

COMMENTARY

How Social Media Is Fracturing Our Attention – and Destroying Democracy

Big Tech and big money politics are exploiting us to fuel discord. It's time to take back the public forum.

By Danielle Allen, D. Graham Burnett and Peter Schmidt Jan. 14, 2025, at 2:24 p.m.



GETTY IMAGES

President-elect [Donald Trump](#) will return to power next week thanks to his victory in the popular vote and the Electoral College, with his Republican Party controlling all three branches of government. Winning a governing trifecta implies widespread agreement in our democracy. But the reality is we are suffering levels of discord and mutual distrust unseen in decades.

A record-high 80% of U.S. adults believe we are greatly divided on our most important values, according to a [2024 Gallup poll](#). That's up 3 percentage points since Gallup last asked the question in 2016, and more than 10 percentage points up since 2012 and 2004.

What's more, nearly 85% of Americans across the political spectrum say that political discourse has become less respectful, and almost 80% think it has also become less truthful, according to a [2023 Pew Research Center survey](#). A majority say politics makes us "angry." When those surveyed were asked to describe our politics, the most popular responses were "divisive" and "corrupt."

This isn't who we are – or, more accurately, this isn't our doing. Political rancor is being stirred up and magnified in our system by profit-driven social media technologies and an electoral system awash in [corporate money](#). The result is a public sphere that has become inhospitable to the careful, pluralistic deliberation that makes democracy work.

Social media companies are using addictive algorithms to keep us engaged on their platforms during all waking hours, keeping our eyeballs glued to screens and mining our attention for huge profits through data analytics and ad-revenue optimization.

Tech company overlords have shown little concern for how their platforms use shock and outrage to capture and hold our attention while polarizing our politics and harming our democracy. Their addictive algorithms keep us on our devices for longer than ever, feeding us a curated stream of irresistible hits of dopamine, fueled by disgust, surprise and prurience.

To make matters worse, Mark Zuckerberg announced last week that he is ceasing [third-party fact-checking at Meta](#), the parent company of Facebook, Instagram, Threads and other addictive platforms – with no alternative strategy proposed for how to revive a norm of truthfulness in media and public discourse.

Big Tech's strategy to mine our attention is strikingly similar to the techniques used in oil fracking. Just as high-pressure detergent is pumped deep into the earth to force oil and gas to the surface, digital platforms firehose vast quantities of digital content slurry at our eyeballs, breaking our deep concentration and redirecting our attention to the surface where it can be exploited for ad revenue. In other words, tech companies are "fracking" our attention – with devastating results.

Just as shale oil fracking causes tremendous collateral damage to the environment – from earthquakes and sinkholes to ozone smog – fracking our attention has devastating effects on our polity. Tech companies are polluting our public sphere by amplifying outrage and disgust, misinformation and disinformation, tribalism and an impatience for complexity, uncertainty or ambiguity.

Add to the mix the geyser of big money from corporate interests that was unleashed on our politics by the Supreme Court's [Citizens United ruling](#) in 2010. The result is a toxic brew that threatens our constitutional democracy.

Nearly \$11 billion was spent on [political advertising](#) in the 2024 elections, according to AdImpact, which tracks political spending. That's up almost \$2 billion from 2020, and it's substantially higher than the \$4 billion spent in 2016. Political campaigns and their allies poured \$619 million, as of last August, into [digital political ads on Google and Meta](#) alone. That money feeds a machine expertly designed by AI-driven algorithms to shock, segment and silo audiences. Unfortunately, the drivers that maximize engagement and profit for social media companies are fundamentally at odds with building democratic consensus.

[Elon Musk](#), the tech titan and world's richest man, spent some \$250 million in the closing weeks of the campaign to support Trump. That money, alongside pro-Trump messages that Musk shared and amplified on his social media platform, X, clearly helped Trump get elected. Since Trump's victory, Musk has won back that investment many times over, netting an estimated [\\$170 billion in profit](#), according to reporting by The Washington Post, as the market value of his companies has skyrocketed. Fracking our attention is obviously good for business.

It's time for us to take back the public sphere from the tech overlords who are exploiting us. One place to start is with [Section 230](#) of the Communications Decency Act of 1996, which protects internet companies and platforms from liability for what their users post on their platforms.

We believe the problems with our public sphere aren't primarily with what users post, most of which is protected by the First Amendment. The real problem is that social media algorithms determine what kind of content to prioritize and amplify, in effect, making an editorial decision of what to "publish." Very often, they choose harmful and divisive content that captures and holds our attention. Platform companies need to be held responsible for their editorial choices like every other publisher.

The [Federal Communications Commission](#), which is responsible for enforcing Section 230, has not used it to rein in social media companies. We propose replacing Section 230 with a framework that governs algorithms to make sure they're not polluting our public sphere. While the internet is indispensable to our modern world, our democracy must be protected from attention fracking.

At the same time, we need to rehabilitate and repopulate alternative, "in real life" community forums that exist all around us, so that we're not so reliant on and addicted to digital communities designed to exploit and divide us. Organizations like the [Trust for Civic Life](#), the [Friends of Attention](#) and the [Strother School of Radical Attention](#) have gotten the effort started. The Trust for Civic Life supports local community initiatives to build civic infrastructure across the U.S., with an emphasis on rural and transitional regions. That includes projects to restore [local journalism in eastern Iowa](#) and to create spaces for [native entrepreneurs](#) in South Dakota, among others. This is democratic action and community building – in real life.

Meanwhile, the nonprofit [Strother School of Radical Attention](#), based in Brooklyn, New York, runs a wide range of [classes](#) and free [workshops](#) centered on what we and others call "[attention activism](#)," the effort to push back, collectively, against digital fracking. The group promotes the creation of "[attention sanctuaries](#)" in schools, libraries and other civic spaces. The [Friends of Attention](#) is a nonpartisan coalition of writers, artists, academics and community organizers whose manifesto, "[Twelve Theses on Attention](#)," argues that protecting our attention "is fundamentally political" and "the work of freedom."

The [New York Times](#) recently predicted that 2025 will be a "turning point in the war for attention." For the sake of our democracy, we hope this prediction is right. Only by resisting the attention frackers can we remake the public forum and forge common ground.

Danielle Allen is the James Bryant Conant University Professor at Harvard University and directs the Allen Lab for Democracy Renovation at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

D. Graham Burnett is the Henry Charles Lea Professor of History and History of Science at Princeton University and the co-editor of "Scenes of Attention: Essays on Mind, Time, and the Senses."

Peter Schmidt is the program director at the Strother School of Radical Attention in Brooklyn, New York.