On World Wide Web's 29th Birthday, Its Inventor Warns of Threats to Digital Rights

"The fact that power is concentrated among so few companies has made it possible to weaponize the web," warns British computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee

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*On the 29th anniversary of the founding of the World Wide Web, British computer scientist **Tim Berners-Lee**—the inventor of the internet as we know it and a long-time advocate of digital rights—penned an open letter to call for stricter regulations of the major tech corporations that aim to control the web.*

> "What was once a rich selection of blogs and websites has been compressed under the powerful weight of a few dominant platforms," laments Berners-Lee, writing for the Guardian. "This concentration of power creates a new set of gatekeepers, allowing a handful of platforms to control which ideas and opinions are seen and shared."
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> "The fact that power is concentrated among so few companies has made it possible to weaponize the web at scale," he warns, pointing to how we have recently "seen conspiracy theories trend on social media platforms, fake Twitter and Facebook accounts stoke social tensions, external actors interfere in elections, and criminals steal troves of personal data."

Although internet users across the globe have "looked to the platforms themselves for answers," Berners-Lee reasons that a "legal or regulatory framework that accounts for social objectives may help ease those tensions."

His call for stricter rules to preserve the open internet follow the United States' rollback of federal net neutrality protections late last year—which Berners-Lee strongly opposed, calling Federal Communications Commission chair **Ajit Pai**'s master plan to gut nationwide safeguards that prevented internet service providers from putting a premium on certain content "one of the greatest threats to the web in America."

Today, Berners-Lee runs the World Wide Web Foundation, which works to "advance the open web as a public good and a basic right." In his piece for the *Guardian*, in addition to demanding more regulations, he also emphasizes the needs for closing the digital divide and facilitating more inclusive conversations about the internet's future.

He notes that the United Nations declared internet access a basic human right in 2016, and while this year we're reaching the point where more than half of the global population is online, people who are female, poor, or living in rural regions—or some combination of those characteristics—are still much less likely to have internet access.

Berners-Lee also declares that "today's powerful digital economy calls for strong standards that balance the interests of both companies and online citizens," and emphasizes the importance of "consulting a diverse cross section of society in the process" of rethinking how the web works now.

Challenging "the myth that advertising is the only possible business model for online companies, and the myth that it's too late to change the way platforms operate," he concludes, "on both points, we need to be a little more creative."

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