

Technology & Society

While technology and the internet have transformed how we learn, connect, create and engage with the world around us, they have increased divisions across society and exacerbated inequality. The Technology and Society program believes that the internet must be designed and governed as a vital public good that ensures equitable access and the strongest protections of fundamental rights.

Portfolio Snapshot

Annual Budget
\$14 million

International
\$7 million

PIT Catalyst Fund
\$50 million (2020-2022)

Grantees
118

BUILD Budget
\$38 million

BUILD Grantees
27

The Challenge

Technology is never neutral. Every innovation can create risks that perpetuate inequality. Technology designed to connect us has divided us, amplified disinformation, and promoted dangerous speech. Powerful social media companies have enabled discriminatory advertising for housing, employment and credit, and biased algorithms have led to more police in communities of color. Over and over again, we have seen that the benefits and risks

of technology are not distributed equitably; they instead follow broader social patterns of privilege and power.

And while access to the internet is recognized as a necessity for full democratic, economic and cultural participation, nearly 43 percent of people in the United States don't have sufficient access at home. Low-income communities, communities of color, people with disabilities and immigrants are hardest hit both by the digital divide and discriminatory technology.

Our digital infrastructure—the code, policies and standards that power the technology that permeates every aspect of life, such as hospitals, banking and social media—is under-maintained and undermined in ways that favor corporate and government interests over the needs of the public.

The laws and regulations that govern the internet lack the robust protections needed to safeguard fundamental rights. Regulatory systems are led primarily by lawyers and policy experts. Without public interest technologists on their teams, governments, nonprofits and the private sector can't keep up with rapid technical advancements or apply technical expertise that protect the public.

The Opportunity

There is growing recognition that the internet must be governed as an essential public good, and that emerging digital technologies, from facial recognition to artificial intelligence, must be designed and governed to protect and advance the fundamental rights of all people, particularly historically underrepresented people.

Our investments in individuals and organizations in the developing field of public interest technology have taught us that we can greatly increase the impact and capacity of civil society to understand the dangers and opportunities brought forth by advancements in technology. Understanding and engaging in the ever-emerging technology landscape allows civil society to anticipate and thwart potential harms and negotiate solutions with governments and the private sector.

Ford is one of the few private foundations to focus on the intersection of technology and society, working in the United States and abroad. Our partnerships with organizations with expertise in emerging areas of technology, historic relationships with human rights movements, and a global team deeply embedded in the field puts us in a strong position to advance this work.

Our Aim and Approach

We focus on securing strong, effective legal, policy, social and technical protections related to the internet and digital technology. We increase collaboration among technologists and social justice organizations to ensure that technology advances, rather than undermines, equity. We concentrate on:

- **Supporting progressive policy at every stage.** Our support of policy research, coordination and advocacy helps guarantee that public interest internet and technology policies are well-developed, successfully implemented and effectively enforced. These policies are designed to expand equitable broadband access, protect net neutrality, disrupt pervasive surveillance, establish individual and community privacy rights, prevent algorithmic bias and high-tech profiling, balance protections for free speech against the harms of disinformation and dangerous speech, and foster a competitive technology marketplace.
- **Strengthening organizations and networks.** We help organizations work together to ensure that technology policy and infrastructure advocacy, research, litigation and public campaigns are aligned. We support the legal, technical, communications, and digital security capacities of individual organizations working to promote public interest internet policies, so the networks and coalitions are more than the sum of their parts.
- **Establishing a robust field of public interest technology.** By building this field, we can increase the technical capacity and literacy of civil society and governing institutions to ensure technology's role in advancing civil and human rights is evident and public interest technologists are trained and deployed to have an impact.
- **Building bridges between technologists and civil society.** Working together, they can be more effective at identifying gaps and opportunities in the maintenance and governance of critical public infrastructure, technology-related policy and the implementation of public interest technology.

- **Increasing donor collaboration and coordination.**

We work to bring more resources to public interest technology organizations and professionalize the emerging field.

Our Impact

Our aim is for technology to be widely accepted as a vital public good to be regulated effectively, resulting in more access and better protections through enforceable rules and norms to guard against bias, censorship and surveillance. These efforts will be supported by a diverse landscape of technologists who advance free expression, privacy, equity, access and fundamental rights. To make that future possible, we work toward four outcomes:

- **A robust field of policy institutions focused on public interest technology will take shape.** With this network in place, the organizations we fund will achieve enforceable legal, regulatory and technical standards that ensure fairness, privacy and equity, and they will help rebalance power in emerging digital systems driving every aspect of a connected, modern society.
- **An increase of informed leaders in public interest technology.** There will be more public interest technologists integrated in a variety of sectors, including government, civil society, corporate, academia and philanthropy.
- **The intersection of technology and social justice will become widely known.** By building partnerships between advocates for civil, human and internet rights and public interest technologists, they will work together to achieve a common goal to protect the public.
- **A more equitable digital infrastructure.** To ensure digital infrastructure prioritizes the public interest, there will be increased awareness of current threats, institutions will be equipped to support its maintenance and governance, and a larger pool of developers and contributors will exist to increase diversity, talent, and perspectives in the technical foundations of the internet.

Grantee Snapshot

Bringing technology to the fight for civil rights

The Ford [Civil Rights, Privacy, and Technology Table](#), brought together by the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights' Education Fund, is a collaboration of advocates and public interest technologists working together to address emerging challenges at the intersection of civil rights and technology. In 2014, the group developed the [Civil Rights Principles for the Era of Big Data](#), which has served as the foundation for long-standing efforts to confront bias in data-driven decision-making tools that perpetuate inequality. This collaboration has resulted in significant changes to industry practices, such as Google's decision to ban targeted ads for predatory payday loans that target vulnerable Americans disproportionately, and city and state bans on facial recognition technology.