

TECH POLICY

Why the balance of power in tech is shifting toward workers

A record number of tech worker unions formed in the US last year. They're part of a global effort.

By Jane Lytvynenko

February 7, 2022





Ifeoma Ozoma blew the whistle on racial and gender discrimination at Pinterest in 2020, together with her coworker Aerica Shimizu Banks. She's since become an advocate for other whistleblowers.

ADRIA MALCOLM/THE NEW YORK TIMES VIA REDUX

Something has changed for the tech giants. Even as they continue to hold tremendous influence in our daily lives, a growing accountability movement has begun to check their power. Led in large part by tech workers themselves, a movement seeking reform of how these companies do business, treat their employees, and conduct themselves as global citizens has taken on unprecedented momentum, particularly in the past year.

Concerns and anger over tech companies' impact in the world is nothing new, of course. What's changed is that workers are increasingly getting organized. Whether writing public letters, marching in protest, filing lawsuits, or unionizing, the labor force that makes the corporate tech world run is finding its voice, demanding a future in which companies do better and are held more responsible for their actions.

A week to remember

It began with a Facebook outage. For some six hours on October 4, 2021, services for its 3.5 billion users across the world were unreachable. The timing couldn't have been worse for the company: just hours before, whistleblower Frances Haugen had dropped a series of damning revelations about Facebook's willingness to put corporate goals above ethics and its users' well-being. The stock price plunged. On the 5th, a Tuesday, Haugen would unflinchingly testify for three and a half hours before the United States Senate Commerce Committee on how "Facebook consistently chose to prioritize its profits" over public safety.

THE DOWNLOAD

Your daily dose of what's up in emerging technology

Enter your email

[Sign up](#)[Privacy Policy](#)

If executives at Facebook and other tech companies hoped Haugen would be an outlier, Ifeoma Ozoma had other plans: a day after Haugen's testimony, Ozoma and several colleagues launched [the Tech Worker Handbook](#) online. Ozoma was herself a whistleblower, having [called out racial and gender discrimination at Pinterest](#), together with her coworker Aerica Shimizu Banks, in 2020. Since then, she has become something of an inspiration for whistleblowers in the tech world. "I've heard from tech workers asking for advice since I first went public," she says. She responded to hundreds of people individually, but to her that solution was just "not scalable," so she used what she'd learned from those experiences to build the website. It got 30,000 hits on the first day.

The handbook guides potential whistleblowers on how to handle the media, explains legal rights, and teaches both online safety—to avoid corporate surveillance, for example—and offline tactics, like how to get through a doxxing campaign. "Preparedness is power," says the front page.

"Individuals should not have to rely on whisper networks for justice." The site received an effusive response online and endorsements from activists, researchers, and other whistleblowers.

Just a day after publishing her handbook, Ozoma notched another major victory for accountability: on October 7, California governor [Gavin Newsom signed bill SB 331](#) into law.

Also known as the Silenced No More Act, the bill protects workers who speak out about discrimination and harassment, even if they've signed a nondisclosure agreement, a common practice in the tech industry. The bill was written by state senator Connie M. Leyva and cosponsored by Ozoma, who drew from her whistleblowing and policy knowledge to help shape it. "Forty million people is a big fucking deal," she says, referring to California's population. "And if it would end there it would be a big fucking deal."

To support MIT Technology Review's journalism, please consider [becoming a subscriber](#).

Sign up for your daily dose of what's up in emerging technology.

Enter your email

Sign up

Get updates and offers from MIT Technology Review

By signing up, you agree to our [Privacy Policy](#).

It didn't end there. As the law was making its way through the legislative system, a coalition of companies spearheaded by Ozoma pushed other tech firms to commit to extending its protection to all employees, not just those based in California. Expensify and Twilio agreed, but "it's been a different story with Apple, Google, Facebook, Etsy, and a number of other companies," Ozoma says.

Undeterred, the Transparency in Employment Agreements Coalition worked within the guidelines of the US Securities and Exchange Commission to file shareholder resolutions with seven technology companies, pushing them to extend the Silenced No More protections to all employees. Apple tried to get the proposal thrown out, but in late December the SEC ruled that the proposal does not "seek to micromanage the company," as Apple claimed, meaning shareholders can now vote on it. If it's passed at the March 4 annual meeting, the company will have to publish a public report on the use of concealment clauses in cases of discrimination or harassment.

The Silenced No More Act went into effect on January 1, 2022. Even if every shareholder proposal effort fails, workers who live in California have been liberated from the restrictions that NDAs impose. The new law all but guarantees that new voices will step forward to bring their experiences to light.

"All of the work that we're doing and speaking up and organizing builds on what has come before and makes it possible for more to come in the future and to be successful," Ozoma says.

Rooted in Techlash

To understand how advocacy and organizing within the tech industry work now, you have to go back to 2018, the year of the Techlash. Three important things happened that year. First a Cambridge Analytica whistleblower came forward with allegations of data misuse at Facebook. Then thousands of Google employees fought against Project Maven, an AI initiative created to enhance military drones. The year culminated in a massive, global Google walkout spurred by

MIT Technology Review**Subscribe**

the streets, says Claire Stapleton, one of the organizers.



COURTESY PHOTO



COURTESY PHOTO

JS Tan and Nataliya Nedzhvetskaya help run the Collective Action in Tech archive, a project tracking the industry's organizing efforts.

According to Collective Action in Tech, a project tracking the industry's organizing efforts, every year since the walkout has seen more workers speaking out. The big tech companies' image as friendly giants had been shattered. Part of the walkout's legacy, Stapleton says, was "helping people see the gap between how companies present themselves and how they run a business, and what the capitalist machine is and does."

TECH ARCHIVE.

“Compared to 2018, I think there’s a lot more realism about what organizing workers means and what comes with that,” says Nedzhvetskaya, a PhD candidate at the University of California, Berkeley. “One theory for why we’re seeing this base building is because people realize this is a hard thing to do individually.”

Last year, rather than penning open letters (which can be a fairly quick process), workers began pushing for unionization, a notoriously prolonged ordeal. But creating unions—even if they’re “solidarity unions,” which have fewer legal protections—is an investment in the future. Twelve tech-worker unions were formed in 2021, according to Collective Action in Tech’s analysis, more than in any previous year. Tan, who originally conceived the archive, says most of those unions are at smaller outlets where there are fewer barriers to organization. But workers from larger firms are getting in on the action too.

“If the goal is to hold these big tech companies accountable,” says Tan, himself a former tech worker who helped organize within Microsoft, “it’s not just one of these groups of workers who’s going to be able to do it. It’s the combined strength of them.”

The fight against “digital slavery”

Nader Awaad knows where to find Uber drivers with time to spare. He approaches them while they idle in the parking lots outside London’s bustling airports, waiting for customers. Awaad hands them a leaflet and talks to them about joining a union, patiently hearing them make the same complaints he’s heard echoed across the industry.

Gig drivers aren’t the white-collar software developers you might picture when you think of a tech worker, but they make up a huge and growing group of tech employees. Over the last year, they have become increasingly vocal about several basic demands: for better pay, increased safety, a way to seek recourse if they are unfairly kicked off a company’s app. In the [UK](#) and [South Africa](#), drivers have brought Uber to court. In the US, [DoorDash drivers](#) went on an unprecedented, countrywide strike over plunging pay. In [Hong Kong](#) and [mainland China](#), food delivery workers organized strikes for better pay and safety. In [Croatia](#), Uber drivers held a press conference and a strike, saying their payments were late. “We feel like digital slaves,” one union member said.



In October 2021, Awaad helped organize a demonstration among drivers to protest termination without chance for appeal.

WIKTOR SZYMANOWICZ/NURPHOTO VIA AP

Awaad began driving for Uber in 2019 after being laid off from his previous job as a senior manager. He immediately felt the industry's problems. "It reminded me of reading Charles Dickens," he says. "The level of exploitation. The level of deprivation. I said, 'I can't believe it.'" Just as quickly, he realized he was not alone. Another driver he met at Heathrow sympathized. He looked around for a union to join, and by April 2019 he was a member of United Private Hire Drivers, a branch of the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain. He is now the elected chair.

His local membership of 900 or so drivers echoes those global problems, and he's helped organize pickets and strikes, but he says the companies are refusing to engage in open dialogue. Awaad says drivers have to stay on the road for 12 or 14 hours a day to earn enough to get by.

In a landmark case last February, the UK's Supreme Court ruled that drivers are entitled to holidays, pensions, and a minimum wage. Several unions say Uber has avoided those new obligations, but the European Commission has also taken notice of the problem. It issued a directive in December to "improve the working conditions in platform work," meaning new rules will follow.



Nader Awaad joined United Private Hire Drivers, a branch of the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain, in 2019. He is now the elected chair.

COURTESY PHOTO

Then there's the problem of algorithmic discrimination. Companies use algorithms to verify that drivers are who they say they are, but face-recognition technology is notoriously worse at recognizing nonwhite faces than white ones. In London, the vast majority of drivers are people of color, and some are getting removed from the platforms because of that gap.

Termination without a chance for appeal was a major motive for a strike Awaad helped organize in October. About 100 drivers rallied in the brisk London air, holding a large black banner with "End unfair terminations, stop ruining lives" written in white. In the background, protesters held signs with photos of drivers. "Reinstate Debora," one of them said. "Reinstate Amadou," said another.

During that rally, United Private Hire Drivers announced a discrimination complaint it had filed on the basis of the face-recognition errors. "We expect the court to come heavy on Uber because it happens in other countries, not only in our country," Awaad says.

big the moment was going to be,” Field says. By the afternoon, big-name celebrities were voicing their support.

The drivers who do get work face other dangers. Covid exposure is an ongoing concern. So is assault—Awaad has spoken with drivers who have been attacked and robbed of their cars. He plans to organize a protest in front of the UK parliament to demand safety measures, and has been reaching out to other unions representing drivers, hoping to form a coalition and get the companies to act.

“We have two drivers who were killed in Nigeria. We have a driver who was killed on the 17th of February in London. We have, on a daily basis, attacks against the drivers,” Awaad says. “It’s not something that has to do with London only. It’s a global issue.”

Busting union busters

In September, workers at Imperfect Foods who had voted to unionize found that their employer was prepared to play the role of union buster. The same thing happened in November at HelloFresh, another grocery delivery service, whose workers in Aurora, Colorado, reported bullying and intimidation from management. When workers at an Amazon warehouse in Alabama held a vote in April on whether to unionize, the company interfered so extensively that the US National Labor Relations Board ordered a do-over. (In a separate settlement, the agency said Amazon must allow its workers to freely organize unions.)

Such tactics are spreading, according to Yonatan Miller, a volunteer with the Berlin chapter of the Tech Workers Coalition. “Germany has a strong tradition of social compromise and social partnership, where companies are not as adversarial or hostile,” Miller says. “This is something that you’re kind of seeing imported from the US—this kind of US-style union-busting industry.”

MIT Technology Review**Subscribe**

ULI KAUFMANN

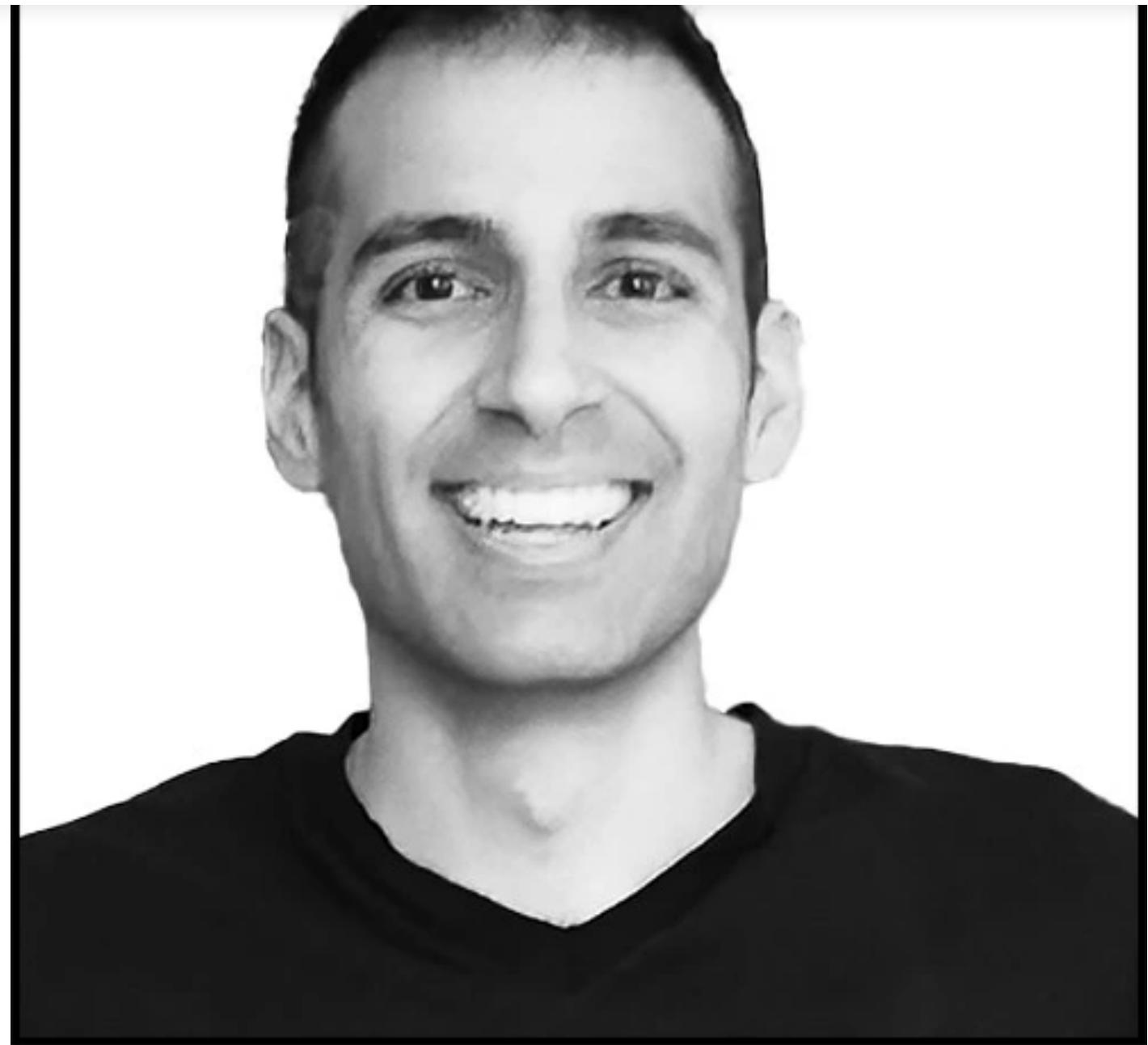
The Tech Workers Coalition is a grassroots, volunteer-led organization with 21 chapters globally. Miller got involved in 2019 and still remembers the first meeting, in Berlin's Kreuzberg neighborhood, with about 40 tech workers in attendance. "Most of us were, as they say in Germany, newcomers. And some of us were from Arabic or Muslim background," he says. But most were from Latin America, Eastern Europe, or elsewhere in Europe.

The idea behind the coalition is to help find a global answer to a global problem, and in the Berlin chapter's two years of operation, it has achieved plenty of tangible results. It helped organizers at the grocery app Gorillas, Germany's first unicorn company, which fought bitterly against a workers' council, a union-like organization within a company that negotiates rights for workers. It also helped raise funds for an Amazon warehouse worker in Poland who was fired in what the coalition says was retaliation for her union activity. When the HelloFresh workers were trying to unionize, the coalition chapter in Berlin organized a protest in front of the company's headquarters in solidarity. Any time there's need or want, the coalition comes in to provide training, advice, or support, much of it "happening more discreetly behind the scenes," Miller says.

In his eyes, these efforts are bringing the tech industry closer to other industries' standards. His labor organizing is inspired as much by the activity of teachers and health workers as it is by the Google walkout. The inability to mingle with these other workers is one reason the pandemic has been so frustrating—it cut off access to the bars and gatherings where complaints turn into ideas and, eventually, actions at a moment when the industry had just begun to accept the need for labor organizing. "We won the moral argument," Miller says, "but we haven't been able to flex it."

Tech, with integrity

The dust from Frances Haugen's testimony last October hadn't yet settled when two former Facebook workers made an announcement. Sahar Massachi and Jeff Allen were launching the Integrity Institute, a nonprofit intended to publish independent research and help set standards for integrity professionals, who work to prevent social platforms from causing harm. Both Massachi and Allen had been ruminating on the idea for a while. They'd worked to clean up platforms as part of Facebook's integrity team; some of Allen's research was among the documents Haugen leaked. Now they wanted to answer big questions: What does integrity work look like as a discipline? What does it mean to responsibly build an internet platform?



COURTESY PHOTO



COURTESY PHOTO

Sahar Massachi and Jeff Allen launched a nonprofit to publish independent research and help set standards for integrity professionals.

“When you’re doing that work, it just very quickly becomes clear that this is going to be a very long-term problem,” says Allen. It’s also a problem that goes beyond Facebook. Every platform struggles with how to handle spam, foreign influence operations, and networked disinformation. Allen and Massachi want the Integrity Institute to be the go-to place for advice and original research on these issues, which they plan to publish in an open-source format.

Related Story**She risked everything to expose Facebook. Now she's telling her story.**

Sophie Zhang, a former data scientist at Facebook, revealed that it enables global political manipulation and has done little to stop it.

The field. “Right now, it’s obviously very difficult to imagine how anybody can do any real research within these corporations,” Gebru told [MIT Technology Review](#) in December 2020. “But if you had labor protection, if you have whistleblower protection, if you have some more oversight, it might be easier for people to be protected while they’re doing this kind of work.”

“Strength in community”

Terra Field worried it would rain on the day of the walkout. The weather was cloudy, and she wasn’t sure how many people would show. “None of us were particularly amazing at project management,” she says. At Netflix, there’s an ongoing joke that every meeting starts five minutes late: it’s called the Netflix Five. That was true of the walkout, too. Field watched as, at five minutes past the hour, the parking lot of Netflix’s office in Los Gatos, California, filled with trans workers and their allies, gathering to rally against the company’s reaction to criticism of Dave Chappelle’s latest special, *The Closer*.

Field hadn’t expected [her Twitter thread](#) about the comedian’s anti-trans jokes to lead to the work stoppage, but it was “incredibly gratifying” when over 100 people came to the rally. “At first I don’t think I understood how big the moment was going to be,” she says. By the afternoon, big-name celebrities—[Dan Levy](#), [Elliot Page](#), and [Jonathan Van Ness](#) among them—were voicing their support on social media.

Massachi and Allen are not whistleblowers. They’re careful to stay well within the bounds of their NDAs and avoid getting into detail about their time at Facebook. But they represent a larger trend of former big tech employees using their expertise to bring knowledge about platform functions into the public light.

This includes algorithm ethicists, who had their own revolution in 2021. Meredith Whittaker, an AI researcher and former Google employee who helped organize the 2018 walkout, is [now advising](#) the US Federal Trade Commission. Timnit Gebru, who was fired in December 2020 from her position co-leading Google’s Ethical AI team, announced the creation of the [Distributed AI Research Institute](#) a year later.

The firing of Gebru and then the team’s founder, [Margaret Mitchell](#), had sent [shock waves through the AI and tech communities](#). Google employees [penned a letter of protest](#) to CEO Sundar Pichai, other [engineers resigned](#), and a campaign titled [#MakeAIEthical](#) [sought to disrupt Google’s influence](#) over



Terra Field didn't expect her Twitter thread about Dave Chappelle's antitrans jokes to lead to a work stoppage at Netflix.

COURTESY PHOTO

Field began working at Netflix in 2019; it was her first job after she transitioned. She talked to the trans employee resource group during the interview process, and after she was hired, it wasn't long before she joined herself. The group, she said, became a lifeline for many during early pandemic isolation, and especially for those who transitioned during that time and needed community. But it also served a larger function at Netflix. Members met with other teams to provide training. "It was a lot about helping people understand the trans experience—trying to build empathy, understanding," Field says.

One of the key relationships the group built was with the content teams, who turned to its members as a resource and a sounding board. "It meant that there weren't things that accidentally might hurt the trans community," Field says. It was an informal process, but a helpful one. The group helped consult on a much-praised episode of *The Baby-Sitters Club*, for example, which thoughtfully featured a trans character. It also helped with questions on how to dub trans voices in different countries and talked about "how to make the content more authentic."

But the group was blindsided by Chappelle's special. Its members found out at the same time as everyone else—through a push notification. "We kind of felt betrayed on some level," Field says. She thinks the reaction would have been different had trans workers known it was coming and had the opportunity to give feedback. "I'm from New Jersey, so the way I deal with things is complaining about them loudly," she says.

MIT Technology Review[Subscribe](#)

walkout, she resigned, citing [the firing of D. Pagels-Minor](#), another trans employee who helped organize it. Pagels-Minor denied having leaked sensitive materials to the press, as Netflix claimed.

“At first I don’t think I understood how big the moment was going to be,” Field says. By the afternoon, big-name celebrities were voicing their support.

dan levy 

@danjlevy

12:05 PM · Oct 20, 2021



31.5K



Reply



Copy link to Tweet

[Explore what's happening on Twitter](#)

According to data from Collective Action in Tech, identity-based discrimination [was a driving factor](#) for much of the current wave of organizing at US tech companies. Workers have demanded that companies [remove anti-Asian content](#) from their platforms and [penned letters calling](#) on corporate leaders to support Palestinians. Over 2,000 Apple employees [petitioned](#) against the recent hiring of an executive who they said was “misogynistic” and held “harmful views” on women and people of color. The executive left the company as a result. During last year’s pride month, Google workers [circulated a petition](#) asking the company to take steps to ensure the use of chosen names instead of birth names for trans employees.

It makes sense to Field that Silicon Valley companies don’t see more protests about wages from their white-collar employees—those workers get stock options, good salaries, and free lunch. But

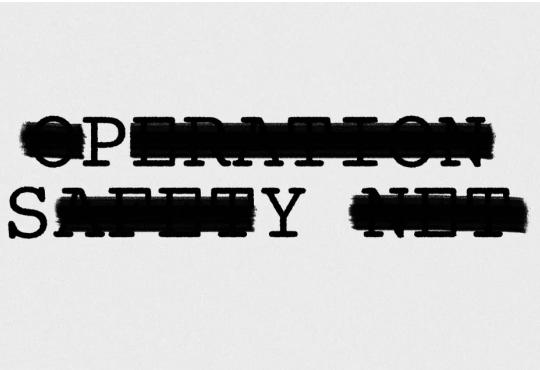
“I feel like one thing that type of action having happened five or ten years ago, but now the gates have been flung open. “My hope is that this momentum continues and expands,” she says, “as people realize there’s strength in community.”

Jane Lytvynenko is a senior research fellow on the Tech and Social Change Project at the Shorenstein Center at the Harvard Kennedy School. **T**

by Jane Lytvynenko

DEEP DIVE

TECH POLICY



The secret police: Cops built a shadowy surveillance machine in Minnesota after George Floyd's murder

An investigation by MIT Technology Review reveals a sprawling, technologically sophisticated system in Minnesota designed for closely monitoring protesters.

By Tate Ryan-Mosley & Sam Richards





The secret police: Inside the app Minnesota police used to collect data on journalists at protests

Intrepid Response is a little-known but powerful app that lets police quickly upload and share information across agencies. But what happens to the information it collects?

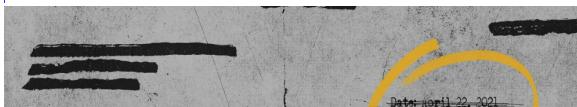
By Sam Richards & Tate Ryan-Mosley

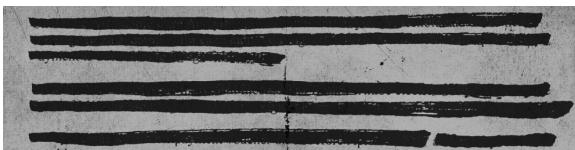


How big technology systems are slowing innovation

The great IT revolution is no longer promoting economic dynamism. It's preventing it.

By James Bessen





The secret police: After protests around George Floyd's murder ended, a police system for watching protesters kept going

Documents obtained by public records requests show that Operation Safety Net, a sprawling policing operation in Minnesota, continued to respond to protests long after the effort was supposedly shuttered.

By Sam Richards & Tate Ryan-Mosley

STAY CONNECTED



Illustration by Rose Wong

Get the latest updates from MIT Technology Review

Discover special offers, top stories,
upcoming events, and more.

Enter your email

MIT Technology Review

Subscribe

[Privacy Policy](#)