

April 22, 2022

Welcome back to the Unfinished newsletter, where we explore key issues at the intersection of tech, ethics, and society.


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What we're thinking about


Former president Barack Obama delivered a speech at Stanford University Thursday addressing the role technology has played in sowing disinformation and harming democracy. He took particular aim at the hidden algorithms that surface content and drive engagement on social media platforms. "You have the sheer proliferation of content and the splintering of information and audiences. That's made democracy more complicated," he said.

 You can [watch the full speech here](#). It's a little bit more than an hour long.

 You can also [read a full transcript of Obama's remarks](#) via Tech Policy Press.

 Choice quote from the former POTUS: "If we do nothing, I am convinced that the trends we are seeing will get worse ... Without some standards, the implications of this technology for our elections, for our legal system, for our democracy, for rules of evidence, for our entire social order, are frightening and profound."

 *Washington Post* reporters Elizabeth Dwoskin and Eugene Scott [published a great rundown](#) of the keynote.

 Will Oremus, also of the *Post*, did [a long tweet thread](#) about the address that's worth reading, too. His core takeaway: "Overall, Obama evinced a strong grasp of social media's role in society, for both good and ill. He's clearly

done a lot of homework here—more so than a lot of the bigwigs who have parachuted in to lecture on it in the past.”

📖 Further reading: Earlier this month, [the Atlantic published a feature](#) by Jonathan Haidt arguing that in the past decade or so, social media has weakened “three major forces that collectively bind together successful democracies: social capital (extensive social networks with high levels of trust), strong institutions, and shared stories,” and further, that “social media is indeed corrosive to trust in governments, news media, and people and institutions in general.” The result, as articulated by the story’s headline, is that American life has become “uniquely stupid.”

👁️ Haidt has also released [a public, shared Google Doc](#) collecting academic literature related to social media and political dysfunction. It’s a very cool project! The influential tech journalist Casey Newton [wrote that he prefers the Google Doc](#) to the *Atlantic* essay, in fact: “Rather than attempt to draw grand conclusions about a mind-boggling set of variables, it lays out a set of important questions and gathers some of the best research we have on the subject to date.”

📺 For another perspective on democracy and tech, we recommend this [interview with Taiwan Digital Minister Audrey Tang](#) from the Center for Humane Technology.

📺 Elsewhere on the internet, the *New York Times* tech journalist [Shira Ovide explored a new academic analysis](#) that complicates a cliched narrative about YouTube’s propensity to spread conspiracy theories to innocent bystanders. “The kittens-to-terrorist pipeline is extremely uncommon,” she writes. Instead, “The findings suggest that policymakers, internet executives and the public should focus less on the potential risk of an unwitting person being led into extremist ideology on YouTube, and more on the ways that YouTube may help validate and harden the views of people already inclined to such beliefs.”

🧠 One final recommendation for weekend consumption: *MIT Technology Review* launched a new series on the ways in which artificial intelligence is creating a “new colonial world order.” [The first part](#), on “digital apartheid” in South Africa, is a must-read for anyone who wants to better understand how technology can reinforce painfully familiar problems.

"Over the years, a growing chorus of experts have argued that the impact of artificial intelligence is repeating the patterns of colonial history. Here in South Africa, where colonial legacies abound, the unfettered deployment of AI surveillance offers just one case study in how a technology that promised to bring societies into the future is threatening to send them back to the past."

KAREN HAO AND HEIDI SWART IN MIT TECH REVIEW

Thank you for reading.

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Have a great, restful weekend.

The Unfinished team

Project Liberty, 888 Seventh Avenue, 16th Floor, New York, New York 10106

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