

America's "Digital Shield": How We Are Making Big Tech Companies Accountable to the Public by Continually Preserving Tens of Millions of Online Ephemeral Experiences – Content That Can Impact Users Dramatically and That Is Normally Lost Forever

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Abstract

The internet has made it possible for a small number of technology companies to dominate the thinking, behavior, and votes of more than 5 billion people worldwide using new subliminal techniques. We have discovered and quantified about a dozen of these techniques in controlled experiments we have been conducting and publishing since 2013, and in 2016, we developed technology that allowed us to preserve search results on multiple search engines. Search results, like newsfeeds and video sequences, are types of “ephemeral content” that influence thinking and behavior and then disappear, leaving no paper trail for authorities to trace. In 2018, 2020, and 2022, we improved and expanded our monitoring systems to preserve a wide variety of online content in the days leading up to multiple U.S. elections. We build our systems by recruiting real voters around the U.S. – in 2016, just 95 voters in 24 states – and, with their permission, installing custom software on their computers that allows us to stream the political content they see to our servers, where we quickly aggregate and analyze the data. In our small 2016 project, we preserved 13,000 politically-related searches, and we found substantial political bias on the most popular search engine, sufficient to have shifted at least 2.6 million votes in the Presidential election that year. In 2022, through the computers of a politically-balanced group of 2,742 registered voters, we preserved more than 2.5 million ephemeral experiences on multiple platforms, which tended, once again, to be highly biased politically. In late 2022, we began to build a permanent, large-scale monitoring system in all 50 states – our “Digital Shield” project. As of April 2024, we have preserved more than 86 million ephemeral experiences on multiple platforms, with the system growing larger each day. This system will make Big Tech companies accountable to the public for the foreseeable future, forcing them to constrain their algorithms so that they do not interfere with our free-and-fair elections, with the impressionable minds of our children, and with human autonomy. To view a public dashboard summarizing the progress of our data collection in real time, visit <https://AmericasDigitalShield.com>.