symbiosis with it? Then add to the mix, gales with the power to bend it to their will. We are left with a gnarled, withered tree for whom this 'freedom' is a bleakness. Equally, imagine a bird is born and told 'you are free to fly!' – what does that mean without all the things it needs to do so: feathers, air pressure, thermals, and the food, protection, rearing of its parent?

Put simply, freedom is a good thing created by many other good things, it is a meaningless concept without them. In the case of human autonomy, our core freedom of self-determination, these good things include love and care, respect and dignity, knowledge and truth, and protection from oppression and manipulation. When people receive this support and protection over the course of their childhoods, they are in a good position to find and make the most of the many opportunities and freedoms that life offers them. But big tech's rhetoric and philosophy on freedom are silent on these things; indeed its preconditions, and their profit-driven operations so often work against them.

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40: Zaleznik, D. (2021). Facebook and Genocide: How Facebook contributed to genocide in Myanmar and why it will not be held accountable. *Systemic Justice Journal: Critical Corporate Theory Collection*.

<https://systemicjustice.org/article/facebook-and-genocide-how-facebook-contributed-to-genocide-in-myanmar-and-why-it-will-not-be-held-accountable/>

41: <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/social-media/2017/11/social-media-and-silencing-effect-why-misogyny-online-human-rights-issue>

42: In a survey of over 1000 11-14 year old boys conducted to inform a Vodafone and Global Action Plan campaign I contributed to last year, we found that within only 10 minutes of going online, a third of boys reported seeing violence, a quarter saw negative content about girls and women, a quarter saw sexual content, and a fifth saw content that made them feel bad about themselves. Naturally these percentages increase the longer children are online. <https://www.vodafone.co.uk/newscentre/press-release/ai-aggro-rithms/>

Also see other research by Global Action Plan on girls' social media feeds and their impact: <https://www.globalactionplan.org.uk/online-climate/safer-socials/body-image>

And: <https://counterhate.com/research/deadly-by-design/>

<https://5rightsfoundation.com/resource/pathways-how-digital-design-puts-children-at-risk/>

# CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: FINDING FREEDOM

So in summary, not only does the dominant business model of big tech fail to support the freedom of speech its leaders espouse, it actively undermines it, as part of a broader assault on our deepest freedom, that of our autonomy. At the heart of much big tech philosophy is in fact a nihilistic, libertarian vision of freedom<sup>43</sup> – their own freedom to ‘move fast and break things’, to act carelessly,<sup>44</sup> without concern for the freedoms and rights of the billions they train their computational forces on.

In the collective effort to tackle the harms big tech is fuelling, we need to tell the truth about freedom. Let’s talk about what freedom of speech really looks like, and let’s talk about other freedoms too – freedoms from abuse, deception and hate; freedom of thought; and the freedom to development, with all the supports and protections that entails.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that ‘*education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms*’. Children and young people need to know about the freedoms they have a right to, and the attempts to undermine them that they will find themselves navigating.

In tandem with these conversations, we need to fight for technology that not only doesn’t curtail our freedom, but instead seeks to promote it. Let’s push for autonomy-supportive versus manipulative algorithms, demanding those that privilege our intentions over our impulses, our deepest values and goals over our kneejerk reactions, insecurities, and base instincts. The stakes couldn’t be higher – as James Williams concludes, ‘*in order to do anything that matters, we must first be able to give attention to the things that matter. It’s my firm conviction, now more than ever, that the degree to which we are able and willing to struggle for ownership of our attention is the degree to which we are free.*’<sup>45</sup>

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43: Hanson, E. (2023). *How freedom ideologies have fuelled tech-assisted child abuse and what we can do about it*. Keynote at PIER23 conference: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMYc7U9NOVg>

Also see Hanson, E. (2019). ‘Losing track of morality’: Understanding online forces and dynamics conducive to child sexual exploitation. In *Child sexual exploitation: Why theory matters* (pp. 87-116). Policy Press.

44: In Sarah Wynn-Williams memoir of working at Facebook, *Careless People*, she describes its offices displaying posters on the walls with the exhortation to ‘move fast and break things’. The book’s epigraph is an excerpt from *The Great Gatsby*: ‘*They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their cast carelessness – or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.*’

45: Williams, J. (2018). *Stand out of our light: Freedom and resistance in the attention economy*. Cambridge University Press.

## FURTHER READING

For a deep dive into the machinations and far-reaching consequences of Surveillance Capitalism, look no further than Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power* (Profile books).

For briefer but no less incisive discussions, turn to *Ten arguments for deleting your social media accounts right now* by Jaron Lanier (Vintage) and *Stand out of our light* by James Williams (Cambridge University Press).

*Technofeudalism* by Yanis Varoufakis is a fascinating analysis of how Big tech's practices emerged from recent capitalist history and are now ushering in a new, darker economic order.

We also recommend *Pornography and Human Futures*, published here at Fully Human, also written by Elly Hanson. This report explores the themes of autonomy and online manipulation in more depth, with specific reference to the business model of the porn industry (which overlaps and intersects with that of wider Big tech).