What Big Philanthropy Can Learn from Big Tech

SAFIYA U. NOBLE

UCLA Center for Critical Internet Inquiry

n July 29, 2020, I sat glued to my television watching four of the most powerful men in Big Tech testify before the House Judiciary Committee during antitrust hearings. The hearing was an important forum for confronting threats to democracy that stem from monopoly control by technology companies. A few days later, I had the honor of engaging in an online fireside chat at the RightsCon conference with Federal Trade Commissioner Rohit Chopra about how the commission is invoking the "unfairness doctrine" to take on the outsize power the tech sector holds in determining all manner of outcomes affecting the lives of people who should be protected by federal antidiscrimination law and consumer protection regulations.

The Judiciary Committee hearings showed us that it's difficult for Big Tech to acknowledge its role in antidemocratic and antisocial activities—from the facilitation, exacerbation, and amplification of hate speech and calls for genocide or violence against ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities to its monetization and profiteering from discriminatory and monopolistic business practices. The statements by tech company CEOs from Google, Amazon, Apple, and Facebook show us that believing oneself to be a good person with good intentions cannot mitigate the damage that is being done by the global impact of the company one leads.

The harms caused by digital products used in lending practices, predictive algorithms, and targeted advertising that discriminate in housing and employment have been increasingly made visible by scholars and journalists over the past decade. After many years of superficial coverage and laudatory profiles in popular media, the tech firms are finally facing more critical coverage from scholars and journalists about their content moderation practices, too. By using newer evidence-based research techniques, such as computational data analysis and data visualization, alongside good old-fashioned investigative journalism, beat reporters and long-form journalists have unequivocally shown the many heretofore unaccounted for downsides in the way the tech industry has shifted the way we live—and not without great cost. Indeed, many of these changes that journalists, often working in concert with university researchers, have demonstrated are profoundly antidemocratic, if not authoritarian, and even dystopian in some cases. In late 2020, US policy makers are finally taking notice.

What can be learned from the hearings and from this renewed national conversation about the role of concentrated power and wealth in the handful of companies that are radically reshaping our fragile experiment in democracy in the United States? What is the role of Big Philanthropy in these conversations, and how can it model a departure from the harmful status quo?

Big Philanthropy: Opportunity at a Crossroads

The major foundations and other giving organizations we term Big Philanthropy for ease of discussion, operate quite differently from the way individuals do when they make charitable contributions to a variety of issues and concerns they care about. Big Philanthropy operates on a vastly different scale. It is often not as visible to laypeople, nor are the deliverables or outputs as easy to understand as, say, a Kickstarter campaign to launch an innovative car seat for toddlers or a GoFundMe effort to raise money for families that have no money to bury their loved ones. When I talk about Big Philanthropy, I refer specifically to large private foundations that have millions of dollars of interest income to distribute on an annual basis. With their focused and coordinated giving, these organizations are capable of establishing new paradigms in society. Indeed, such societal change is often at the core of their mission.

Yet it can be hard for large and venerable organizations to move toward the very new paradigms they often seek to establish and shift. I argue, however, that it is at just such a place of novelty and perhaps even organizational discomfort where the greatest opportunities for profound societal change lie. This is the crossroads at which many philanthropic organizations find themselves as they attempt to find a role for them in unraveling and intervening in centuries of injustice.

While foundations and other giving organizations are trying to find their place in the face of calls for justice for Jacob Blake, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and the countless lives harmed and ended by the violence of racial and economic injustice, we must remember that, despite the relative newness of some racial justice organizations on contemporary front lines, calls for racial justice actually began three centuries before today's clarion reminder that Black Lives Matter. Indeed, one of the most extraordinary opportunities for positive social change and impact in the struggle to strengthen democracy, evidenced by a society of structural and interpersonal care, is to align with the struggle for racial and economic justice. It is one of the most compassionate and appropriate uses of Big Philanthropy's concentrated wealth, and it can play a pivotal role in reparations to communities that have long been harmed by structural violence and oppression, as well as by institutional neglect. The philanthropic world itself is not untouched by the very legacies we now must seek to undo.

What those of us who study racial and economic injustice know is that the generational wealth that makes Big Philanthropy possible was built by the development of exploitive economic, social, and political systems in the United States and around the world. Big Philanthropy was often predicated upon and continues to thrive on extraction, even as its intentions are shifting. In this moment, it is crucial to rethink the role of philanthropy in national and global inequity—and it is crucial to deploy these resources in meaningful new ways.

Big Philanthropy's Future: Expanding APIs for the Protocols of Giving

In some ways, Big Philanthropy parallels Big Tech in that it creates an ecosystem of legitimacy and sets standards and protocols for smaller and less well-capitalized organizations. Not only does Big Philanthropy have the financial and cultural capital to make major positive social change happen, but it also has the gatekeeping power to set the terms of engagement for the scholars, practitioners, activists, artists, and institutions it funds. Large-scale philanthropy defines the scope of the problems to be solved by the groups and projects it supports. The industry of large-scale giving often creates an API—an application program interface—for engagement. Its protocols have to be used by grantees in order to participate meaningfully. Big Philanthropy's APIs function as key building blocks in shaping an entire ecosystem, even as it frames and responds to the most pressing social issues of the moment.

An API, in the simplest terms, is an interface that allows software programs to work with applications and websites. It enables one type of software to talk to another. APIs are often simple commands that can, for example, allow for accessing aggregated data that can be repurposed in another application. Rather than writing new code for every possible new app or web interface, APIs are shortcuts that allow programmers to access other application data easily.

I use this analogy to help illuminate the role philanthropy plays in making certain ideas viable, too. It can legitimate new research, ideas, and democratic and public-interest projects through the transfer of capital into new pathways. APIs have been built on early HTTP web architectures, not unlike philanthropy's origin stories, where remnants of past priorities and choices extend into the future, even if those older models prove to be limited over time.

Moreover, the assets of Big Philanthropy are often built from extractive relationships, even while giving is deployed to address many important problems. From this vantage point, Big Philanthropy can reconcile with those communities to whom it owes its existence, and it can build new infrastructures for the future. Architectures of giving have been in place for so long that it is often hard to innovate around them or leave reliable models behind in order to make a major change. APIs are a less visible and yet powerful force in making many modern digital engagements possible.

Some of the most powerful APIs help major companies extend their reach through smaller ones—through the integration of Google Maps into a small WordPress site, for example, or the use of an API integration platform to bundle many APIs. Everyone using a digital device is using an API, from weather tracking to login authentications on a favorite website. Indeed, the landscape of what we do with networked, internet-based technologies has often been determined from deeper in the stack through APIs, which construct the range of outcomes and possibilities.

Like the old HTTP architectures of the web upon which new APIs are built, the advancement of giving in support of social progress is often slow and incremental, with minimal investments in people and ideas that aren't already embedded in other legacy systems or that represent strong alignment with the status quo. Like venture capital, the largest funders often make resources available to the safest bets, to the known and similar players, and to the like-minded from the same networks. Big Philanthropy often lowers the bar for incumbent grantees, and imposes higher standards of proof for people of color, for activists, for people using frameworks of antiracism or feminism in their approaches—or for people who describe their work in ways that are less well understood or unknown to program officers and boards of directors. These analogies are important to think about as we face major challenges and opportunities that require departures from the status quo.

Big Philanthropy Facing Challenges to Democracy

The crises of 2020 have revealed that investments in democracy are more crucial than ever. We are living through a global pandemic and it is hitting the United States hard. While certain sectors of the economy lie in ruins and each day sees record unemployment, tech markets are flourishing. What does it mean for us that Big Tech is realizing record profits while sectors essential to the public—health, education, and investigative journalism—are struggling? What does it mean that Big Tech is replacing or eroding core functions of so many democratic institutions with so little sense of responsibility or accountability?

Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have become our primary sources for news, displacing local newspapers, public radio, and television while abdicating responsibility for the wasteland of false stories and disinformation that pervade their platforms. It is in this moment, and in this context, that we see public wealth delivered to tech media giants through climbing stock prices that are, in part, due to our total dependence on them to get us through.

In the midst of global and national crises, we sit helpless and watch the greatest transfers of public wealth in the history of the United States take place. We watch the rollback of civil and voting rights and the rise of authoritarianism. Big Philanthropy, through its support of key organizations invested in strengthening peoples' movements, has a key role to play in using this moment to resist the collapse of democracy and to reenergize the public's belief that we have a say in the making of the world we live in, even though those beliefs have come at great cost. The greatest opportunities for change come in the face of these contradictions.

As major tech firms, in particular, reach record highs of revenue and market capitalization, they continue to pay record low taxes, when they pay at all. Every dollar diverted from the tax base is a dollar divested from the public good. It is money taken from social safety nets, teacher

and caretaker support, public health systems, and livable wages for workers. What is even more insidious than corporate bailouts or tax avoidance is the callous way we are supposed to acclimate ourselves to increasing social inequality, the decimation of affordable housing, the rising cost of higher education, and increased costs of food, water, gas, electricity, and basic goods. It is in this same context that the public good is threatened by a loss of trust in science, in the credible observations of history, and in the power of the arts to help us make sense of the times.

Meanwhile, philanthropy and charitable giving are tasked with picking up the bill.

Possibilities for the Future of Philanthropy

What can be learned from these failures, and what are the possibilities for philanthropy in redressing long-ingrained systemic economic and racial injustice by helping to build community and democratic institutions? What does repair look like in the face of the indifference we witnessed during the House Judiciary Committee's antitrust hearings?

Big Philanthropy can look to the last fifty years of the tech sector as a cautionary tale about how uncritical investment in projects and paradigms, with little accountability to the publics who will be affected, need to be slowed down and, in some cases, abolished. How much difference would multimillion-dollar philanthropic investments make if they were redirected toward restorative and reparative practices, such as flattening the curve of inequality? At a time when seemingly endless financial and other resources go to supporting extractive tech tools and platforms, funding initiatives that question and push back on the status quo would be an ideal place for philanthropic investment to make a major difference in shifting the unequal relationships that define our present social landscape.

The opportunity for Big Philanthropy and the lessons to be learned from this moment of Big Tech are that the restorative and reparative work will come from transfers of wealth and resources into the hands of those who are working to cultivate new paradigms of possibility and collective responsibility. I see this as a major upside for giving organizations, but it will mean not only expanding the scope of the kinds of projects and initiatives to be funded, but also diversifying the ranks of researchers, academics, artists, and culture makers who are funded. It is what expanding the Big Philanthropy API will look like in practice.

Now is the time for philanthropy to put its resources behind a future of progressive and inclusive democracy that isn't predicated on a permanently exploited underclass. We can't normalize the current state of affairs. We need just systems of repair and restoration. We need new models for giving and policy frameworks with democracy and the public good at their core.

Safiya U. Noble, PhD, is an associate professor at UCLA and the author of the best-selling book *Algorithms of Oppression*. She is the codirector of the UCLA Center for Critical Internet Inquiry and a faculty advisor to the UCLA Bedari Kindness Institute. Follow her on Twitter @ afiyanoble and @C2i2_UCLA.