

# Capitalism and democracy not compatible on the Internet, author says

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"Really existing capitalism" is "turning the Internet against democracy," says University of Illinois communication professor Robert McChesney, in his new book "Digital Disconnect." Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Two decades into the digital age, the Internet is now "enmeshed in the fabric of nearly every aspect of life," says University of Illinois communication professor Robert McChesney. In ongoing debates about its influence and future, there are, he says, celebrants and skeptics.

But there's an "elephant in the room" that's getting little attention, McChesney says in a new book. That elephant is capitalism, and its growing [dominance](#) of the Internet is threatening everything from privacy to democracy.

Both the celebrants and skeptics "take capitalism for granted as part of the background scenery" and disregard the [political economy](#), McChesney writes in "Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy," published this month by The New Press.

"When capitalism is mentioned, it is usually as the 'free market,' which is taken as a benevolent given, almost a synonym for democracy," McChesney writes. Yet "really existing capitalism" doesn't fit with the free-market "catechism" or with democracy, he writes; "the crisis of our times is that capitalism undermines democracy."

The Internet has been transformed from the noncommercial and [public space](#) that many dreamed of in its earlier days to one that "has been commercialized, copyrighted, patented, privatized, data-inspected, and monopolized," McChesney writes.

As part of that process, advertising has been transformed online in a way that eliminates previous notions of privacy, and the government has surveillance powers that were once unimaginable. Large telecommunication and entertainment corporations that once appeared to be vulnerable, because of the Internet, have prospered through their influence in a "corrupt" policymaking process.

The Internet giants that have risen over the last two decades are not the progressive force some think them to be, and have prospered as the result of [monopoly](#) privileges, exploited labor, and [government policies](#) and subsidies, he says.

McChesney has written extensively in the past about the politics and economics of the media, the decline of journalism, and corporate influence in the government's media policymaking. He also is a co-founder of Free Press, a media reform organization.

This book comes now, McChesney writes, because he sees the Internet as having crystallized to a significant degree. "We are in a position, in some respects for the first time, to make sense of the Internet experience and highlight the cutting-edge issues it poses for society," he writes.

We also are in a better position to understand what decisions can be made that might determine the future of the Internet and its influence in shaping the society, he says in the book.

Among his prescriptions: broadband availability to all for free as a basic right, strict regulation of advertising and a sharp reduction or elimination of the tax write-off of advertising as a business expense, heavy regulation of digital "natural monopolies" or conversion of them to nonprofit services, large public investments in journalism, net neutrality, strict privacy regulations that make online activities as private as correspondence in the mail, and strong legal barriers against militarization of the Internet and use of it for warrantless surveillance.

Yet while outlining these and other reforms related to the broader communications environment, McChesney pessimistically writes that none of them have a chance of enactment given the power of wealth and corporations in the policymaking process. Movements for democratic reform and revolution will therefore be required, he writes, and he

believes those movements are emerging.

"At the center of political debate will be economics: What sort of economy can best promote democratic values and structures and self-governance while nurturing the environment? And at the center of everything will be the Internet. The democratization of the Internet is integrally related to the democratization of the political economy. They rise and fall together."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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