

years, as what used to be called ‘user-generated content’ has become professionalised in the form of the ‘creator economy’ and the work of influencers on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and other platforms, attention has shifted towards the exploitation of cultural workers rather than audiences. I examine these issues in Chapter 13.

10.2.6 IT Giants and Their Operations: Impact on Policy and Environment

The increasing presence of IT corporations in business and everyday life has been referred to at a number of points in this book (in Chapters 1, 6, 8 and 9). There are numerous reasons to be concerned about their growing presence:

- IT firms have been much more lightly regulated than rival firms in sectors such as media, telecoms and consumer electronics. Indeed, this helped to fuel their spectacular growth in the twenty-first century (cf Chapter 6).
- They exert considerable lobbying power, potentially distorting public policy in their favour – see the discussion of the ‘fifth wave’ of policy in section 6.5.
- We saw above that dubious forms of surveillance and data gathering are at the heart of their operations.
- They assiduously avoid tax (see BBC, 2017).
- They have spread their operations across the world and in spite of some well-publicised efforts to claim that they are bringing benefits to poorer countries or regions, they have done so on terms that some have labelled using concepts such as ‘digital colonialism’ (see Chapter 14).
- There is considerable evidence that, in spite of some efforts to conform to green goals, their business models, based on cycles of obsolescence and replacement, are deeply damaging to the environment (see Good, 2016; Maxwell and Miller, 2012).

The tech companies are further extending their reach over our experience of the world, and capturing huge amounts of data about us as they do so. Since the early 2010s, there have been increasing calls by commentators and policymakers for stronger scrutiny and regulation, and there have been some movements in this direction, though mainly on the grounds of competition law, such as the European Commission’s €2.4 billion fine of Alphabet/Google in 2017 for promoting its own online shopping service in its search results. The Federal Communications Commission of the 2021–2025 US President Joseph Biden administration, under Lina Khan, sought to move in the direction of limiting their power (Kang 2024), filing lawsuits against Amazon and Meta based on anti-competitive behaviour and investigating relationships between tech giants and AI

start-ups. Donald Trump has sent mixed messages, working closely with Elon Musk and allowing other tech billionaires to court him. Yet even such actions, based on principles of competition rather than on broader questions about the well-being of citizens and societies, represent only small dents in the armour of these vastly powerful corporations. Some critics advocate much more radical interventions such as the public ownership of data repositories, under systems of democratic control by citizens (see Morozov, 2018). But this seems a distant prospect.

10.2.7 The Looming Threat of Artificial Intelligence

Meanwhile, the onset of artificial intelligence threatens to worsen further the effects of digital networks on climate change and to entrench yet further the dubious power of the IT sector. The relentless drive for power evident in the development of search and social media is even more apparent in the recent evolution of those technologies that are generally and problematically known as AI. I use the word ‘problematically’ here because of the profound uncertainties surrounding how to define ‘intelligence’ in general (Hao, 2025: 89–101). Moreover, many of the recent developments are associated with just one type of AI method, generally known by scientists as ‘machine learning’ (a term not without problems of its own – see Mitchell, 2019: 109–39), whereby and specifically a development known as ‘deep learning’ or ‘neural networks’, which is reliant on vast data capture and computer processing capacity. But when, from the early 2000s onwards, the internet made available vast amounts of data, and as businesses such as Amazon, Alphabet and Microsoft invested some of their vast profits into cloud computing, significant advances in the results of ‘deep’ machine learning were made.

In this context, some key figures and organisations began to claim that something increasingly labelled as ‘Artificial General Intelligence’ (AGI) was on the horizon: a supposed state where computers could achieve human levels of intelligence. There have been debates since the 1950s about whether this would ever be possible, and if it were, when, and also whether the results would be a terrifying loss of human control over machines or beneficial (Mitchell, 2019). By the 2010s, businesses and scientists were claiming that AGI was around the corner, and it could indeed be harnessed for good – and this was an excellent way of gaining financing (see also Benjamin, 2024). One particularly prominent company was OpenAI, founded by a mix of Silicon Valley investors and computer scientists in 2015, including Elon Musk and the company’s later CEO Sam Altman. In her intriguing book about this company, Karen Hao (2025: 93) has written about how they became ‘the poster child’ for a line of thought that made grandiose promises about the potential of AGI – that it would ‘solve climate change, enable affordable health care, provide equitable education’. But as Hao observes, OpenAI ‘cannot say how the technology will deliver on these promises – only that the staggering price society needs to pay for what it is developing will someday be worth it’ (p. 93).

Machine learning variants of AI have developed products that provide benefits in the domains of healthcare and the climate crisis, though some of these benefits are still