

Democracy in Danger S4 E8 Titans of Tech

Will Hitchcock [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:04] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:06] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

Congressional Hearing [00:00:11] The subcommittee will come to order...

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:13] In July 2020. We saw a remarkable scene play out on Capitol Hill.

Congressional Hearing [00:00:19] We welcome to today's hearing on online platforms and market power...

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:21] Lawmakers lined up some executives from the four biggest players in the digital world, Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google.

Congressional Hearing [00:00:31] So help you, God.

Congressional Hearing [00:00:32] Yes, they do. Yes.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:34] They all got grilled on the business practices.

Congressional Hearing [00:00:36] Congressman, we're always looking to improve the YouTube experience...

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:39] On their collection and use of personal data.

Congressional Hearing [00:00:42] Including on the exact circumstances of when Amazon is allowed to view and or use aggregate data?

Congressional Hearing [00:00:47] Yes, yes, we will do that.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:50] On their relationships with competitors.

Congressional Hearing [00:00:52] And that story is that Facebook saw Instagram is a powerful threat..

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:55] Even on their role in undermining democracy.

Congressional Hearing [00:00:59] Russian interference in the American election.

Congressional Hearing [00:01:01] Congressman, thank you. There have been a lot of steps that we've taken to protect the integrity of elections...

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:08] Now it seemed at that moment, maybe like the start of something, maybe a shift away from the cozy atmosphere that Silicon Valley had long fostered with Washington.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:19] I remember that, Siva. But let me ask you, has anything changed since then?

Congressional Hearing [00:01:23] Apple's App Store, isn't that correct?

Congressional Hearing [00:01:25] Sir the App Store, thank you for the questions. The App Store is a feature...

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:31] Not really, at least not yet. Look, there are some proposals working their way through Congress right now, and you know, the Biden administration is open to different forms of legislation that might strengthen antitrust review or might limit the ways companies use data. Some of it could generate some bipartisan support. Some of it could bring some sense of public accountability, but I'm not holding my breath. Even though Republicans and Democrats seem to agree that these companies are problems, they don't agree on the nature of the problems. And look just as importantly, Big Tech has been embedded in the American power structures since its birth in the middle of the 20th century. This industry has always benefited from the support of the state, of the military and of our financial systems. And of course, in turn, the state, the military and the financial systems are fundamentally invested in maintaining the power and success of these companies.

Will Hitchcock [00:02:28] Well, to get deeper into that story of power and technology, we have Margaret O'Mara on the line with us from Seattle. Margaret is a historian at the University of Washington. She focuses on the nexus between American politics and the tech industry. Her most recent book reaches back to the 1940s to tell the story of the rise of Big Tech. It's called, *The Code: Silicon Valley and the Remaking of America*. Margaret, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

Margaret O'Mara [00:02:56] Thank you so much, Will, and Siva, it's great to be here.

Will Hitchcock [00:02:59] So, Margaret, I'm a Cold War nerd, as you know, and I'm hoping you can take us back to the early days of digital computing, the 40s in the 50s. Your book, you know, explains it all that support from the U.S. Department of Defense during the Cold War was absolutely central to the development of the high tech sector. So this really isn't a story of just the free market at work, is it? The titans of industry of the high tech field have always talked about the sort of creativity in their field, but they've always had big handouts from government. So how did Silicon Valley become Silicon Valley and what is that relationship with the state, with government, with the Cold War, with the military defense sector? Talk a little bit about that relationship and how it is so central to understanding where Silicon Valley came from.

Margaret O'Mara [00:03:46] Yeah. So it's and only in America story. The peninsula south of San Francisco in the early 20th century was agricultural, like a lot of California. It specialized in growing fruit. Prunes and apricots were the main export. And there was, a couple of things set it apart. One was that there was Stanford University, which had been founded by a railroad baron Leland Stanford and his wife Jane in the 1890, opened in 1891. And was trying to, you know, had a decent reputation, research reputation, but it wasn't yet Stanford. It was on the make. And around Stanford there were, Stanford did have strengths and engineering, and there were a few garage startups. Small companies that were in the periphery of Stanford, one of them, founded in 1939, was Hewlett Packard by two Stanford alums. But really, you could look across the United States at that time and

in the first decades of the 20th century, and find lots of pockets of entrepreneurial tinkerers in garages building things. It wasn't something that was, you know, predicted that it was going to be what it became. And, and really the turning point started with the Second World War, with the Pacific Theater, with all of the military buildup and the influx of defense manufacturing and workers and soldiers coming into the Pacific West. And then, in the 1950s and onward, the Cold War military industrial complex. And Stanford, its administrators cannily seeing what was coming, the flood of money that was about to be spent on advanced electronics and money that was going to flow into universities, for research and for scientific education in the early 1950s and forward remade its curriculum, as only a private university can do, and made itself the perfect receptacle for this new Cold War money. And this really interesting symbiotic, small but symbiotic community of industry and higher education started forming by the late 50s, where you have Big East Coast-based electronics and computing firms that open research labs in the valley near Stanford, where they can tap into that talent. And then another significant thing that gets the flywheel turning is Lockheed, which is based in L.A., opens its missiles and space division in the middle of the 1950s, about 10 miles down the road from Stanford. And that, Lockheed, now Lockheed Martin, obviously, major defense contractor, that was the biggest employer in the valley through the late 80s, throughout the duration of the Cold War. Which is this hidden history that really is not, even in the valley, is not fully understood, partially because almost everything they were doing was top-secret. So people working there couldn't go home and tell their families what they were doing, much less appear on the cover of Fortune magazine as an entrepreneurial genius.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:06:31] This corporate state partnership project was like central to postwar American liberalism. It was this, this notion that we could have this big dynamic set of industries almost directly funded from the U.S. government with civilian oversight, you know, we assumed. And we could build up this powerful American economy in these particular sectors. We saw this happen not just with the computer industry, we saw with the chemical industry, we saw it with steel, we saw it with pharmaceuticals in various ways, right? But something special about Silicon Valley, right? What was different structurally and ideologically that left us with a very different sense of its role in the world by the end of the 20th century than, say, the chemical industry?

Margaret O'Mara [00:07:18] Mm-Hmm. My kind of shorthand is that the government threw a lot of money in the Valley's direction and then mostly got out of the way. Now it wasn't completely without strings attached, and I think there are many, many an entrepreneur will complain about all the, you know, red tape that comes with taking money from the government, but really, there was a lot of flexibility afforded. So here's what sets the Valley apart. It has to do materially with what it was building, what it was specializing in and also where it was. So what it was building against small, advanced electronics. This was a market that was, there weren't big incumbents in it, making transistorized electronics. The transistor had only been invented in 1947, it's a very, very new device. And there is a demand for this. The Cold War and especially the space race as part of the larger Cold War project, creates intense demand for very advanced light, powerful electronics because those can power both rockets and missiles. I mean, that's what it's all, it's about the missile gap, it's about the Apollo program. And so this is interesting because you don't have incumbent contractors, you don't have the pork barrel politics that plays out in other parts of the Cold War defense complex, where you have powerful senators in the south and southeast, ensuring that military installations come to their districts in their states. It was wide open. The only companies that were specializing in this very, very bespoke, very distinctive type of integrated circuit silicon semiconductor technology were mostly out in California. And so they got to have this very deep pocketed customer for their products at

a time when there was no commercial market for them. And so that kind of creates this very entrepreneurial, intensely competitive semiconductor industry that knows that NASA's going to buy their products. And so in doing that, they can scale up production. The price per unit goes down and then a commercial market becomes possible by the late 60s and early 70s. That's really the metaphor of the launch pad for the rocket kind of plays in multiple ways.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:09:21] Right, right. But that turned to the commercial market is really crucial here in all areas of American culture. Because let's not forget, we're not just talking about rockets and missiles. We're talking about that transistor radio through which Americans are listening to the Beatles, right? As they walk around their neighborhoods or listening in their cars, right? So the miniaturization of electronic circuits, getting rid of the big tubes allows for rock 'n' roll, right? Allows for people who listen to rock and roll in their cars and from their pockets and in their dorm rooms. And all sorts of things flow from that. Now, look, historian Fred Turner at Stanford has written an account of the cultural growth of Silicon Valley, one that rests upon rock 'n' roll to a large degree, or at least upon the counterculture, right? He connects the growth of Silicon Valley in the 70s, 80s and 90s to the Whole Earth Catalog, to people who were working around the Grateful Dead, like John Perry Barlow, who became like an early stage of the free software movement and of this sort of, you know, revolutionary spirit. And he says, like Burning Man is as important to understand the growth of Silicon Valley as looking at Hewlett-Packard, right? So what do you think about that? What is the connection between the cultural milieu of Northern California and this big government industrial military milieu?

Margaret O'Mara [00:10:35] I think there's a lot. You know Fred and I, our frames of Silicon Valley, it's not a two different interpretations. It's a yes/and, it's showing two different dimensions, and they operate in very different ways. Look, the counterculture 60s generation embrace of personal computing and individualized electronics, miniaturized electronics as a tool towards a better world, that is very much in reaction to the intensely militarized economy of the valley. You have people going to Stanford and Berkeley in the late 60s. They're getting access to computers. They're getting introduced to computers thanks to government funded computer labs on these campuses. They are protesting the military research that's going on these campuses. They graduate. They're really, really jazzed about computing. They see every computer they know is in the back room of some academic computer lab or a big corporation or a big government agency. They are tools of the establishment. And the last thing they want to do is take a job at a place like Lockheed. If you spent your college years protesting the Vietnam War and dropping out and tuning in, you are, the last thing you want to do is go work for the man and that particular man. So there's in the 70s, you see these technologists who are going to work at Xerox PARC, which is the industrial research lab that doesn't have anything to do with defense work. And that becomes the place that over the span of the 1970s, the generator of so many foundational technologies of the personal computer.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:12:07] It's where Steve Jobs looked over someone's shoulder and saw the graphical user interface and the mouse and said, hey, we can actually sell this to humans and name it after the Beatles' record label and, and get these devices onto individuals' desk. And like you said, right, it's about the ship to the individual, to the radically free individual. So that's a very different notion than the military collective, right?

Will Hitchcock [00:12:31] Well, let me let me let me jump on to that question because it carries us into the some of the less appealing dimensions of the countercultural sort of era, which, you know, one of the things that has always been noted about the late 60s and

early 70s and the counterculture that emerged is that there was a combination of feminist awareness and a lot of sexism at work. And this is also true inside the industries that you're writing about. I'm just wondering, to what extent is there, you know, in addition to an ideology of liberation, there's also a focus on kind of relentless profit making of workaholic kind of quality. And it's very masculine, the environment in which these founders of the tech industry are operating is run by young men who are highly competitive. And the way you tell the story, there's a kind of a towel snapping almost frat boy kind of quality to some of these key figures. Is sexism, I might even say misogyny, somehow hardwired into the tech revolution?

Margaret O'Mara [00:13:25] It is hard wired. I think that's one reason it's so hard to reprogram or reprogramming has been so gradual and the needle has moved so slowly. The modern tech industry is the product of several streams of input, so to speak. One is this incredibly hard charging, hyper masculine, almost all male environment, technical environment of the early semiconductor industry, which is hyper competitive. It's all about a race to market and iteration and getting yourself, you know, elbowing out the competition. And it has a business culture that has its roots in the engineering lab and an atmosphere that was again all male. And I'm talking about, you know, kind of old school engineering before computer science, which is very kind of an atmosphere of unvarnished criticism. You need to have a very, very thick skin to get along, that was part of the culture. And of course, there were plenty of women. They were just in support roles and they were stay at home wives who were keeping everything going so these guys could work all the time. So you combine that with, let's say, this offshoot of the new left. This, you know, sixties generation technologists, who are very much kind of thinking about and sharing the broader vision articulated by the new left of kind of fighting imperialism, moving through to a new, more equitable world. And of course, most of the people doing this, although the very, you know, the early personal computer movement contained a good number of women, but it was almost all white. And as the computer movement moved from movement to industry and by the late 70s, becomes a capitalist enterprise, the women by and large, just drop out of the picture. And again, this this techno idealism, techno optimism that is presuming that the computer is going to be the fix. If we just have good enough engineering, a good enough tool, then all of the messiness of politics, all the messiness of the world can be, can be resolved and that animating principle continues. So those two kind of hard charging workaholic. Work hard, play hard. Your life is your work. Combined with this, the computer is going to be the tool by which we get the world to a better place. Those things still are the heartbeat of Silicon Valley in many respects. And that has been a common theme of Silicon Valley politics, which is that, that kind of tech will set us free or there must be an app for that. We can't think about these companies and these people and these platforms, separate from the political economy in which there are growing and rooted.

Will Hitchcock [00:15:57] But is that is that an illusion? Isn't that an illusion that we constantly want? The notion of a technocratic world that is somehow neutral, that can be put to use for progressive ends? That's a powerful dream of people on the left. And it remains so, isn't it?

Margaret O'Mara [00:16:14] Yeah, it does. It remains a very powerful dream. And there, and even in the critiques of Big Tech that break them up, the you know, you're violating privacy, you need to be regulated, you need to have some content moderation. There's this implicit presumption that, you know, the problem is you just need a better algorithm. The problem is, you know, you just aren't functioning the way you should and you aren't advancing democracy. And this again, this dates from before the digital age. This very

American notion. This nation that has celebrated inventiveness and entrepreneurship since the get go. This idea that there must be a better technology out there. And perhaps the answer is maybe it's not a technological fix.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:16:58] Right, right, right. I mean, as I've been writing and saying, the problem with Facebook is Facebook, right? It's not something you can tweak around the edges. I want to turn to a different version of what you're talking about, right? This notion that the technocratic, the technological, the algorithmic, the cryptographic can let us rise above the political life, that dirtiness of the machinations of the state. I think it's best distilled right now when you look at cryptocurrency, which seems to be a rage. I mean, I see it as a set of Ponzi schemes. I don't know how you see it. But look, it seems like cryptocurrency, which was sold to us almost literally as a way to create a global means of exchange that would have something like fixed value in the marketplace. There would be no inflation because there's no Federal Reserve that could increase the money supply, right? But they didn't count on multiple versions of cryptocurrency actually increasing the money supply. It's all meant to circumvent systems of power that have been established for centuries, the banking system and the state. So what is the connection between the cryptocurrency ideology, the cryptocurrency fad and the industries themselves, which you know, seem to have a historical blindness to their own embeddedness in the state? Even Peter Thiel and his surveillance companies are dependent on state contracts. It just seems like no one in that world seems to want to acknowledge the extent to which states matter in everything that they do.

Margaret O'Mara [00:18:41] Yeah, I mean, cryptocurrency is fascinating. I've been trying to watch it all with an open mind, and I just again and again get the Ponzi scheme element reinforced to me, quite frankly. I mean, right now, the extreme volatility in the cryptocurrency world, you know, reminds me of the middle part of the 19th century, right? The roots of this, why that regulation and why central banks exist is, you know, the wild west of the 1860s/1870s. You know, the guys who brought you 1873. That same sort of very loose or absence of regulation and security is what's going on here. And there's a reason we have banking regulations. There's a reason we have measures in place to protect consumers, protect the, you know, particularly the little guy. You have a lot of people who are who are seeing this as a path to economic opportunity and autonomy. You have a lot of ordinary folks who are holding cryptocurrency and very invested in it. But the other dimension of cryptocurrency, I think that what's fueling it? Well, first of all, you know, the Valley, Valley companies are trying to figure out like, what's the next big thing, right? What's the, we're kind of towards the end of the curve of, you know, the transistorized everything and what's the what's the next thing? I think what's problematic and makes me skeptical is that so many of the evangelists of the crypto revolution are people who already are sitting on piles of cash themselves. They are the power players of the web 2.0 Revolution or the web 1.0. And, you know, instead of outsiders saying, let's disrupt the system.

Will Hitchcock [00:20:16] Not exactly zealots for democracy, perhaps. Well, Margaret, it feels like we're approaching a watershed moment. Maybe, maybe we are, maybe we aren't, I'd like to hear what you think. But it does seem as if it's possible to imagine lawmakers reconfiguring the regulatory environment around the tech industry. You know, you've compared this kind of awakening to earlier periods of significant legislation and regulation. The auto industry in the 60s, the tobacco companies in the 90s. Do you think there is a path towards government playing a role in compelling tech companies to behave more ethically, responsibly? And you know, what might that look like? What could that

regulatory and political environment look like? Or has the horse left the barn a long time ago?

Margaret O'Mara [00:21:03] Yeah, government regulation, government intervention is going to be the way to change the business practices of these tech companies. We know this historically. We know this just simply because, look, these companies are for-profit publicly traded companies whose executives have a fiduciary duty to deliver value for shareholders. They're not going to change their business model in a way that makes them considerably less money unless regulators force them to, or the threat of regulation is such that they preemptively change. But here's the tension, and here, I think, is a contrast between seatbelts in the 60s and 70s or safety regulations for cars and tobacco in the 90s, which is that those moments of regulation, successful moments of regulation occurred as those industries were, yes, still very, very powerful but were not at the apex of their financial power. And I think a lot about how, you know, just as these CEOs were called up to Congress in the summer of 2020 and after, and there's been so much talk about regulation while you just get on the Amtrak and take a four-hour train ride to New York from Union Station and Land and Wall Street and the tech story is very different. And I think the thing that is really challenging right now is that these tech companies have been minting money. Their valuations are in the trillions, they have delivered for the market, they have delivered. And they're, you know, the tail that wags the dog of not this the Nasdaq, but even the entire stock market. And so that is a tension there. You know, yes, in the 1960s and 70s, Detroit automakers were still riding high, but they were getting some more competition. And in the 1990s, tobacco makers were riding high. But you know, the number of smokers was declining. So it's interesting this tension between regulatory momentum and financial success may be the thing that will really trigger some change, will be a reset in the stock market.

Will Hitchcock [00:23:05] What about the immense competition coming from Donald Trump's new platform, Truth Social?

Margaret O'Mara [00:23:10] Oh that's going to be...

Will Hitchcock [00:23:12] That's that must have them turning over in a cold sweat at night in their beds.

Margaret O'Mara [00:23:16] Shaking in their boots, yeah. But you know, I mean, in all seriousness, like the rise of TikTok does, you know, it's a proof point for the argument that American social media companies have been making, which is that the market is going to take care of itself. You know, we do have competitors and, and this has been the, you know, the pushback on antitrust enforcement that tech has delivered again and again. Like, we're just we moved so fast that the market is going to take care of itself.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:23:42] Right. But let's not forget that both TikTok and the major Facebook competitor in the world, WeChat, are basically instruments of the government of the People's Republic of China. So, you know, we're still talking about concentrations of power and concentrations of state power and anti-democratic trends. So, Margaret, this is the thing like we, you know, we talk about a lot of issues on the show. We, we talk a lot about, you know, the history of the United States in detail, but we always want to get it back to this central question. What does all this portend for democracy in the 21st century? So how do you see all of this, all this momentum, all this money, all this power, the story you've told? Influencing the state of democracy in the United States?

Margaret O'Mara [00:24:24] Well, I think the intense concentration of power and money in the hands of relatively few companies and led by relatively few people in Silicon Valley does create a challenge to democracy, maybe not explicitly, but implicitly. And I think about a lot of the, again, the inputs over a 70-year history. These companies are very much products of the previous generations that came before them. They are influenced and mentored by previous generations quite literally. Venture capitalists often were operators themselves, and they are not only providing money, but mentorship to young entrepreneurs and telling them how the world should work. And there's a common theme of a kind of truncated democracy that flows through the thinking of a lot of these men, which is that, you know, there's a real premium placed on being smart in tech. Are you smart? Are you really, really smart? Are you could engineer? You're really smart. This value of smartness. And this also infuses this sort of so-called meritocracy that Silicon Valley or the tech industry likes to proclaim it has, which is we don't care who you are as long as you're a good engineer. And that, that's, that's a little more, the reality is a little more complicated than that. But when you're very focused on smart people and you see yourself as all right, we've built these products that have been transformative. And you know, the press is being mean to us and senators and congressmen don't know a thing about tech and we just are better. And eventually people are going to come around to our thinking and they all love our products and they use our products. And so with that, you also have this real impatience of listening to not only elected representatives of the people or the, the media, other than taking it seriously other than just PR crisis communications. I think there's also a real geographic narrowness. These are companies and sectors that are populated by highly educated, upper middle-class, mostly American majority-white people, and they may have the best intentions. The products that they are designing are not designed with Myanmar in mind. They're not designed with a real understanding of not only how American democracy works or American history works, but also how the world works. These products are exported globally and are not just things people use for fun, but they're foundational to communication, including political communication. That is an immense responsibility, and this very truncated and limited view of democracy becomes quite dangerous.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:46] Well, Margaret O'Mara, thank you so much for joining us today on Democracy in Danger.

Margaret O'Mara [00:26:52] It was my pleasure. Thanks for having me on.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:27:05] Margaret O'Mara is the Howard and Frances Keller professor of history at the University of Washington. She's the author, most recently of, *The Code: Silicon Valley and the Remaking of America*.

Will Hitchcock [00:27:17] Democracy in Danger is part of the Democracy Group Podcast Network. Visit DemocracyGroup.org to find all our sister shows. We'll be right back after this message from our friends.

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Will Hitchcock [00:28:01] Well Siva, Margaret really started to get at one of the core issues of our podcast, which is, is our weak democracy creating all of these problems and these giants? Or are all of these giants harming our democracy?

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:28:13] Well, you know, look, as Margaret said, it's never an either or question, right? It's always a both right? And that's what we're seeing here. We're seeing, you know, clearly we've documented the ways in which companies like Facebook and Google and, you know, other companies that are dealing in massive surveillance and other companies that are corrupting our political system in various ways are undermining democracy. But one of the reasons that they can. And one of the reasons that they stay so powerful. And one of the reasons that they stop any meaningful legislation, every chance they get, is that we already had a weak democracy. We already had deep flaws in our ability to summon the collective will of the people and execute that collective will in terms of legislation, regulation or any meaningful change, right? That we already had those problems has now been exacerbated by this incredible concentration of wealth and power and by a media system that these companies have completely altered. So now there's really no sense of accountability, and all of our media forms now have to pander to the built in biases of Facebook and Google. So, you know, it's just a really nasty tangle. And Margaret O'Mara's work shows us that it was a tangle from the beginning, right? That the most dangerous part of the postwar liberal consensus, which was that military industrial complex that President Eisenhower warned us about, that thing that we just sort of accepted as maybe a necessary evil in the fight of the Cold War and a necessary evil and keeping America rich and powerful, because after all, we were the beacon of democracy. And if we stay rich and powerful, do whatever it takes to stay rich and powerful, the rest of the world will look to us and maybe try to emulate us, right? That hasn't worked out so well. And within it, now we see the seeds of the demise of democracy.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:08] You know, it's interesting, Siva, to think about the fact that if we want to recover our democracy from this weight of the technology that has been so oppressive, we're going to have to liberate ourselves from our technological habits, our technological addictions. And really turn back towards where it all began, small is beautiful with trusting your neighbor, talking to your neighbor, believing in community, building networks of people you actually know and acting together. Because technology is so easy, it's so accessible and it allows us to feel engaged even though we're isolated and alone. In a way, it's anti-democratic without having to shine a bright light on it's being anti-democratic. And I wonder if on some level, this is really about recommitting ourselves to a kind of personal democracy but before we can solve the big problems.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:30:57] Well, I'd like to think of it as a communal democracy or a social democracy or collective democracy or a democracy that recognizes our shared fate, right? But what happened was, and this is, I think it's really instructive to pay attention to a particular part of the story that Margaret O'Mara tells, right, the turn toward the personal. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, you have figures like Bill Gates creating software for this new version of a computer, the personal computer, one that would sit atomized on someone's desk, not yet networked with other computers. A computer in which amazing things can happen. Things that used to require rooms full of tubes and electronics and and punch cards. You could now do all this really powerful work for yourself, by yourself, for your own business, for your own games. And then Steve Jobs comes along and gives it this sort of magical marketing tinge and says this is a personal computer that can unleash your creativity, right? But it's all personal. It's all about the individual. And so the focus and this tracks perfectly with the Reagan revolution and the neoliberal revolution of the 1980s, right? It's no longer about your connections to others. It's no longer about your, your

barbershop and your church and your neighborhood. It's about yourself. It's about satisfying your wants. It's about indulgence. And combine that with the fact that the American economy and the American culture is so good at emphasizing two values. One is abundance and the other convenience, right? You walk through any supermarket in America and there are more choices of breakfast cereal than you could ever try in your life, and we like it that way. And we get frustrated when the shelves don't have our brand of cereal, right? And convenience. We want Amazon Prime. We want the thing on our doorstep. Maybe the same day at the latest the next day. And when you're selling abundance and convenience to Americans over and over and over for decades, Americans start to learn that this is what they want and need, and it's not about making connections with other people, it's not about deferring gratification. It's not about investing in institutions.

Will Hitchcock [00:33:11] Or compromise.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:33:12] Or compromise, right? It's me, me, me, me, me. And all of that basically makes it harder to run a Democratic Republic because a Democratic Republic requires those multiple acts of sacrificing your own personal needs and indulgence for the greater good. And that's just not a muscle we're used to exercising anymore. Well, that's all for this episode of Democracy in Danger.

Will Hitchcock [00:33:41] But keep your phone handy. We're going to replay a show we did on lawmaking in Texas. And guess what? Like they say down there, it's crookeder than a barrel of fishhooks.

Texas Citizen [00:33:51] Every Texas citizen should grow up knowing about all of this in order to form solid opinions at the ballot box and empathy within their communities. Whitewashing our history is wrong.

Will Hitchcock [00:34:01] In the meantime, use your tech platforms to save democracy. Shoot us a Tweet @dindpodcast that's D-I-N-D podcast. And yes, you can even share this episode on social media. That's OK.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:34:15] There's a lot more to read and see on our web page. It's DinDanger.org. And look, if you're a teacher, think about using our show and all the supporting material we put together in your classroom.

Will Hitchcock [00:34:27] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol. Jennifer Ludovici is our associate producer. Sidney Halleman edits the show. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell, Jane Frankel and Elie Bashkow.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:34:39] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. The show is a project of UVA's Deliberative Media Lab. We're distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:34:56] And I'm Will Hitchcock. We'll see you next time.