

MEMORANDUM

TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Accountable Tech
RE: How Big Tech Boosts Autocrats
DATE: April 1, 2022

I. Overview: How Big Tech Boosts Autocrats

As Russia’s unjustifiable assault on Ukraine has intensified, the social media platforms at the center of the information war have announced a range of break-glass measures. Facing mounting pressure from all sides – the West demanding aggressive action to counter Russian propaganda, and the Kremlin threatening to shut down their services if they do – platforms have been left with few easy answers.

But to focus exclusively on how the platforms navigate these high-stakes decisions would be a disservice; we must grapple with systemic failures. Our information ecosystem has been placed in the custody of unaccountable Big Tech companies who are incentivized to amplify outrage and appease governments to maximize global engagement. They’ve been ruthlessly faithful to that profit model, tilting the scales in favor of demagogues at the expense of democracy.

Big Tech companies have been both subsidizing and profiting off state-run Russian propaganda outlets for years. They have bent their own rules to accommodate repressive regimes and censor activists around the world, all while touting their commitments to freedom of expression. They have enabled malign actors to undermine democratic values and sow humanitarian disaster from Myanmar and the Philippines to Ethiopia and Brazil.

In Ukraine, we’ve seen the best and worst of social media; viral acts of bravery from ordinary Ukrainians and Russian protesters have rallied the world, while pro-Kremlin forces weaponize disinformation to sow confusion and justify atrocities. Without meaningful transparency, it’s impossible to quantify the net effect of each platform – or even to understand what steps they’re actually taking to mitigate harm. In this fog of war, we need more clarity, context, and caution. When the dust settles, we need systemic reforms to bolster democracy.

II. The Big Picture: Platforms’ Core Infrastructure and Incentives

“One of the biggest issues social networks face is that, when left unchecked, people will engage disproportionately with more sensationalist and provocative content... At scale it can undermine the quality of public discourse and lead to polarization.”
–[Mark Zuckerberg, 2018](#)

A. Algorithms Reward Demagoguery and Erode Consensus Reality

At the most fundamental level, platforms like Facebook and YouTube are built to optimize a business model that is incompatible with democracy: surveillance advertising. The core infrastructure of these platforms – the product designs and algorithms that shape the content each user is served – are built to maximize engagement, because they make money by profiling people and targeting them with more and more hyper-personalized ads.

Those algorithms incentivize and amplify the most incendiary content because it drives the most engagement. The effect around the world has been to elevate demagogues, turbocharge political sectarianism, and erode the consensus reality upon which democracy depends.

- [2016 Internal Facebook Presentation](#): “64% of all extremist group joins are due to our recommendation tools”
- [The Guardian, 2/2/18](#): 'Fiction is outperforming reality': how YouTube's algorithm distorts truth
- [WSJ, 2/17/18](#): How YouTube Drives People to the Internet's Darkest Corners
- [The Verge, 9/15/21](#): Political parties told Facebook its News Feed pushed them into 'more extreme positions'
- [Bloomberg, 10/25/21](#): Facebook Staff Say Core Products Make Misinformation Worse
- [VideoWeek, 10/25/21](#): Hateful Ads are “Substantially Cheaper” on Facebook than Positive Ads, Whistleblower Tells Parliament
- [WaPo, 10/26/21](#): Five points for anger, one for a 'like': How Facebook's formula fostered rage and misinformation

Around the world, autocrats and extremists have weaponized these dynamics to destabilize democracies and sow humanitarian disasters.

- [The Verge, 9/5/18](#): How autocratic governments use Facebook against their own citizens
- [NYT, 10/15/18](#): A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts From Myanmar's Military
- [CJR, 11/8/18](#): Facebook slammed by UN for its role in Myanmar genocide
- [Vice News, 11/8/21](#): How Facebook Is Stoking a Civil War in Ethiopia
- [Bloomberg, 12/7/17](#): How Rodrigo Duterte turned Facebook into a weapon, with help from Facebook
- [BuzzFeed, 9/4/18](#): How Duterte Used Facebook To Fuel The Philippine Drug War
- [WaPo, 10/24/21](#): How Facebook neglected the rest of the world, fueling hate speech and violence in India
- [NYT, 8/11/19](#): How YouTube Radicalized Brazil
- [CNN, 10/22/21](#): Not stopping 'Stop the Steal:' Facebook Papers paint damning picture of company's role in insurrection
- [WaPo, 10/27/21](#): In Poland's politics, a 'social civil war' brewed as Facebook rewarded online anger

B. Coddling Repressive Regimes, Censoring Activists

Beyond designing platforms that are optimized for engagement, the drive to maximize global user attention also incentivizes Big Tech to cozy up to those in power to ensure they maintain unfettered access to markets – even when doing so means bending their own rules and principles to appease VIP users at tremendous cost.

- [WSJ, 9/13/21](#): Facebook Says Its Rules Apply to All. Company Documents Reveal a Secret Elite That’s Exempt. | *A program known as XCheck has given millions of celebrities, politicians and other high-profile users special treatment, a privilege many abuse*
- [BuzzFeed, 2/21/21](#): "Mark Changed The Rules": How Facebook Went Easy On Alex Jones And Other Right-Wing Figures
- [FT, 10/25/21](#): Employees pleaded with Facebook to stop letting politicians bend rules
- [Politico, 10/25/21](#): Facebook staff complained for years about their lobbyists’ power
- [Ex-Facebook CSO Alex Stamos, 5/26/20](#): “A core problem at Facebook is that one policy org is responsible for both the rules of the platform and keeping governments happy.”
- [WSJ, 8/14/20](#): Facebook’s Hate-Speech Rules Collide With Indian Politics
 - “The company’s top public-policy executive in the country, Ankhi Das... whose job also includes lobbying India’s government on Facebook’s behalf, told staff members that punishing violations by politicians from Mr. Modi’s party would damage the company’s business prospects in the country, Facebook’s biggest global market”

Despite portraying themselves as unwavering champions of free expression and American values in the US, dominant social media companies have repeatedly bowed to censorship demands from repressive regimes around the world to avoid hits to their business.

- [LA Times, 10/22/20](#): “In countries including Cuba, India, Israel, Morocco, Pakistan and Turkey, Facebook routinely restricts posts that governments deem sensitive or off-limits.”
- [Daily Beast, 10/25/21](#): Zuckerberg Personally Caved to Censorship Demands From Vietnam Government, Says Report
- [TechCrunch, 1/11/17](#): Facebook is censoring posts in Thailand that the government has deemed unsuitable
- [NY Post, 2/24/21](#): “Sheryl Sandberg and other top Facebook execs silenced a Kurdish group at the request of the Turkish government in a bid to protect its business in 2018”
- [NBC News](#): “Dozens of Tunisian, Syrian and Palestinian activists and journalists, many of whom use the platform to document human rights abuses in the region, say their Facebook accounts have been deactivated over the last few months.”

III. Putin’s War: Break-Glass Measures Underscore Historic Negligence.

It should not have taken an onslaught of war crimes and overwhelming public pressure for Big Tech to take steps to curtail Putin’s disinformation machine. Even bare minimum steps like demonetizing and labeling known Kremlin propaganda outlets were hastily made only after the invasion had begun, despite years of malfeasance and months to prepare for this crisis.

We can and should acknowledge Silicon Valley’s strong if belated moves against the Kremlin, and that Russia blocking its citizens from access to independent media has made a dark situation even worse. But we must also evaluate the totality of this story – one which includes years of inaction, ongoing enforcement failures, and a refusal to learn systemic lessons.

A. Major Platforms Refused to Take Baseline Actions for Years

After Russia weaponized major social media platforms as part of an unprecedented attack on American democracy in 2016, the nature of the threat was quite clear. Indeed, to its credit, Twitter announced [in October of 2017](#) it was banning Sputnik and RT from advertising.

Both outlets were forced to [register](#) with the Justice Department as official foreign agents. As the State Department [later detailed](#), “the Kremlin has used these outlets to interfere in elections, undermine democracy, and threaten the rules-based international order.” Yet the biggest US tech companies continued to mass-distribute their content globally for profit until several days into Putin’s heinous war.

- [Meta, 2/25/22](#): “We are now prohibiting Russian state media from running ads or monetizing on our platform...”
- [YouTube, 2/26/22](#): “Earlier today, we began pausing a number of Russian channels’ ability to monetize on YouTube, including RT...”
- [The Verge, 3/1/22](#): Facebook has stopped recommending Russian state media globally
- [Google, 3/1/22](#): “We have also significantly limited recommendations globally for a number of Russian state-funded media outlets across our platforms.”
- [Protocol, 3/7/22](#): Silicon Valley enabled Russian state propaganda. Now it’s too late.
 - “It didn’t have to be this way. Social media giants could have taken any number of soft actions along the way that would have deprived Russian propaganda of oxygen without requiring Facebook or YouTube to block them entirely. For one thing, prioritizing trustworthy information over engagement across their platforms would have helped.”

B. Systemic Problems Undermine Platforms’ Interventions

While Big Tech has belatedly taken unprecedented steps to curtail the Kremlin’s information warfare, their on-the-fly policy announcements, whack-a-mole enforcement, and systemic opacity undermines harm mitigation efforts and forestalls structural progress.

For example, major platforms have by-and-large failed to develop comprehensive state media policies – which is particularly pertinent because they have continued to both finance and profit off Russian propaganda even amidst this crisis.

- [Business Insider, 2/24/22](#): With Ukraine under attack, Google and big brands like Best Buy continue to fuel Russian propaganda
- [NewsGuard, 3/7/22](#): Despite promises, Google and other ad platforms are still funding Russian disinformation
- [Media Matters, 3/8/22](#): YouTube is making money off a false Ukraine-biolabs conspiracy theory that is tied to Russian disinformation and QAnon
- [Axios, 3/9/22](#): China's state media buys Meta ads pushing Russia's line on war
- [Media Matters, 3/16/22](#): Facebook and Instagram have allowed and profited from advertising pushing the false Ukraine-US biolabs conspiracy theory

Similarly, harmful vectors of pro-Kremlin disinformation continue to evade new safeguards – especially in non-English languages, where platforms have failed to invest proper resources.

- [WaPo op-ed by Reset director Ben Scott, 3/24/22](#): Big Tech needs to pull the plug on Russia’s biggest propaganda campaign
 - “[The Kremlin’s] own accounts continue to post on [Instagram and Twitter] in Russian – reaching people inside Russia that circumvent the block as well as the very sizable Russian-speaking communities in Eastern Europe... This is partly because they failed to invest in adequate product safeguards in languages other than English – a terrible risk that is now costing us all dearly.”
- [NBC News, 3/8/22](#): Russian propaganda targeting Spanish-language users proliferates on social media
- [The Guardian, 3/16/22](#): ‘Game of Whac-a-Mole’: why Russian disinformation is still running amok on social media
- [WaPo, 3/24/22](#): Blacklisted by the U.S., pro-Russia accounts have still been posting propaganda on Twitter and YouTube
- [The Guardian, 3/31/22](#): Facebook fails to label 80% of posts promoting bioweapons conspiracy theory
- [NYT, 3/30/22](#): How War in Ukraine Roiled Facebook and Instagram
 - “Meta...took an unusual step last week: It suspended some of the quality controls that ensure that posts from users in Russia, Ukraine and other Eastern European countries meet its rules... because the workers could not keep up with shifting rules about what kinds of posts were allowed about the war in Ukraine”

While platforms did take some encouraging “soft” actions – like appending clear labels and friction (interstitials) to all posts linking to Kremlin-affiliated media – only the companies themselves have access to data on the efficacy of such interventions. Outside observers are left to take their word on any metrics they choose to share, and can hardly tell if other measures were even implemented, like algorithmically downranking certain content and accounts.

That lack of accountability and data access for researchers hamstrings the entire industry's ability to build collective knowledge when it comes to best practices.

- [Bloomberg, 3/10/22](#): “Labeling tweets that link to state-backed media outlets decreased their reach on Twitter by 30%, said Yoel Roth, head of site integrity at Twitter.”

C. Years of Bowing to Kremlin Censorship Demands Weakened Big Tech

As the global web continues to splinter under a rising tide of autocracy, tech companies face admittedly tough choices about how far to go to comply with local laws that run afoul of their principles. But time and time again, they seem to find ways to justify almost anything to maintain access to markets, even under deeply repressive regimes.

Russia has been among the starkest of such cases. Each capitulation from Silicon Valley has emboldened Putin to make even more draconian demands, and in turn, entrenched Big Tech's position as an arm of the Kremlin propaganda machine.

- [WaPo, 3/12/22](#): Putin's prewar moves against U.S. tech giants laid groundwork for crackdown on free expression
 - “[Big Tech has] made numerous compromises with the Kremlin in recent years that have undermined activist groups, impaired Russians' access to reliable information and look increasingly problematic in the wake of the invasion.”
- [BBC, 2/15/18](#): Instagram submits to Russia censor's demands
- [BuzzFeed, 2/7/19](#): Google Is Pulling Websites From Searches At Russia's Request
- [NPR, 11/1/19](#): New Russian Law Gives Government Sweeping Power Over Internet

Last July, Putin signed a particularly menacing law that required US tech giants to establish Russian offices. This would serve to give the Kremlin more leverage to force censorship, in part by exposing tech employees to threats – which is exactly how Google and Apple were compelled to remove opposition leader Alexei Navalny's voting app.

By indulging this level of thuggery, Big Tech is inviting repressive regimes around the world to follow in Putin's footsteps.

- [Reuters, 7/1/21](#): Putin signs law forcing foreign social media giants to open Russian offices
- [NYT, 9/17/21](#): Google and Apple, Under Pressure From Russia, Remove Voting App
 - *Former UN freedom of expression chief, David Kaye*: “The companies are in a really difficult position, but they have put themselves there. They are de facto carrying out an element of Russian repression.”
- [ABC News, 9/25/21](#): Putin critic Navalny slams Google and Apple for accepting Kremlin censorship

- [Politico EU, 2/23/22](#): Meta, Facebook’s parent company, has begun complying with new requirements in Russia for “foreign IT companies.”
- [NYT, 2/26/22](#): Russia Intensifies Censorship Campaign, Pressuring Tech Giants
 - “The situation puts the tech companies in a bind, caught between their public support for free expression and privacy and their work in countries with authoritarian leaders.”
- [The Intercept, 3/28/22](#): Google Ordered Russian Translators Not To Call The War In Ukraine A War

IV. **Beijing: A Case Study in Big Tech’s Profits-over-Principles Approach**

As Big Tech trumpets its ostensible commitment to democratic values and free expression in the face of Putin’s war, it’s illustrative to examine their posture toward Beijing. After all, China – with their Great Firewall, pervasive surveillance, and draconian censorship laws – is the techno-authoritarian prototype to which Putin aspires, and democracy’s greatest adversary. Indeed, the biggest American social media companies have been banned there for ages.

Far from giving them the Putin treatment, Big Tech has bent over backward to accommodate China and find ways to harness its massive market power, no matter the societal cost. From Amazon and Apple aiding and abetting the genocidal oppression of the Uyghurs, to Facebook and Google endeavoring to build entire CCP-censorship-approved versions of their platforms, Silicon Valley’s moral bankruptcy has been on full display.

A. **Big Tech Mass-Distributes CCP Propaganda For Profit**

Even as Big Tech played up their demonetization and reduced distribution of Kremlin state run media – and despite China’s domestic bans – leading CCP propaganda outlets continue to have colossal “organic” and paid reach on American social media platforms.

Platforms like Facebook have not only allowed CCP propaganda outlets to thrive, but have continued to run global ad campaigns for them – including ads pushing the Kremlin line on the war in Ukraine. Previous ads have smeared pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong, whitewashing the Uyghurs genocide, and blaming the U.S. for the coronavirus pandemic.

- [Foreign Policy, 3/23/22](#): Chinese State Media Is Pushing Pro-Russian Misinformation Worldwide
- [Axios, 3/9/22](#): China's state media buys Meta ads pushing Russia's line on war
- [WSJ, 4/2/21](#): Facebook Staff Fret Over China’s Ads Portraying Happy Muslims in Xinjiang
- [The Telegraph, 4/5/20](#): China floods Facebook with undeclared coronavirus propaganda ads blaming Trump
- [Gizmodo, 8/9/19](#): China's Biggest Propaganda Agency Buys Ads on Facebook and Twitter to Smear Protesters in Hong Kong

- [The Verge, 8/21/19](#): YouTube pressured to ban Chinese state media ads that spread misinformation about protesters

B. Censorship, Surveillance, and Forced Labor – Big Tech’s Beijing Overtures

Big Tech has repeatedly put profits above all else when it comes to accessing the Chinese market, going to breathtaking lengths to appease Beijing, including aiding and abetting their most egregious assaults on democracy and human rights.

- [NYT, 11/22/16](#): Facebook Said to Create Censorship Tool to Get Back Into China
- [WSJ, 1/30/17](#): Facebook Is Trying Everything to Re-Enter China—and It’s Not Working
- [NYT, 8/1/18](#): Google, Seeking a Return to China, Is Said to Be Building a Censored Search Engine
- [WaPo, 10/16/18](#): Google really is trying to build a censored Chinese search engine, its CEO confirms
- [NYT, 8/1/17](#): Joining Apple, Amazon’s China Cloud Service Bows to Censors
- [The Information, 12/7/21](#): Inside Tim Cook’s Secret \$275B Deal with Chinese Authorities
- [WaPo, 11/20/22](#): Apple is lobbying against a bill aimed at stopping forced labor in China
- [NBC News, 3/7/22](#): “Amazon has continued to work with companies in China accused of using forced labor despite public warnings about their work practices”
- [BuzzFeed, 11/4/19](#): Amazon, Apple, And Google Are Distributing Products From Companies Building China's Surveillance State

V. Conclusion

A decade ago, young protesters living under repressive regimes across the Middle East and North Africa used nascent platforms like Facebook and Twitter to organize and document an unprecedented movement that inspired the free world. Today, we’ve seen fearless Ukrainians do much the same, as they defend their homeland from Putin’s unconscionable war. But if casting those now-dominant platforms as the great democratizers in the Arab Spring was naive, to do so now would be indefensible.

To the extent that Big Tech has helped defang the Kremlin propaganda machine, it’s been done haphazardly at the whim of a few CEOs with unfathomable power over global communications after years of willful negligence. Their surveillance advertising-based platforms balkanize and bend the information ecosystem toward demagogues, whom they coddle when in power, all to maximize profits. Their business model has crushed the journalism industry, exacerbating the truth decay that has paved the way for this rising tide of autocracy.

We need not deny the reality that tech giants have done, and will continue to do, things that have a positive impact on the world, nor that internet freedom will be critical to salvaging global democracy in this moment of peril. But those who’ve pushed it to the brink will not save us.