Jessa Lingel, **The Gentrification of the Internet: How to Reclaim Our Digital Freedom**, Oakland: University of California Press, 2023, 168 pp., $16.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Jacob Green
University of Virginia

In the first chapter of ***The Gentrification of the Internet: How to Reclaim Our Digital Freedom***, author Jessa Lingel, professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, includes an anecdote about her students' shifting attitudes toward the Internet. Lingel writes that her students mostly perceived the Internet and social media as "Good Things" in 2010, which predated the revelations of Edward Snowden and Cambridge Analytica; 10 years later, her students come to class more aware and skeptical of the surveillance and discrimination practices that characterize the Internet today (p. 18). This anecdotal journey of innocence to experience anticipates the arc of the book, which uses gentrification theory to diagnose the problems of today's Internet, and how we can collectively imagine ways in which it can be more equitable and consumer friendly.
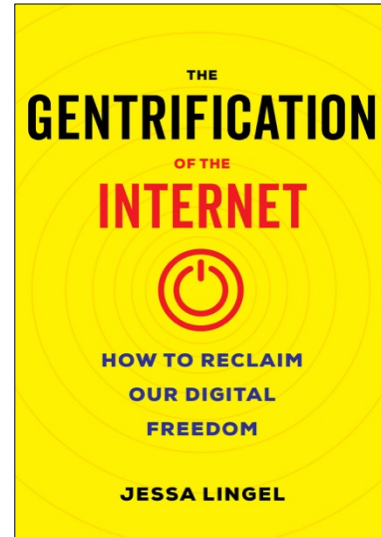
The text oscillates between using gentrification as a metaphor (for example, monolithic platforms like Facebook putting smaller websites out of business) and describing instances of urban gentrification driven by tech corporations (like Amazon moving into cities and increasing the cost of living and real estate). As Lingel describes, gentrification is about power, displacement, and legal and financial systems, and this book applies it convincingly as a framework for understanding how shifting dynamics in our online spaces and relationships—as well as the infrastructures that support the Internet—have long been steered by the hypercommercialized interests of corporations as opposed to the needs and desires of users.

Lingel presents the effects of gentrification in three thematic categories that appear throughout the text: displacement, isolation, and commercialization. Together, these effects contribute to a loss of digital diversity, which is described in the second chapter, "The People and Platforms Facebook Left Behind." The consequences of the homogenization of the Internet can be found by contrasting it with the pre-algorithmic Web of decades past, and this chapter explores the rise and fall of the websites Body Modification E-Zine (BME) and Tumblr to recall a "weirder" and "more open" Internet (p. 23). Importantly, Lingel points out how BME was built by members of the body modification community rather than the tech industry, which allowed for policy and design decisions to reflect the values of its own community members. After Facebook and Instagram offered wider audiences for content than niche websites like BME, members began to migrate to these increasingly mainstream platforms where they faced being governed by different values and the fragmentation of their own community. Similarly, after Tumblr ostracized marginalized users following changes to the website in 2018, Lingel concludes: "One way of describing Tumblr's transformation from internet cool kid to abandoned ghost town is as a failed bid at gentrification" (p. 32).

The third and longest chapter, "The Big Problems of Big Tech," offers concrete analysis of the three ways that the tech industry gentrifies: companies moving into local neighborhoods, the lack of diversity in their workforce, and a business culture that prioritizes profits over people (p. 43). These three cases also neatly fit the tripartite categorization mentioned in the previous paragraph: Tech headquarters *displace* people in local neighborhoods, a lack of diversity *isolates* a homogenous workforce, and prioritizing profits is a consequence of *commercialization*. Lingel criticizes the "piecemeal experiments and altruism" from individual companies as an inadequate response to the issues caused by gentrification, like the stark decrease of people of color in gentrified cities like San Francisco, San Jose, and Oakland (p. 53). Lingel calls for more robust relationships with surrounding communities, like tech companies putting resources into "local schools, infrastructure and housing initiatives" (p. 53). If the reader is wondering how the tech industry got here, the chapter also balances its social and economic analysis with historical context by describing how Big Tech became the go-to industry for business talent—as opposed to the finance industry— after the 2008 recession. The infusion of finance culture, and the initial public offering model of success, led to the commercialization mentioned earlier, which puts shareholders above users (p. 63).

Internet service providers (ISPs) are also guilty of gentrifying, which has led to industry consolidation. In 1998, over 92% of the U.S. population had access to seven more more ISPs, but these smaller, community-based ISPs have been pushed out by larger national conglomerates (p. 80). By 2015, consumer choice in ISPs shrank dramatically: A mere 24% of developed areas in the United States had access to two or more ISPs, while the other 76% only had a single option for an Internet provider (p. 81). One of the most obvious results of this commercialization are increased costs for consumers due to a lack of competition. Yet price-gouging is only one consequence, as ISPs also facilitate surveillance and create inequities of Internet access.

Moving from diagnosis to potential remedies for the issues posed by ISPs, two revelations came in the sections on mesh networking and dark fiber. Lingel argues that meshnets—wireless nodes in a network that talk to the other nodes—is one alternative to ISPs and offers the example of the Red Hook Initiative, which installed a mesh network in Brooklyn in 2012. Dark fiber presents another alternative: miles of excess fiber optic networks installed in the late 1990s by overzealous cable companies to create a series of networks that are not being used. Cities and neighborhoods could make use of these alternatives to ISPs, but thinking about these systems is also the first step in changing how people perceive the Internet. Lingel points out how increasing familiarity with these technologies will force residents to think about the Internet as infrastructure.

The final chapter concludes with a toolkit for fighting Internet gentrification, including calling for increased regulation in cities and online platforms, while also urging users to learn the politics of these platforms. Lingel encourages the reader to "be your own algorithm" by leaning into diversity and taking ownership for their online networks, and, perhaps along the way, reclaiming some of the wonder of the early Web that promised encounters with interesting people and new perspectives (p. 104). This aspiration appears increasingly important in an Internet characterized by misinformation, filter bubbles, and the digital clutter that has been colloquially referred to as AI "slop."

Gentrification of the Internet is not merely descriptive, as indicated by its subtitle: *How to Reclaim our Digital Freedom*. This text is rooted in an activist ethos that seeks to identify the various "adversaries

in the struggle for more ethical technology and more ethical cities" (p. 15). Lingel explicitly states that this book was written with activists and ordinary Internet users in mind, as opposed to other academics (p. 19). The commitment to a more general audience translates to a highly readable book without jargon, citations, or footnotes; instead, it contains a helpful glossary and a list of resources committed to fighting for social justice and against urban gentrification. Readers interested in other books that confront inequity in our technological systems may appreciate recent titles like *More than a Glitch: Confronting Race, Gender, and Ability Bias in Tech* by Meredith Broussard (2024) and *Data Grab: The New Colonialism of Big Tech and How to Fight Back* by Ulises A. Mejias and Nick Couldry (2024).

References

Broussard, M. (2024). *More than a glitch: Confronting race, gender, and ability bias in tech*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Mejias, U. A., & Couldry, N. (2024). *Data grab: The new colonialism of Big Tech and how to fight back*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.