

# New digital tool reveals spheres of influence of big tech companies

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# Sphere Transgression Watch

Credit: Radboud University

Today sees the launch of the website "Sphere Transgression Watch," which reveals how major technology companies are gaining more and more influence in different areas of our society. The Digital Good research team led by Prof. Tamar Sharon invites other researchers and



interested parties to use the digital tool and contribute their own examples.

## The growing influence of big tech

On the new website, <u>www.sphere-transgression-watch.org</u>, users can see how <u>big tech</u> companies like Apple and Alphabet are involved in more and more spheres of our society, such as healthcare, education, culture and politics. For example, a company like Microsoft, which was initially founded as a <u>software company</u>, is today involved in all manner of healthcare-related initiatives. Sphere Transgression Watch provides insight into the quantity and diversity of such initiatives.

These companies bring innovations to these domains, but their involvement also results in all kinds of new dependencies, which we are often completely unaware of and which are inadequately regulated. The new tool reveals how far this influence goes and offers both a <u>visual</u> representation and a database with examples of activities of tech companies that are reaching beyond their original spheres of influence.

#### Is having multiple spheres of influence a problem?

The digital tool is inspired by the theory of justice of philosopher Michael Walzer. He believes that our social life is organized around different domains, or spheres, each of which is in turn organized around different concepts of justice. In a just society, advantages in one sphere, such as wealth or political power, should not translate into advantages in another sphere. If this does happen, then Walzer says this will ultimately lead to an unjust and tyrannical society. According to the Digital Good team, big tech companies are now using their technical knowledge to gain unfair advantages and influence within domains that are currently undergoing digitization, such as healthcare and education.



#### **Digital Good**

Digital Good, part of the iHub, is an ERC-funded project that addresses the question of how to deal with the increasing influence of major technology companies in healthcare and healthcare research. "Large technology companies now have influence far beyond their own domain," says Tamar Sharon, lead researcher of the project. "In the Digital Good project, we are investigating the ethical and societal challenges associated with this influence, particularly in the areas of healthcare and biomedical research."

"How are these companies influencing these domains? Do their values and knowledge clash with the values and expertise of the new domain? What influence could these companies have on research agendas? And what dependencies will be created when these companies start offering public services? Identifying these influences is one step, but ultimately we want to develop a normative framework: to what extent should we allow this influence, and under what conditions?"

### **Input requested**

Sphere Transgression Watch is an open digital tool (i.e. the data is not yet complete). The Digital Good team is continuing to develop the website, and also invites other researchers to contribute. They can add new information on the activities of the following companies: Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, Huawei, Palantir, IBM, Meta, Alphabet and 23andMe. In addition, journalists, policymakers, social organizations and members of the public can use the tool to find out how far the influence of big tech actually reaches. Please send an email to <a href="mailto:stw@ru.nl">stw@ru.nl</a> if you wish to contribute to the tool.



#### Provided by Radboud University

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