

The Ethic of Solutionism and the Spirit of Digital Capitalism

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"All of us at Apple and Google believe there has never been a more important moment to work together to solve one of the world's most pressing problems."



"[W]e hope to harness the power of technology to help countries around the world slow the spread of COVID-19 and accelerate the return of everyday life."

Overview

- What is solutionism?
- Why the 'spirit of capitalism'?
- How can we measure this?
- What do we find?
- What are the implications?

What is solutionism?

Elements of solutionism

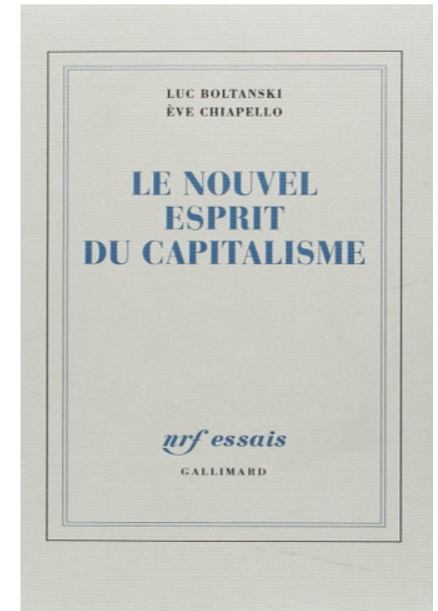
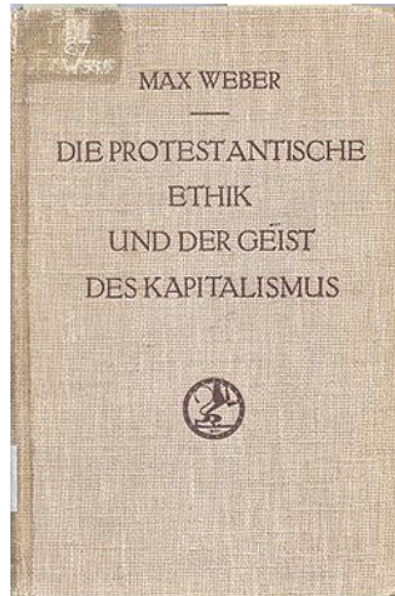
- Technological solutions to social problems
 - Recasting of social problems
 - Extrapolation of 'computational thinking'
- Doing well by doing good
 - Not just an inventor, but an innovator
 - Belief in the proportionality of profit opportunities and social problems

The solutionist credo: have your cake and eat it too

"What's amazing about tech is that there are so many opportunities to have your cake and eat it, too. There's a stereotype that you have to choose in life between doing good and making money. I think for a lot of people that's a real choice. But for technology, there are a significant number of opportunities – Google search being the most massive example of all time – where we simultaneously are doing something lucrative and really good for the world. A lot of times you can get in situations where they're all aligned, where the bigger the reach of the good you're doing, the more money you'll make." — Justin Rosenstein

Why the 'spirit of capitalism'?

A brief conceptual history



ideational factors ⇒ ***normative ideas*** ⇒ ***dynamic values***

Definition & Operationalization

Definition: The spirit of capitalism refers to the historically changing set of normative beliefs that legitimate, motivate, and orient the actions of capitalist actors.

Motivation, Legitimation, Orientation

	Sombart	Weber	Boltanski & Chiapello	Modern social science
Motivation	"dominant motives"	"psychological sanctions"	"powers of attraction"	Normative Compliance (Etzioni 1975)
Legitimation	"general acceptance"	"world of hostile forces"	Capitalism & critique	Ideology (e.g. Piketty 2020), Managing of Non-Market Environment (Bach & Blake 2016)
Orientation	-	ideas as "switchmen"	-	Ideas & uncertainty (Blyth 2002, Beckert 2016)

Orders of Justification

	Market	Inspiration	...	Solutionist
Central Value	Free Competition	Originality	...	Solving key social problems
Evaluation Criteria	Value, Price	Creativity, Non-conformity, Authenticity, Epiphany	...	Upgrading and Enabling Humans/Humanity
Sacrifice	Opportunism	Not fitting in	...	Risk-Taking (Failure)
Ideal Type	Businessman, merchant	Creative Genius, Misfit	...	Philanthro-Entrepreneur
Insanity	Regulation	Conformity	...	Lone inventor, mission-less capitalist, Luddite
...
Test	Competitiveness	Original thoughts, invention, creations	...	Disruption

Definition & Operationalization

Definition: The spirit of capitalism refers to the historically changing set of normative beliefs that legitimate, motivate, and orient the actions of capitalist actors.

Operationalization: The spirit of capitalism as a compromise between and combination of various orders of justification (or politics).

How can we measure this?

Classifying Text

Trade-off between theoretical and empirical ambition:

How can we apply a theoretically ambitious classification to a larger body of text?

⇒ Using hand-coded documents to train a classification algorithm which then estimates category proportions in large text corpora (Hopkins & King 2010, Jerzak et al. 2019)

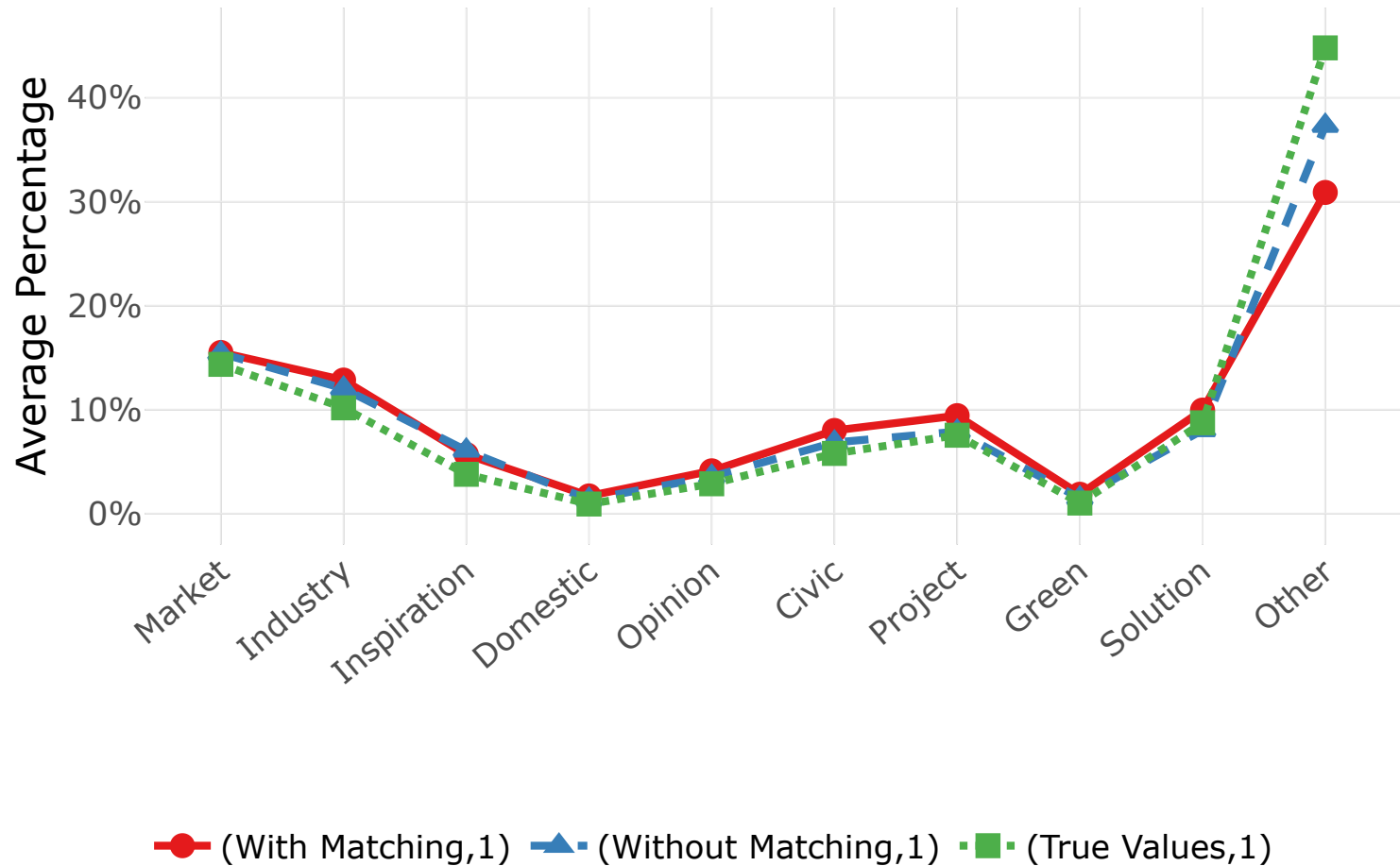
Three Text Corpora

- **Speech Acts by tech elites** → What are the professed normative beliefs of the elites of digital capitalism?
- **Wired Magazine** → What are the dominant normative beliefs in the wider tech milieu?
- **Harvard Business Review** → What are the dominant normative beliefs in capitalist discourse at large?

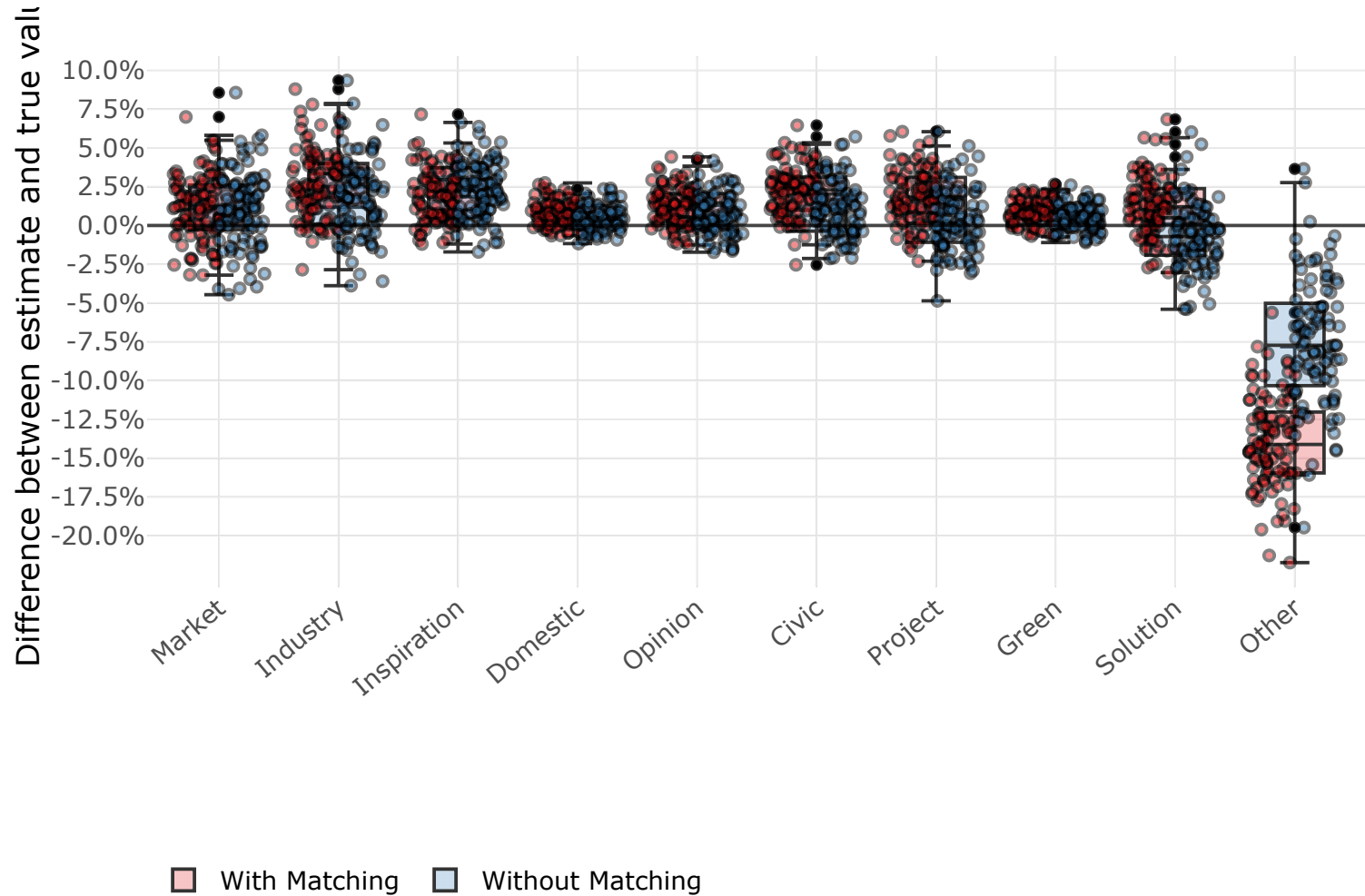
Three Steps

- **Hand-code** (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.7$)
- **Estimate** (Readme2)
- **Validate** (Trainingsset/Testset-Splits)

Validation

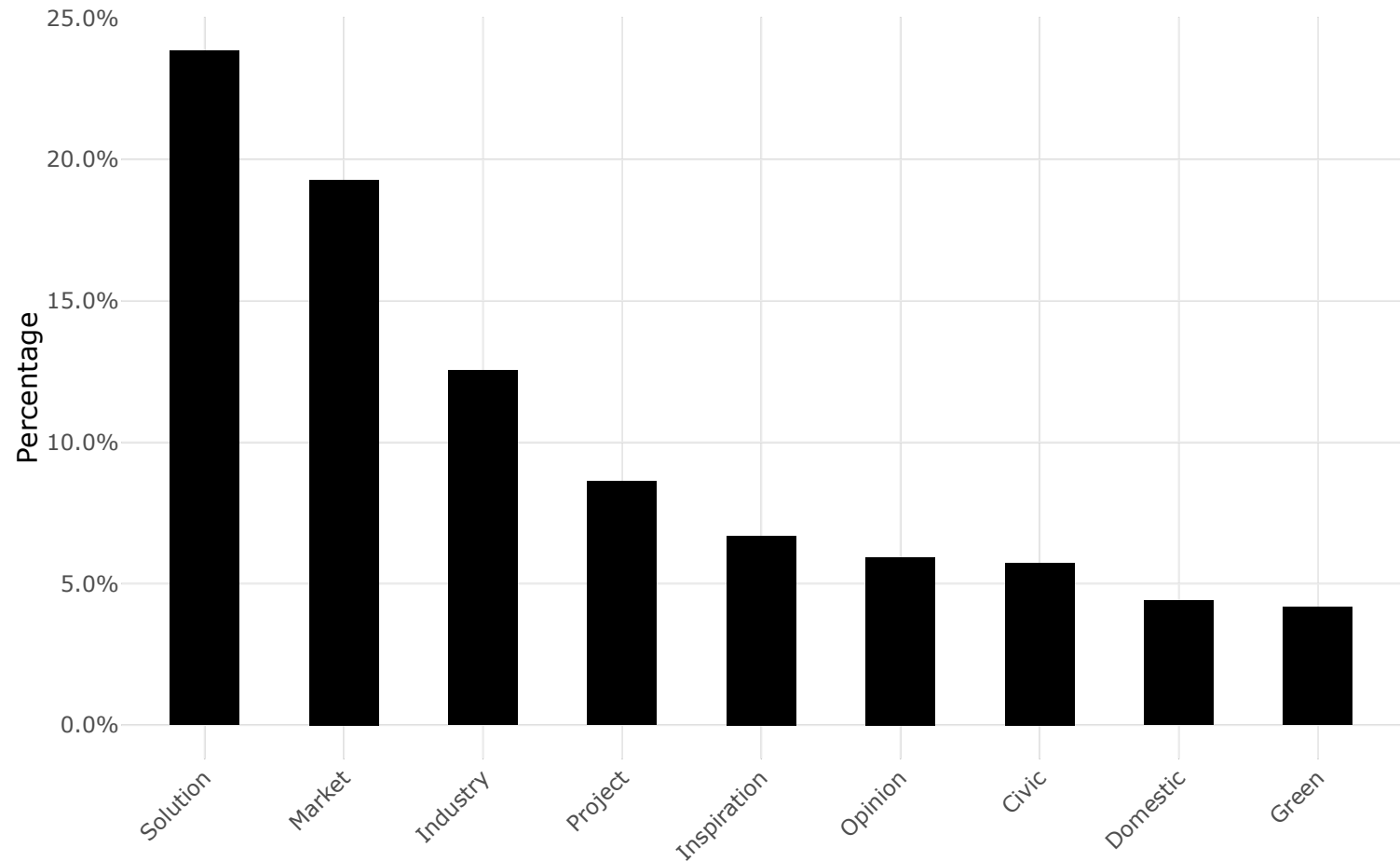


Validation II

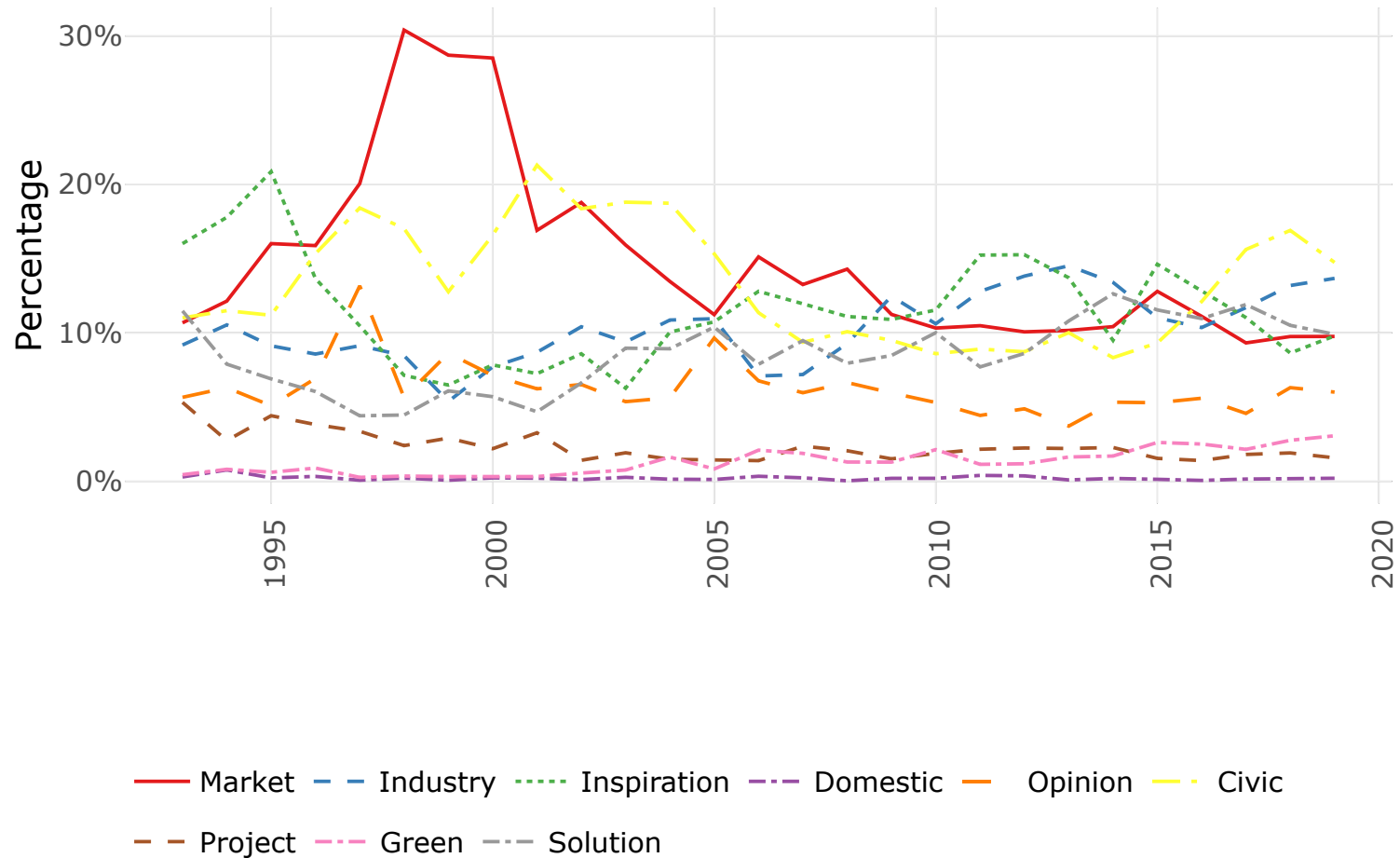


What do we find?

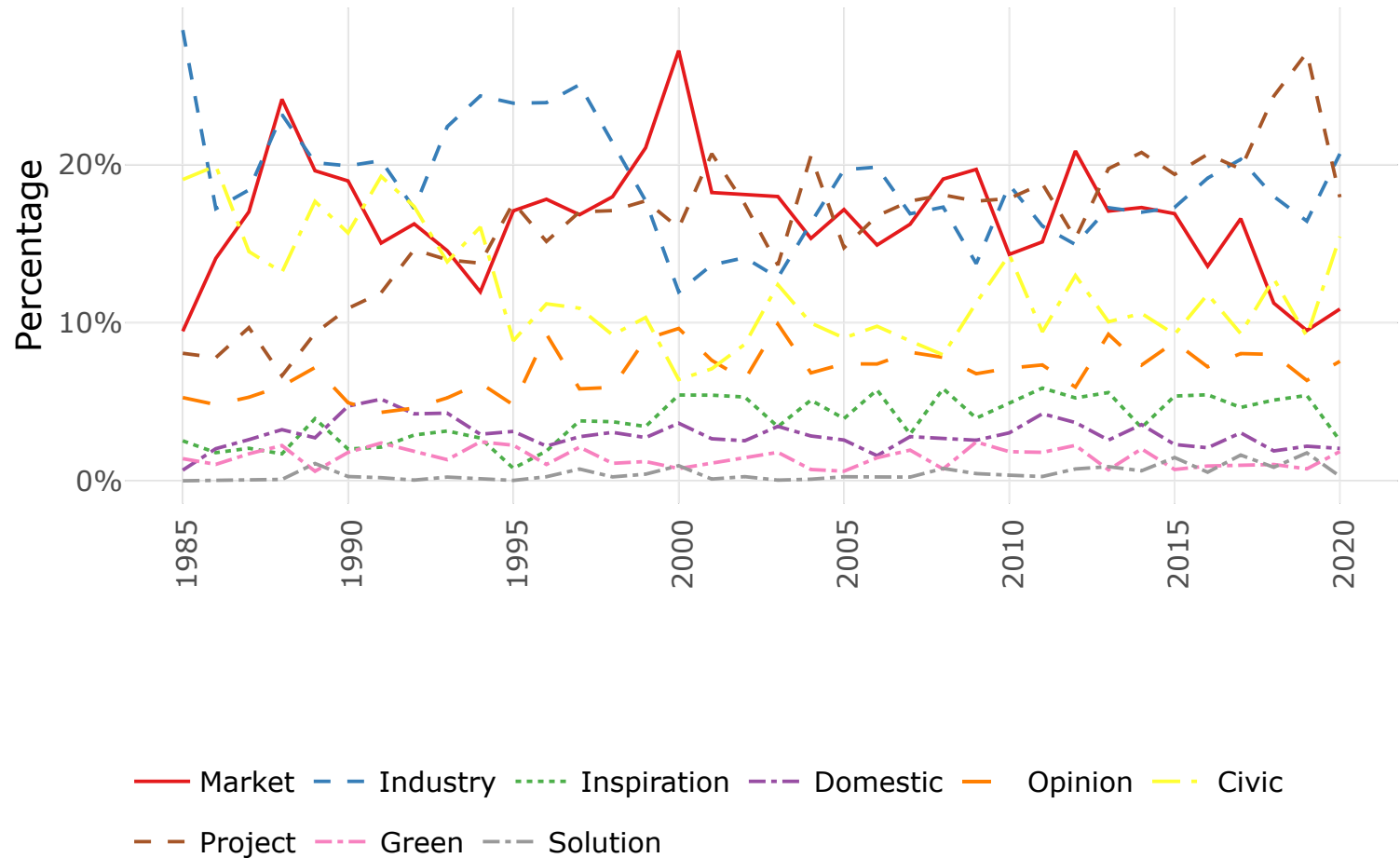
Elite Corpus



Wired Magazine



Harvard Business Review



What about it?

Motivation

- Capitalism's motivation problem: ensuring compliance with moral carrots
- 'Don't be evil' as a boomerang: the self-binding force of normative commitments
- Between PR and HR: costly signaling in a competitive market for talent

Legitimation

- Shaping the 'moral background': how moral goodness is assessed (Abend 2014)
- The techlash that came late: why did tech companies get away with it for so long?
- Not like Wall Street: how the spirit of digital capitalism reacts to capitalism's new social critics

Orientation

- In the shadow of uncertainty: if we don't know what to do we might as well do what we think is right
- A bit of focus: how moral ideas organize economic activities
- A future brave and bold: selling expectations, not just products

Solutionism in times of corona

- The techlash wanes: Tech companies seem to be essential *in* the corona crisis and *for* solving it
- Data colonialism on steroids: big tech goes public
- Good cop, bad cop: solutionism and neoliberalism

How does it work? If you have an Apple Watch and are interested, all you have to do is download the Research app on your iPhone and give it permission to link, collect, and share data. Apple is hoping the results of its first big push to collect health information — tracking when heart rates go too high or low — convinced users that the company is up for the job. What do users get for giving up access to all that precious data? Apple says they can earn the reward of a pat on the back and “Humanity [saying] thank you.”

Thank you!