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Reading the Crisis: Technology with Wendy Liu

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K Biswas

Hi, everyone. Thanks for joining us. I'm K Biswas. I'm a critic, editor of Representology: The Journal of Media and Diversity, and chair of London-based community radio station Resonance FM. I'm delighted to welcome you to our second conversation of our third series of Reading the Crisis, which is part of the Stuart Hall Foundation's programme In Search of Common Ground. Inspired by the life and work of British-Jamaican intellectual Professor Stuart Hall, this series asks what kinds of tools and strategies are needed to confront this conjuncture, and where are the intersections where current solidarities can be built. Now, this year, there's an expanded format for Reading the Crisis, whereby me and Aasiya Lodhi present six in-depth conversations with significant writers and thinkers, covering what we consider to be the most pressing issues of our time. Today we discuss technology, while elsewhere in the series, we talk about the economy, democracy, migration, culture and the climate. Running monthly until November, each one-on-one conversation will hopefully help to demonstrate how engaging in conjunctural analysis as Hall envisioned can enrich creative and political practice and deepen academic and organising work. Hall's approach to making sense of the current political moment encourages us to ask ourselves what roles can we play in the pursuit of a more just world.

In today's conversation, we consider technology with Wendy Liu. I hope we can cover the key themes of her 2020 book *Abolish Silicon Valley*, and also remark on one of Stuart Hall's essays from the 1990s, *Which Public, Whose Service?* which can be found in the Duke University Press collection *On Media*, published in 2021. Have your questions ready for the second half of this conversation, when there will be 40 minutes or so for a Q&A. Please submit comments using the chat box at any time during the event, and remember, live captions are available by clicking the CC button in the Zoom bar. So I'd now like to welcome our guest, Wendy Liu. Now, Wendy is the author of *Abolish Silicon Valley: How to Liberate Technology from Capitalism*, which was published by Repeater

in 2020. She started building websites at 12 years old and became a software engineer, having studied maths and computer science at McGill University. A Silicon Valley sceptic who advocates for greater workplace organising among tech workers, she's appeared on numerous podcasts and written for publications like The Guardian, Tribune, The Atlantic, New Socialist, Notes From Below, and has a column in San Francisco's Bay Area Current. Welcome, Wendy. I'm delighted to speak with you.

Wendy Liu

Thank you so much for having me. Really honoured to be here.

K Biswas

Now, can you tell the audience a bit about your experiences working in the tech industry, from your internship at Google to navigating the start-up world with the tech accelerator Y Combinator?

Wendy Liu

Yeah, absolutely. So it's funny... Thank you for reading that bio, and I think the bio's... You know, just building on that is a good way to answer this question. My internship at Google actually came a little bit late in my burgeoning software engineering journey. I started writing code at 12 just on the family computer, working on open source projects, working on side projects, and a lot of it was very self-directed, which feels almost quaint compared to the way software development is probably taught these days. Back then, we didn't have these AI tools that could do things for you, and so a lot of it was just me trying to figure out how these things worked on my own, reading the documentation that was available online, joining these different communities and discovering in the process that there was this pathway from these skills that I was sort of learning on my own, unsupervised, to this industry that was very lucrative and very revered, and so at a pretty early age, I felt like there is a track for me to kind of rise up beyond, like, who I was and who I was destined to be and become someone different, just by virtue of learning these skills and really applying myself. And I didn't really know what that looked like or what I would be doing, but there was enough of this ecosystem among all these bloggers, these venture capitalists, these software engineers who, I think, cultivated this idea of a meritocracy, that you could be anyone – you could be, you know, a 12-year-old anywhere in the world, and if you really try, you can just become really good at these certain technical... You can master these technical skills and then you will be on your way to becoming a multimillionaire in Silicon Valley. You know, it was sort of a... never a

fully sketched out dream, but that was something that stuck in my head from a pretty young age.

And so I just kept coding more for myself, more for fun. For me, I wasn't really motivated by the idea of entrepreneurial wealth so much, but it was always in the back of my mind that part of the reason why it seemed like a valuable thing for me to do to spend time writing code, building these projects, you know, working on open source projects, is because it would eventually pay off. There would be some sort of pay-off. And so then I ended up interning at Google in 2013, which was honestly just like a world away from the Google that we have now. I mean, things were so different then. That was the time when optimism in the tech industry was pretty high, and it really felt like... I mean, Google was still associated with the idea of making the world a better place. And so I went into it expecting it to be, you know, really inspiring, really interesting, really compelling, and found it kind of weirdly bland and boring, the way that I think a lot of big companies, you know, you work a low-level job at any big company, it doesn't really matter how well you're paid, it just... Sometimes the work is boring. And so that's when I started to feel this strange dissonance between this idea I had of Google as this place where smart people worked on the world's most pressing problems and the reality of what my internship was like and what it would have been like if I had kept working there afterwards. And so that was when I started to feel like I wanted to do something different than follow this path and be an engineer at Google.

So then an opportunity came up to start a start-up with some friends, some classmates of mine at McGill, and we interviewed with Y Combinator, which, for those who don't know, is a start-up accelerator. At the time, it was based in Mountain View, California, and it had an amazing reputation as having given birth to all of these very prestigious tech companies – so Reddit, Airbnb, Dropbox, Stripe, DoorDash, Instacart, Coinbase... You know, the list goes on and on, and so it was just this... If you wanted to be a start-up founder, you had to be around that world, you know? It's OK if you don't get in, but it's nice to be around these people, to have these connections. And so we interviewed and didn't get in, and that was, I think, this turning point for me where I didn't really take it so seriously, this idea of starting a start-up. I had already committed to working at Google. But I knew I didn't want to. And so I think I was craving this sense of working on something that could grow and that I could have ownership over, and that would hopefully be meaningful. And so we worked on the start-up not as part of Y Combinator, just on our own, and then we eventually got into a different accelerator in New York City that was for technology start-ups, and in the process, I learned a lot about the technology, learned a lot about the start-up world, and after a few years it started to become clear to me that this idea I'd had of using my technical skills in service of some sort of greater good and making a lot of money in the process, there was something that didn't hold up. That this was kind of unrealistic, like a very naive, foolish dream I'd had.

But it was strange, because the rest of the industry appeared to be built on that dream, and I could see all these other people who were sort of going into it with this idea, and I could start to see how it all fell apart once you... You know, the more money you raise, the more your dreams collapse. And so while I was very deep in this start-up world and feeling very disillusioned by what we were building, that was when I started to find these critiques of the tech industry, you know, first by people within the industry and then by journalists and then by scholars, academics, activists from outside the industry, and that's when I started to really question my idea of what the industry was for and what the point of it was, and it became clear to me that I couldn't keep doing what I was doing, that I needed to find a different way of being in the world than, you know, being a software engineer and expecting that this was my way of making a difference in the world, of doing something useful.

K Biswas

So you were a wide-eyed teenager working with open source software and working within, like, democratic online communities. You catch a glimpse of Google's Sergey Brin and Larry Page and OpenAI's Sam Altman early on in your career, and you go, "There's something up." And when you begin your involvement in the tech industry, how important were ethics to these self-proclaimed leaders? Who did Silicon Valley feel accountable to? Was there much resistance to external oversight and regulation?

Wendy Liu

Yeah, that's a great question. I think definitely yes. And I think there was this idea that the industry could regulate itself, and in the 2010s... I feel like it's important to periodise these things, because I think the 2010s tech industry felt very different than the 2020s tech industry. In the 2010s, it felt like, first of all, the customer was the king, right? And the idea is that as a young start-up, you're trying to find product market fit, and so you're accountable to the customers. And so all that really matters is that your customers love you and that they keep coming back, they keep wanting to do what you're doing, and that you have to pivot until you find product market fit, because ultimately the end goal is to serve the customer and have the customers love you. And so, in a way, I mean, that's really just allegiance to the market, which is kind of a strange god to worship, but that's what it was. And there was this idea that the industry was sort of self-policing and that you don't need external oversight, it's just the founders... I mean, maybe... There's this idea of the founder, the ideal founder, as being this young college dropout sort of Mark Zuckerberg-style person who maybe... Maybe this person, he himself doesn't really think about ethics, but it's OK, because the market somehow magically invents

ethics and morality, you know, and so then only the best start-ups win, which of course is not really how things work in practice, but I think that was the dream.

And then definitely in the 2010s, there were a lot of critiques of the tech industry about the lack of ethics, especially from sort of feminist, anti-racist scholars, activists, workers in the industry, and that was kind of starting to eat away at this idea that you could self-police and you could have an industry that's of course mostly made up of these quite privileged white men, that they are the ones who can somehow make the industry ethical. And we saw all these scandals – the Cambridge Analytica one, which I'm sure most people are familiar with, that was a major one. There was the scandal of Theranos, which was the blood testing company that was briefly valued at \$9 billion before it was revealed that it was essentially a scam, and now the founder's in prison. And so we had things like that that I think really eroded the idea in the public that Silicon Valley could police themselves, that there was some sort of internal mechanism within the industry for ensuring that the companies that were produced, the companies that were coming out of the industry, that they were creating useful products that were good for us, and that they were behaving... The founders were behaving ethically... You know, I think those ideas all started to collapse around maybe the mid-to-late 2010s.

And I think now we are in a very different moment where ethics is almost a dirty word, especially with the Trump presidency, where anything to do with diversity is just thrown out the window, and instead, what we have, this very kind of masculinist, right-wing disdain for just the idea of ethics, and, you know, ethics is for weak people, right? Ethics is for the leftists, the hand-wringers, and what's really important is might and power and domination, and so this is a moment where Palantir is, you know, kind of like the crown jewel in the administration. There was an ad that Palantir had at San Francisco airport, where I live, that just said, "Palantir – software that dominates." And that's just all it said. And I think that, honestly, is just such a good emblem of the moment we're in now, when we are in the era of software that dominates, we're in the era of ethics not being a roadblock any more, whereas in the 2010s, I think there was always... The ethics were always kind of superficial, and there were companies that would say, "Oh, we have this mission statement, we really care about diversity, we really care about doing right by people," but they were never really challenged on that, and so it was more just a way for the leaders to make themselves sound good. And now it's like we're in this era where that's fallen apart, and there's very little pretence of ethics.

I mean, if you look at any of the statements being made by tech CEOs these days, or venture capitalists, there's so little attention paid to ethics or whitewashing what they're doing. It's more just like, "Well, this is what we're doing, and you'll have to get used to it." You know, we're making weapons, we're making these horrible surveillance technologies, but this is what it is, and there's no room for ethics any more.

K Biswas

And I suppose what I am really interested in finding out, because you live in San Francisco, is, what happens when the tech companies bled into existing local communities in San Francisco? What was the effect on them around everything from gentrification, rent increases, cost of living spikes? And of course, this is currently a live issue with respect to the building of new data centres around the world, which are sparking protests in America, France, Chile, even here in London, where you spent some time in the 2010s.

Wendy Liu

Definitely. I think in San Francisco, the most interesting symbolic example is that of the Google bus protests, which people may have heard of, and that was in the mid-2010s. So the back story of that is that Google and a lot of the other big tech companies are based in South Bay, which is... I mean, it's not technically that far away, but because the US does not have a great public transportation network, it feels very far, and most people end up driving, and the public train system is just not as fast or as well-maintained as it ought to be, and so then these tech companies, they started... They started this shuttle programme, and that was really in response to worker demand. It wasn't this sort of top-down thing, it was a bottom-up thing that workers wanted to be able to get people who lived in San Francisco to go to South Bay, which is maybe, like, an hour, hour and a half commute, in these big buses, just to make it easier. And, of course, what started happening is, I mean, as this became more and more of a widespread phenomenon with all these different tech companies doing that and all these tech workers who lived in San Francisco wanting to be nearer the bus stops, is that anywhere there was one of these shuttle bus stops, you would see a rise in evictions, and part of the reason behind that is because San Francisco has traditionally had very limited rent control, so there is rent control, and organisers have had certain successes, but there's no vacancy decontrol, and so if someone gets evicted for whatever reason, then rents can go back up to market rate, and even the rent control that does exist, it's not that amazingly enforced, and there aren't a lot of resources for tenants, and so this is a city that traditionally is very hostile to people who don't have money, of course, and very friendly to real estate capital. As much as I think, you know, real estate capital wishes it was more friendly, it's still... The balance of power is still very much in the favour of capital.

And so what you ended up seeing is a lot of people who'd been living in the city for a long time, maybe they're from here, maybe their families have been from here, they're seeing their lives become unaffordable because of, among other things, these Google buses and what they represent – these people who are paid much more money and who are

usually from out of town, who just want to live somewhere that's fun and exciting, and they want to be able to commute to their jobs in the sort of more boring suburbs of South Bay. So it became... On the one hand, there was this very material phenomenon of, you know, a limited supply of housing and not great protections for people who are living in these houses, but it also became this sort of cultural flash point. It was seen as a clash between old and new, between tech and locals, and there were all these protests that attracted a lot of attention. There were people writing graffiti saying things like "die yuppie scum" or "die techie scum", stuff like that, which was very inflammatory. I think a lot of people were really upset about it, but, I mean, to me, the way I see it is, this is an expression of people who are doing their best to hold on to this threadbare connection they have to a place that they want to stay in and they don't really have a lot of resources.

And the city definitely took the side of this new tech elite for the most part, right, and it was... I think there were a lot of battles being fought, but I think ultimately what we see is this new tech elite won, and Google buses managed to continue. Google and other buses, they glide through the city, you know, unmolested. Rents are still going up. I mean, right now, rents are going up because of the AI boom, and they're really, really just dreadful. I mean, they've gone up by just eye-dropping percentages in some parts of the city, especially near the AI companies, and so we're seeing a whole new wave of evictions and just gentrification because of these tech companies. And I think, yeah, in terms of the data centres, I think in some way it's been really heartening to see how unified Americans have been, especially. I mean, I'm sure all over the world too, but America, you know, notoriously a very divided, polarised country, just to see all these people from across the political spectrum come together in support of banning data centres and not wanting a data centre in their neighbourhood, because they understand what that does to their quality of life and they also understand what the actual output is of these data centres, that what is produced is this technology that is not going to be good for them. It's going to degrade their quality of life, it's going to be used as an excuse to lay them off, and it's going to just make the world kind of slightly worse all around them. So I think what we're seeing right now with the data centres, it feels a bit like the chickens coming home to roost in a way, right? This is the logical end point of what happens when technology is viewing the earth as just like a resource, something to be colonised, and not seeing it as something that people need to live, and a place where people actually live and make their lives.

K Biswas

And even if Big Tech is not turning up directly on your doorstep, I think there is this growing awareness of tech's excesses from media coverage, and in the six years since your book was published, that public awareness just continues to grow about tech's

interconnections with governments and the role of artificial intelligence in increasing militarism or ecological decline. I mean, how is Silicon Valley coping with the greater public scrutiny, would you say?

Wendy Liu

Yeah, that's a great question. I think both very well and not very well, I'd say. It's interesting – you're seeing this polarisation. I think the leaders are coping just fine, because they're able to... Because we're in this era where you have the rise of this revanchist right-wing political terrain, and you can simply say, "Well, we're trying to make a lot of money, we're doing these things that are a little bit evil, we're making money, and that's fine," and they can kind of get away with it. The way Trump has been able to get away with everything he's doing, you know, and you have a lot of these tech companies that are aligning themselves with Trump, whereas maybe ten years ago, they would have positioned themselves against him, but now, it's actually... It's working out for them pretty well. I think we are seeing among the tech worker class, I think we're seeing this growing awareness of the dangers of the industry, and there was a moment, the late 2010s, when it felt like tech worker organising was really on the ascendant, and there were some small victories. You know, people were able to... There was that walk-out at Google in 2018, which was really sort of unprecedented for a big tech company, where all these people had essentially a work stoppage to protest the fact that there was... Google had paid out a giant amount of money to someone who was accused of sexual misconduct towards subordinates, and then there was a protest around... There was a lot of organising around Google's contracts with the military.

A lot of other tech companies had similar things, contracts with ICE, contracts with the military, organising around Palestine. There've been a lot of really inspiring cases of tech workers organising. I think the problem that we're seeing now is that the tech industry was sort of unused to that kind of thing, but now it's not. Now it knows, now it has a playbook, right? It's like those incidents of activism were responded to by these companies with harsh crackdowns, firings, really just punishing these people for organising, and I think that had a chilling effect. And we also saw all these lay-offs happening in the last few years that I think have had even more of a chilling effect, and so this is a time when it's like we need tech organising more than ever, and it's also harder than ever, because the landscape is different, because for one, tech workers are seen as more replaceable, partly with the rise of AI but also just because there has been an oversupply in the industry, whereas maybe ten years ago, you were hearing all these people saying, "Well, we don't have enough software engineers, everyone needs to take coding boot camp and become a software engineer," and now we're hearing the opposite message. "There are too many software engineers. Don't go into that." You

know, get a humanities degree, or just resign yourself to your fate as being permanently unemployable. It's like a very different class composition that we're seeing right now.

So, yeah, I don't know. It's interesting – there's so much power concentrated on top, and there's so much potential for those who are working at these companies and who are maybe the few people who are remaining after all the lay-offs to do something about it, but I think people are really scared, and in that background, in that context, I think it is really inspiring to see, for example, you know, the DeepMind workers who are in the UK trying to form a union and really putting themselves on the line. I think that's brave. I think it's very hard to do, and most of the people who I know in the tech industry here in the Bay Area, it's like, there's so little appetite for anything like organising, because people are so scared for their jobs, and they're scared that if they lose their job, they won't be able to find another job, because this is not a good time to be a software engineer who needs a job and doesn't have a great resume, right? It's like if you're kind of a superstar AI engineer, you'll be fine, but if you're not, then you might have to find a job in a different industry.

K Biswas

And of course that sort of precarity and vulnerability spreads outside the gig economy that's developing around software engineers and tech workers to each and every one of us, and earlier this year, you wrote a fascinating piece for The Guardian on AI and what you described as "cognitive sovereignty". Do you have any advice for members of our audience on how to minimise the temptation to outsource one's thinking to artificial intelligence?

Wendy Liu

Yeah, thanks for asking that. I don't know if I necessarily have great advice. I think I just... For myself, I've learned a few things that I know are bad for me and that don't align with the kind of person I want to be in the world. I think with AI, I see it a lot of the time as a short cut, and there are moments when that short cut can be useful, and I think it's also important to distinguish between different types of AI, because there's so much technology that gets lumped together under that umbrella, and they're different, right? I mean, using AI in the context of... You know, generative AI to write an essay. To me, that is not a great use of time. Anything that was written by AI is not worth reading, most likely. I think using the sort of built-in AI features when you're doing a Google search, I think that is a little different, partly because that is being pushed on us, and it's actually really hard to get rid of the AI search overview in Google. I mean, you can do it, but it's not intuitive. And I think if you're searching for something and you see this result in the AI

overview, you're like, yeah, this sounds kind of right, you know, this makes sense... I think that's not the end of the world.

I think it is different when you're relying on AI in an emotional sense, right? It's like, if you're using it as a therapist, if you're using it as... You know, "give me advice on how I should approach a situation", I think that's a case where you really have to stop and ask yourself, is this advice coming from a good place? Is it coming from a place I trust? Because these models are black boxes. We don't know where they get their data from. There's no way of really doing an audit to understand what values and morals are encoded in these things, and you're really just trusting some corporation to tell you something that's important to your life, so I think in that case, you know, just talk to a friend, talk to a family member, talk to someone you actually know, and I think when it comes to writing, or any kind of creative work, I think it's so important to not outsource your thinking to AI, precisely because, I mean, the whole point of it is developing your own skills, developing your own sense of taste. And I think it's... Yeah, just, it's dangerous.

I think we see these technologies as if they're kind of just a given. They're just things that exist in the world, you know, the way that... I don't know, like this glass of water is just a thing that exists, and I take it for granted. I mean, I think with the glass of water, it's probably fine. I think with a piece of technology that has this huge financial speculative bubble behind it, that is produced under these very unsavoury conditions and that is deployed by these people who... I mean, some of the people running AI companies are so untrustworthy, and they're so prone to lies and manipulation. I think when you put all these factors into account, plus, of course, the environmental consequences, then it's like, well, do I really want to become reliant on the technology that is making the world worse and is being promoted by the world's least trustworthy people, and could maybe go away any minute or could be completely changed, you know, tomorrow, and I have no control over? I think those are all factors to consider, the fact that these technologies are just... They're not things that have any kind of democratic oversight in any way, right? They're deployed by these private companies and the motives behind the people running these companies are very self-interested, and there is this giant bubble that could pop at any moment. I think it's starting to show signs of something starting to go awry.

I think with all these factors, and the fact that a lot of this LLM technology, it's so addictive, you know, it's like we, as human beings, we're trained to make meaning out of words, and you see this string of words and you really want to impute meaning onto it, even when there isn't meaning, even when it wasn't written by a person, but you want to believe that, I think because of that as well, that just makes these technologies especially dangerous, probably even more dangerous than social media feeds, which, already, we all understand that these are designed to be addictive, they're designed to

make us feel bad about ourselves to want to buy things. I think we should apply the same kind of scepticism towards AI technology, that this technology isn't just given to us to help us do things and to make our lives better. This technology has a motive, and it's not one that's aligned with our own interest.

K Biswas

Now, someone who never outsourced their thinking to artificial intelligence was Professor Stuart Hall, and I think that now might be a good time to bring in his essay written in the early '90s called Which Public, Whose Service? which is published in the Duke University Press collection On Media. Now, it concerns the issue of public service broadcasting in an era of private competition, and it helped stimulate debate in the run-up to the BBC's charter renewal in the '90s, a process which the corporation is undergoing yet again over the next year. So if I could read a short passage from the essay...

"Modern culture has been transformed by the communication and information revolutions. In modern societies, broadcasting is now the main source of popular knowledge, pictures of the world about how society and the world operate. It forms the discursive space in which the key issues that shape the world and our everyday lives receive their first popular, often decisive formulation, where they are widely visualised, debated and imagined. It occupies an enormous proportion of the waking lives and leisure time of most adults and children, an enormous popular investment in the symbolic. Its creative work in a variety of forms and languages, its figuring of the world in image and sound, feeds the public mind, the social imaginary. It shapes what the public knows, but also gives form to its fears, anxieties, desires and pleasures, thereby helping to constitute the social identities through which we experience ourselves and act in the world."

Now, this could all be said over three decades later about the internet and digital culture. How were you struck by this passage and the wider themes in that essay from the '90s?

Wendy Liu

Yeah, I really love that essay, and I'm glad you sent that over. I think this idea of a public service is precisely what's missing from the modern conception of the internet, and I think we need that concept back, and I think we need to be thinking of these platforms like Twitter, Facebook, TikTok even – these are the portals through which a lot of especially young people are getting their information. They're forming their views of the world through these platforms, more so than... I mean, how many young people do you

know who watch public programmes versus getting YouTube content pumped to them every day? You know, it's like this is the new broadcasting, and it's very fragmented.

There's a line in that essay where Stuart Hall talks about how the nation is sort of... There's like a complex unity that's made through the process of broadcasting, and I think what we're seeing in this modern age is the opposite. It's this fragmentation that is being accelerated by the way these platforms are... They produce all these very fragmented information streams, and I think that itself is very dangerous, but that's precisely what these for-profit platforms want to maximise, because that is the right way to get people addicted, to produce something that's just for them, to really hone in on their deepest fears and anxieties, try to sell them more products, and so this is kind of the world that hypercapitalism has wrought, where you have all these individuals who are just addicted to their own individual broadcasting streams that make them want to buy more products over and over, where these companies are reaping the rewards and they're making record profits. So I think this is kind of the worst of all worlds, right? This is maybe the worst world that we could imagine, and I think if Stuart Hall were writing about today, I think he would not be happy with how things have turned out, and I think the way we challenge... I think the right way to look at the world we have now is to see that these platforms are not just the outputs of these private companies, right? I think there's this tendency within Silicon Valley to really enshrine the idea of private property and to enshrine the idea of innovation as being something that forms like Athena from the heads of these really brilliant white male software engineers, which... I don't think that's a useful... I think that's a very dangerous formulation. I think it's ahistorical, I think it's deeply antisocial, I think for me the way technology has developed is, it's developed as this sort of communal project of a lot of different people working on it, not always getting credit for what they're working on, but sort of coming together and building these things and building on each other – the way that we think of science, often, as a commons, I think we have to think of software also as this commons, that unfortunately has been privatised for various reasons of history.

You know, we can look at all the developments of the neoliberal politicians in the US, especially, in the '90s, early 2000s, the work they did to privatise the internet, and so be it, this was the way it developed. It doesn't mean that this is the way it has to continue to develop, and I think we're seeing all these really morbid symptoms, and I think they all arise from the fact that the internet is being treated as this... Like a thing that needs to be privatised, a thing that does not really belong to individuals. The only relationship any of us can have as individuals to the internet is, either we're just the end user, and we're treated like scum, we have no control, we're just these, like, rats in an experiment, or if we're lucky, then we can start our own internet companies. But of course, the window for that is closing.

You know, we're seeing this oligarchy. We're seeing these monopolies that are forming, and there isn't really a lot of leeway for someone to start a new company. It's just the ability to produce something and get money and to disrupt the existing sphere is so limited, because we have this stagnation. And so I think because we're in this space, I think it's a really fruitful time to start thinking about different models of how the internet could work, and I think for me the most fruitful model is the idea of, it is a public good, and it should be distributed as a public service, and in a way, it's so hard to imagine that, because we're so used to this world where Google and Facebook or now Meta just control... Have the duopoly on advertising, right, and they control these platforms and they produce all these billionaires, these terrible people who are just running the world, and so we're so used to that, but I think that we should remember that this is a very historically contingent phenomenon. It didn't have to be this way. In the same way that the creation of the railroads produced all these railroad magnates. They're not around any more in the same way, right? It's like we have these new industries, and I think we should find a way to remind ourselves that the internet being this sort of privatised monster is just one of many possible worlds, and that there is an alternate path where we treat it as a public good, we treat it as something that belongs to the people and that is governed by non-commercial principles, and I don't really know what that will look like. I think even for me, it's hard to imagine, but I think the first step is just going back to Stuart Hall's ideas about broadcasting as a public service. I think that is such a useful imaginary for us for the internet today.

K Biswas

I feel that Stuart touches upon these subjects sort of 30 years before the event. He writes, "the idea that a strictly commercial television system comes free to the viewer is a profound piece of popular mystification", and of course, the same may be said for popular social media platforms. I mean, how have we got to this point where Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, even Google as a search engine, which are nominally free to users – I mean, they're free to use – are posting these record profits and have created this oligarchy you mentioned?

Wendy Liu

Yeah, I think that's such an important point. I think this mystification, I think it occurs by this kind of strange manoeuvre where the source of the money is hidden, and it's shifted, and so if you look at Google and Meta and how they make their money, together the two of them form this digital advertising duopoly, and they take in most of the ad money that's spent on digital platforms these days, and I think what that means on a global scale is that they sit on top of these global value chains of commodity

production, and so any time you want to buy a pair of sneakers, right, how much of that money goes to Google and Facebook? Not an insignificant amount, for the most part, right? I mean, not for absolutely everything, but if you look at the top consumer goods companies, for example, look at where are they spending their money, I mean, some of it goes to the cost of making the goods, but sure, a certain amount of it goes to marketing, and some of that goes to these platforms that get people hooked on them and then end up essentially selling attention to these advertisers.

And so I think we can't buy into this myth that these platforms are free, because they're not free. They're sort of piggybacking on these other companies in the private sphere, and so it's different, I think, from the taxpayer-funded model, but I think we should see it as something that really belongs to all of us. I think this is the sleight of hand that Silicon Valley's very good at, that it's like, well, it's these private companies, they can do what they want with their money, it's nothing to do with you. You know, it's no cost to you, the taxpayer. But, you know, it is a cost to us, and I think the cost to us comes in the form of, if we think of the technological commons of all of humanity, all these inventions that have been produced, and we think of them being fenced off and gated and patented and controlled by a small number of these very untrustworthy people, I think that is the cost, right? The cost is that this is a world that we all should have some sort of say in, and we don't, just because of a certain number of very historically contingent choices to privatise this technology and to lock it off, lock it away from the rest of us.

So, yeah, I think that is maybe the central challenge, is just to get people to understand that these companies are making money at our expense, and even if you can't directly see the mechanism, there is an indirect mechanism where the quality of the goods and services you buy, it's worse because some of that money has to go to keeping these companies alive and propping them up, and the quality of these platforms as well is worse, because they have these commercial incentives where they have to keep you hooked, they have to get you to buy things you don't want to buy, and they're pushing AI on you even when you don't want it, just because that's kind of this weird corporate imperative. And ultimately, the world is just being degraded because of this kind of privatised control of the internet, and whatever the internet could have been, it's not living up to its potential, because it's being used for these very financially driven ends at the behest of a very small number of people.

K Biswas

And maybe that is the point of unity. I mean, the recent headlines across the world about the threat of AI to skilled knowledge economy workers – no longer is automation about sort of automating the work of the working class. It also goes into areas like finance and universities and the arts, and as you mentioned earlier, tech itself. Can you

envisage any kind of cross-workplace, cross-class unity between those whose job prospects are undermined by automation? And are there ways of bringing parts of the tech industry into public ownership that people are exploring or could explore?

Wendy Liu

Yeah, I mean, I hope so, I definitely hope so. When I think about public ownership of the tech industry, I think we have to be very careful to not be too broad and to assume that everything being made would simply be better if it was publicly owned. I think there's some technologies that shouldn't be made at all, right? And I think this is... In some ways, it's a very obvious point, but I think people forget this. For example, you know, it's like, should we be making... If we're making a lot of weapons, should we simply bring them into public ownership? It's like, well, maybe we should stop making the amount of weapons that we make, right? There are certain technologies that are just dangerous, and where the benefits don't necessarily outweigh the costs. I think with a lot of this generative AI technology, I'm not convinced that it needs to be brought into public ownership. I think I'm more interested in seeing a world where this technology is developed on a much smaller scale and by people who can be kind of trusted to use it for the benefit of the common good, and definitely not the way it's being rolled out right now, where it's being kind of seized upon by anyone who has any kind of power in a corporation or an organisation to try to reduce headcount, to try to replace actual human beings with this kind of black box, this machine that sometimes works and sometimes doesn't.

I think that to me is the danger, and I don't think the solution is that we need to have public ownership of this technology and just get a stake in it. I think it's, maybe this technology shouldn't exist the way it does, it shouldn't be rolled out the way it does. It certainly should not be marketed the way it does, as this kind of magical machine that will replace all your frontline workers, all your service workers, all your professors, whatever. It's like, that's not a realistic way of approaching this technology, it's not a very responsible way of approaching it. So, yeah, I guess I would hope to see that there would be cross-class unity between kind of anyone whose job might be threatened by... Not automation, per se. I wouldn't even call this technology automation, I would say it's just like a machine that kind of provides a superficial version of what's expected, like, a very superficial, a very small part of what is expected of these workers, and I think automation could be a much... Could actually be a good goal to strive towards, and I think automation in the sense of simplifying parts of people's jobs that are not necessarily that interesting and that people don't want to do, but I think that has to be done sort of for the workers themselves. It has to be done at their behest and it has to be done under their control, and I think that's not really part of the conversation right now, right? The only way we talk about automation in popular discourse is, it's

something that bosses are pushing on workers using technology that they themselves don't understand, that they're purchasing from these outside vendors who are really themselves houses of cards, you know? And it's just this very strange roundabout way of talking about automation. I don't think it's true automation.

If we think about the way automation worked for automobile factories, for example, it's not using LLM technology, and it's not to say that we should celebrate the kind of automation that was done by companies like Ford, but I think that gives us an example of, OK, this is what automation could look like, and I think we should challenge ourselves to have a broader imaginary about what would automation look like if it was actually done for workers? If it was done to make people's jobs better, you know, not to replace them, but to augment their jobs and give them tools to simplify the more boring processes, the most boring parts of their jobs, and give them more leverage and expand their ability to do more? And I think that could only happen if automation were sort of in the control of labour and not capital, and so to get there requires, really, a completely different world, a completely different balance of power, and it's not really visible from where we are now, but I think it's something that's worth fighting for. I think that's probably something that can only be done by building the labour movement and building institutions, building movements to challenge the power of capital.

K Biswas

And also kind of cross-cultural solidarity as well. This isn't just a thing around American tech companies. In China, you have a million graduates who are entering a market where there are not enough jobs as well. So is it possible to build that kind of cross-country solidarity as well as cross-class and cross-industry? Now, before we go to audience questions – and, please, if you do have a question watching this, or a comment, just drop them in the chat, and I'll read some of them out – I want to finally ask you, an early believer in modern computing as a potentially liberatory force for mankind, is there a possibility of resurrecting in the 21st century those early utopian ideals that the internet promised the 12-year-old you?

Wendy Liu

Yeah, I love that question. I think yes, but I think it requires kind of a roundabout way of getting there. I think it requires challenging capital, you know, not to just keep beating that drum, but I think if you look at some of the early techno-utopian writing, the kind of pure technologists, a lot of them, were notoriously averse to the idea of politics. They want to think of themselves as kind of above the realm of politics – you know, cyberspace is a place where no government can enter, right? It's a space where it's just

meritocracy, it's hackers with technical skills... I think that was always, like, a nice dream, and it doesn't really hold up in reality. I think if you look at the way technology will be deployed in a capitalist system for the benefit of capital, then I think you quickly see that all the liberatory potential gets drained or sidelined in favour of the more exploitative capacities of this technology.

I think the way we get to a world where technology is seen primarily in terms of its liberating capabilities is, we have to fight capital. We have to diminish the power of capital. We have to reduce capital's ability to just deploy this technology wholesale and do what it wants with it. And I don't know exactly what that looks like except through more movements to challenge the rise of capital, but I think it's very hard for me to be excited by any technology that is being built these days, because I immediately see, even if it's developed with this really beautiful mission statement about how it will only be used for good, I see immediately how it will be either thwarted in that mission, or that it will be seized upon by capital to make life worse for people for its own gain. So... Not to end on too depressing of a note, but I think that's... I think maybe trying to turn that into a kind of resolve, it's like, well, if we want technology to be emancipatory, then we have to fight capital, and that's kind of the only way we get there.

K Biswas

Well, I think that's a perfect time to go into audience questions, and we've got a question from Tommy, who asks, if we are all now phono sapiens, as Byung-Chul Han says, how do we cultivate alternative habits and relationships towards technology in our day-to-day lives collectively? How do we avoid an individualistic, self-fashioning project of eschewing technology personally that neglects a wider transforming of the social and the public? Great question.

Wendy Liu

That is a great question, yeah. I think there is... It does feel like there's this really large shift towards people trying to get away from their phones, you know? To spend less time with their phones. It feels like we've passed a watershed line where it's not... Nobody's sort of just saying, "Oh, yeah, just spend more time on your phone and it's good." I think everyone's very aware that spending too much time on your phone is not good for you, it's not good for the kind of person you want to be. But it does also feel like a lot of this discourse is framed in a very individualistic... You know, it's like, put your phone away, don't use anything... that's something that's sometimes only available to people who have a certain amount of privilege already, who don't necessarily need to be on their

phone. Yeah, I don't know. I think that is a wonderful question. I'm not sure if this is something that I have got much insight into.

I think part of it is just remembering that we have all been able to live without phones for a long time, and that maybe in this moment when you can see the phone as almost like a vehicle for increasing these kind of inhuman tendencies that are being pushed on us and these very antisocial ways of interacting, I think it maybe is a prosocial act to just use your phone less where you do have an option, right? If, rather than being at home and scrolling reels, you know, talk to someone, watch something with people, find some other way of getting the information or the culture or the entertainment that you want that is in a community with people, and seeing that as a small-p political act, where you're seeking out a community of other people and you're deliberately rejecting this idea that you should be on your phone and get this kind of instant gratification from the stuff that's tailored to you specifically, and maybe it's good for you. Maybe there's some kind of character that's being built through this process of forcing yourself to seek beyond that.

K Biswas

I wonder if there were other more kind of utopian pathways that other parts of the world promised with technological development. I mean, Evgeny Morozov's brilliant podcast The Santiago Boys talks about Chile under Allende, the growth of a different form of cybernetics, and there were also experiments in the late 20th century in France as well that sort of sought to lift all boats, I think. I mean, did we just go down one pathway, the American neoliberal model of competition? Is there a way of discovering these, like, other pathways that history may have lost?

Wendy Liu

Yeah, I think we did go down this very American-dominated pathway, and that's why so many of the big tech companies that kind of dominate the world are American, and are run along the lines of this very American entrepreneurial privatised model. And I like the examples you brought up. Another example I think of is slightly in a different vein, but it's the Lucas Plan...

K Biswas

Yes.

Wendy Liu

...in your neck of the woods, in the UK, with Lucas Aerospace, and the workers at this plant coming up with a plan to take the technology that was being previously used for, I believe, building planes, I think for...

K Biswas

Yeah, for aerospace.

Wendy Liu

For war, right. Yeah, for aerospace purposes, and seeing, OK, what else can we make? What other kinds of technology can we make that are more socially useful? Could we make dialysis machines? Could we make eco-friendly public transit? And I think that is the kind of mentality that is missing, and that maybe that should come back, especially if we're... I think we're at a time when the AI bubble is really starting to fall apart, maybe slowly, maybe too slowly, but we are seeing all these companies post numbers that don't make any sense, and it feels like funding is starting to dry up, and I think maybe this is a good time to start thinking about, well, what can we do when the bubble pops? Because it will at some point. When it pops, what happens with these companies that exist? What happens with the data centres that have been built? You know, how do we come up with more fruitful uses? I'm not sure, in the case of these data centres specifically, I'm not sure that there are any, but I think it's important to try to think, you know, what can be salvaged from the wreckage and how do we build technology that is less overtly privatised and less overtly capitalist from the wreckage of this AI roll-out.

K Biswas

Stuart Hall's great friend Hilary Wainwright wrote extensively about the Lucas Plan, and, you know, after a couple of drinks, she'll tell you about how in Argentina, there were factories that were closing down after a financial crisis, but the workers stayed on, occupied it and produce things of social good. So the idea that the infrastructure is in place, private infrastructure is in place, but then the public use it, almost flips around that idea that was so popular in the de-industrialised era, during Thatcherism and Reaganism, of taking public and made by public money and public hands and then privatising that space and building profit-seeking models. So perhaps that's something that we can explore. We've got a couple more questions in the Q&A. We've got Joanne saying, thinking about Gavin Mueller's take on the Luddites, is there any for scope for collective contemporary Luddism in our relationship with tech? Great question.

Wendy Liu

A great question, yeah. Actually, I make these T-shirts that just say "the Luddites were right", in the same font as the those, like, anti-piracy... "You wouldn't steal a car." People kind of love those shirts. I feel like we're in the middle of this, like, Luddite moment. In New York, there was a piece that came out recently about these kids who are starting this kind of like Summer of Ludd programme, and it does feel like there's a lot of interest in the Luddite movement, and there's a desire to see them as not the way that the Luddite term has become... You know, become so... Like, it's defamatory, and it's become this insult, and I think there's an interest in seeing the Luddites as part of a movement that was smarter than history often considers them to be, and seeing that they were responding to not technology per se but the way that technology's being used to damage people's lives. So I do think that there is a lot of potential for that kind of movement. I mean, I love the Luddites, and I love what they stood for, and it makes me so happy when someone asks me, "Oh, what does that mean? What does the shirt mean? Why were the Luddites right?" I'm like, "Yeah, well, let me tell you about this kind of oft-forgotten part of history..." I think we have to reclaim the sort of historical legacy they left behind, because it offers us such a useful path for the current moment. It offers us a path to resist, it offers us a way of not totally buying into the world that is being carved out for us, and it lets us see ourselves as historical actors, not as individuals, but as a collective. I think that's so important, especially because the Silicon Valley mythology is so individualised.

You know, there's this idea that if you want to do something, the best thing you can do is start a company. If you don't like the way the internet is, start a new internet company. And I just think that's wrong. I think that's... To see yourself that way is to see yourself as an empty vessel of capital to just, you know, someone through whom capital does its bidding, and I think that's not the right way to push for a new kind of emancipatory project or any kind of social change that is actually for the better, and so I think the Luddites offer a really beautiful counterpart, like, a different way of understanding yourself as a historical actor, where you're not someone who as an individual starts a company, makes a lot of money, does something on your own, but rather, you're part of a movement of people who are kind of all on the same level, and what unites you is the fact that you're all part of this class. You're all acted upon by capital in the same way, and you can all, as a collective, as a mass, resist, you know, push back against capital.

And that historically, there have been successes and failures – the Luddites themselves, I don't know to what degree we'd consider them a success, but I think it's important that they fought, and I think for us now, it is also important that we fight, and we see ourselves as... The only way that we can actually make a difference in how the world works is if we see ourselves as part of a collective trying to resist what capital is doing to

us with that technology, and I think reclaiming the link between the Luddites and capital, and not just simply technology per se, right? Because it's not like the looms were being... It's not like this technology was being made by just normal people, and that they could use them if they wanted to. No, it was implemented in a very top-down way by capital. I think we have to see modern day technology in the same way, that this is not... This is being pushed upon us by an outside force that wants to dominate us, and that the best thing we can do is to try to push back as part of a collective, and I think identifying with the Luddite movement is a very powerful way to do that.

K Biswas

Well, in that vein, there is another question in the chat, which is, what are some labour movements that inspire you or give you hope, their histories, notable people involved, what their actions resulted in, etc? Have you found any in research for your book? What are the lessons pertinent from these examples that stick out?

Wendy Liu

Yeah, I love this question. So, living in San Francisco, I've become very familiar with the 1934 general strike, which was a strike that started with the longshore workers – so the ILWU is the International Longshore Warehouse Workers Union, and they encompass not just the longshore workers who work on the ports, unloading, loading, but also a lot of people who work in different warehouses and at different distribution points inland. So it's like a pretty broad union. And in the '30s, there was this problem where the union hiring halls were not very well run, and so what would happen is, say you worked for the union, you show up and you might just not get a job that day, because maybe the person who's working has been bribed by someone else or they just don't like you, or they're racist or something. And so it wasn't very fair, and conditions were very difficult. They were very stressful, a lot of injuries occurred, but it could be a pretty good paying job if it worked out. You know, sometimes it would be OK. And so there were a lot of people who worked these jobs and knew they deserved better, and there was a lot of organising. There were some members of the Communist Party, there were members of other unions and other groups who saw that this type of work was an important choke point for capital, because if a container ship or... Sorry, this was before containers. If a ship is not getting unloaded, then these products are not going to be sold, and then the value will not be realised, and so I think the strategic importance of this kind of work was seen pretty early on. And so in the '30s, there was an effort to try to organise them and to demand, among other things, higher wages, get better working conditions and a union-controlled hiring hall, like, a hiring hall that was not just run by the bosses.

And the way this ended up occurring is, there was a general strike that occurred, so the workers went on strike, and this was in '34, 1934, in summer. Workers went on strike, and there was a picket line, and then the cops were sent in, as usual, and then there were two workers who were killed in one skirmish, and then more skirmishes happened, and there's a funeral march that was held that really just shut down this giant street in the middle of the city called Market Street. It sort of bisects the city. So there's a funeral march down Market Street, and at the time, there was a lot of collaboration, a lot of cooperation with other unions, and so you ended up with essentially this citywide general strike. Not everyone was on strike, but so many different types of workers were on strike in solidarity with the longshoremen, and this really brought the city to a halt, and after several days, it completely shifted the balance of power to the point where the workers got some of what they wanted.

Not everything they wanted, but they got something. They got a better contract, they got this union-controlled hiring hall, and I think it's a really powerful and beautiful moment, and all the accounts I've read of this strike, I think the reason it inspires me so much is, it shows how something can just come out of what feels like nothing, how something can shift so quickly and really just alter the balance of power, and not just that, but also alter the way people see the world. I think there are a lot of people who before that didn't really see themselves as political actors, didn't see themselves as historical actors. They thought of themselves as individuals who just went to work, had these terrible working conditions and went home, and I think that the experience of something like that, this general strike that really just changed the fabric of the city, I think that teaches you to see yourself as a historical actor who is capable of making a change not just for yourself but for the people around you. And that, I think, is so beautiful, and is something that I think we need to remember. Yeah, so that strike is one that I think about a lot.

K Biswas

I think that specific historical conjuncture of the interwar years, the strikes that you mention... It's the 100th anniversary of our only general strike in Great Britain at the moment, 1926, and I feel that the knock-on effects of what workers were able to get from the new deal in America to, I suppose, aspects of the post-war welfare state, were in part inspired by those workers' organisations of the interwar era, so maybe it's time for another round of that, if we're going to get better, I suppose, state-agreed contentment, a settlement, I suppose, both between labour and capital. We have another question from Sabiha, which is, what kinds of technologies give you most hope today, and what would a counter-hegemonic digital culture look like? So you're somebody who's obviously spent 20 years kind of with your head in modern technologies. Is there

anything from the last 20 years that gives you kind of hope that it would be good for audience members or tech workers of the modern day to explore further?

Wendy Liu

Interesting question. Yeah, I think the way I would answer that question is that, I think for myself, being able to... learning how to use technology and learning how to build technology has been so liberatory for me, because it's given me the ability to... It's taught me a certain way of thinking, like, a very structured, rational way of thinking that I think is really... It's important and useful, but it's also given me the power to build certain things for myself. So, for example... This is kind of a silly example, but the way I read books is, I'll just put... here's an example. I have these Post-its in the Stuart Hall book. And what I do with these Post-its is, I type up the passages I like and I add my comments and I add tags and I put this all into a system that I built for myself. And I'm sure that if someone wanted to try to build one now with vibe coding, like, they could probably do something faster, but I think for me, it was important to build it and to spend a lot of time and energy building it, and sort of take the long way, because now I have this huge sense of investment, like a psychic investment in this technology that I've been working on for ten years that contains the notes of every book I've read in the last ten years. And I think that's a beautiful thing that technology offers, right? You can build something that is tailored for your own use case, and in this case, the technology that I learned when I was writing code, I mean, this is something that... It all came together, and I thought, OK, let me try to build something just for my own use case that helps me track the books that I've read and the ideas that I like and the quotes that are interesting and inspiring, and tag them and search them and just have all this information available to me.

And I think there's something to be said about technology that you're personally invested in that's not just given to you, because I think, I mean, if Google had released a product for this and I could just sort of search for in any moment, I think I wouldn't feel as personally attached to it and as committed to it as I do now, where it is kind of a manual process and it takes a long time, but it's mine, and it's such a part of how I navigate the world, and how I write and how I think. You know, I'm always pulling up quotes from this thing that I built for myself.

So I think, yeah, the roundabout way I'd answer the question is, I think any piece of technology that you have a personal investment in, that you understand how it works and you feel like is useful for yourself, if you've put time and energy into making it work for you, I think that is a beautiful liberatory and hopeful kind of technology, right? It could be like an Excel spreadsheet that you use to keep track of something important in your life, and I think that's a good use of technology. I think taking something that is

produced by the corporate world and then turning that on its head and sort of using it for your own purposes, using it for, you know, organising purposes, for example, for activist purposes.

K Biswas

Activist...

Wendy Liu

I think that's beautiful.

K Biswas

Yeah, there's a question around what activist spaces do you feel are essential to engage with in the pursuit of transforming the tech space into one focused on public good?

Now, I know at the end of Abolish Silicon Valley, there's a kind of broad list of demands that you write, which is around reclaiming entrepreneurship and work, public services, IP, culture, and I wonder if there are these activist groups doing that work at the moment that you're kind of aware of? Across the world, as well.

Wendy Liu

Yeah, for sure. So I wrote that chapter kind of in the heyday of the Corbyn movement, right, and so it was a very different era, and I think a lot of the things I brought up seemed so close in a way that they don't really seem now, which is a little disheartening. But, I mean, there is still so much good work being done. Here where I am in San Francisco, the Democratic Socialists of America is really interesting. And so Bay Area Current, which is the publication that I write for... I mostly write... I write this column about billboards, the tech billboards, and for those who'd never been to San Francisco, please look it up, because you will not believe the weird AI billboards that we see all around us. You know, other places have billboards for, like, Coca-Cola or something, and here we see a billboard for a very specific AI company that none of us will ever need. So Bay Area Current, it came out of the DSA here, the East Bay DSA, and, I mean, the Tech Workers Coalition. I used to be more involved when I was first writing about this, and these days I'm not that involved any more, but I think it's a really important space, because it's a space that is trying to get tech workers, people who are working in tech in whatever capacity, to see themselves as these historical actors, as

part of this collective that can push back against capital. So I think that's really important.

And there's also work being done by sort of more older, established, less overtly political institutions like the Electronic Frontier Foundation, which is pushing back against some of the worst overreaches in terms of technological surveillance and the way the internet's getting worse, and the way technology's being used to take away people's freedom and privacy. So I think there are a lot of these spaces that deal with this. I don't know if I... I'm sure there are others that I haven't thought of that aren't popping into my head right now.

K Biswas

And I suppose I wanted to ask a question – I was writing earlier this year about, I suppose, the second Trump administration's backsliding to its commitment to diversity. You know, the tech giants used to say that they were incredibly meritocratic. Whoever you are, whatever background you came from, you could make it in the industry if you worked hard. And I wonder... Companies from Facebook to Amazon scrubbed their diversity goals in the run-up to an election. Musk has swung his weight around behind far-right political parties from the AfD to Restore Britain, and I wonder, not only from your personal experience, which you write about in Abolish Silicon Valley, but in a sort of wider sociological sense, how can people of colour, women, marginalised groups, find their way into, I suppose, tech and be able to fight as a kind of cross force, as it were?

Wendy Liu

Yeah, great question. I'm going to see if I... I'm going to try and answer. I don't know if I... It's a very, very big, challenging question. I guess a little bit of background on the diversity backlash – I think something that's emerged in Silicon Valley is this idea of the MEI framework, as opposed to the DEI framework, so DEI standing for diversity, equity and inclusion. Several Silicon Valley sort of right-wing figures have been championing this idea of merit, excellence and intelligence as a counterpart, and the idea is that diversity was too focused on demographics, it was too focused on being inclusive, and we were sacrificing the merit, this kind of objective idea of merit. So of course, I mean, to anyone who has any kind of critical humanities background, we understand that this is a very silly idea. But it's a very powerful idea, and so Silicon Valley has always kind of thought of itself as a meritocracy despite all evidence to the contrary, and so this idea of merit as a guiding force now in the Trump era is very powerful, and I think it means that the atmosphere will be at least for now pretty hostile to anyone who tries to go against that, to anyone who instinctively understands that merit is not an objective force that

can be determined by those in power, but is one that is weaponised to suit their needs and to stifle dissent, and to promote people who kind of are similar to them, who have similar ways of thinking.

And I don't know what it looks like for someone trying to make their way in an industry that is in thrall to this idea of meritocracy. I think it's a very hard path, maybe, is what I'll say, and it means having to comport yourself in such a way that the people on top see that you do have merit even if it doesn't... Even if you have to kind of contort yourself strangely, right, to show them. It's like, well, yes, I am intelligent, I can behave in a way you expect even if this is not natural to me, even if I don't think this is that valuable. I think it means having to perform a certain way, and to understand what it is that the people on top are looking for – what do they think is merit, and how do I perform that just for the sake of keeping my job? I think it's a very hard thing to do, but it's doable. It's definitely doable. I think a lot of women and people of colour, you know, people in the tech industry who don't fit the traditional mould, I think we've all had to kind of do it to some degree. I know that for me myself, I think that I got used to, at a pretty young age, dealing with the very, like, sort of masculine arrogant way of speaking with regard to code, and so a lot of things that... I think I just had to train myself to deal with that, to just be like, well, someone's going to say something really rude, and I just have to not take it personally and I just have to learn to work with it and just pretend that this is the way I want to behave. Like, this is not actually... It's not the way I actually want to be, but in certain spaces, you kind of have to just meet the demands of the people around you, because they are the ones who have power and they set the norms.

And so I think it's like keeping these two things in mind at the same time. It's like recognising that you will have to act, you'll have to put on a performance, to be able to be perceived as competent and intelligent in these spaces, but that maybe it's not the real you, it's not the way you want to behave, but on some level, you have to kind of demonstrate this, that your ability to conform to these norms before you can advocate for your own way of being. So, yes, that's kind of depressing advice, but that's what I would say.

K Biswas

It is difficult as well, because, obviously, these social media platforms are kind of drivers of racism and misogyny in a way not seen, certainly, in the post-war epoch in terms of communication technology, so the idea that someone like Musk has his X platform that has all manner of awful racist and sexist content on it, to be part of a tech industry that's richest advocate is someone who is making money off the back and getting political capital on the back of creating this essentially slop machine, must be quite a difficult thing for tech workers, and yourself, I suppose, to acknowledge.

Wendy Liu

Well, I think yes, and no, because I think it's difficult if you believe in it, but I think as soon as you start to see the way it really is, it helps... It's a very radicalising insight, right, to see that the emperor has no clothes. All these powerful, wealthy people, they're fools, right? They don't have any moral compass. They don't have... They have nothing to offer us. They're not philosopher kings, right? I watched Barry Lyndon recently, the Kubrick film.

K Biswas

Love that film.

Wendy Liu

And I mean, amazing film, and I think so much of what resonated with me about that film is, you see all these men with their wigs and their fancy outfits and these beautiful, opulent buildings, and they rule the world. These Lords and ladies, they rule the world, and it's just rotten at the core. You know, there's nothing good there. There's no... They're all such these pathetic creatures who have no courage, no insight. You know, and I think this is how we should see the tech industry now. The people in charge, they are like these men in wigs whose portraits are hanging on the walls. I mean, they don't actually have anything useful to offer us, and they happen to be in the position they are because of historical circumstances that have elevated them to positions that they don't deserve to be in. And if you look at... yeah, I mean, if you look at Elon Musk, I think he's such a great example, because we see everything about him, his background, you know, his strange views, his sort of rampant drug use that's just going unchecked. I mean, just the way this man behaves is, he is not a paragon of virtue, and we know this, and I think once we see that about him, it becomes easier to see this about all the other titans of industry who run our world and are really running it into the ground. These are not people who are grounded, wonderful individuals, who are connected to what we all need. No, these are people who don't really care about us.

They don't really care about anyone, you know, other than themselves and the people... I mean, even not the people close to them. I think these are not people who have anything to offer in terms of how we should all be living our lives, and so I think it's kind of a liberating insight to see that these people are just kind of randomly selected. They were selected for terrible reasons, to be making decisions about the future of the planet, and that we need to dethrone them. And I think it starts with, in your own mind, you have to dethrone them. I think if you work in tech right now, I think the important

thing is to just have some perspective and to realise that the people who are making decisions, the people who are on top, most of them don't really deserve to be there. Like, they cannot handle that responsibility, and they really shouldn't have that responsibility, and I think once you realise that, I think then everything makes sense.

So I think for me before, before I realised that, I just didn't understand. I was like, why is the world getting worse and worse, when these people on top, they're so smart and they're so full of merit and intelligence! And now, it's like, well, yeah, yeah, this is why. It's because they're actually not full of any of these great qualities, they just pretend they are. They just believe they are.

K Biswas

Yeah, the people who proselytise around, like, hard work and merit are often beneficiaries of familial generational wealth transfer, from Elon Musk to Rupert Murdoch to Peter Thiel. These are people who started rich and continued to get richer, so the idea of just merit kind of falls by the wayside. We have time for one final question from the chat, which is: You mentioned critical humanities. With the gutting of higher education in arts, humanities and social sciences, how can we help to keep up the critical intellectual pressure that seems so needed now?

Wendy Liu

Yes, I mean, it is devastating to see what's been happening in higher education and the arts. I think my maybe kind of glib answer is that, well, we kind of have to make these things on our own, right? It's like, if the institutions are being gutted, then we have to start our own institutions. We have to find existing things. I think we have to try to push for it however we can. I mean, myself, I'm not part of any institution right now. You know, I'm not part of any sort of academic world, but for me, it's important to try to do this kind of work, to do this kind of writing and to keep up with what's going on, and so I put effort into finding other people who are kind of doing this and installing myself in these little circles, and so I think it's like, these things are possible, we just maybe have to be creative. And we have to find like-minded people and, you know, build things and form our own institutions and find resources where we can, and just be really creative and just kind of rely on each other and find other people who inspire us and rely on that to keep ourselves going. I don't know if I have any better answers. I would love to hear what do you think.

K Biswas

I mean, I was going to say, we have a final, final question that I must ask, because it's from Rhian, who is an AI engineer, who wants to ask, at what level of abstraction do you think a tech revolution starts? Is it a hardware electronics level, our own chips and PCBs? Or at a software level? Now, I'm not qualified to answer that question, but I think you may be!

Wendy Liu

I mean, yeah, it's interesting. I think all of them, right? I think... I guess I'm not sure if revolution in this sense is meant in, like, Industrial Revolution or sort of like a political revolution, but I think, looking at the history of how the economy has changed, I think at all these levels, you see these sort of small scale Industrial Revolutions happening because of technological development. I think right now, we're in an era when software is most important, and the software that is being... I think that... [INAUDIBLE] ...where most of the world's defining... epochal defining, even, changes are occurring. So I think for me, I'm most interested in what happens in the software layer. Hardware-wise, it does feel like a commodity. You know, no offence to any hardware engineers. You're doing great work. But I think the industry treats it as a commodity, rather. Maybe that's a better way of putting it. And software is where a lot of the interest is right now. So, yeah, I think the software layer is maybe my final answer to that.

K Biswas

I mean, fantastic. We'll have to draw today's conversation to a close, sadly. Thank you so much, Wendy, for sharing your insights with us. Thanks to Tayyab Amin for producing this event. Also to our funders, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Hollick Family Foundation, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and The Power of Pop Fund. A huge thank-you to all of you guests who joined us today. There'll be a recording of this event available in the next few weeks. Please sign up to the newsletter and social channels, and do keep an eye on the Explore section of our website, which has an ever-growing, free to access set of digital learning resources. That's at stuarthallfoundation.org And finally, please join us for the next Reading the Crisis conversation, where I'll be talking to Richard Seymour about democracy, on Wednesday, August 12, from 5:30pm, UK time. Hope to see you there. Thanks, and goodbye for now.