

1 *Gentrification Online and Off*

This is a book about technology, power, dignity, and freedom. It is about the commercialization of online platforms and the suppression of community. It is about the gentrification of the internet. When I call the internet gentrified, I'm describing shifts in power and control that limit what we can do online. I'm also calling out an industry that prioritizes corporate profits over public good and actively pushes certain forms of online behavior as the "right" way to use the web, while other forms of behavior get labeled backward or out of date. Over time, it has become harder for people to keep personal information private, to experiment or play with digital technologies, and to control how the web looks and feels. The internet is increasingly making us less democratic, more isolated, and more beholden to corporations and their shareholders. In other words, the internet has gentrified.

Gentrification is a very loaded term. It has supporters and detractors who see the world in vastly different ways. Is it helpful to use such a polarizing concept as the main argument of a book? And even if it is, is it useful to think of the internet as gentrified? I'll argue that it's precisely because the word *gentrification* is so loaded that it's a good starting point for thinking about the politics of the internet. By leaning into the conflicts around urban gentrification,

we can make sense of the political realities of the internet. Gentrification gives us a metaphor for understanding how we got to the internet we have now and how it could be different.

When people connect gentrification to the internet, they're usually talking about the tech industry's role in reshaping neighborhoods that host tech company headquarters. When tech companies move their headquarters to a city or neighborhood, their workers usually follow, driving up rents and bringing new social norms. Longtime residents get pushed out and are excluded from whatever benefits tech companies might bring.

These are important problems (and I'll get to them in chapter 3), but it's not the whole story. In addition to physical spaces being warped by Big Tech, online spaces and relationships are increasingly dictated by corporations instead of being driven by communities. A small number of companies control a huge percentage of online technologies. Facebook (which also owns Instagram and WhatsApp) dominates the market for social media users, shifting a huge amount of economic and political power to one corporation. Meanwhile, Google controls online searches with a whopping 86 percent of the global market, according to the website Statista. The next most popular search engine, Bing, doesn't even come close. Amazon has redefined what online shopping looks like, predicting our interests and changing norms around the marketplace. Power is so concentrated that living without the Big Five tech companies (Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, and Microsoft) isn't just inconvenient, it's almost impossible. Meanwhile, another monopoly controls digital infrastructure, with a cadre of ISPs dictating who gets internet access and how much it costs.

If we look at who works in Big Tech, it's no surprise that industry priorities are skewed. Overwhelmingly run by White people and cis

men, Big Tech has a tendency to ignore people of color, as well as women, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ people. And just like “urban renewal” tends to reward people who are already wealthy, innovation in Big Tech has made a lot of money for a small number of people. But there’s more than just money at stake: Big Tech has fought against efforts to give more people more power, like federal regulation and employee unions. Within the industry, the biggest players have monopolized digital culture, pushing out smaller companies and older platforms. In this process of displacement, mainstream platforms get to define what online interactions are normal and what online interactions are problematic. Condensing this much control goes beyond a reduction of consumer choice; it’s a form of technological gentrification.

By calling the contemporary internet gentrified, my goal is to diagnose a set of problems and lay out what activists, educators, and ordinary web users can do to carve out more protections and spaces of freedom online. The web we have wasn’t inevitable. It’s the result of a specific set of policies and values. Gentrification helps us understand the story of a changing internet, identifying winners and losers, and suggesting a vision for a fairer digital landscape. To start making this case, we need to be clear about gentrification. We can start by asking, What is urban gentrification and how does it help describe the modern, mainstream internet?

What Is Gentrification?

Gentrification is a loaded and controversial term. Some people think of it as an opportunity for economic development, a way to bring money and resources to poor neighborhoods. Others see an invasion of newcomers who will displace longstanding social

networks and their cultural histories. Part of the problem is that gentrification isn't just one thing—instead, there are a bunch of labels and stakeholders with competing ideas about how city space should look and feel, and who should get to live there. As a starting point for understanding what gentrification means and why it matters, we can look at how urban studies scholar Gina Perez defined it:

An economic and social process whereby private capital (real estate firms, developers) and individual homeowners and renters reinvest in fiscally neglected neighborhoods through housing rehabilitation, loft conversions, and the construction of new housing stock. . . . Gentrification is a gradual process, occurring one building or block at a time, slowly reconfiguring the neighborhood landscape of consumption and residence by displacing poor and working-class residents unable to afford to live in “revitalized” neighborhoods with rising rents, property taxes, and new businesses catering to an upscale clientele.

Gentrification involves the cooperation of developers and local governments, as well as individual homeowners and renters. It isn't just about the *presence* of newcomers, it's about their priorities. With support from local governments and financial institutions, gentrifiers transform space and remake it according to their tastes and values.

Gentrification is fundamentally about power. As urban studies scholar Sharon Zukin has written, “Gentrification makes inequality more visible.” It's a contest between groups of people with different levels of power and resources. In the United States, the concept is often tied to race: gentrification usually means young, affluent, White people displace longtime residents, who are

usually people of color with fewer financial resources. Racism and other kinds of discrimination have long shaped who gets to live where in the United States. Whether we're talking about redlining and biased mortgage lending or the forced relocation of Native Americans, in the United States, the freedom to live where we want has not been available to everyone. Many activists think of gentrification as yet another form of social and economic exclusion driven by bias and privilege.

Gentrification changes who lives in a neighborhood, which businesses will thrive, and who's likely to find work. In my neighborhood in South Philadelphia, I've seen locally owned bodegas, diners, and community centers turn into yoga studios, gastropubs, and brunch spots. The goal of these new businesses is not only to match the interests of newcomers but also to bring similar people to the neighborhood. If you like yoga, craft beer, and fancy French toast, these new businesses may seem pretty great. But if you can't afford to shop at the new stores or if they don't have things you want to buy, you now have to travel farther to find stores that meet your needs, your neighbors could be out of a job, and you also have highly visible reminders of who's meant to feel welcome in the neighborhood.

We often think of gentrification as something spatial, but its consequences unfold over time. More affluent neighbors raise home values and property taxes. Eventually, previously affordable neighborhoods become out of reach for families who may have lived in the neighborhood for generations. As a result, people move out, which breaks up longstanding social ties and weakens community cohesion. An irony of gentrification is that many newcomers seek out urban areas that have a strong sense of community and culture, only to threaten the very characteristics that first drew them to the neighborhood.

Since at least the 1960s, researchers have tracked gentrification across the globe. For most of human history, people lived in rural or semirural areas, and cities were often viewed as hotspots of crime and pollution. While many people still think of cities as dirty and crime-ridden, as of 2014, more people in the world live in urban areas than not, according to a report from the United Nations. Cities have always been associated with economic growth and cultural invention, but what's new to the twenty-first century is how many wealthy people are choosing to live in urban environments. For example, in 2019, *US News* announced that San Francisco became the city with the most billionaires per capita—one for every 11,612 people. Gentrification advocates like to point out that wealthy neighbors pay higher property taxes (which isn't true in cities that give gentrifiers tax breaks or abatements). But a sudden increase in wealthy neighbors also has negative consequences. Rich newcomers can push out longtime residents by physically taking up more space, as houses that used to accommodate multiple families are turned into mansions for single families. Even more damaging are so-called investment properties, which are purchased by people who have no intention of living there. Betting that the appeal of urban living will continue, investors purchase houses and apartments in the same way that people speculate on art or gold. A journalist for the *Guardian*, Tracey Lindeman, has been tracking investment properties in major Canadian cities. In Vancouver, twenty-five thousand properties (about 10 percent of the total) are unoccupied, most of which are investment properties. On the other side of Canada, almost 40 percent of Toronto's condos are unoccupied or short-term rentals. This is despite a fierce demand for affordable housing in both cities. From Oakland

to Baltimore, Sao Paulo to Amsterdam, and Istanbul to Sydney, people are struggling to find affordable housing.

People who see gentrification as a good thing tend to emphasize opportunities for new businesses and real estate development. But these benefits aren't evenly distributed. Urban gentrification has a tendency to make rich people richer and poor people poorer. According to a *Guardian* special report on crime and gentrification, for each millionaire household in the San Francisco Bay Area (and there are more than two hundred thousand), there are four new people living below the poverty level. Newcomers may think they're improving the neighborhood, but what improvement means depends on your priorities—and whether you can afford to stay in a neighborhood where the cost of housing is on the rise.

Gentrification changes the physical spaces in a neighborhood, bringing different architectural aesthetics and new kinds of businesses. Over time, existing houses seem smaller and more dated, and old businesses lose customers as new residents bring demands for cosmopolitan perks. Gentrification also changes the social norms in a neighborhood, with the potential for clashes over noise, parenting styles, and even pets.

Who's responsible for gentrification? Gentrification is a partnership between people, policymakers, and real estate companies. When we hear the word *gentrifier*, we might think of young, White couples moving into a neighborhood, looking for affordable housing in urban areas. Young people are increasingly eager to start their careers and families in cities, and empty nesters are moving to cities rather than staying in the suburbs. But it's also important to realize that gentrification isn't just about personal decisions about where to live or individual landlords bumping up the rent for

tenants. At the city level, gentrification involves tax breaks for new construction and sometimes more drastic approaches, like eminent domain, which means the city takes over one or more properties to build a new development or expand infrastructure. (I'll get into local policies meant to kickstart gentrification, like those enacted by local governments trying to attract Big Tech companies to their cities, in chapter 3).

Local policies are one piece of the puzzle, but another key force is the banking and real estate industry. In some cases, bankers, realtors, and landlords will deliberately exclude people from real estate opportunities based on prejudice. Called redlining, this practice systematically excludes people of color (and historically, other groups, like unmarried women and Jewish people) from owning property. In the United States, redlining was finally outlawed in the 1970s, but the problem has been difficult to stamp out. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced a \$200 million settlement with Associated Bank over redlining in Chicago and Milwaukee in May 2015. A three-year HUD investigation found that the Associated Bank purposely rejected mortgage applications from Black and Latinx applicants. Others have noted that the risky mortgage lending at the root of the 2008 financial recession also discriminated against the poor and people of color, with banks deliberately targeting these groups as customers for predatory lending agreements. The wave of foreclosures that followed fueled house-flipping across the country. Investors and developers scooped up foreclosed houses, setting off new waves of gentrification in neighborhoods that were already hard-hit.

Gentrification has become a money-making strategy implemented by megafirms with Wall Street backing. Ben Lane, a

journalist for the real estate publication *HousingWire*, has documented a powerful shift in landlords in the United States. In 2017, the rental company Invitation Homes merged with Starwood Waypoint Homes, creating the nation's largest landlord, with roughly eighty-two thousand homes across the country. Another Wall Street-backed firm, American Homes 4 Rent, owns forty-nine thousand homes in twenty-two states. When Wall Street sets the terms of a rental agreement, what kind of landlord do you get? For many renters of single-family homes, the answer is a landlord who doesn't make repairs or exceptions for late payments. A report from the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta found that corporate owners of single-family rental homes were more likely than smaller landlords to evict tenants; some filed eviction notices on a third of their renters in just one year. As difficult as it might be to convince your upstairs landlord to fix a sink or accept a late payment, negotiating with a major corporate lender can be even more futile. In 2020, COVID-19 exposed how vulnerable renters are during financial and health crises: while housing advocates and activists demanded universal rent relief and a moratorium on evictions, local and state governments were able to protect only renters living in federally backed housing.

Urban studies researchers have been writing about gentrification for over fifty years, and not everyone describes it in the same way or focuses on the same politics. If we're not precise about what the word *gentrification* means, then all we have is the anger and confusion associated with it. To use the concept to think about the internet, it's important to be really clear about what I mean when I use the word *gentrification* in this book. Here are the key features of urban gentrification to keep in mind before we start applying the concept to the internet:

Gentrification involves displacement. Over time, longstanding communities and their histories get pushed out to make way for newcomers.

Gentrification is about power.

Gentrification takes more than a handful of people moving into a neighborhood; it also requires the support of local financial and legal systems.

Gentrification is a process that gets active help from local laws and rules that offer tax breaks to developers and from city officials who actively call for real estate investment.

Gentrification has to do with homes as well as businesses. The residential side of gentrification involves the replacement of one community with another, but the business side can be just as important in terms of local employment opportunities.

Gentrification can't be fought on an individual level; it takes a community. Because gentrification is bigger than a handful of people, houses, or businesses, challenging it has to combine individual practices with collective action and new regulations.

How Is the Internet Gentrifying?

Now that we have a clear sense of what gentrification means, we can start to think about how key themes of gentrification show up online. Across different cities and neighborhoods, gentrification exaggerates inequality and normalizes certain social values while excluding others. Something similar has happened to the internet. A growing number of journalists, lawmakers, activists, and tech insiders have raised concerns about discrimination, segregation, and commercialization online. The techno-optimism that defined the 1990s and early 2000s has faded, and many of us are left