

Use Big Tech Settlements for Civic Renewal

The harms have been social, the remedies should be too



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Meta's multibillion-dollar settlement last week with state attorneys general was a welcome start. It holds the social media giant accountable for damage to our children and childhood itself. But it's just a start.

An incredible opportunity now beckons.

With **thousands of cases still pending**, more funds should flow into state coffers in months and years ahead. Billions more in ill-gotten gains may yet be delivered back to the people. What are we going to do with this money? And by "we," we mean "we people." This is a windfall for all.

These state-coordinated settlements compensate us as citizens—and human beings—for harms at the scale of our social, civic and community lives. These are public funds meant to pay back the public costs of unregulated "**human fracking**": the invasive extractive **pump-and-suck** by which Big Tech has made trillions by drilling into our eyes and minds with algorithmic tools and high-pressure "content."

We obviously need to use the money to make things better: addressing those who have been harmed, and protecting everyone from new wrongs. Much depends on getting this right.

There will be a strong impulse to focus immediately on spending money to help individuals. People have been hurt. They need immediate care. Think of this as the triage unit: in come the wounded, and the doctors and nurses go right out to assess and address the urgency. Using settlement money this way looks like patch-up surgery.

and stabilizing care: For example, therapeutic support and training initiatives can help kids avoid online manipulation and reduce distracted behaviors.

But we need much more than field hospitals for the many casualties of Big Tech. We need deeper, structural interventions to stop the havoc wrought by the human frackers, and to renew the conditions of our health, peace, and thriving.

This means investing in our communities and the civic infrastructure and social conditions that nourish human flourishing.

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The most powerful communication system in human history, which has linked everyone to everyone around the world, has mostly left us feeling more **isolated**, more **lonely**, more **depressed**, than at any other point in recorded human history. That's because these are not, in fact, “connection” systems; they are **extraction systems**.

And what they extract, for money, is our *attention*. The real harm that Meta's practices have done is to rob us of our ability to exercise the kinds of human-to-human attention out of which good lives are made—in families, in schools, in towns, in a nation.

So let's use these settlement monies to invest in programs and projects that *bring people together*. Joint attention is a **condition of possibility for deliberative democracy**, and we need to renew our collective attentional lives if we hope to renew our shared democratic culture.

More conventional remediation strategies, the ones that emphasize individual behaviors and personal habits, leave each person “doing the best they can” in the face of a towering, systematic and AI-superpowered adversary. Even where well-intentioned, such “solutions” place the burden of resistance directly on the end-user. It's a tactic straight out of the playbook of the extractive industries, who've been refining those moves for more than half a century.

We cannot patch up individuals and hope for the best. The only hope for our civic and authentic flourishing is serious investment in our civic, social and intersubjective

lives. Online band-aids or screen-time apps aren't enough. We need *solidarity*, and a billion is a good place to start reassembling the social fabric and social experience that social media has done so much to shred.

What does that look like? We need new kinds of **sanctuary spaces** that nurture the human uses of human beings—places like **826 Valencia** and its partners. This literacy-centered support program in San Francisco helps students express themselves through writing. One program is a storytelling and book-making class that takes kids on a virtual trip to explore characters and form the plot for a story they will *tell together*. **Attention sanctuaries** (from libraries to museums to concert halls to playing fields) are where we regroup to remake our shared world, together. Educational and recreational activities matter too. Take, for example, **High School Law Review**, which operates in 17 different states. This program brings students together to learn how to disagree in a civil manner and to make arguments to each other that respect dignity and mutual humanity. Or **NatureBridge**, which brings 30,000 students every year to national parks to experience the great outdoors and to connect with each other. Finally, we have our own experience administering “**Attention Activism**” **programs for youth**, which demonstrate the enormous thirst for new opportunities to cultivate the habits and practices of attention at the center of human freedom and wellbeing.

The good news is that language in the Meta settlement explicitly opens room for exactly this kind of investment. But we need non-profit groups working to restore and renew authentic experiences of social solidarity to mobilize as individual states create distribution mechanisms for the dispersal of these funds. And we want states to be visionary and direct the majority of the funds to building civic infrastructure.

Reclaiming the power to shape our civic, social, and individual lives will not be easy. But by supporting such community-based and civic practices, which build collective resistance to the extractive logic of these companies, we can nourish healthy social and democratic life. This supports the formation of a new generation equipped to resist and reshape the anatomizing forces of our digital-first economy.

The Meta settlement is big, but there is more to come. This is public money, which compensates us for harms to our lives in community. So let's make sure we use the

money to *take care of the public*.

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Dispatches on the Politics of Attention

By School of Radical Attention

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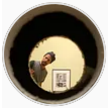




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Yes! And in addition to the excellent structures you describe for connecting young people purposefully, don't forget they need knowledge based employment in these same kind of sharing and teaching with peers and near peers. The masses of young people will be only involved unless we hear their pressing need for their own income as adolescents. These schools would be great sources of youth employment funds, not just for the poorest, but for every high schoolers systematically.

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