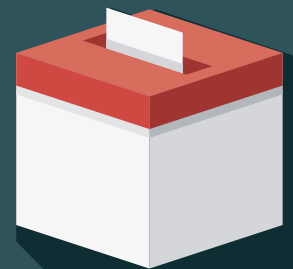# NETGAIN PARTNERSHIP

COVID-19 AND DIGITAL SOCIETY WEBINAR SERIES

BROADBAND ACCESS IN THE US

NETGAIN PARTNERSHIP

HIGH-SPEED INTERNET ACCESS CAN BE LIFE OR DEATH DURING A PANDEMIC

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

Advocates have long pushed for policy reforms to bridge the 'digital divide' and make broadband internet accessible and affordable for all. Yet with the nation in the throes of a deadly pandemic, millions of households cannot access or afford the internet at home just when they need it most. As many people are isolated in their homes indefinitely, the COVID-19 pandemic has starkly exposed how unequal access to the internet harms historically marginalized communities. Without broadband access, millions can't work from home, continue their education remotely, communicate with loved ones, or see their health care provider. The quarantine to date has already deepened many of our country's existing economic, educational, and social inequities. The recent CARES Act did not address the need for internet access, raising the stakes for future relief bills, like the HEROES Act, which includes a range of support for broadband access, but faces an uphill battle in the Senate. If passed, the HEROES Act would create emergency benefits for internet service in the event of a family member losing their job, enhance the FCC's Lifeline program for subsidized phone and internet service for families with low-incomes, support online distance learning efforts and expedite the buildout of rural broadband networks -- among many other much-needed benefits.

41 million people in the US – nearly 43% of the population – don't have home internet access

WHY IT MATTERS

Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, our lives were increasingly lived online, with everything from the job search process to a student's homework occurring digitally. The pandemic has accelerated and intensified digital inequities that were already keeping millions of individuals and families from connecting to loved ones, keeping their jobs, and accessing their health care providers and other crucial services. The issue is most acute in historically marginalized communities already facing multiple forms of injustice. Low-income households, older consumers, and people living in Tribal or rural communities lack access to the internet, face higher costs to connect, and often live in areas without the infrastructure necessary for broadband. Many of those impacted are people of color.

TOP INTERVENTIONS

From demanding digital equity reform in the historic CARES Act stimulus package to fighting for critical Lifeline funding that lowers the cost of phone and internet for low-income consumers, groups on the frontlines of broadband access are not backing down. Solutions that address the ever-expanding digital divide are needed now more than ever as millions of Americans lack access and opportunity to work, go to school, bank, buy groceries, connect with their health care provider, and otherwise participate in society. Public interest groups are working tirelessly to garner new broadband provisions for hardest hit communities in the second phase of federal relief.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Leading public interest groups are using a variety of creative approaches to secure broadband affordability and accessibility for all.

The **Allied Media Project** has innovated mesh wireless technology, which allows neighbors to form their own local network and share an internet connection in spite of the government's continued failure to provide affordable and accessible broadband during the pandemic. The **American Indian Policy Institute** provides research, analysis, and education to support Indigenous groups nationwide that have taken action to protect their communities from COVID-19. Organizations have united to urge the FCC to expand the Lifeline program to meet the acute need for broadband during the pandemic, and **MediaJustice** leads the coalition to expand Lifeline program assistance to the millions of Americans who cannot afford phone and internet services. The **National Digital Inclusion Alliance** works alongside practitioners to facilitate information sharing, relay on the ground experiences to the press, and provide resources on digital literacy during the pandemic. The **National Consumer Law Center** is fighting to protect consumers from losing essential utility services in their homes and to expand low-income discount and recovery programs, as well as equal access to broadband and wireless services. Local leaders have the power to elevate the national conversation on universal connectivity, and **Next Century Cities** support local leaders as they develop tailored, community-based solutions.

MORE INFORMATION

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COVID-19 AND THE US DEMOCRATIC PROCESS
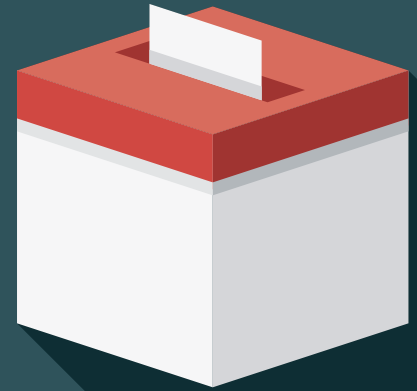
NETGAIN PARTNERSHIP

THE FUTURE OF OUR DEMOCRACY DEPENDS ON
SAFE AND RELIABLE DIGITAL PLATFORMS

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

The growth of online platforms and digital processes has galvanized democratic movements on the front-lines of social change in the United States and across the globe. But as the COVID-19 pandemic continues, already susceptible platforms and processes are increasingly exposed to security threats and deliberate attacks from bad actors working to undermine the safety and validity of our democratic institutions. The susceptibility of our democracy to these kinds of threats hinders our ability to hold free, fair, and safe elections and the first "high-tech" Census in 2020. Advocates and grassroots organizers also face a new reality as community education, outreach, and offline mobilization grind to a halt, and campaigns are forced to rely solely on digital strategies to carry on.

In April 2020, more than 3 billion people used Facebook, Messenger, Instagram or WhatsApp in a single month for the first time ever.

WHY IT MATTERS

While digital technology has transformed the way we work, learn, and communicate with one another, shifting to an exclusively digital world in the time of

COVID-19 poses immense security challenges to our ability to participate, mobilize, and express diverse opinions freely. Online attacks, intimidation efforts, and disinformation campaigns not only threaten the safety and security of our policymakers and social justice leaders, but silence the diversity of voices on the frontlines of our most crucial social change movements and erode the very foundation of our democracy. Without protections and safeguards in place to flag or remove disinformation, our ability to be accurately counted in the Census or receive reliable information about elections will be jeopardized and ultimately controlled by state actors and tech giants who wield dangerous power over our digital society. We must embrace multifaceted interventions that hold platforms accountable and engage directly with Big Tech to develop solutions alongside communities most impacted by potential harms, including native communities and communities of color.

TOP INTERVENTIONS

Federal, state, and local governments face the herculean task of safeguarding our elections amidst a global pandemic and evolving technological world. They must also prevent a massive undercount in the 2020

Census. To protect the foundation of our democracy and curb the spread of disinformation online, we must hold Big Tech companies, like Facebook, Google, and Twitter, accountable so that all people have the reliable and timely information on the COVID-19 health crisis, along with accurate information about elections and the Census. While major platforms provide a digital space to voice opinions and build community, they must also work with advocates and policymakers to train dedicated staff on election and Census threats, and commit to strengthening content policies and interference protections to prevent rampant voter suppression, hate speech, and intimidation on their sites. These interventions, among many others, are crucial to protecting the integrity of our democratic institutions.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Advocates and public interest groups are addressing these growing harms by leaning into secure, innovative digital tools and strategies for online outreach and mobilization to better meet people where they are in this moment.

As an existing leader in digital organizing, *Color of Change* launched the 2020 Voter Justice Agenda to fight for universal, no-excuse vote-by-mail, secure and accessible ballot collection sites and ensure voter-verifiable ballot tracking in the time of COVID-19 – to ultimately make voting less burdensome for Black voters already facing systemic barriers at the ballot box. *The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights* developed digital organizing resources to help secure an accurate census count for hard-to-reach communities, despite social distancing restrictions, and continues to collaborate with Big Tech, including Facebook, to address gaps in election and census information security on their sites. At the forefront of voting technology, *Dr. Juan E. Gilbert*, Ph.D, University of Florida, created an open source voting system for federal, state, and local systems across the U.S. to make voting more secure and accessible during the pandemic and long after. This technology will potentially allow voters to reserve a time to vote and ensure social distancing is practiced in states where vote-by-mail cannot be achieved statewide. *United We Dream* is also working to support and reach immigrants online with trusted community

messengers to inoculate against disinformation and other relentless attacks from the Trump administration, as well as producing digital resources for voting procedures during COVID-19 and participating in the 2020 Census.

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WORKERS AND COVID-19

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES ARE NECESSARY TO PROTECT OUR ESSENTIAL WORKERS

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, employers' failure to provide basic workplace protections and benefits to gig-economy contractors and employees had already undermined the financial security and health of individuals and families across the nation. As people who work in Amazon warehouses, stock grocery shelves, deliver packages, and other frontline workers confront life or death in the workplace, lack of basic protections is all the more stunning. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos' wealth, for example, has grown by $24 billion as frontline Amazon workers protesting for protective equipment, hazard pay, and expanded sick leave have been fired in retaliation. The CARES Act provides some short-term support for essential workers at Amazon as well as other frontline companies, including Uber, Lyft, Postmates, and Instacart, but thousands are still fighting for workers compensation, health care benefits, and sick pay. In addition, many companies that did offer some hazard pay during the first months of the pandemic – including Amazon, Kroger, and Starbucks – have started to end these benefits, despite the pandemic's continued toll.

As of June, the COVID-19 pandemic has made Jeff Bezos $35 billion richer. While Bezos's wealth skyrockets, Amazon warehouse workers make a mere $15/hr to work during the pandemic.

WHY IT MATTERS

As billionaire executives continue to consolidate and increase their own wealth, often profiting from the pandemic, frontline workers are denied the basic rights and support needed to provide for their families and survive in our economy. Workers must be able to organize and demand a living wage, safe working conditions, and equitable workplace protections during the COVID-19 crisis and long-after. No one should have to suffer dire health consequences for working in unprotected spaces with limited pay and lack of benefits to recover from injury or hazardous exposure. Digital advocacy strategies, like organizing employee walk-outs or demanding the creation of employer generation hardship funders, are needed to craft durable protections for workers.

TOP INTERVENTIONS

COVID-19 has put the lives and the livelihood of big tech's workers and contractors in an even more precarious position, when wages and benefits for working people were already shamefully weak. Companies have an obligation to provide the equipment, benefits, and wages that ensure their employees are working in safe and secure conditions. At the most basic level, this includes providing personal protective equipment, hazard pay, and expanded sick leave for employees and contractors during the pandemic. All workers should also receive robust benefits and wages that allow them to fully support themselves and their families. Federal and local governments should also extend unemployment benefits and basic worker protections to contractors to provide them with support.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Working people are unionizing, organizing and joining together to shift power and improve their workplace. As states undergo the process of reopening businesses and lifting stay-at-home orders with no end to the pandemic in sight, this work has taken on renewed urgency.

Coworker.org invests in the digital organizing power of workers by hosting and promoting worked-organized campaigns across sectors that demand protections like hazard pay, personal protective equipment, and fair wages and paid leave. Gig workers have faced increased surveillance and weakened protections while their services have become even more indispensable, and *Gig Worker Rising* educates and supports workers of color as they take on billion dollar corporations for better wages and working conditions. Amazon's profits have skyrocketed during the pandemic, yet it continues to deny its workers fair wages and basic protections. *Awood Center* builds East African worker power to push back against Amazon's inhumane work conditions and insist that they prioritize workers' health and safety. In the face of Amazon's ever-increasing threat to our democracy and economy, *Athena Coalition* shepherds individuals affected by Amazon's dangerous practices and organizes to get solutions from the company and from public policy.

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DISINFORMATION, DIGITAL HATE, AND BIG TECH

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COMBATING RACIALIZED DISINFORMATION AND HATE SPEECH WILL PROTECT VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES AND PREVENT VOTER SUPPRESSION

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

Information disorder is the deliberate spread of false information with the intent to sow confusion and cause harm. Growing disinformation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, in combination with the proliferation of disinformation around the uprising against violent and too often deadly policing, has created an unprecedented media landscape full of digital hate and racialized disinformation. Extremists have capitalized on COVID-19 uncertainty, leveraging white racial resentment about the economy, unemployment, public health, and an uncertain future to stoke chaos and violence. Hateful content and speech across the internet has further fueled xenophobia and racism targeting Asian, Black, and other vulnerable communities. Moreover, social media platforms from Facebook (Instagram, Whatsapp) and Twitter to Google and YouTube, face increased pressure to quickly respond to disinformation, fraud, and online hate.

In one experiment, social media companies kept 90.6% of the posts flagged as spreading COVID-19 misinformation.

WHY IT MATTERS

Rampant disinformation and online hate have made the offline world more hostile and dangerous for historically vulnerable groups. Disinformation distorts reality, preventing the public from being equipped with the correct information to protect their health and exercise their right to vote. It also fuels racism and xenophobia. Hate speech has not only forced some individuals to quit social media to protect themselves, but has also spurred physical violence – sometimes with deadly consequences. As the country faces another reckoning with its racist institutions, unprecedented mass death, an economic crisis, and the continued erosion of trust in media and the government, the public is particularly vulnerable to hate speech and information disorder. Big Tech platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Google, and Youtube, continue to fail to meet the moment.

TOP INTERVENTIONS

The rise of hateful content and disinformation online by extremists and white supremacists has grown exponentially as our means of communication,

mobilization, and advocacy shift to digital platforms – disproportionately targeting Black, Latinx, and Asian communities amid the global pandemic. Alongside state and federal policymakers, public interest advocates are working tirelessly to curb the spread of racialized disinformation by pressuring platforms to flag or remove rampant disinformation from their sites. This work also includes training staff to review existing content policies and more accurately identify falsehoods to reduce the spread of racist hate speech targeting communities of color online. Policy interventions continue to evolve as radical extremists seek new ways to spark violence and chaos and disrupt the flow of factual information vital to our society.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Advocates, nonprofit coalitions, and public interest groups are coming together to combat racialized disinformation and protect the validity of truth online. This work has never been more important as we now turn to digital platforms to not only receive critical public health information on COVID-19, but to protest, mobilize, and empower other social movements.

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights is educating platforms on the need to create or adapt current content policies that help staff discover, assess, and respond to disinformation related to elections and the 2020 Census. The Leadership Conference is also holding platforms to account if and when they violate said policies that directly harm historically marginalized communities. The *Center for Countering Digital Hate* also recently conducted research on how to monitor social media giants and their ability to flag or remove weaponized content related to the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically. To protect the validity of accurate information in the media, *First Draft* is training journalists to better understand the spread of disinformation and teach techniques to reduce the amplification of disinformation in reporting. As a result of increased racism and xenophobia related to COVID-19 and the Asian American community, *Asian Americans Advancing Justice* released a series of tools and resources to push back against hate and provide factual information for their partners, allies, and community members. And following the recent influx of protests across the country,

Political Research Associates examined the spread of false and deliberately misleading narratives on the ground and opportunities to identify and document possible threats in real-time.

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BIG TECH'S INCREASING POWER

NETGAIN PARTNERSHIP

WE MUST WEAKEN BIG TECH TO STRENGTHEN OUR ECONOMY AND DEMOCRACY

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

The economic crisis caused by COVID-19 continues to strengthen big tech's hold over the economy and society. Already, small businesses and retail outlets across the country are in a free fall as the result of social distancing measures, leaving Amazon to gain an even larger share of the marketplace. Meanwhile, local restaurants struggling to stay in business are now turning to online ordering and delivery apps, like Grubhub, that price gouge and face little to no regulation. Journalism and news outlets also face increasing financial difficulties as ad dollars and subscriptions plummet, further diminishing revenues, and making them even more dependent upon Facebook, Google, and Apple to provide financial support for their content. And perhaps most dangerous in the long term, platform companies' decisions regarding election misinformation and incitements to violence on their platforms continue to reveal the deep-rooted power and control they have over the basic functioning of our democracy.

More than 100,000 small businesses have closed permanently since the pandemic hit

WHY IT MATTERS

The pandemic has helped big tech and digital platforms exploit and devour small businesses, further concentrating sectors of our struggling economy, stifling innovation, and threatening people's livelihoods. Black and Latinx small businesses are economic engines for entire communities, and the economic chaos the pandemic has wreaked has the potential to decimate them. In a time where the country needs strong investigative reporting to tell the truth about COVID-19 and the uprisings for racial justice, journalism is suffocating under big tech's power. Journalism's increasing reliance on major platforms for ad revenue has turned them into information gatekeepers, lining their pockets even as they promote the flow of harmful and too often hateful information. This steady flow of misinformation and disinformation is chipping away at the underpinnings of our democracy and eroding our basic political structure.

TOP INTERVENTIONS

COVID-19 has exposed big tech and digital platforms' control over almost every aspect of our lives and the inadequacy of our democratic system to combat them. Without federal regulation, corporate

giants like Amazon stand at the epicenter of commerce between producers and consumers – controlling the eb and flow of information, products, and services. This massive shift in power has made it near impossible for small businesses, especially small businesses of color, to survive in a post-COVID-19 world and flooded digital platforms, like Facebook, Google and Apple with hate speech and disinformation. Therefore, it has never been more important to protect the diversity of voices within our marketplace and fight against the growth and consolidation of monopoly power and information gatekeepers. Advocates in the public interest field are launching coalition-based campaigns to demand regulation and congressional oversight over big tech, and ultimately hold them to account. We must ensure that mechanisms for investigative reporting remain possible and free from the iron grip of big tech, and that small businesses – including those historically and deliberately sidelined from our economy in favor of massive corporations – have the opportunity to successfully navigate this challenging moment and continue to contribute to our thriving communities.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

To reign in the growing power and influence of big tech, advocates and public interest groups are fighting for corporate accountability, as well as long-term federal policy change to preserve not only our economy, but the foundation of our democracy.

Public Knowledge is educating advocates and consumers about antitrust law and its ability to hold companies accountable for anticompetitive behavior – an increasingly important regulatory legal tool in the time of monopolization. As Black small businesses continue to struggle following the COVID-19 pandemic, the *Institute for Local Self-Reliance* remains focused on conducting research and educating allies on best practices for fighting corporations who seek to take advantage of this moment and expand their dominance as corporate giants. Through online pressure, *Demand Progress* is actively combating corporate power, as well as the spread of hate speech and disinformation online, and advocating for the break up of big platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, to make the internet safer and more secure. And *Color Of Change* is continuing to

demand more from corporations, and most recently asked Facebook advertisers to pause their ad spending this summer in solidarity with Black Facebook users and advocate for changes to their content practices.

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SURGING DEMAND AND THE GLOBAL INTERNET INFRASTRUCTURE

NETGAIN PARTNERSHIP

WHAT'S AT STAKE FOR THE FUTURE OF TECHNOLOGY?

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

With everything from the boardroom to the classroom shut down and most individuals hesitant to meet in-person, the pandemic has forced nearly all face-to-face interactions online. Website traffic has surged, which has placed an unprecedented strain on the world's internet infrastructure and raised pressing questions about the infrastructure's ability to meet the need: What are the long-term implications of this surging demand? How will the design of the internet change to accommodate video and other tech platforms that we increasingly rely on? How will governments and companies manage the surge in traffic, and what will it mean for possible blackouts and censorship? How will this dynamic affect the public interest's ability to demand regulation?

The landscape for internet infrastructure and technology is changing rapidly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Telecom providers and technology companies must face the recent surge in traffic, and the pressure is on for leaders to adapt policy reforms and standards to the new demands of a digital society.

Data use and fixed broadband consumption in the United States grew nearly 43% between January and March 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19.

WHY IT MATTERS

Internet infrastructure affects all different areas of digital rights, from surveillance to net neutrality to broadband access. The pandemic has stressed the importance of internet infrastructure and spurred growing concerns over internet blackouts, low capacity, decreased speed, and increased censorship – all of which hit historically marginalized communities the hardest. A weakened internet infrastructure could prevent people from continuing the most basic actions like staying in touch with loved ones, maintaining their jobs, or attending school. Groups advocating for justice have lost the ability to meet informally and organize offline, limiting some of their organizing power in a time when it's needed most. These groups have adapted rapidly to online organizing, but are vulnerable to potential censorship and blackouts at the hands of internet service providers and governments. All of this has exposed the need to create policies that protect and design supportive internet protocols and web security.

TOP INTERVENTIONS

As demand for high-speed, reliable internet continues to grow and expand, advocates and researchers across civil society are fighting to design policies that oversee infrastructure regulation and web security, and protect freedom of expression from government interference. Since the creation of the internet, multi-state and international governance bodies have historically ignored regulations on internet infrastructure – allowing power players to remain hidden from public scrutiny and hold almost total control with little to no oversight or accountability. To protect the sustainability and resiliency of our internet infrastructure, we must ensure that civil society has a seat at the table when regulatory conversations are taking place. These conversations will ultimately help prevent internet blackouts, monitor and flag censorship, and reduce the risks of throttling internet speed by Internet Service Providers or other core infrastructure providers.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Across the public interest field, groups are investing time, resources, and expertise to develop innovative solutions that protect and secure the longevity of our internet infrastructure.

The **Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI)** is working to ensure our internet is open and free during global emergencies, like the current COVID-19 pandemic. They developed a [measurement tool](#) to assess the accessibility of COVID-19 webpages around the world, and flag possible censorship activity or moments of government interference. **Article 19** is challenging threats to freedom of expression online by [monitoring and reporting government overreach](#) and urging other governments to recognize possible abuses of international law. Researchers, like **Niels ten Oever from the University of Amsterdam's Media Department**, are also using [qualitative and quantitative methods](#) to evaluate elements of our internet infrastructure (i.e. cables, satellites, codes, agreements, procedures), as well as power players who own and maintain it, and study the internet's impact on distribution of wealth and power. And the **Internet Society** launched the "[Measuring the Internet](#)" project to monitor internet infrastructure providers, examine trends, and tell data-driven stories on internet resilience during times of extraordinarily high use around the world.

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