

'Imam Muhsin [Hendricks] dedicated his life to reconciling faith and identity, offering queer Muslims a space to be their full selves. His assassination is a stark reminder of the dangers faced by those who challenge oppressive interpretations of religion.' — **LGBTQ activist Mbulelo Xinana of Sicebise Social Inclusion**

Why we must give Big Tech the boot

We can build a digital landscape that prioritises people over profit, collaboration over control and justice over exploitation

COMMENT
Anaïs Nony

As of February 2025, TikTok has more than 1.5 billion monthly users worldwide and four billion people use at least one of Meta's core products each month. Between Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp, Meta is able to extract behavioural data about half of the humans living on Earth.

The monopoly over our means of communication is massive. It is our use of corporate-controlled platforms that facilitate this process, which has drastic consequences on our mental, collective and societal well-being.

In an age where every click, like and share is meticulously tracked, packaged and sold, the corporate-owned social media platforms we use daily have become digital panopticons — prisons of our own making. These platforms, masquerading as tools for connection, are in reality engines of surveillance capitalism, extracting our most intimate data to fuel profit-driven algorithms that manipulate our behaviour and polarise our societies.

Every thought you express on corporate-owned social media is harvested, analysed and used to predict your next move. Your emotions are monetised, your friendships are reduced to data points and your sense of self is shaped by opaque algorithms designed to keep you scrolling, buying, reacting and conforming. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter — X — have turned our lives into a marketplace, where we are both the product and the consumer, trapped in a cycle of endless consumption and surveillance.

As brilliantly presented by Professor Shoshana Zuboff in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, tech giants such as Facebook and Google generate billions of dollars annually by selling user data to advertisers. This exploitation of personal information raises serious privacy concerns, because we, the users, have little control over how our data is extracted, sold and used.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal, where the data of millions of Facebook users was harvested without consent to manipulate presidential elections, is a stark reminder of the risks. The cost of this arrangement is staggering: the erosion of privacy, the amplification of hate, the spread of misinformation and the silencing of marginalised voices. These platforms do not serve us; they exploit us, and in doing so, they undermine the very foundations of a free and equitable society.

Furthermore, corporate-controlled social media platforms, designed to keep us hooked, are fuelling a silent



Graphic: JOHN McCANN

mental health epidemic. Disrupted sleep patterns, decline in self-esteem, anxiety and stress upon logging off social media are some of the symptoms of social media addiction.

The constant comparison to curated, idealised lives breeds feelings of inadequacy and loneliness. The endless scroll, the dopamine hits from likes and shares, and the pressure to perform online are eroding our community-rooted well-being.

The irresistible feeds of these platforms operate on an insidious business model: the attention economy. Your attention is the product, and it's sold to the highest bidder. Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube and TikTok use sophisticated algorithms to maximise engagement, exploiting psychological vulnerabilities to keep you scrolling.

Research in communication studies found that emotionally charged con-

tent, particularly anger and outrage, is prioritised to keep users engaged. This affective manipulation of attention fragments our focus and our capacity to care for what matters the most, leaving us mentally exhausted and emotionally drained.

Hyperactivity online often leads to an abrupt switch into hyperpassivity in real life.

Now that the internet has become breeding grounds for misinformation, there is worldwide concern over false news and how it can influence political and economic power. Research by

Soroush Vosoughi et al found that false news stories spread six times faster than true ones on Twitter, largely because falsehoods elicit strong emotional reactions such as fear, disgust, and surprise. Similarly, social media algorithms often amplify harmful stereotypes and discriminatory content. These biases are not

accidental; they are embedded in the design of the platforms.

In today's political climate, we have a collective responsibility not to participate in corporate-owned social media, which has real-world consequences, from eroding historical realities and mass manipulation to political polarisation. We know these platforms prioritise engagement over accuracy, allowing harmful content to proliferate farther, faster, deeper and more broadly than the truth, while censoring scientific figures, civilians, journalists, dedicated activists and on-the-ground reporters.

By divesting from corporate-owned social media, we boycott these systems of inequality and exploitation, and support alternatives that prioritise fairness and equity. It is time we use tools that enhance rather than undermine our capacity for connection, action and social change, where our data isn't a commodity, where our voice isn't manipulated by algorithms designed to keep us scrolling silently. It is time we collectively take a stand against this exploitation and support

alternatives that serve the common good, where community, not profit, is the driving force.

It requires a collective effort to change our habits but it is worth it. Open-source technologies such as nos.social and Mastodon offer decentralised, community-rooted alternatives that prioritise user control and privacy, so "your posts, feed and connections belong to you, not a corporation". You can use these platforms for free to build your own social media community.

These platforms are built on core principles and goals of the digital commons: the emphasis is on user privacy and security, it is open source, and it is nonprofit. Digital commons involve the distribution and communal ownership of information and technologies. These platforms are designed to rebuild social connection by serving communities, not exploiting them.

Community-rooted tools are not just alternatives to corporate social media; they are weapons in the fight against surveillance capitalism and mass exploitation. They empower us to reclaim our data sovereignty and build a more just and equitable world. By using these tools, we can communicate, act, and organise for social change, free from the manipulative algorithms and data-hungry corporations that dominate the current digital landscape.

The act of divestment is not just a personal choice; it is a collective movement. It is a declaration that we will no longer be complicit in our own exploitation. It is a commitment to building a world where technology serves human dignity, rather than the other way around.

By organising, educating, and advocating for these alternatives, we can contribute to dismantling the structures of surveillance capitalism and replace them with systems that reflect values such as solidarity, fairness, and autonomy. It is not easy to ditch WhatsApp or share content through less-known platforms but we must have the courage to change. The stakes could not be higher: our privacy, our international justice system, and our freedom hang in the balance.

Divesting from corporate-owned social media is not just about rejecting the harms of Big Tech; it's about acting for the future we want with solidarity for those who suffer the most from this ongoing exploitation.

We will have to relearn how to use our phone and how to collectively work on projects but these tools, built by and for the people, offer a powerful alternative to the fascist-orientated surveillance capitalism that fuels platforms like Facebook and X.

The fight against surveillance capitalism is not just a technological battle; it is an emergency, a struggle for the soul of freedom in the 21st century.

The choice is ours: continue to feed the machine, or reclaim the life of our mind, spirit and soul, and build a more equitable future for all.

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