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Tripping and Falling into the Cyberpunk Age: An Analysis of the Merging of Government and Big Tech

by

Lya Joseph

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Lya Joseph

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Lya Joseph

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List of Committee Members:

Dr. Dean Caivano

Dr. Vera Fennell

Dr. Marie Schenk

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Abstract

This thesis develops “cyberpunk” not merely as a genre of speculative fiction but as a political framework for understanding the convergence of technological corporations, capitalist accumulation, and state power in the United States today. Drawing on scholarship concerning platform capitalism, surveillance capitalism, algorithms, artificial intelligence, and technofascism, I examine the growing political influence of technology corporations and their owners. The analysis considers the 2024 election and the second Trump administration; algorithmic amplification and AI-generated propaganda; corporate data collection and biometric surveillance; and the environmental consequences of expanding data center infrastructure. I argue that these developments reveal the emergence of a cyberpunk political order characterized by private control over essential technological infrastructures, the conversion of data and attention into economic and political power, the integration of corporate technologies into governmental practices, and the displacement of social and environmental costs onto vulnerable communities. Taken together, these conditions reorganize the ways information is produced, circulated, and verified, while weakening democratic accountability and individual agency. Cyberpunk therefore provides a framework for understanding how technological advancement, when governed by accumulation and efficiency, can further concentrate power rather than promote collective well-being.

Introduction

In 2024, Donald Trump, a billionaire, was elected president of the United States for the second time. This was after his first presidency, where he initiated a bigoted travel ban (known as the "Muslim ban"[1]), dismissed COVID-19 as a leftist hoax, resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths[2], amongst other things. What was new this time around was the overt presence of a tech billionaire alongside him in the federal government. Some of the most notable people at the second inauguration in January 2025 were Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, Google CEO Sundar Pichai, Apple CEO Tim Cook, TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew, and Tesla CEO Elon Musk.[3] All of these men were also billionaires at the time, except the CEO of TikTok, who is a millionaire.[4] It is important to note that then, Musk was the richest person on Earth and still is as of 2026,[5] and briefly became the world's first and only trillionaire.[6] Musk had been recently appointed to lead the newly created Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, and a series of other billionaires and multimillionaires had been appointed to oversee federal agencies.[7]

In keeping up with his anti-immigrant rhetoric, Trump authorized Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to essentially hunt down members of immigrant communities and

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[1] Amnesty International UK, "A licence to discriminate: Trump's Muslim & refugee ban," *Amnesty International UK*, August 21, 2017, https://www.amnesty.org.uk/licence-discriminate-trumps-muslim-refugee-ban.
[2] "U.S. Virus Death Toll Tops 400,000 in Trump's Final Hours," PBS News, January 19, 2021, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/u-s-virus-death-toll-tops-400000-in-trumps-final-hours.
[3] Ali Swenson, "These Tech Billionaires Flanked Trump at Inauguration | AP News," AP News, January 21, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/trump-inauguration-tech-billionaires-zuckerberg-musk-wealth-0896bfc3f50d941d62cebc3074267ecd.
[4] Josh Rodgers, "Who Is TikTok's CEO and What's His Net Worth? - AfroTech," AfroTech, n.d., https://afrotech.com/tiktok-ceo-net-worth.
[5] "Forbes 2026 Billionaires List - the Richest People in the World Ranked," Forbes, n.d., https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/.
[6] Francisco Velasquez, "Elon Musk Loses Trillionaire Status as Global Tech Rout Hits SpaceX," June 24, 2026, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c8j2m2p8dgmo.
[7] Bill Barrow, "A Look at Billionaires Trump Has Picked for Government Posts | AP News," AP News, January 31, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/donald-trumps-cabinet-wealth-billionaires-0d5147df74c7f0a851df296aeab2e164#.

communities of color across the country, stirring up fear and anxiety for residents.[8] While planting the seeds of fear in these communities, he had not neglected to sow seeds of opportunity for the wealthiest foreigners abroad. Trump had publicized his idea for a so-called "gold card" visa that would only cost $5 million. This gold card would grant wealthy foreign investors a new way to achieve U.S. citizenship.[9]

Turning attention to the tech and online world, a new economy is on the rise: cryptocurrency. According to the Reserve Bank of Australia, cryptocurrency is a digital currency.[10] It is not tied to any government or bank and exists in a volatile market.[11] This type of currency has garnered attention from multi-millionaires and billionaires, along with criminals who see the potential gains.[12] It also consumes a shocking amount of energy to operate the data centers behind it. According to a United Nations study, the most popular cryptocurrency, Bitcoin, was found to have an energy consumption higher than that of Pakistan, home to more than 230 million residents. If that is hard to conceptualize, think of it this way: Bitcoin's carbon footprint was "equivalent to that of burning 84 billion pounds of coal or operating 190 natural gas-fired

[8] Meg Anderson, "Police Say ICE Tactics Are Eroding Public Trust in Local Law Enforcement," *NPR*, March 30, 2025, https://www.npr.org/2025/03/30/nx-s1-5304236/police-say-ice-tactics-are-eroding-public-trust-in-local-law-enforcement.
[9] Elliot Spagat and Will Weissert, "Trump Sees 'a thirst' for His 'gold card' Immigration Visa Idea | AP News," AP News, February 26, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/trump-gold-card-visa-million-investors-1aa4585dc053e21c7d887f1fdb9eec13.
[10] Reserve Bank of Australia, "Digital Currencies | Explainer | Education," April 2, 2025, https://www.rba.gov.au/education/resources/explainers/cryptocurrencies.html.
[11] Oswego State University of New York, "The Basics About Cryptocurrency | CTS," accessed March 20, 2025, https://www.oswego.edu/cts/basics-about-cryptocurrency.
[12] "UN Study Reveals the Hidden Environmental Impacts of Bitcoin: Carbon Is Not the Only Harmful By-product," United Nations University, April 21, 2024, https://unu.edu/press-release/un-study-reveals-hidden-environmental-impacts-bitcoin-carbon-not-only-harmful-product.

power plants."[13] This fuels the growing concern over the catastrophic effects of cryptocurrencies on the planet, especially on low-income communities living in already vulnerable climates.[14]

Online, netizens are made subject to algorithms that they may believe they have much more control over than they really do. Social media apps use algorithms to keep users on the app and continue showing them content the algorithm believes they will like.[15] Short-form content apps like TikTok have been found to have exposure and popularity bias in their algorithm, influencing what users see despite their diverse interests.[16] Court-sealed documents of TikTok's executives communicating about the addictive and adverse mental effects of the app have also come to light.[17] With the United States and Europe experiencing a right-wing surge,[18] the popular app YouTube has recently been found to have a recommendation algorithm that directs users to radical and heavily biased videos, and this is especially the case for users with right-wing views.[19]

With these profound changes in mind, I argue that they are a sign of societal regression and social decay. More importantly, these trends provide alarming concern that we are entering a *cyberpunk* era of capitalism. Cyberpunk, as I use it here, is an age of unprecedented technological advancement and connectivity, in which the most prominent corporations,

[13] Sanaz Chamanara, S. Arman Ghaffarizadeh, and Kaveh Madani, "The Environmental Footprint of Bitcoin Mining Across the Globe: Call for Urgent Action," *Earth's Future* 11, no. 10 (October 1, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1029/2023ef003871.
[14] Chamanara, Ghaffarizadeh, and Madani, "The Environmental Footprint of Bitcoin Mining Across the Globe: Call for Urgent Action."
[15] Dorcas Adisa, "Everything You Need to Know About Social Media Algorithms," Sprout Social, October 30, 2023. See bibliography.
[16] Chenchen Yang, "Bias in Short-Video Recommender Systems: User-Centric Evaluation on TikTok" (MA Paper, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2022), https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/concern/file_sets/2801pr99d?locale=en.
[17] Bobby Allyn, "TikTok Executives Know About App's Effect on Teens, Lawsuit Documents Allege," *NPR*, October 11, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/10/11/g-s1-27676/tiktok-redacted-documents-in-teen-safety-lawsuit-revealed.
[18] Scott Simon, "Right Wing Movements Are Growing in Europe. How Do They Differ From Those in the U.S.?," *NPR*, July 6, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/07/06/nx-s1-5026953/right-wing-movements-are-growing-in-europe-how-do-they-differ-from-those-in-the-u-s.
[19] Muhammad Haroon et al., "YouTube, The Great Radicalizer? Auditing and Mitigating Ideological Biases in YouTube Recommendations" (University of California, Davis, 2022), https://arxiv.org/pdf/2203.10666.

especially big tech, overtly exercise power in official government spaces and have companies whose influence extends into and integrates with nearly every part of life. The cyberpunk era makes it hard to distinguish between government and tech corporations, and this is intentional as a means to concentrate surveillance and control into the hands of a few politicians and tech oligarchs bent on securing profit and power. In this thesis, I argue that we are living at the beginning of a new mutation of capitalism, in which profit and technological advancement, without regard for humanity's well-being and the planet, are primary. The political and ethical consequences of this structural transformation will be the health of the planet and the mass deception of the public, which threatens the agency and the potential ever to achieve self-actualization of the individual.

In presenting my argument, I begin with a literature review that sets the stage for my analysis and clarifies specific terms and concepts pivotal to my claims. In the literature review, I note that the cyberpunk genre, given its original connotations and usage, could serve as a political framework for depicting contemporary society. Then, I will explore the dynamics between technology and capitalism and how that ultimately connects to algorithms, social media, and artificial intelligence. The literature review will conclude by defining "technofascism," an essential aspect of my diagnosis of capitalism's mutation. In my analysis, I explore the political, ethical, and environmental implications of these changes. This includes a discussion of the dissolution of the once-liberal/left-leaning tech world. Such a shift in the political and social leanings of the tech world fuels the rage-bait, algorithm-driven, artificial-intelligence-dominated virtual landscape we live in, creating an environment ripe for technological deception. Then, I turn to how the government uses this kind of technology and its implications. I will examine the effects of the rapid adoption and integration of artificial intelligence into people's lives, and how

the data centers that support these platforms can cause significant harm to the very people who use them and to the environment. As artificial intelligence becomes increasingly widespread, I will also discuss the relationship between humans and AI. Finally, before concluding, I will analyze the problematic relation between the tech oligarchy and what we know as truth, and how we validate what is true or false.

Literature Review

This literature review will provide an introduction to cyberpunk as a literary genre, offer a reconceptualization of "cyberpunk", and draw a connection among these distinct yet intersecting interpretations of the term. This will segue into a review of how technology and capitalism currently work in tandem. This section will review key voices in critical scholarship on capitalism and modern technological advances. Afterward, space will be devoted to better understanding and assessing the dominance of algorithms, especially as they pertain to social media, and what is known of the implications of artificial intelligence and its rapid advancement. Finally, this literature review will examine technofascism as a term and then how the current political landscape creates more room for its possibility. This final section will examine hints of it that appear in how those behind the largest tech companies, these companies' practices, and the possibilities that come with their data management may be described as, or evolve into, technofascistic proclivities.

"Cyberpunk" as a Genre and Political Framework

To make my argument, I develop my own definition of cyberpunk. But first, it is helpful to take a look at the term in its original context. Cyberpunk is originally known as a sub-genre of science

fiction emerging in the 1980s as "an exploration of human experience within the context of media-dominated, postindustrial, late capitalist society," according to the late Claire Sponsler.[20] This sub-genre's popularization is often credited to author William Gibson, who released his book *Neuromancer* in 1984.[21] The characters in these stories are situated in a meaningless world where authority cannot be trusted, and human existence outside of their world's pervasive and dominating technology is almost a far-fetched fantasy.[22] Istvan Csicsery-Ronay writes of the genre this way:

> 'Cyber/punk'—the ideal postmodern couple: a machine philosophy that can create the world in its own image and a self-mutilating freedom, that is that image snarling back. This broader sense of cyberpunk reflects the increasingly pervasive influence of a particular moment of science fiction on postmodern culture: the moment when science fiction depicts what one theorist, Zoe Sofia, calls the 'collapse of the future on the present.'[23]

This genre turns traditionally curious and optimistic science fiction on its head by suddenly bringing the progress of technological advancement and the presence of the wealthiest corporations behind it under intense scrutiny and suspicion. It takes a step back from the one character's life and looks at the world and system in which they live. The reader and the protagonist then cannot help but see how mega-corporations, technology, and the many other products of capitalism have infiltrated every aspect of their life.

This genre exists in a world where incomprehensible terms and agreements have more bearing on your life than policy. Congressional meetings are replaced with board meetings. Chief executive officers replace policymakers. Human creativity is undermined and deemed unnecessary because artificial intelligence can create something similar enough. While extremely

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[20] Claire Sponsler, "Cyberpunk and the Dilemmas of Postmodern Narrative: The Example of William Gibson," *Contemporary Literature* 33, no. 4 (1992): 627, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1208645.
[21] "cyberpunk," Encyclopedia Britannica, December 5, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/art/cyberpunk.
[22] Sponsler, "Cyberpunk and the Dilemmas of Postmodern Narrative."
[23] Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, "Cyberpunk and Neuromanticism," *Mississippi Review* 16, no. 2/3 (1988): 270, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20134180.

connected to other humans in ways never seen before, the community is peculiar, and loneliness and suspicion of others are the norm. Surviving takes priority over living. To protect the planet is irrational, alarmist behavior, thwarting the manifest destiny of capitalism to exploit the Earth and its most vulnerable people and living beings. Advanced technology is no longer a tool but a fully integrated, seamless, and necessary part of existence. Today, this genre is becoming our *reality*.

Technology and Capitalism

The use of technology within capitalism tends to bring about greater efficiency for a corporation or entity that inherently requires the perpetual production of goods. In simpler terms, produce as many goods as possible at the lowest possible price. Given how technology and capitalism work together, this may eventually mean relying on technology for the labor needed to produce goods rather than on employees. Robert Heilbroner describes technology within capitalism as follows,

> Technology thus becomes a sociopolitical force within capitalism, not merely a lever of material change. The reason, of course, is that technological change is the chief source of new areas of profitable accumulation.[24]

Technology does not mark a pivotal moment in history solely when a new device is created to bring greater ease to our lives; rather, a technological advance can create a new or improved product for purchase and sale. This inevitably creates a new means of accumulating wealth. Heilbroner supports these conclusions in writing that as technology creates "new processes of production," the necessity for the worker to participate in the production process disappears.[25]

Christian Fuchs stresses that we need to consider Marx's analysis of commodities and capital, driving the point that due to neoliberal capitalism, everything has been commodified.[26]

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[24] Robert Heilbroner. "Technology and Capitalism." *Social Research* 64, no. 3 (1997): 1321–25. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40971214.
[25] Heilbroner. "Technology and Capitalism."
[26] Christian Fuchs, "Karl Marx in the Age of Big Data Capitalism," ed. Christian Fuchs and David Chandler, *Digital Objects, Digital Subjects: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Capitalism, Labour and Politics in the Age of Big Data*, 2019, 53–72, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvckq9qb.6.

This idea is important to keep in mind, as part of my argument is that technological advancement takes priority regardless of its effects on humans and nature. This also requires us to examine the economic erosion of capitalism through a Marxist analysis of this stage. To put classical Marxism in simple terms, societal structures and institutions are built on economic activity, and the class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie drives the course of history.[27] That is, until class struggle within capitalism collapses and then transitions into a classless society.[28] Singh notes that as time went on, so did Marxism in how it was attempted and manifested. This can be seen by the attempt at executing it in the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba.[29]

As the Frankfurt School evolved, its key thinkers, such as Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, attempted to amend Marxism as it had been known before to incorporate philosophy, social science, and radical criticism based in social reality.[30] Singh finds that Marx's analysis of the class divide is still very relevant today, especially considering how the wealth gap has significantly increased in recent times and when observing the way in which labor has been exploited in our digital age.[31] Through a Marxist lens, we can see how technology and capitalism work together not only to commodify everything possible but also to achieve peak productivity by any means necessary. Capitalism is definitely still central, but it looks very different and has more ground to dominate when technology is factored in.

Nick Srnicek's *Platform Capitalism* describes how capitalism has evolved to situate itself within digital spaces. Srnicek writes that we now have "platforms," which are the digital infrastructures that allow us to interact with others, such as Microsoft Windows operating

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[27] Unnati Singh, "Marxism in Today's World," *International Journal of Political Science and Governance* 6, no. 2 (July 22, 2024): 134–36, https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2024.v6.i2b.377.
[28] For orthodox Marxists, the transition would evolve from capitalism to socialism to communism, which would be the classless society stage. Also see, Singh, "Marxism in Today's World."
[29] Singh, "Marxism in Today's World."
[30] "Critical Theory (Frankfurt School) (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)," December 12, 2023, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-theory/.
[31] "Critical Theory (Frankfurt School) (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)."

system, Apple's App Store and operating system, Google's search engine, Uber.[32] These platforms then rely on what Srnicek calls "network effects," which are when the value of the platform increases as more users use it; think of joining or using an app because your family and friends are already using it.[33] This, in turn, leads to some platforms gaining a monopoly on certain sectors in the digital world and inherently more access to user activity and data.[34] They own the platform, while users create the data that they will extract. This is how these platforms turn their users into the product, a point that will be explored further shortly.

Taking all of this data collection into consideration, it is useful for us to turn to Shoshana Zuboff's book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. To begin, Zuboff includes various definitions of surveillance capitalism.[35] There are two that are especially relevant to my argument. Zuboff offers two of the following,

1. "A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales"
2. "A rogue mutation of capitalism marked by concentrations of wealth, knowledge, and power unprecedented in human history"[36]

The first definition importantly captures what makes this invasive level of data collection concerning. Using Google as one of the most notable platforms to take advantage of the wealth of behavioral data it had collected on its users, Zuboff notes how Google used that data to help advertisers sell their products.[37] The original use of user data on Google's platform, or behavioral data, was to improve search results, but its use was expanded to informing targeted advertising.[38] Changes like this shift the platform's purpose from keeping users connected and making

[32] Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (John Wiley & Sons, 2016).
[33] Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism.*
[34] Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism.*
[35] Zuboff has six definitions of surveillance capitalism, but I am only using these two. See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for the Future at the New Frontier of Power* (PublicAffairs, 2019).
[36] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.
[37] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism.*
[38] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism.*

information readily available to becoming a marketplace for user data, often unbeknownst to users. As Zuboff puts it, one of the foundations for surveillance capitalism is that these companies behind the digital platforms can "ignore considerations for individuals' rights, interests, awareness, or comprehension."[39] In the digital world, user ignorance and aloofness are good for business.

The second definition highlights what the introduction of these platforms means for capitalism and bears a strong resemblance to what I describe as the defining feature of the cyberpunk era. This definition, coupled with the preference for users to be uninformed about how they are giving their personal data and how that data will be used, creates a threat to democracy in Zuboff's opinion.[40] The intent of selling user data (behavioral data) to advertisers is to steer users into doing what would be most beneficial for advertisers. Zuboff says that this interferes with our autonomy because these companies have an unimaginable amount of data on users to predict what users will do next but also to condition users' behavior in the future.[41] This amassing of so much information on users gives these companies an incredible amount of power over users and their futures, especially when users know so little about them.[42] Keeping this in mind, it is important to zoom in a bit closer on how technological advancements are presented or advertised to us, and what they are supposed to signal to the user in light of this.

Many technological advancements are presented as a way to usher in greater ease and efficiency into our lives, which ought to grant us more leisure time, but as products are commodified, so is our "free time." Pedersen et al. write about the commodification of our attention, specifically by digital platforms, and in their work, they mention how employers, in an

[39] Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism.*
[40] John Laidler, "High Tech Is Watching You," Harvard Gazette, March 9, 2019, https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/03/harvard-professor-says-surveillance-capitalism-is-undermining-democracy/.
[41] Laidler, "High Tech Is Watching You."
[42] Laidler, "High Tech Is Watching You."

effort to keep as many employees' attention on work, block access to certain websites.[43] This highlights the sort of fight for our attention in our very digitized age. McKenzie Wark's *Capital is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* describes an "asymmetry of the sharing" when it comes to media consumers and the providers of that media.[44] This asymmetry is glaring when we consider the media that we consume for free, making us the product being sold.[45] We may turn to these readily accessible devices and platforms that provide entertainment or increase our efficiency, but in reality, they reduce us to products *and* consumers. The attention economy that Tim Wu analyzes, which all of these "attention brokers" like Facebook, Google, TikTok, and more have high stakes in, prevents this idea of these technological advancements freeing up our time.[46] The way the attention economy works does not truly permit "free time" for users.

Algorithms, Social Media, and Artificial Intelligence

This is where things like algorithms come into play. For the algorithm to function, it needs to be fed user data. In *Capital is Dead: Is This Something Worse?*, Wark writes,

> The evil genius of the postbroadcast-era media is that it not only holds our attention, it also records it. A lot more information can be extracted as to who we are, what we like, and which punk rock goddess we want to be. A lot of media consumers end up being quite shocked at just how much information about themselves they are giving away, and for free.[47]

Acquiring this user data is especially easy when users are convinced by the attention brokers that, after checking off the lengthy terms and agreements box, they are gaining access to an app, website, or platform for free. The acquisition of this data is, interestingly, carried out through a

[43] Morten Axel Pedersen, Kristoffer Albris, and Nick Seaver, "The Political Economy of Attention," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 50, no. 1 (August 6, 2021): 309–25, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-101819-110356.
[44] McKenzie Wark, *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (Verso Books, 2021).
[45] Wark, *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?*
[46] Tim Wu, "Blind Spot: The Attention Economy and the Law," *Antitrust Law Journal* 82 (2017), https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2941094.
[47] Wark, *Capital Is Dead.*

form of deception, and, given the number of users these platforms have, it is mass deception. This data is to be used by investors on these platforms for monetary gain.

A theory often linked to the way in which the algorithm functions is the theory of information foraging, offered by Peter Pirolli and Stuart Card in the 1990s.[48] This theory draws parallels with animal foraging as it aims to explain how people use the internet to seek the information that they are looking for most optimally, similar to how animals try to forage for food.[49] The theory suggests that when people are surfing the internet intending to acquire a specific piece of information, they consider their source options (websites) and essentially weigh that against how much effort (time) it would take for them to go through that source or sources to get their answer.[50] Now, when it comes to algorithms, this foraging process gets interfered with by changing the information that users will see and how they will comprehend it.[51] Simply put, algorithms have a powerful effect on users.

Technofascism

"Technofascism," a term coined by Janis Mimura in her book *Planning for Empire: Reform Bureaucrats and the Japanese Wartime State*, can be defined as a merging of "technical rationality, comprehensive planning, and the modern values of productivity and efficiency with ethnic nationalism and right-wing organicist ideologies."[52] Let us take a cursory, albeit close look

[48] Raluca Budiu, "Information Foraging: A Theory of How People Navigate on the Web," Nielsen Norman Group, November 10, 2019, https://www.nngroup.com/articles/information-foraging/.
[49] Budiu, "Information Foraging: A Theory of How People Navigate on the Web"
[50] Budiu, "Information Foraging: A Theory of How People Navigate on the Web"
[51] Gabriela Proleac and Alexandra-Niculina Ghergut-Babii, "How Social Media Algorithms Influence the Way Users Decide - Perspectives of Social Media Users and Practitioners," *Technium Social Sciences Journal* 57 (2024): 69–81, https://access.heinonline.com/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/techssj57&id=70&men_tab=srchresults.
[52] Aaron Stephen Moore, "Planning for Empire: Reform Bureaucrats and the Japanese Wartime State," *Social History* 37, no. 1 (February 1, 2012): 75–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2011.651606.

at how technofascism manifested in Japan during World War II. In the 1930s, Japanese technocrats, what we now call "tech bros," were given an unprecedented amount of power behind the scenes in the Japanese government and eventually pushed the country into war.[53] In the column, he writes,

> In the nineteen-thirties, Japan colonized Manchuria, in northeastern China, and the region became a test ground for techno-fascism. Nobusuke Kishi, a Japanese commerce-ministry bureaucrat, was appointed to head the industrial program in Manchuria, in 1936, and, with the collaboration of a new crop of the Japanese conglomerates known as zaibatsu, he instituted a policy of forced industrial development based on the exploitation of the local population. When Kishi returned to national politics in Japan, in 1939, along with a clique of other Japanese technocrats who had worked in Manchuria, he pursued similar strategies of state-dictated industrialization, at the expense of private interests and labor rights.[54]

This is a prime example of how these appointments quickly went south and how the actions of these appointees establish a system in which the worker, rather than the user, is expendable if it means increased productivity and industrial development. The country is to be run the same as the company.

When we look at how friendly Silicon Valley is with the current Trump administration and how Elon Musk, a non-elected member of the administration who also happens to be the wealthiest person on Earth, now has a whole department under his belt despite his lack of government experience, we have reason to suspect technofascism may be in its nascent stages. Musk's appointment to the DOGE is the government turning itself into another little company for him to cut budgets. He has already fired thousands of federal workers to date.[55] His supposed role in our government is reminiscent of his first actions after buying Twitter. There, he fired

[53] Kyle Chayka, "The History of Techno-fascism," *Kyle Chayka Industries* (blog), February 28, 2025, https://kylechayka.substack.com/p/the-history-of-techno-fascism.
[54] Kyle Chayka, "Elon Musk, and How Techno-Fascism Has Come to America," *The New Yorker*, February 26, 2025, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/techno-fascism-comes-to-america-elon-musk.
[55] Elena Shao and Ashley Wu, "What We Know About the Trump Administration's Cuts to the Federal Work Force," *The New York Times*, May 5, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/03/28/us/politics/trump-doge-federal-job-cuts.html.

80% of the company's employees because of the company's "negative cash flow," plus, in his own words, "This is not a caring [or] uncaring situation. It's like, if the whole ship sinks, then nobody's got a job."[56] This is the same Nazi-saluting Elon Musk who some view as a "techno-eugenicist."[57]

In discussing what appears to be technofascism taking hold in American government right now, it is important that I focus in on Musk, his techno-eugenicist ideas, and how that ties in with data. The use of data to inflict harm on certain groups in society is not new in world history or in the history of the United States. Julia Métraux, a reporter for *Mother Jones*, interviewed Anita Say Chan, the author of *Predatory Data,* which discusses the history and use of data to devalue human life to achieve eugenicist goals, and had this to say about eugenicist data collection in the United States,

> In the US, varied datafication methods—from IQ exams and immigrant literacy tests, to criminal databases, biometric archives—were deployed by eugenic researchers in an effort to not just track and surveil the poor, and to argue for their segregation from so-called "fit" populations, but to collect data that eugenicists insisted would prove the higher incidences of moral, physical and mental "unfitness" among the poor.
>
> Our contemporary datafication systems continue to do this today—not only by allowing their growth to be fueled by the expansion of online platforms and social media systems that minimize protections for minoritized users, but by enabling the amplification of political violence against minorities in the interest of protecting their profits[58].

When we examine Musk's takeover of Twitter, which he changed the name of to X, we see just what Chan mentions when we look at the increase of hate speech on the app, specifically homophobic, transphobic, and racist hate speech, which are getting increasingly more

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[56] Michelle Toh and Juliana Liu, "Elon Musk says he's cut about 80% of Twitter's staff," *CNN Business*, April 12, 2023, https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/12/tech/elon-musk-bbc-interview-twitter-intl-hnk.
[57] Julia Métraux, "Eugenics Isn't Dead—it's Thriving in Tech," *Mother Jones* (Mother Jones and the Center for Investigative Reporting, January 2, 2025), https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2025/01/eugenics-isnt-dead-its-thriving-in-tech/.
[58] Métraux, "Eugenics Isn't Dead—It's Thriving in Tech."

engagement (i.e., likes) than before.[59] Musk uses his power to platform and re-platform far-right extremists who were previously removed from the app and even uses his own account to tweet and retweet problematic right-wing commentators and conspiracies.[60] As the owner of X, Musk has substantial control over how the app is run and what its users agree to be subject to. This also means he has significant control over how their data is used. Interestingly, this same person has now had an extremely influential position in our government.

Analysis

In the following section, I present my argument for why I believe we have entered a cyberpunk period. The literature review has ultimately suggested that the inherent tensions of capitalism are producing a challenge to how power, truth, and subjectivity are formulated. Now, in this analysis, I want to further explore how cyberpunk offers a lens through which we can understand this moment in capitalism and dissect the way tech oligarchy and government are engaging in an especially interesting dynamic. This unique political and structural dynamic, I believe, has many consequences for the people who are and/or will be subject to it.

The Tech Industry Started as a Liberal/left-leaning Sphere…What Changed?

A 2017 study from Stanford Graduate School of Business found that wealthy tech entrepreneurs "support liberal redistributive, social, and globalistic policies but conservative regulatory policies."[61] The largest tech companies, Apple, Google, Microsoft, Tesla, Intel, and more, had

[59] Daniel Hickey et al., "X Under Musk's Leadership: Substantial Hate and No Reduction in Inauthentic Activity," *PLoS ONE* 20, no. 2 (February 12, 2025): e0313293, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0313293.
[60] Charis Hoard, Audrey McCabe, and Ruby Seavey, "Elon Musk Continues to Cater to Far-right Twitter Accounts Promoting Bigotry, Extremism, and Misinformation," Media Matters for America, December 15, 2022, https://www.mediamatters.org/twitter/elon-musk-continues-cater-far-right-twitter-accounts-promoting-bigotry-extremism-and.
[61] David Broockman, Greg F. Ferenstein, and Neil Malhotra, "Predispositions and the Political Behavior of American Economic Elites: Evidence From Technology Entrepreneurs," Stanford Graduate School of Business,

even joined forces the same year to sign an *amicus curiae* brief to oppose the aforementioned Muslim ban.[62] It is clear that just a few years ago, Silicon Valley would have easily been considered and perceived to be progressive, and now it is cozying up to the current extreme right-wing regime in the United States. Big tech opposed executive abuse of power and supported marginalized communities. Seemingly supportive of these communities by giving them spotlights, whether it be a Google doodle to commemorate a holiday or pay homage to a pioneer from a marginalized community, or YouTube urging you to check out videos from creators of a marginalized community. I posit that all of this was either a facade or, for some of these companies, in the beginning, before it was a billion-dollar company, it was authentic, but when the money flowed in and the profitability of tech was realized, the morals guiding the industry dissolved and were replaced to meet the bottom line.

The irony here is that just a few years ago, Sundar Pachai, CEO of Google and the parent company Alphabet, sat down with *60 Minutes* to talk about how the company is being responsible for keeping its advanced AI out of reach to the public as it was still an experiment, seemingly adhering to the company's main guiding principle since 2004, "Don't be evil."[63] That is what characterizes the moment we are living in: the beginning of the cyberpunk period. Tech companies that started as far-fetched ideas, supported by a small but passionate group of geniuses who just want to better the world and make technology that helps people, have become mega-corporations. The heads of these mega-corporations not only realize the absurd amount of money flowing in, but also that when they cut their commitments to inclusivity, equity, or

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December 9, 2017,
https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/faculty-research/working-papers/predispositions-political-behavior-american-economic-elites.

[62] Michael Bass, "A New Democra-Tech Party," *Brown Political Review*, February 17, 2017, https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/new-democra-tech-party/docview/3093160567/se-2.

[63] Keith Zubrow, "How Google's 'Don't Be Evil' Motto Has Evolved for the AI Age | 60 Minutes," CBS News, April 16, 2023,
https://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-googles-dont-be-evil-motto-has-evolved-for-ai-age-60-minutes-2023-04-16/.

support for underprivileged communities, they can save money or, more importantly, further concentrate power in the hands of specific members of our society. This is when "Don't be evil" is scrapped. This is what *changed*. This is when the "financially smart" move dominates the ethical one. Take a look at SB 1047, a bill that was proposed in California to hold AI developers civilly accountable if their AI does something harmful.[64] In response to this, OpenAI and other AI developers have expressed opposition to the bill, claiming that the state was threatening the growth and progress of technological innovation in the state.[65] Guardrails for the safety and security of humanity and the planet undermine technological innovation and progress. The growth and progress of technological innovation reinforce the power, relevance, and influence of these companies and their owners on the public, or what they call "users."

This is an aside, but it's important to look at the word "user" in the context of technology, how it positions the public relative to these companies, and what they offer the public. They position themselves as providers (of internet, search engines, smart devices, etc.) but also as toolmakers or, better yet, tool providers. This makes all this advancement seem unassuming and inherently beneficial to society.

Back to the power, relevance, and influence these companies and their heads have. It is through this accumulation of power (including wealth, since this is still capitalism we are talking about), relevance, and influence that these big tech tycoons gain an almost inseparable presence in our personal, professional, and academic lives. The devices we use transcend the idea of "a time and a place" for these things. The devices they provide are not meant to be confined to a single purpose or place. Everything you can do on your desktop computer can be done on your

[64] "Senator Wiener's Groundbreaking Artificial Intelligence Bill Advances to the Assembly Floor With Amendments Responding to Industry Engagement," Senator Scott Wiener, August 15, 2024, https://sd11.senate.ca.gov/news/senator-wieners-groundbreaking-artificial-intelligence-bill-advances-assembly-floor-amendments.

[65] Frank Landymore, "Tech Companies Furious at New Law That Would Hold Them Accountable When Their AI Does Bad Stuff," *Futurism*, August 22, 2024, https://futurism.com/the-byte/tech-companies-accountable-ai-bill.

cell phone, and if that is still too bulky or inconvenient, they have provided watches with some of the same key functions. Their products are seamlessly integrated into our lives. We rely on them now. We *need* them.

They provide us with apps we can choose from, specifically social media apps, to connect, which was the initial idea. Then it became evident that these apps could become addictive and had negative effects on people's mental health.[66] When this came to light, nothing fundamentally changed; they just added parental controls and screen time limits that were not really effective. These were apps intended to connect people, but were not successful in leading the socially anxious and lonely to the online support and community they wanted.[67] Instead, we are left with an abnormal ability to peer into the lives of strangers (unless their pages are private), excessive access to those closest to us, and an overwhelming flow of news and information from all around the world. Do not be mistaken, my point here is not that social media and the newest gadgets are inherently evil and dangerous to humanity. My point is that they failed in their original purpose, and yet those behind it all continued with a new purpose that no longer prioritizes the user's well-being. The apps made available to users contain a lot of information about users: usage time, age range, location, and more. What these companies are ethically doing with all this data is questionable, as it appears to be used to keep users on the app or device for as long as possible.

What is to be said of all this? Well, one thing is certain: a compromise was made somewhere down the line with big tech. That compromise was humanity's well-being for what was seen as a much more lucrative deal: barely considered innovation. This means innovation

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[66] Yubo Hou et al., "Social Media Addiction: Its Impact, Mediation, and Intervention," *Cyberpsychology Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* 13, no. 1 (February 21, 2019), https://doi.org/10.5817/cp2019-1-4.
[67] Emily B. O'Day and Richard G. Heimberg, "Social Media Use, Social Anxiety, and Loneliness: A Systematic Review," *Computers in Human Behavior Reports* 3 (January 1, 2021): 100070,https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2021.100070.

that fails to consider the needs of the average person (or user) and, at most, considers the interests of those with the most financial investments in the industry. The rush of the race to see which company can release the newest innovation is more important than considering the effects of releasing it to the public for use. The user is expendable. Profit is not.

Now, though, we must consider what happens when this creeps its way into government. In the history of the world, it has happened before, and there seems to be reasonable suspicion that it may happen again in our near future.

Rage Bait, Algorithm, AI, and Deception Through Tech

As technofascism creeps (or stomps) into our government and more people are opting for the online world rather than the real one for relief, an examination of *how* our modern-day online spaces interact with us is needed. Certain entertainment forms of content seem a bit techno-dystopian, like IRL ("in real life") streamers with hundreds of thousands of live viewers who may stalk streamers in real life using clues from the livestream and even go as far as to kill or threaten to kill streamers while live.[68] In the less extreme cases, IRL streamers may just do whatever is the most publicly outrageous thing they can think of for more views, which can equate to more sponsorships, which then equals more money. The idea of "doing anything for views" (i.e., doing anything for online engagement) is important here because it fuels the rage bait machine. I will define rage bait as content intended to secure online engagement by enraging or upsetting viewers (or users), who then comment, share, like, or dislike it.

This concept of upsetting the public to get engagement is heavily tied to the algorithm. The algorithm responds positively to rage bait, meaning it will push content that upsets the

[68] Alyssa Mercante, "'Stream Sniping' Has Become a Nightmare for IRL Creators — but What Is It?," *Rolling Stone*, March 20, 2025, https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/what-is-stream-sniping-twitch-1235299441/.

public or emboldens those with problematic views simply because it drives engagement and keeps users active on the platform. Some of this content has the potential to radicalize and polarize people. The more online radicalization and polarization, the more user activity on the platform. This signals more eyes for whatever product or service is taking up ad space. Considering that platforms like X have been found to have ads running on white supremacist and other hate speech hashtags, this is not surprising.[69] Connecting people online to form wholesome relationships and community is no longer a widely sought-after goal for the corporations that run the platforms or the companies that make the devices that run them. If rage yields the most engagement, which in turn makes the corporation more profitable with these online spaces, then so be it. Make users' social lives the company's and ensure that the company always turns a profit.

This rage is often a response to misinformation or outright falsehoods. Not long ago, the adage "Don't believe everything you see on the internet" was often repeated and invoked when encountering something especially questionable or odd online. Today, that saying is aggressively ignored. There are ways to prove that certain things are true or false. For example, empirical/visual evidence and audio evidence are two main avenues for proving something; the combination of the three is even better. The issue we encounter today is that artificial intelligence can produce images of things that never happened, audio of things that were never said, deepfakes of non-consenting speakers, and more. While some AI-produced content is obviously detectable, others may not be, especially with older age populations that are not as tech-savvy or up to speed with recent technological advancements.[70] When we have a president, cozied up with

[69] David Ingram, "Elon Musk's X Runs Ads on #Whitepower and Other Hateful Hashtags," NBC News, June 6, 2024, https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/social-media/elon-musk-x-twitter-antisemitism-hashtags-trending-hate-rcna151945.
[70] Alice Masquelier-Page, "Older Americans Prepare Themselves for a World Altered by Artificial Intelligence," The Associated Press, August 14, 2024,

the developers and proponents of this type of technology, who is also comfortable releasing a doctored image of a recently deported immigrant's tattoos to prove his gang affiliation,[71] it may only be a short time before such a corrupt administration decides to use this technology to create "evidence" to prove its weekly myths.

Government, Technology, and Mass Deception

Recall our previous discussion on technofascism. The way in which the Trump administration engages with artificial intelligence, advanced technology, and big tech corporations is cause for great concern and largely inspired me to look further into the topics explored in this thesis. The President of the United States, Donald Trump, comfortably uses his platform to post AI-generated images to his millions of followers. This comes as no surprise considering his friendliness with the heads of various tech corporations. What he and his administration are using this technology to do is purposefully misrepresent reality and spread right-wing propaganda. Trump has posted an AI-generated image of lawyer and activist Nekima Levy Armstrong in tears as she is being arrested, and the former Secretary of Homeland Security, Kristi Noem, posted the same picture before he did.[72] The first AI-generated post from the White House depicted Donald Trump as the King of New York on a magazine cover similar to the *New York Times*.[73] The White House also posted a Studio Ghibli-style AI-generated image of a

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https://www.ap.org/news-highlights/spotlights/2024/older-americans-prepare-themselves-for-a-world-altered-by-artificial-intelligence/.

[71] Jack Izzo, "Photo Trump Shared of Abrego Garcia's Tattoos Real but Altered; No Evidence They're Gang-related," Snopes, April 24, 2025, https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/trump-ms13-photo-abrego-garcia/.

[72] Kaitlyn Huamani, "Trump's use of AI images further erodes public trust, experts say," PBS, January 27, 2026, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/trumps-use-of-ai-images-further-erodes-public-trust-experts-say.

[73] Steve Rose, "The Slopaganda Era: 10 AI Images Posted by the White House – and What They Teach Us," The Guardian, January 29, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/jan/29/the-slopaganda-era-10-ai-images-posted-by-the-white-house-and-what-they-teach-us.

woman being arrested by ICE in tears.[74] There are also various AI-generated propaganda posts released by the White House, the Department of Homeland Security, and even the Labor Department that appear to be inspired by neo-Nazi texts and Nazi propaganda.[75] Trump also posted a doctored image of the Obama family boarding Air Force One covered in graffiti; this was some months after he had posted a racist video depicting former president Barack Obama and the former first lady Michelle Obama as primates.[76]

All of this is what many now consider "AI slop," meant to normalize and numb reactions to the markers that we associate with fascism and authoritarianism. We are far past the point of asking what happens *if* a government uses this type of technology to present things to the public that are not real, because the government already *is*. This grants the federal government an unprecedented amount of power to warp people's perceptions of what has or has not happened. Using an art style that would otherwise be considered cute and aesthetically pleasing to create illustrations depicting a woman who ICE agents kidnapped attempts to nullify and mask the violent nature of what is happening to our neighbors. Images reminiscent of Nazi propaganda should not be considered normal, or mindlessly liked and scrolled past. These images are not immediately recognized by everyone who comes across them, and they also serve as a dog whistle for those who know exactly what they are and support the messaging behind them. The highest level of government is now disseminating imagery that, only a short time ago, would have been found only in the most fringe corners of the internet. All of this points to a desire to play on people's ignorance for as long as need be until far-right propaganda is considered normal political speech and expression. This further platforms right-wing extremism and dresses it up in

[74] Rose, "The Slopaganda Era."
[75] Rose, "The Slopaganda Era."
[76] Will Weissert, "Trump posts a doctored photo portraying Obamas boarding Air Force One spray-painted with graffiti," PBS, July 6, 2026, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/trump-posts-a-doctored-photo-portraying-obamas-boarding-air-force-one-spray-painted-with-graffiti.

a way to appear like a mildly controversial take in the marketplace of ideas. In reality, it is far from that, especially in what is supposed to be a representative democracy. According to philosopher Jason Stanley, "Nationalism is at the core of fascism."[77] The presence of people like Stephen Miller, the White House Deputy Chief of Staff who is known to be in support of white nationalist and white supremacist ideology,[78] and Pete Hegseth, the current Secretary of Defense or what has now been renamed the Secretary of War, who has tattoos linked to white supremacy[79] can already be found in the highest level of American government, after all.

Returning to the topic of mass deception, the notion of privacy needs to be examined in this age of cyberpunk. With all sorts of apps collecting data on users from their location, demographics, and more, there is obviously a lot of information on people at the disposal of tech corporations. This is becoming increasingly normalized and explicit as new features and devices are introduced, such as biometric security and advanced security cameras, which are presented as enhancing security and protecting individuals, providing a greater sense of comfort. There are also surveillance devices presented as casual lifestyle accessories that let you literally see the future of how technology can be integrated into daily life; I am specifically referring to the Meta glasses. The use of biometric security tends to involve the saving of a user's fingerprint, facial features for recognition, or iris scans to verify a user's identity before providing them access to potentially sensitive information.[80] The U.S. Department of Homeland Security brags on its website that they use biometric security to detect and prevent undocumented migrants from

[77] Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (Random House, 2018).
[78] "Congressional Leaders Condemn White Nationalist Stephen Miller, Call for Immediate Removal From Role as White House Senior Advisor | Congressional Hispanic Caucus," Congressional Hispanic Caucus, June 13, 2023, https://chc.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/congressional-leaders-condemn-white-nationalist-stephen-miller-call-for.
[79] Jasper Craven, "Pete Hegseth's Crusade to Turn the Military into a Christian Weapon," *Politico*, December 26, 2024, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/12/06/pete-hegseth-defense-religion-christian-00192117.
[80] Jim Holdsworth and Matthew Kosinski, "What is biometric authentication?," *IBM* (blog), March 11, 2026, https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/biometric-authentication.

entering the country,[81] the same department ICE falls under. The use of this sort of technology by law enforcement agencies is not restricted to homeland security, but even local police forces are doing the same and wrongfully arresting over a dozen people so far, according to the ACLU.[82] Wrongful arrest is obviously a problem, but it is an even greater problem when it becomes a side effect or casualty of integrating imperfect technology in an already deeply flawed law enforcement system. Like humans, facial recognition technology has biases, and in a study those biases were found to show up especially strongly when it came to darker-skinned women who were most likely to be misidentified by facial recognition.[83] A wrong identification can have life-changing consequences, and as shown by research, those consequences may very well be most likely experienced by Black and brown people. In the United States, Black people are already disproportionately arrested by police.[84] The use of artificial intelligence to assist a historically violent and discriminatory system has the potential to exacerbate these existing and unresolved problems.

How is safety increased when this level of data collection can produce this extreme of a mistake? This idea of security requires an expansive amount of surveillance. This surveillance, though, is not limited to government buildings or large public spaces; it can be at your front door. Think of newer home security systems like Ring that offer doorbell cameras, indoor and outdoor security cameras, and alarms designed to keep your home safe. For enough people, this security system gives them a sense of safety and control over their homes, but the technology's

[81] "Biometrics," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, August 28, 2025, https://www.dhs.gov/biometrics.
[82] Lauren Yu and Nathan Freed Wessler, "Wrongful Arrests Pile up Due to Facial Recognition Technology," *American Civil Liberties Union*, April 14, 2026, https://www.aclu.org/news/privacy-technology/more-than-a-dozen-wrongful-arrests-due-to-police-reliance-on-facial-recognition-technology.
[83] Joy Buolamwini and Timnit Gebru, "Gender Shades: Intersectional Accuracy Disparities in Commercial Gender Classification," *Proceedings of Machine Learning Research* 81 (2018): 1–15, https://proceedings.mlr.press/v81/buolamwini18a/buolamwini18a.pdf.
[84] "Racial Disparities Persist in Many U.S. Jails," The Pew Charitable Trusts, May 16, 2023, https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2023/05/racial-disparities-persist-in-many-us-jails.

invasiveness quickly becomes hard to ignore. During the 2026 Super Bowl, a Ring ad was aired introducing a new "search party" feature that would help find lost pets by tapping into all their users' camera feeds, specifically those who did not opt out, to see if the system could recognize their lost pet.[85] The greater implications of this feature and the technology behind it were quickly recognized. Ring, owned by Amazon,[86] can use and share its technology with law enforcement agencies to find the location of immigrants being targeted especially hard during this administration and other groups of people who have been singled out by this government and over the course of this nation's history. This is a significant overreach by the government and its tech affiliates into people's lives.

Sure, we now have home security systems run by one of the largest tech companies, which many people have already been convinced will make their lives feel safer, despite the company's strong willingness to share customers' camera footage with law enforcement. But in the cyberpunk era, this is not enough. Even more surveillance needs to be normalized. This is where devices like Meta glasses come in: unassuming frames that can capture what a user sees as they go about their day, serve as users' personal assistant, and even speak to them in celebrity voices.[87] These glasses allow anyone who owns a pair to record and photograph what they see, including the people and things that they run into throughout their day without having to ask for permission beforehand. More than 7 million pairs were sold in 2025 alone.[88] While these glasses can be really helpful for people who are blind, have eyesight issues, dyslexia, dementia, and

[85] Jay Stanley, "Ring Superbowl Ad Shows Americans How Powerful Surveillance Systems Have Become, Freaks Them Out | ACLU," *American Civil Liberties Union*, February 13, 2026, https://www.aclu.org/news/privacy-technology/tracking-alpr-cameras/doorbell-camera-video-search.
[86] Jay Stanley, "Ring Superbowl Ad Shows Americans How Powerful Surveillance Systems Have Become, Freaks Them Out | ACLU."
[87] Elle Hunt, "I Wore Meta's Smartglasses for a Month – and It Left Me Feeling Like a Creep," *The Guardian*, April 1, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2026/apr/01/i-wore-metas-smartglasses-for-a-month-and-it-left-me-feeling-like-a-creep.
[88] Hunt, "I Wore Meta's Smartglasses for a Month."

other conditions[89] they can be used for less wholesome things. There have been men who consider themselves "pick-up experts" who record their interactions with women without their consent and post the footage online using Meta glasses.[90] This is deeply troubling to say the least and regressive when considering that this makes having a conversation with a woman seem like some sort of "conquest"[91] worthy of recording for men, and very unsafe for the women who do not realize they are being recorded without consent. This moment in time allows such technology to be produced and sold to the public with little consideration for the repercussions of giving practically anyone who can afford the glasses the covert ability to record others without consent. In the cyberpunk age, there is little effort by these tech corporations to ensure privacy. Their devices and services are practically a part of us and our lives, and should apparently have access to it all too.

Now, in light of all this, when I refer to "mass deception," I am referring not just to the public believing in the same lie spewed by an official government account or one of the tech oligarchs unveiling their company's newest, most invasive piece of tech yet that they conveniently do not mention is collecting more data on you than expected. What I mean by "mass deception" is the degree to which big tech and government, very easy to mix up as of recent, have an inordinate degree of control over the way information is produced, distributed, and verified. Only a few big tech companies are behind the most prominent search engines and AI chatbots. Those companies are also good friends with the federal government. Let us combine, say, Palantir with X, just for an example. Palantir is a data analytics and technology

[89] Hunt, "I Wore Meta's Smartglasses for a Month."
[90] Sophie Tanno and Ivana Scatola, "So-called 'manfluencers' are filming themselves trying to pick up women. Smart glasses are their perfect tool," CNN, February 9, 2026, https://www.cnn.com/2026/02/09/world/manfluencers-smart-glasses-intl.
[91] Tanno and Scatola, "So-called 'manfluencers' are filming themselves trying to pick up women. Smart glasses are their perfect tool."

firm that is deeply entrenched in managing the data for federal agencies.[92] As of recently, the firm has been tapped by the Trump administration to help different federal agencies merge their data on Americans and residents into one huge database that allows the federal government access to an obscene amount of information on people.[93] Take that and combine it with a platform like X owned by a man who was formerly involved in the American government and who, out of the 31 days in January of 2026, used 26 of those days to spew white supremacist talking points[94] and who could very willingly partner with a company like Palantir. For the right price, a collaboration like this could take all of Palantir's data and link it to X accounts to persecute people who criticize the government. Now this is all hypothetical, but more alarms should be going off.

Just Put it into Chat…

Beyond its potential and proven ability to severely disrupt human beings' most basic understanding of what is real and fake, it also disrupts original thought, thoughtfulness, creativity, and interpersonal connections. These AI platforms can answer prompts on the user's behalf that can then be copied and pasted wherever the user desires. This makes me ask: now that the user no longer has to allocate time to answering whatever the question was, what will the user do? Does AI give the user more time to reflect on life? Or maybe spend time with their family? Or perhaps spend time doing a hobby that they have long since neglected? The issue with this, though, is that if this is the case, as it is often advertised, it literally makes no sense. Capitalism is designed to consume most of our lives by devoting a majority of our time to

[92] Sheera Frenkel and Aaron Krolik, "Trump Taps Palantir to Compile Data on Americans," *The New York Times*, May 30, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/30/technology/trump-palantir-data-americans.html.
[93] Frenkel and Krolik, "Trump Taps Palantir to Compile Data on Americans."
[94] Nick Robins-Early, "Elon Musk Posted About Race Almost Every Day in January," *The Guardian*, February 12, 2026, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2026/feb/12/elon-musk-posts-january-white-supremacists.

making money, spending it, then looking for things that convince us to spend more, and this cycle keeps repeating. This is a very watered-down version of how capitalism functions and focuses on only a sliver (labor/consumerism) of what makes up our lives, but please bear with me and this particular sliver for now.

When we look at it this way, all AI does in this sense is remove the need to think at all. If the need to think is lost, so is the idea of thoughtfulness. Building on Zuboff's aforementioned work, this goes further than removing people's agency in making political decisions; it now also removes people's agency to create and convey their own emotions and sentiments in their more personal and intimate relationships. Ads like Apple's Apple Intelligence ads that ran in 2024 show exactly that. A wife forgets her husband's birthday and is only reminded when their children come downstairs with gifts, so she has Apple Intelligence make her a cute video of photos for him and presents the gift a few seconds after.[95] A bored office worker types an unprofessional email to a colleague and has Apple Intelligence make it sound "professional" and sends it to them, and the colleague is just surprised that the sender had the capacity to sound that smart.[96] A corporate businessman is asked if he read some documents; he lies and says he did, so he is then asked to carry the meeting, but then rolls out the conference meeting room on his office chair and uses Apple Intelligence to give him the key points, and he confidently returns to start the meeting while his colleagues look at him unseriously.[97] These are obviously made to be funny, unserious ways to use their AI and to make a memorable ad, but there is something to be said about the lack of thought and thoughtfulness exhibited throughout. While *you* may not use Apple Intelligence or any AI to obviously slack off as an employee or make a gift for a loved

[95] Apple, "Apple Intelligence | Create Memory Movies | iPhone 16," October 28, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A0BXZhdDqZM.
[96] Apple, "Apple Intelligence | Writing Tools | iPhone 16," October 28, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3m0MoYKwVTM.
[97] Apple, "Apple Intelligence | Catch up Quick | MacBook Pro," November 4, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BK8bnkcT0Ng.

one, AI *is* completely capable of doing those things. The developers of AI tools are aware of this and flaunt it as another technological success. The machine can help you feign intelligence and care, so in certain areas of your life, why strive for either? This is the "tool." As a society, can we confidently say that this is a step forward for humans and technology?

Seemingly thoughtful, meticulously crafted digital projects can be created using AI. This should not be misconstrued as implying that AI can create truly unique art of its own, inspired by its perception of the world. Yes, technically, AI can generate art, but at what cost to human artists? AI art-generating platforms have been trained on human artists' works, allowing them to produce copies, renditions, or works that share notable features. This devalues human creativity and the careers of artists because these artists end up suffering financial losses as companies find it cheaper to use AI to produce the images and art that they need.[98] These artists are also having their art used to train AI without their permission, and to make matters worse, these AI art generators are inaccurately representing people of color.[99] For the company or corporation, all this means is cheaper art for their products and marketing. They will not actually need to contact models of color. They can just use AI-generated images of made-up people of color like Cameron-James Wilson, a white visual artist who made a Black woman AI supermodel that they own and license to other big fashion brands for use.[100] This shows not just a disruption of creativity but also opens the door for people to literally own the likenesses of already marginalized populations, which is a whole other issue.

Data Centers, the Environment, and Sustainability Commitments[101]

[98] Harry H. Jiang et al., "AI Art and its Impact on Artists," *AIES*, August 8, 2023, 363–74, https://doi.org/10.1145/3600211.3604681.
[99] Jiang et al., "AI Art and Its Impact on Artists."
[100] Jiang et al., "AI Art and Its Impact on Artists."
[101] Portions of this section are from or informed by a literature review that I wrote in Fall 2025 for POLS 400.

What powers the technology needed for this cyberpunk era? Undoubtedly, our answer rests largely on data centers. Cryptocurrency, mentioned earlier for its energy consumption, and AI data centers consume enormous amounts of energy and resources to function. These "data centers are essentially large warehouses that house super-computers. These super-computers are what run a tech company's information technology infrastructure and hold the data needed for applications and services to be conducted.[102] In 2025, it was reported that Elon Musk's xAI was using gas-powered generators to support the company's generative AI, Grok.[103] The glaring issue with this is that the Memphis data center, located in a historically Black, low-income neighborhood, is severely polluting the community's air.[104] This does not phase operations, though, because as the need for more energy grew, so did that data center.[105] The company's operations must continue to grow even if people, users and non-users, are harmed in the process. This is not just a deduction made from the aforementioned facts, but reality. With the tech demand for AI on the rise, the actual size and energy capacity of these data centers are also increasing to the point where they have the same power capacity as 80,000 to 800,000 homes or 100 to 1,000 megawatts.[106] These data centers are straining the existing power grid because of the immense amount of energy they require.[107]

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[102] Susnjara, Stephanie, and Ian Smalley, "What is a data center?" IBM (blog), November 17, 2025. https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/data-centers.
[103] Nasser Eledroos, "Progress Shouldn't Poison Black Communities." Tech Policy Press, June 25, 2025. https://www.techpolicy.press/progress-shouldnt-poison-black-communities/.
[104] Chunrong Jia and Jeffery Foran, "Air Toxics Concentrations, Source Identification, and Health Risks: An Air Pollution Hot Spot in Southwest Memphis, TN," *Atmospheric Environment* 81 (September 13, 2013): 112–16, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.atmosenv.2013.09.006.
[105] Eric Hilt, "xAI Built an Illegal Power Plant to Power Its Data Center - Southern Environmental Law Center," Southern Environmental Law Center, April 14, 2026, https://www.selc.org/news/xai-built-an-illegal-power-plant-to-power-its-data-center/.
[106] EPRI, "Powering Intelligence: Analyzing Artificial Intelligence and Data Center Energy Consumption," May 28, 2024. https://www.epri.com/research/products/000000003002028905.
[107] Xin Chen et al., "Electricity Demand and Grid Impacts of AI Data Centers: Challenges and Prospects," arXiv.org, September 8, 2025, https://arxiv.org/abs/2509.07218.

So, clearly data centers use a lot of energy. But what does that *actually mean*? Well, about 1 in 5 data centers receive the water needed to cool their expanding facilities from significantly stressed watersheds.[108] Despite this, nearly half of data center servers are completely or partially powered by "power plants located within water stressed regions."[109] Living in a time when the effects of climate change are becoming more extreme and are only expected to intensify the less action governments take, this information sheds light on a huge oversight by these tech companies for using this much energy. These data centers are powering the future right now, but they are also ignoring their negative environmental impacts. The irony here may be obvious, but it is important to reiterate that these advancements were intended to benefit humans, transforming how we go about our lives and engage with the environment through increased access to knowledge. However, this does not appear to be the case. What happens to the surrounding communities and wildlife if a drought occurs? Perhaps a second look at Musk's Grok AI data centers can offer insight into how these tech companies might respond to the harm their operations cause in the communities where they operate. The gas turbines being used to operate the facility are polluting the air, and they are doing this with "no permits, no public input, and no notice to nearby communities."[110] It grows increasingly hard to believe that the purpose of platforms that need data centers of this scale is to even remotely improve the lives of their users, both online and in their physical reality.

This now requires us to look at some of the companies behind these centers and the environmental commitments and claims they make, despite what we now know. According to an article on Google's own official blog, *The Keyword,* in the span of a year the company's "median

[108] Md Abu Bakar Siddik, Arman Shehabi, and Landon Marston, "The Environmental Footprint of Data Centers in the United States," *Environmental Research Letters* 16, no. 6 (April 27, 2021): 064017, https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/abfba1.
[109] Siddik, et al., "The Environmental Footprint of Data Centers in the United States."
[110] Eric Hilt, "xAI Built an Illegal Power Plant to Power Its Data Center - Southern Environmental Law Center,"

energy consumption and carbon footprint per Gemini Apps text prompt decreased by factors of 33x and 44x, respectively".[111] They also brag that their data center energy emissions were decreased by 12% in 2024 despite their electricity consumption increasing by 27%,[112] and in a 2024 environmental report they disclosed that their emissions increased by 48% since 2019.[113] Microsoft has made commitments to be, "carbon negative by 2030 and by 2050 to remove from the atmosphere an equivalent amount of all the carbon dioxide [the] company has emitted either directly or by [their] electricity consumption since [they] were founded in 1975."[114] The company's environmental report states that one of their target goals is to reduce their "indirect emission from all other activities in which [they are] engaged."[115] Their report shows that they are not doing a great job at that, as those indirect emissions from the company's activities have actually increased by 26% since 2020.[116] Now, when socially and environmentally impactful companies like these, with worths in the trillions respectively, fail to do what they say they will, as an effort to clean up their own mess, what happens? Nothing. Nothing happens. Well, nothing to really mitigate this and hold these companies accountable. This is exacerbated by governments actually calling for these tech companies to expand even further with no regulations. This can be seen through Trump's 2025 Executive Order No. 14365 titled "Ensuring a National Policy Framework for Artificial Intelligence" that will produce a framework that "forbid[s] State laws that conflict with the policy set forth in this order" and allows these harmful AI companies to "be

[111] Ben Gomes, "Our Approach to Energy Innovation and AI's Environmental Footprint," *Google*, August 22, 2025, https://blog.google/outreach-initiatives/sustainability/google-ai-energy-efficiency/.
[112] Gomes, "Our Approach to Energy Innovation and AI's Environmental Footprint."
[113] Google, "Google Environmental Report 2024," *Gstatic.Com* (Google, 2023), https://www.gstatic.com/gumdrop/sustainability/google-2024-environmental-report.pdf.
[114]Microsoft, "Sustainability | Microsoft," n.d., https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/corporate-responsibility/sustainability-journey#commitment.
[115] Microsoft, "2025 Microsoft Environmental Sustainability Report," *Microsoft* (Microsoft, 2024), https://cdn-dynmedia-1.microsoft.com/is/content/microsoftcorp/microsoft/msc/documents/presentations/CSR/2025-Microsoft-Environmental-Sustainability-Report.pdf#page=10.
[116] Microsoft, "2025 Microsoft Environmental Sustainability Report."

free to innovate without cumbersome regulation."[117] Environmental accountability is watered down and trivialized as "cumbersome regulation" in the cyberpunk era.

Humans, AI, and the Connection in Between

AI has another questionable use and ability: disrupting our understanding of interpersonal connections. I am referring to the development of what they feel are deep connections or relationships with AI chatbots; Character.ai has become more popular recently. Character.ai is an AI platform that allows users to have conversations with AI-generated characters, including celebrities, friends, and romantic partners. This platform may be helpful for those who are practicing a language or if a user just wants to play a game.[118] The use of the platform gets a bit troubling when we look at the instance of a fourteen-year-old who grew a very close, occasionally romantic, relationship with a chatbot character and eventually shared suicidal thoughts with her and then took his own life, leaving a message to the character that he would be coming home to her.[119] This is an extreme instance of what can go wrong with this use of AI, and I do not mean to say that all interactions with role-play AI are this intense. I mention it to highlight the potential for humans to develop incredibly deep connections with a bot that is just saying what it is taught to say in response to the messages users send it. A study on sycophantic AI even showed that the AI models tested affirmed users 49% more often than humans, and in their human experiments they found that, "even a single interaction with sycophantic AI reduced participants' willingness to take responsibility and repair interpersonal conflicts, while increasing

[117] Donald J. Trump, The White House, and J.D. Vance. *Winning the Race*, 2025. https://whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Americas-AI-Action-Plan.pdf#page.
[118] Internet Matters Ltd, "What Is Character AI? What Parents Need to Know | Internet Matters," Internet Matters, May 8, 2025, https://www.internetmatters.org/advice/apps-and-platforms/entertainment/character-ai/.
[119] Kevin Roose, "Can A.I. Be Blamed for a Teen's Suicide?," *The New York Times*, October 23, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/23/technology/characterai-lawsuit-teen-suicide.html.

their own conviction that they were right."[120] These chatbots are often programmed to reassure the user without pushback, which does not replicate normal or healthy discourse. There is no one on the other side of these messages, but in this age of social isolation, these bots may be used as a sort of solution that does not actually connect humans. What is there to say of a society where people may feel more comfortable and find it much more accessible to speak with an AI chatbot than to find a safe person to talk to? Is this really a tool for advancement or the newest bandage in our increasingly digital world?

It is very hard to believe that these platforms are simply intended to connect our great big world and make our lives easier. These platforms strategically run and remain relevant by using algorithms that surface inflammatory content. The AI tools designed to assist and make our lives easier seem more aimed at cutting humans out of actions and interactions that arguably require humanity. This seems to be the greatest mass-deception of it all, at first glance, and even in the second, we believed it all. The original goals of all these platforms have long been left behind in favor of profit. Exploiting controversy is more lucrative than nurturing a healthy community. Producing and improving artificial intelligence will yield companies a greater return on investment and a much more compliant, productive workforce than hiring humans who may organize for basic workers' rights.

Tech Bros and Tech Corporations: Do They Hold a Monopoly on Truth?

The internet is often our source for truth (specifically, when it comes to legitimate sources and outlets) and our go-to for fact-checking. This vast virtual landscape is essentially owned by a few big tech corporations, acting in their own interests, and users are exploited at their expense to

[120] Myra Cheng et al., "Sycophantic AI Decreases Prosocial Intentions and Promotes Dependence," *Science* 391, no. 6792 (March 26, 2026): eaec8352, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aec8352.

achieve those interests. This leads me to the question of whether these few companies ultimately possess a monopoly on truth, and to a degree, it makes sense to say "yes!" Obviously, there are "truths" that are very personal and unique to different people's lives, often referred to as "felt truths" or "emotional truths." But what about universal truths? Big answers to big questions. We are discussing matters such as study results, what happens on live news, and the images we see of real-life events. If all this information we may assume is true is accessible only through a small set of sites, apps, and platforms owned by a few tech corporations and their owners, then the monopoly they have on truth becomes potentially unsettling. They have already compromised many of their original goals for profit. On the occasion that they are bought out by the Trump administration, for example, to say certain things, not say others, and flat out deny claims, even in the most basic understanding of what is true and false, we must consider what this may mean for American society. Think of well-known conservative Fox News, which has been "sold" to the far-right for a long time and has "journalists" and anchors that say things that are just false,[121] yet have a devout audience that believes it even when they are presented with credible counter-evidence. If it worked there, there is a chance for this model to be expanded. If the public is successfully rage-baited and polarized as a result, there is room for a similar grip of lies to be had on the larger public.

Credible, reliable access to knowledge and to what is true is not meant to be owned by a company. Especially not by any companies that have shown themselves to be overly willing to buckle and fold if that grants them perks from an extreme right-wing government. This is what becomes unignorably frightening in this cyberpunk moment. The technology we now *need*, the information sources we should *trust*, and the government that should *recognize* and try to *protect*

[121] David Bauder, Randall Chase, and Geoff Mulvihill, "Fox, Dominion Reach $787.5M Settlement Over False Election Claims | AP News," AP News, April 18, 2023, https://apnews.com/article/fox-news-dominion-lawsuit-trial-trump-2020-0ac71f75acfacc52ea80b3e747fb0afe.

people from such levels of control are becoming one entity. There is no discernible difference between the government's best interest for the people and big tech's best interest for itself. This is not because they just so happen to be incredibly similar but because they have become the same through the collapse of public and private power. The same person that can control and distort what shows up on the *Trending* page of a social media app[122] can also seamlessly slip in and out of government. In the cyberpunk era, a president in cahoots with big tech can get an app shut down, then have that same app reopened with a pop-up thank-you message to himself[123] to look like some sort of savior. The same app that was supposedly shut down because it was owned by a non-American company collecting Americans' data, now owned by a "US-majority corporate entity," collects even more surveillance information on American users than before.[124] What has become unmistakably true in the cyberpunk era is that the "truth" that makes up our reality can be altered to satisfy the government officials and tech oligarchs behind it. Truth, or whatever is presented as it, therefore, rests in the hands of those who control the digital-corporate-governmental power structure.

Conclusion: What does this all mean for us?

The public, whom these corporations call "users," must be mindful of how we use these ever-advancing devices and services. They most definitely have the ability and potential to be very useful tools in our lives. They can help us to maintain and develop deep connections with one another. They can be the start of healthy relationships—platonic, romantic, familial, or

[122] Shannon Bond, Bobby Allyn, and Juana Summers, "2 Years in, Trump Surrogate Elon Musk Has Remade X as a Conservative Megaphone," *NPR*, October 25, 2024, https://www.npr.org/transcripts/nx-s1-5156184.
[123] Julia Reinstein and Max Zahn, "TikTok Thanks Trump After It Begins Restoring Service to US Users," *ABC News*, January 19, 2025, https://abcnews.com/Business/tiktok-restoring-service/story?id=117857636.
[124] "Under U.S. Ownership, TikTok Poses an Even Greater Threat to Americans' Privacy," Harvard Kennedy School, January 27, 2026, https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/carr-ryan/our-work/carr-ryan-commentary/under-us-ownership-tiktok-poses-even-greater-threat.

professional—that ultimately enrich our lives. They can help us organize our thoughts, brainstorm, and more. They can also tear us further apart, addict us, anger us, depress us, isolate us, and eventually render us useless in the most extreme cases. Yet this cannot simply be changed by people getting VPNs and publicly expressing discomfort with the symptoms of a cyberpunk order.

The problem lies in the way the government and tech oligarchies have meshed into one surveillance machine that takes no issue with violating almost any sense of privacy for the people. The data being collected is, in some ways, for our own good, yet the most prominent ideas for how to use it are to sell it to advertisers or share it with law enforcement. Tech oligarchs can move through our government without any campaigning, elections, or direct public address. Being friends with whoever is in charge does the trick just fine. The problem lies in how the experiment of connecting us all worked ~~at first~~ and then, over time, showed signs of failure yet grew more expansive despite that. Providing platforms that are shown to thrive on polarizing people with problematic content and no intention of fixing that supposed anomaly in the system that also just so happens to be the company's moneymaker. The problem is that the need to think and be imaginative is being framed as an inconvenience a digital assistant can solve. It is odd that some of today's greatest tech innovators, who brainstormed and toiled over their own projects and ideas until they got to where they are now, find it an unnecessary and tedious step in bringing the human imagination to life. Algorithms, perfected to take up as much of our time as possible and show us what we want to see, help make all of this happen more smoothly.

This structural change we are witnessing overtly marries government and big tech in ways that those making the plays stand to benefit, while everyone else just has to adapt. However, this does not have to be our future. We are not completely numb and unaware of what

is happening. While our sense of agency is being gradually stripped away, we still have a chance to vote for people who will fight against big tech, resist the right-wing extremists and nationalists in our government, and call out the failure of our government to protect the people. Moving forward, there should be more legal and enforceable protections put in place to guard people against invasive and covert data collection and from tech corporations whose platforms are known to have negative effects on users and/or the environment. Our government should be at the service of the people, not looking to make a profit with their friends in big tech at our disposal.

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