

# Even fed-up tech workers are paralyzed by Silicon Valley's sick LOOK AT ME culture.

[Ian Bogost](#)

*To commemorate the company's initial public offering in 2011, LinkedIn gave some of its employees a lucite cube emblazoned with the stock ticker, LNKD, on one side and "Next Play" on the reverse. That phrase encapsulates the business philosophy of Jeff Weiner, LinkedIn's CEO at the time.*

Weiner has said he [borrowed](#) "next play" from the Duke University basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski, who incants the phrase to push his players past the distraction of their last success. Once Weiner adapted it as a business koan, he used *next play* obsessively: to [announce](#) Microsoft's \$26 billion acquisition of LinkedIn, to [describe](#) his resignation from the CEO role, to [name](#) his new venture-capital firm. During LinkedIn job interviews, candidates were [commonly asked](#) to name the job they wanted to have after the one they were applying for—scouting out their next, next play, even before the next one became current.

Nextplayism is Silicon Valley's whole culture: *What are you gonna do next?* "I hear people ask it of each other two or three times a week," Ian McCarthy, a vice president of product at Yahoo, told me. Progress is based not on the virtues of results, but on reaching a milestone. What comes before is relevant only insofar as it brings about what will have followed.

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This ethos helps explain some of the context around recent worker unrest at Facebook, which erupted last week after the company refused to [moderate](#) President Donald Trump's posts implying that protesters could be shot. Mark Zuckerberg's inaction [ignited a revolt](#) by Facebook staff: [Some employees](#)

[staged a virtual walkout](#), others [criticized the CEO](#) in a staff meeting, and at least one engineer [resigned in protest](#).

The social-media giant was once one of the most desirable gigs in the industry, but that might be changing. A quiet set of workers that McCarthy, who mentors many younger tech professionals, called “Never Facebookers” has emerged, people who tell him that they wouldn’t work for the company under any circumstances. For those already working at the company, which didn’t respond to a request for comment, another option is to abandon ship. But that move falls prey to the logical trap of the next play: That what follows is better than what came before, by virtue of its succession. (Weiner objects to my interpretation, saying that for him, a next play always requires “reflection, not just moving on.”)

The whole industry is implicated in this problem, including [Google](#), [Reddit](#), [Uber](#), and others. Tech workers most able to protest their employers with resignation are those who have the least to lose—the ones who will find their next play easily, reinvesting conscientious objection in yet another tech company. The industry says it wants to improve the world, but its workers are so comfortable, and so entrenched, that they have a hard time finding a way out that doesn’t lead them right back in again.

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It’s easier for tech workers to talk about taking a stand than to do so. For one, big technology companies such as Facebook and Google are [viciously competitive](#) about acquiring talent. They hire or [poach](#) the best people, sometimes just to prevent a competitor from having access to them instead. Some workers

don't want to rock the boat for fear they might get blacklisted, McCarthy said. And ironically, the brokenness at companies such as Facebook and Uber can also make their jobs enticing. Disruption is appealing, and the promise to move fast and break things (even priceless and irrecoverable ones, such as [democracy](#).) can be a recruiting tool.

Others already in a company's employ may see an opportunity to fix some of its ills. One product manager at a large tech firm, who also advises many early-career professionals, spoke with me on the condition of anonymity because she fears reprisal from within the industry. She told me about her "activist" friends who refuse to leave jobs at Facebook, even if they disagree with the company's practices. "They came to change the world," she said, "and stayed to work within the system on issues they cared about." The same drive that makes these workers care about the consequences of Facebook's impact on democracy also makes them want to stick it out in an effort to improve the service.

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Even so, Facebook seems to have crossed the line of tolerable abhorrence for some tech workers. Inside the business, nextplayism may offer the best, and maybe the only, way for them to show their distaste. "The vast majority of people I know at the director-and-up level, when they are leaving a company and looking for a new gig, they're Never Facebookers," McCarthy, who is also an occasional [collaborator](#) of mine, said, referring to senior-level roles. "They're offended if you even offer to do introductions to someone at Facebook."

But that is a privileged attitude. Much of the magical operation of online services is driven by rote laborers, such as [moderators](#),

[AI-training wranglers](#), and [gig workers](#). They aren't counted as members of the industry, except perhaps as its casualties. Among skilled, white-collar tech workers, nearly three-quarters were not born in the U.S., [according to some reports](#). For those on work visas, work choices are determined almost entirely by their immigration status: According to the tech workers I spoke with, they tend to choose larger companies for stability, hoping to turn work sponsorships into green cards. Even if some workers disapprove of what their company is doing, quitting a job can mean losing their immigration status and [running the risk of getting deported](#). The product manager at the large tech firm also speculated that immigrant engineers might not understand or care about uniquely domestic social issues, such as the specific history of antiblack racism.

Even among American citizens, some tech workers are in the business simply to [make money](#), [gain power](#), and [solve problems](#)—even if they create just as many new ones in the process. These “equity engineers,” as I’ll call them by one of their goals, cashing out, might have studied computer science in order to solve problems, or to live a good life. It would be a caricature to say that these archetypes don’t care at all for politics, but their radicalism tends to be an inward-facing one, lured by technolibertarian fetishes such as blockchain. For this group, technology *is* politics, and seeing the two at odds becomes incoherent.

That leaves only a small group in a clear position to speak up. Many of these folks represent the top of the workers’ food chain (though the venture partners still cast long shadows overhead). Probably white, probably engineers, and probably American-

passport holders, they have plenty of other options both in and out of the Valley.

Take Timothy Aveni, the 22-year-old Facebook engineer who [quit](#) the company last week in disgust after Zuckerberg's failure to act in response to Trump's posts. Aveni, according to a post on his [LinkedIn page](#), graduated from the Georgia Institute of Technology in 2019 with a 4.0 GPA in computer science (a program in which I teach), and worked for two summers as a Facebook intern before taking a full-time job at the company. He's young, white, and American. In an email, Aveni acknowledged that he is privileged, well compensated, and burdened by few personal obligations or commitments. Leaving his job wasn't an easy choice, but he is keenly aware that it wasn't as hard as it might have been for someone else.

That's even more true for Alexis Ohanian, the Reddit co-founder who [resigned](#) from the company's board last week because of its history as a hub for [racism](#) and [conspiracy theories](#). Ohanian has committed future Reddit-stock gains to advancing black rights and urged the company to fill his board seat with a black member (which it [did](#)). These are noble gestures, but they are also relatively painless choices for Ohanian, who didn't respond to a request for comment. He is married to Serena Williams, and the couple's net worth [reportedly approaches](#) \$300 million.

Ohanian doesn't need a next play at all, and Aveni will likely, and easily, parlay a Facebook resignation on principle into one.

Others are more reticent about their distaste for the industry, even if they won't admit it outright. Ian McCarthy introduced me to some of the younger folks he construed as Never Facebookers, but none of them responded to my invitation to

talk. LinkedIn's spokesperson wouldn't even talk to me about the Lucite cube. It's all part of the culture: There's real fear about retaliation in Silicon Valley, which is still a small town despite its global conquest. Nobody wants to piss off the wrong founders, or venture capitalists, or even the upwardly mobile equity engineers who might later open doors for them.

[Read: Even amid scandal, Facebook is unstoppable](#)

Nextplayism dies hard. All workers worry about their future, but the ambitious people drawn to tech are almost pathologically reticent about foreclosing future opportunities they don't even know about yet. And besides, *what are you doing next?* tends to have only a few valid answers in the Valley: starting your own company, for example, or running a large engineering or product team, or becoming a chief something officer.

The tech workers who long for political righteousness are mired in a fundamental trap. They conflate their identity with their workplace to an extreme, partly because they've been enculturated to believe that technological innovation brings about social benefit rather than hindering it. If they had a less grandiose view of Silicon Valley, social and political action might take place away from work, during the off-hours. But then again, off-hours don't exist; technology has erased boundaries between work and life for the Palo Alto set even more than it has for those of us who use their products.

Some tech workers don't care about the social ills they design, or don't notice them. But others, and far more than have made their voices public recently, are unhappy about the situation. The product manager said that many of her reformer friends who stuck it out at Facebook wound up disillusioned, feeling that they

were just bandaging a gushing wound. Quitting the industry entirely is also difficult; once inside, many find it hard to imagine leaving again. A malaise has descended over the Valley, a mournful sorrow over the old promise to “make the world a better place” and the sad reality that has unfolded instead. Unless enough workers can overcome that silent angst, real progress won’t be possible.

For now, it will come in fits and starts at best—the odd resignation or public rejoinder remaining exceptional. The draw of Silicon Valley is still too strong, and there is as much fear of losing it as of retaining its present form, no matter how destructive it might be. Best to leave your options open, keep your head down, and ship your product. “It’s easy to say ‘I’d never work at Facebook’ now, and then flip later,” the product manager says of the Never Facebookers who, despite their hatred, fear speaking of it. After all, you never know what your next play might be.

We want to hear what you think about this article. [Submit a letter](#) to the editor or write to [letters@theatlantic.com](mailto:letters@theatlantic.com).

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Joe Biden is fed up with all this social media nonsense, and doggone it, he's not going to take it anymore.

The presumptive Democratic presidential nominee published [an open letter](#) Thursday morning addressed directly to [Mark Zuckerberg](#), letting the CEO know that he better shape up, mister, or there will be consequences. Specifically, the letter



critiques Zuckerberg for failing to stem the tide of misinformation and lies spread on his platform by the Trump campaign.

Biden, in full old-man-lecturing mode, told the [willfully obtuse](#) billionaire that his company had failed to live up to its commitment to "improve American democracy" and, for some reason, hasn't listened to the Biden campaign's suggestions on how to best do so.

"The [Biden] campaign has proposed meaningful ways to check disinformation on your platform and to limit the effect of false ads," reads the letter. "But Facebook has taken no meaningful action. It continues to allow Donald Trump to say anything — and to pay to ensure that his wild claims reach millions of voters."

Indeed, Facebook [does take money](#) to spread politicians' lies. It's part of the company's business model, after all. However, the "following concrete recommendations" proposed by the open letter aren't exactly something to build a regulatory foundation on.

There is one distinct proposal contained in the letter that's worth highlighting, though:

"There should be a two-week pre-election period during which all political advertisements must be fact-checked before they are permitted to run on Facebook," proposes Biden in the letter.

And yeah, that actually *is* an idea.

We reached out to Facebook for comment on that proposal specifically, but received no response as of press time. The company did publish a [broad response](#) to the strongly worded letter — and yes, it does really begin with "We live in a democracy[.]"

In other words, Facebook saw Biden's "letter to your manager" energy and decided to one-up it with *Debate Bro* vibes. But the eye rolls don't stop there. See, according to Facebook, the fault actually lies with elected officials — like, one might logically conclude, Joe Biden.

**SEE ALSO: [Zuckerberg really said Trump's 'shooting' comment has 'no history' as a 'dog whistle'](#)**

"Just as they have done with broadcast networks — where the US government prohibits rejecting politicians' campaign ads — the people's elected representatives should set the rules, and we will follow them," reads Facebook's letter — conveniently omitting the fact that, for years, [Zuckerberg insisted](#) that Facebook was not a media company or publisher. "There is an election coming in November and we will protect political speech, even when we strongly disagree with it."


Nothing like taking a strong, principled stand that just so happens to [line your pockets](#).

As the election grows closer, it's likely that this type of critique will only grow in volume and frequency from the Biden campaign. Facebook, after all, is a [deserving punching bag](#). It would be nice, however, if the swings Biden's campaign took were more than just for show

# **Why Is Laurene Powell Jobs Funding Fake News?**

**Liberal billionaire's Emerson Collective claims to fund 'super high-quality journalism,' but backs astroturfed news**

# sites

 Laurene Powell Jobs and former Washington mayor  
Adrian Fenty  
Laurene Powell Jobs and former Washington mayor  
Adrian Fenty / Getty Images

[Charles Fain Lehman](#) -

Laurene Powell Jobs has portrayed herself as a defender of the free press, but while journalistic projects she supports have laid off employees and turned to the government for help, the billionaire has funded a political group that built sham local news sites to push Democratic talking points.

Powell Jobs—worth over \$26 billion thanks to her late husband, Apple founder Steve Jobs—has spent big on major media properties like the *Atlantic*, *Axios*, and *Mother Jones* through her "social change" investment firm, Emerson Collective. But many of those outlets appear to be floundering amid the current economic crisis, taking government loans and laying off staff.

Powell Jobs's attention, however, appears focused more on sending Joe Biden to the White House. Multiple reports have indicated the billionaire has funneled money into liberal media operation ACRONYM, which in turn operates Courier Newsroom, an umbrella over seven different sites that pose as local news outlets while [distributing](#) what one critic called "hyperlocal partisan propaganda."

This mismatch between Powell Jobs's public image and political spending raises questions about how seriously the self-professed friend to independent media takes those commitments, especially when they might conflict with her political goals. Neither a representative for ACRONYM nor for Emerson Collective responded to multiple requests for comment for this article.

Powell Jobs has more than once been listed as a major backer of ACRONYM. A March *New York Times* [story](#) described her as such, as did [a May story](#) from *Vox*.

There is also some evidence of a connection between Powell Jobs and ACRONYM CEO Tara McGowan: Emerson Collective gave \$2 million to Priorities USA Action during the 2016 cycle, when McGowan [worked](#) as the PAC's digital director. McGowan has also [tweeted](#) appreciatively at Powell Jobs.

The exact relationship between Powell Jobs, Emerson, and ACRONYM, however, remains murky. That's thanks in large part to Emerson's status [as an LLC](#), which unlike a more traditional 501(c) designation, protects the organization from having to make public finance disclosures. Courier is similarly structured.

It is clear, however, that both ACRONYM and Courier are doing well. [Since February](#), Courier's stable of sites has grown from three to seven. One of these, North Carolina-based *Cardinal & Pine*, spent over \$20,000 on digital advertising in March alone, according to a Center for Responsive Politics [investigation](#). ACRONYM reported more than \$9 million in receipts in FY 2018, according to documents [obtained by](#) the *Washington Free Beacon*.

Many of the news sites funded by Emerson Collective, meanwhile, are struggling amid a massive economic downturn. The *Atlantic*, in which Emerson owns a controlling stake, [laid off](#) 17 percent of its staff. Group Nine Media, which owns the Emerson-backed *NowThis*, dropped 7 percent of its workforce.

Many Powell Jobs-supported outlets have turned to the federal government for a bailout. *Axios*, which has received Emerson money, [returned](#) a \$5 million loan from the Paycheck Protection Program amid backlash. The *Marshall Project*, an outlet focused on criminal justice reform, confirmed to the *Free Beacon* that it had taken a previously disclosed PPP loan. So did left-leaning

news site *Mother Jones*, which does not appear to have previously disclosed this information.

The *Free Beacon* reached out to a number of Powell Jobs-backed outlets to ask about whether they had sought additional funding from outside sources. Most did not respond or declined to comment, but *Marshall Project* director of strategy and communications Ruth Baldwin said, "We have naturally been in touch with all our major donors since the pandemic began. Not all of them have been able to continue at the same level of support, but we have felt encouraged overall."

The state of Powell Jobs's investments—media properties faltering as a fake news operation takes off—flies in the face of her carefully curated image as a friend to the free press.

In [a column](#) penned in the *Atlantic* in 2019, Powell Jobs referred to journalists as "the world's most valuable troublemakers," writing, "in a struggle for the soul of this nation, in a battle for justice around the world, I am honored to be on the side of those who are fighting for the truth."

That sentiment was echoed by Peter Lattman, the managing director of media at Emerson, who told the *New York Times* for [a flattering profile](#) of Powell Jobs that "broadly, we invest in and support super high-quality journalism," adding "we are looking at innovative approaches to media and storytelling."

Jobs's carefully crafted image has extended to media coverage, not only in the *Times*, but also in the [Washington Post](#). All of this support for "independent media," as [a Times interview](#) put it, seems at odds with the mission of *Courier*, whose parent Powell Jobs funds.

Courier functions as part of ACRONYM's campaign to win elections for Democrats. McGowan framed its outlets as part of combating President Donald Trump's massive 2016 social media campaign, [telling Bloomberg](#) of criticisms that her coverage is slanted, "balance does not exist anymore."

Courier sites disclose only a hint of their larger political purpose, with a mention at the bottom of their pages that they are "owned by Courier Newsroom, Inc." This, the Center for Responsive Politics noted, means that their ads—which primarily target President Donald Trump—"are not considered political by Facebook."

The project's goal is to, as *Bloomberg* put it, "deliver the facts favorable to Democrats that [McGowan] thinks voters are missing, and counter right-wing spin." Gabby Deutch, who works for misinformation outlet NewsGuard, [stated it](#) more harshly: "Courier and Acronym are exploiting the widespread loss of local journalism to create and disseminate something we really don't need: hyperlocal partisan propaganda." Her organization gave all of Courier's sites failing grades for "undisclosed partisan Democratic perspective"—far out of line with any definition of "independent media."