

# Revealed: Google made large contributions to climate change deniers



## The polluters

Environment

### Firm's public calls for climate action contrast with backing for conservative thinktanks

#### The obscure law that explains why Google backs climate deniers

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Google has made “substantial” contributions to some of the most notorious climate deniers in Washington despite its insistence that it supports political action on the climate crisis.

Among hundreds of groups the company has listed on its website as beneficiaries of its political giving are more than a dozen organisations that have campaigned against climate legislation, questioned the need for action, or actively sought to roll back Obama-era environmental protections.

The list includes the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI), a conservative policy group that was instrumental in convincing the Trump administration to abandon the Paris agreement and has criticised the White House for not dismantling more environmental rules.

Google said it was disappointed by the US decision to abandon the global climate deal, but has continued to support CEI.

Google is also listed as a sponsor for an upcoming annual meeting of the State Policy Network (SPN), an umbrella organisation that supports conservative groups including the Heartland Institute, a radical anti-science group that has chided the teenage activist Greta Thunberg for “climate delusion hysterics”.

SPN members recently created a “climate pledge” website that falsely states “our natural environment is getting better” and “there is no climate crisis”.

Google has defended its contributions, saying that its “collaboration” with organisations such as CEI “does not mean we endorse the organisations’ entire agenda”.

It donates to such groups, people close to the company say, to try to influence conservative lawmakers, and – most importantly – to help finance the deregulatory agenda the groups espouse.

A spokesperson for Google said it sponsored organisations from across the political spectrum that advocate for “strong technology policies”.

“We’re hardly alone among companies that contribute to organisations while strongly disagreeing with them on climate policy,” the spokesperson said. Amazon has, like Google, also sponsored a CEI gala, according to a programme for the event reported in the New York Times.

CEI has opposed regulation of the internet and enforcement of antitrust rules, and has defended Google against some Republicans’ claims that the search engine has an anti-conservative bias.

But environmental activists and other critics say that, for a company that purports to support global action on climate change, such tradeoffs are not acceptable.

“You don’t get a pass on it. It ought to be disqualifying to support what is primarily a phoney climate denying front group. It ought to be unacceptable given how wicked they have been,” said Sheldon Whitehouse, a Democratic senator from Rhode Island who is one of the most vocal proponents of climate action in Congress.

“What all of corporate America should be doing is saying if you are a trade organisation or lobby group and you are interfering on climate, we are out. Period,” he added.

On its website, Google says it is committed to ensuring its political engagement is “open, transparent and clear to our users, shareholders, and the public”.

But the company declined to answer the Guardian’s questions on how much it has given to the organisations.

On a webpage devoted to “transparency”, it describes the groups – among hundreds of others, including some progressive advocates such as the Center for American Progress – as having received “substantial” contributions.

Apart from CEI, they include the American Conservative Union, whose chairman, Matt Schlapp, worked for a decade for Koch Industries and shaped the company’s radical anti-environment policies in Washington; the American Enterprise Institute, which has railed against climate “alarmists”; and Americans for Tax Reform, which has criticised companies who support climate action for seeking out “corporate welfare”.

It has also donated undisclosed sums to the Cato Institute, which has voiced opposition to climate legislation and questioned the severity of the crisis. Google has also made donations to the Mercatus Center, a Koch-funded thinktank, and the Heritage Foundation and Heritage Action, a pressure group that said the Paris Agreement was supported by “cosmopolitan elites” and part of Barack Obama’s “destructive legacy”.

Bill McKibben, a prominent environmentalist who has been on the frontline of the climate crisis for decades, said Google and other companies were engaged in a “functional greenwashing” given the contradiction in their public pronouncements and private donations. He

said Google and other technology companies had also not used their own lobbyists to advocate for change on climate.

“Sometimes I’ll talk to companies and they will be going on and on about their renewable server farm or natural gas delivery, and I say thank you, but what we really need is for your lobbying shop in Washington to put serious muscle behind it. And they never do,” McKibben said. “They want some tax break or some regulations switch and they never devote the slightest muscle behind the most important issue of our time or any time.”

A spokesperson for Google said: “We’ve been extremely clear that Google’s sponsorship doesn’t mean that we endorse that organisation’s entire agenda – we may disagree strongly on some issues.

“Our position on climate change is similarly clear. Since 2007, we have operated as a carbon neutral company and for the second year in a row, we reached 100% renewable energy for our global operations.”

The company said it called for “strong action” at the climate conference in Paris in 2015 and helped to sponsor the Global Climate Action summit in San Francisco last year.

But that position is at odds with the support it gives to CEI.

The group’s director of energy and environment policy, Myron Ebell, helped found the Cooler Heads Coalition 20 years ago, a group of libertarian and rightwing organisations that have sowed the seeds of climate denial with funding from the fossil fuel industry.

When Donald Trump was elected to the White House in 2016, Ebell joined the transition team and advised the new president on environmental issues, successfully lobbying Trump to adhere to a campaign promise and abandon the Paris agreement.

Kert Davies, the founder of the Climate Investigations Center, a research group that examines corporate campaigning, said Ebell had led the anti-climate-action crusade for decades.

“They’re extremists,” he said, referring to the Cooler Heads Coalition. “They are never finished,” he said. “Myron has taken a lot of credit for Trump’s actions and is quite proud of his access.”

Recently, however, Ebell – who declined a request for an interview – has criticised the White House for not rolling back environmental protections aggressively enough, even though the Trump administration has gutted every major environmental act established under Obama.

His wishlist now includes reversing a 2009 finding by the Environmental Protection Agency that CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases endanger the health and welfare of Americans.

CEI said it “respects the privacy of its donors” and declined to answer questions about Google. A CEI spokesperson told the Guardian: “On energy policy, CEI advances the humanitarian view that abundant and affordable energy makes people safer and economies more resilient. Making energy accessible, especially for the most vulnerable, is a core value.”

One source who is familiar with Google’s decision-making defended the company’s funding of CEI.

“When it comes to regulation of technology, Google has to find friends wherever they can and I think it is wise that the company does not apply litmus tests to who they support,” the source said.

Topics

## In its insatiable pursuit of power, Silicon Valley is fuelling the climate crisis

*Rebecca Solnit*

Big tech isn’t interested in a better world, just a more profitable one. To beat it, we need to break its stranglehold on us

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‘While Silicon Valley’s remake of so many parts of our lives could have been elegantly environmental and empowering for ordinary people, mostly it’s been profit-driven.’ View over Silicon

The climate crimes of big tech are legion. This summer the Amazon burned. Why? In part because of the policies of the new anti-environmental, anti-human-rights president, Jair Bolsonaro.

How did Bolsonaro rise to prominence and then the presidency? YouTube, and certain of its algorithms that push people toward more extreme content, played a large part. As the New York Times reported in August, not long ago Bolsonaro was “a marginal figure in national politics – but a star in YouTube’s far-right community in Brazil, where the platform has become more widely watched than all but one TV channel”. Members of the nation’s newly empowered far right – from grassroots organisers to federal lawmakers – say their movement would not have risen so far, so fast, without YouTube’s recommendation engine.

YouTube’s search and recommendation system appears to have systematically diverted users to far right and conspiracy channels in Brazil. Some of YouTube’s algorithms have been connected to the rise of racism, white supremacism and mass shootings. It appears its prime agenda is profit – and extremist content keeps viewers hooked, and hooked viewers bring in revenue.

Google, the owner of YouTube, also appears to help push some users toward more extreme content, and it then collects all our data and sells it. Some of that data is used to target you and me for shopping, but politics is now a kind of shopping in which the targeting and manipulation of voters via personal data is like the manipulation of potential customers, as we learned from Facebook and Cambridge Analytica’s role in Brexit and the climate catastrophe that was the election of Donald Trump. (It’s worth noting that everything that the Putin regime is charged with doing in the 2016 US election amounts to exploiting new vulnerabilities created by new technologies.)

This erosion of privacy that Edward Snowden warned us about in 2013 when it was the US National Security Agency eroding it, is being violated far more thoroughly by Facebook and Google aggregating data from everything we do and everyone we know. Snowden warned us that privacy is a crucial part of democracy, a sort of fortress each of us owns – or owned – behind which we are free to think, associate and act without governmental intrusion. The many ways in which everything we do is now monitored and the data is aggregated will be – and in many places is being – used to limit the freedoms of ordinary people. And ordinary people have been, all along, what drives the climate movement’s effort to save the planet from the worst effects of the climate crisis.



‘As the New York Times reported in August, not long ago Jair Bolsonaro was ‘a marginal figure in national politics – but a star in YouTube’s far-right community in Brazil.’ Photograph: Adriano Machado/Reuters

What the climate emergency demands of us and what capitalism does to us are at war with each other, and big tech is a ruthless new version of robber-baron capitalism, with new tools and powers for the same old agenda of consolidating power at the top. While Silicon Valley’s remake of so many parts of our lives could have been elegantly environmental and empowering for ordinary people, mostly it’s been profit-driven.

Citizens have used emerging technologies for justice and equality at least since the activists of Tiananmen Square in 1989 used fax machines and the 1999 shutdown of the World Trade Organisation in Seattle was organised by email, but the liberatory ideals of those who use a technology are often at odds with those who shape and control it. Liberation movements use Facebook, for example, but Facebook has also found itself party to genocide and the corruption of elections.

If you look at the current clashes in Hong Kong or the dire situation in China overall, the new surveillance capacities, including facial recognition, have strengthened the hand – or rather the eyes – of a Big Brother government, making resistance more dangerous and privacy more elusive. China is now exporting its facial-recognition technology, threatening the rest of us with losing what those inside China have already lost.

The ethos behind what big tech offers is usually a libertarian idea of isolation and individualism sweetened with convenience. Take transportation: the ability of big data to understand complex dynamics could have been used – and is, by some minor operators – to make public transit better. But what have Silicon Valley’s titans offered us? Driverless cars for the future, and “rideshare” cars in the present that have undermined the living wages of the taxi industry and flooded cities around the world with more fossil-fuel-burning engines. Elon Musk’s Tesla cars and battery systems may be the one climate-positive to emerge from Silicon Valley proper, but they’re outliers, and Teslas are still private cars.

At the very moment when we needed people to get out of their cars, Lyft and Uber have developed a model to get people back into them. Transit expert Bruce Schaller concluded last year that transportation network companies (TNCs) “compete mainly with public transportation, walking and biking, drawing customers from these non-auto modes based on speed of travel, convenience and comfort. About 60% of TNC users in large, dense cities would have taken public transportation, walked, biked or not made the trip if TNCs had not been available.”



'At the very moment when we needed people to get out of their cars, Lyft and Uber have developed a model to get people back into them.' Photograph: Mike Blake/Reuters

He also concluded, "TNCs have added 5.7 billion miles of driving annually in the Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Seattle and Washington DC metro areas." In the San Francisco Bay Area, many of the Lyft and Uber drivers live in poorer regions and drive long distances in order to chauffeur the more affluent around in increasingly car-clogged metropolises. The dystopia that is Silicon Valley, as it annexes more and more of the Bay Area, shows that the tech overlords have little interest in a better world, as opposed to a more profitable one for themselves.

Big tech itself uses more and more electricity for server farms and networks managing more and more of our activities. A decade or so ago you might have watched a DVD and all the juice involved was on your DVD player and TV monitor; now we stream our entertainment. A recent report concluded that the share of digital technologies in global greenhouse gas emissions has increased by half since 2013, from 2.5% to 3.7% of global emissions. The explosion of video uses (Skype, streaming, etc) and the increased consumption of short-lifespan digital equipment are the main drivers of this inflation. More than that, these technologies that keep us glued to our devices and their corporate-managed content keep us apart from each other.

Human beings are at their best when they live and act as citizens (a word I use without reference to citizenship status). This means decentralised power, democracy as equality and participation, and information systems that are accountable, transparent and reliable. It depends on us being able to experience ourselves and each other as members of the public. I have long believed that means, in part, having unmediated contact with each other in public spaces, on coexisting with strangers and a diversity of human beings.

Human beings are at their worst when they are consumers, locked into the miserable pursuit of satisfaction through the isolation of individual consumption – particularly when that shopping and consuming is done online (and when, as with Instagram, we learn to turn ourselves into commodities). Though many have used technology to further democracy and participation, big tech doesn't want us to be citizens. It wants us to be consumers. To address the climate crisis we need to be citizens – free, powerful, with our private lives private and our public lives vivid, energised and safe.

If we do what the climate requires of us we will decentralise energy production, breaking up the fossil fuel companies and oligarchies and building solar and wind and other renewable technologies that use resources that belong to no one and everyone. The beautiful underlying metaphor here is that decentralising literal power – as the juice that runs our machines – can and should mean decentralising social and political power. But big tech has been about consolidation of power, and it has created a new billionaire class that advocates in its own self-interest and against those of the deep future and the broad majority. It has chosen to be the problem rather than the solution.

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