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Crowdfunding platforms as conduits for ideological struggle and extremism: On the need for greater regulation and digital constitutionalism

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Abstract

Crowdfunding platforms remain understudied as conduits for ideological struggle. While other social media platforms may enable the *expression* of hateful and harmful ideas, crowdfunding can actively facilitate their *enaction* through financial support. In addressing such risks, crowdfunding platforms attempt to *mitigate complicity but retain legitimacy*. That is, ensuring their fundraising tools are not exploited for intolerant, violent or hate-based purposes, yet simultaneously avoiding restrictive policies that undermine their legitimacy as 'open' platforms. Although social media platforms are routinely scrutinized for enabling misinformation, hateful rhetoric and extremism, crowdfunding has largely escaped critical inquiry, despite being repeatedly implicated in amplifying such threats. Drawing on the 'Freedom Convoy' movement as a case study, this article employs critical discourse analysis to trace how crowdfunding platforms reveal their underlying values in privileging either collective safety or personal liberty when hosting divisive causes. The radically different policy decisions adopted by crowdfunding platforms GoFundMe and GiveSendGo expose a concerning divide between 'Big Tech' and 'Alt-Tech' platforms regarding what harms they are willing to risk, and the ideological rationales through which these determinations are made. There remain relatively few regulatory safeguards guiding such impactful strategic

choices, leaving crowdfunding platforms susceptible to weaponization. With Alt-Tech platforms aspiring to build an 'alternative internet', this paper highlights the urgent need to explore digital constitutionalism in the crowdfunding space, establishing firmer boundaries to better mitigate fundraising platforms becoming complicit in catastrophic harms.

KEYWORDS

Alt-Tech, crowdfunding, digital constitutionalism, extremism, platform governance

INTRODUCTION

In January 2022, hundreds of truck drivers formed convoys that converged on Canada's capital city, Ottawa. They staged a rally that marked the beginning of a month-long occupation of the streets around Parliament Hill, along with other protests and blockades across the country. This self-dubbed 'Freedom Convoy' ostensibly assembled to protest vaccine mandates for truckers crossing the Canada-US border. However, the protests rapidly evolved into a wider movement against all Covid-19 mandates and the Canadian Government that enforced them. As the occupiers swelled into the thousands—using hundreds of trucks and other vehicles to establish immovable blockades—fears grew that violence could erupt in ways comparable with the 6 January 2021 US Capitol insurrection. Concerns were heightened by the organizers' close association with far-right interests, troubling imagery, symbolism, and rhetoric among the participants, intimidating conduct toward local residents and vandalism of public space. The constant blaring of horns and other forms of noise pollution was compounded by the diesel fumes of idling trucks, adversely affecting the health of local residents, and even impacting patient access to the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (Rouleau, 2023b, pp. 193–199). Public figures—including the Mayor of Ottawa—were threatened (Rouleau, 2023a, p. 53), and in a parallel blockade in Coutts, Alberta, a cache of weapons was discovered and four men were charged with conspiracy to commit murder of police officers (Rouleau, 2023b, p.16). The mobilization of resources (e.g., stockpiling fuel, food, and kitchen facilities) indicated that the participants intended a long-term occupation, even if threatened with forcible removal. Ottawa's Police Chief described the demonstration as 'unique in nature, massive in scale, polarizing in content and dangerous in literally every other aspect' (Coletta & Hassan, 2022). According to authorities, Canada was under siege by an antidemocratic movement that might even attempt outright insurrection.

The Freedom Convoy was financially supported via crowdfunding. Campaigns on fundraising platforms GoFundMe and GiveSendGo raised enormous sums and attracted donors worldwide. Following intense criticism for their complicity in potentially catastrophic harms (e.g. Snyder, 2022), GoFundMe temporarily suspended and then eventually removed the campaign entirely, provoking outcry among supporters. In response, GoFundMe's competitor GiveSendGo established their own Freedom Convoy campaign, promoting themselves as the only crowdfunding platform willing to defend individual liberty and 'free speech'. Indeed, GiveSendGo claim they are the 'tip of the spear' in bringing down 'Big Tech' companies, who they perceive to be politically biased and unjustly censorious toward conservative causes. This places GiveSendGo among a growing array of 'Alt-Tech' companies pursuing a 'second internet', free from state interference (Donovan et al., 2019).

While, on this occasion, the Canadian government invoked emergency powers to prevent the disbursal of funds raised for the convoy, the resulting backlash threatens to foster troubling innovations in fundraising for extremist causes.

Donation-based crowdfunding platforms are invariably used as conduits for combative political debate (Wade, 2022). While other social media platforms have been scrutinized for their complicity in enabling misinformation, hateful rhetoric and extremism, crowdfunding platforms have largely escaped such criticism, despite their outsized capacity to aid such threats. One exception to this trend is medical misinformation, given the role crowdfunding platforms, especially GoFundMe, have played in the extraordinary growth of fundraising for personal health expenses (Kenworthy & Igra, 2022). As a result, close critical inquiry has explored GoFundMe's role in potentially enabling unproven treatments, outright misinformation, and exploitation of vulnerable persons in desperate circumstances (see Dressler & Kelly, 2018; Snyder & Caulfield, 2019; Vox et al., 2018). Similar concerns emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic that GoFundMe was too easily exploited to promote unproven interventions that may distract from reliably effective preventative and protective approaches (Snyder et al., 2021), including funding the widely-distributed conspiracy theory documentary, *Plandemic* (Baker, 2022). To their credit, GoFundMe have gradually played a more proactive role in removing campaigns containing medical misinformation, particularly vaccine-related misinformation, offering firm commitments that such campaigns would be removed (Bever, 2019). However, GoFundMe has found it difficult to make determinations in cases where funds are raised for legal action in defence of 'medical freedom' and 'informed consent', despite these campaigns appearing 'to be little more than dog whistles to the larger anti-vaxxer movement' (Dorn, 2021). GiveSendGo, meanwhile, has shown no inclination to remove campaigns 'casting doubt on vaccines' (Mak, 2021). Even more troubling, as this study explores, are instances where antivaccine sentiment is used to foster more extremist views. This was evident from the very beginning of the first Freedom Convoy fundraiser on GoFundMe, which framed resisting vaccine mandates as an existential imperative, imploring patriotic citizens to defend their nation from 'tyrannical governments' (Lich & Dichter, 2022; see also Gillies et al., 2023; Snyder & Zenone, 2023).

Using the Freedom Convoy as an illustrative case study, this paper explores how crowdfunding platforms reveal their underlying ideological values in their varying willingness to tolerate complicity with divisive causes. This entanglement in wider political struggles—enabling not simply the *expression* of controversial ideas, but their material *enactment*—compels crowdfunding platforms to address their complicity in harm, rather than simply protecting their supposed legitimacy by remaining 'neutral' on such matters. To this end, this study addresses three primary research questions:

> RQ1: How do crowdfunding platforms respond to the threat of their services being used in support of divisive, hate-based, incendiary, or even outright violent causes?
>
> RQ2: In enacting diverging policies, what underlying ideological values do these platforms reveal, and how do they try to balance their aspiration to retain legitimacy as 'open' platforms while avoiding complicity in significant harms?
>
> RQ3: Given crowdfunding platforms potentially enact dangerous ideas, what regulatory gaps need urgent redressing to mitigate the possibility of catastrophic outcomes?

Drawing on the recent 'Freedom Convoy' movement as an exemplary case study, we argue that GoFundMe and GiveSendGo adopt sharply divergent ethical stances in balancing their legitimacy and complicity, neither of which is reassuringly supported by due process mechanisms, and with relatively little regulatory safeguards to guide these impactful policy decisions. We contend that this lack of oversight has urgent and

wide-ranging implications in affording domestic extremists access to fundraising tools, undoing previously successful deplatforming efforts. We suggest that managing these risks cannot be left entirely to platforms themselves, and thus greater collaboration between state agencies and private entities is needed, complemented by more clearly prescribed reporting and intelligence-sharing responsibilities.

Background: Crowdfunding as conduit for wider ideological battles and the rise of 'Alt-Tech'

Cause-based crowdfunding was established with utopian hopes of supporting innovative projects and urgent needs, such as raising funds for personal medical expenses, learning and education access, humanitarian causes, environmental conservation and animal rescue initiatives (Snyder, 2020; Wade, 2022). Such platforms, however, soon found themselves contending with complex ethical dilemmas that required decisive platform governance. Whereas social media platforms employ content moderation policies to determine what speech is permissible, by whom and when (Baker et al., 2020), the governance of crowdfunding pertains to *what causes can be permissibly financed*. Although there is a wealth of research on content moderation and related governance matters on major platforms (e.g., Meta, YouTube, Twitter), payment processers (e.g., PayPal), and marketplaces (e.g., Amazon, eBay), comparatively little attention has been paid to the governance issues concerning crowdfunding platforms that offer both advocacy and fundraising tools. This potent combination of networked visibility *and* financial support makes crowdfunding platforms powerful mediators in shaping public discourse and political action.

Extensive literature has explored ethical, political, and cultural issues relating to personal crisis fundraising (Berliner & Kenworthy, 2017) and civic crowdfunding projects (Stiver et al., 2015), yet research on crowdfunding to support social movements and political causes remains underexplored. This is surprising, given GoFundMe's most successful fundraising campaigns ever include the Time's Up Legal Defense Fund as part of the #MeToo movement, along with the George Floyd Memorial Fund and Justice for Breonna Taylor campaigns (both catalysts for the Black Lives Matter movement). Although it generated anger among GoFundMe's own employees, the Trump-inspired 'We Build the Wall' campaign—raising funds to build a border wall between the United States and Mexico—was even set to become GoFundMe's second-most successful fundraiser ever. Eventually, this campaign was only removed when the organizers could not deliver on their intent, and were later convicted of fraud (Price, 2022). Similarly, before its removal, the Freedom Convoy was one of GoFundMe's top 10 most successful campaigns. Consequently, crowdfunding platforms are emerging as influential sites where ideological battles are waged, with donors expressing their views through forms of 'rage giving' (Taylor & Miller-Stevens, 2022).

Far-right causes have typically found it difficult to raise funds through online donations (Keatinge et al., 2019). In part, this is due to proactive deplatforming efforts, particularly in the wake of the 2017 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville, during which a counter-protestor was killed by a white supremacist in a violent attack. After this incident, initiatives were introduced 'to restrict and bar extremists from accessing their finances, networks, and social media accounts, as well as demonetising content' (CASIS, 2022, p. 2). In response to the growing threat of domestic extremism, many 'infrastructure companies made unprecedentedly concerted moves' (Suzor, 2019, p. 4) in efforts 'to police and prohibit the free flow of Far-Right hate speech' (Mirrlees, 2021, p. 270). Crowdfunding platforms, such as GoFundMe, were among these companies, seeking to de-platform and deny access to extremist causes. In response, several short-lived crowdfunding sites were created:

GoyFundMe, Hatreon, WeSearchr, MakerSupport, FreeStartr, Rootbocks and Counter-Fund. Although these alternative platforms typically listed 'free speech and fighting censorship as motivation', the reality often 'underscore[d] a darker purpose: financing hate speech' (Carson, 2017). These platforms usually folded quickly, undone by their wilfully antagonistic approach. GoyFundMe, for example, displayed overt antisemitism, while Hatreon (pronounced '*hate*-reon') directly pitched itself as a platform for funding hatred. Alienating those with more moderate political views, these companies soon became defunct, often after payment processors and hosting companies refused services, rendering them inoperative (Michel, 2018).

Major technology companies typically exercise regulatory powers (e.g., suspending accounts, removing hashtags and posts) to avoid association with hate-based causes. If they neglect or refuse to exercise such powers—aside from the threat of government regulation, loss of users, and reduced advertising revenue—platforms risk implication in catastrophic violence and social unrest; for example, Facebook's role in the Rohingya genocide (Fink, 2018). However, although legislative efforts are emerging globally to mitigate online harms (see Schlesinger, 2022), platforms are largely 'left to develop their own internal regulations without democratic supervision' (Sablosky, 2021, p. 1022). Consequently, the internet remains governed in a relatively 'lawless' way, with a select group of infrastructure and service providers operating with 'almost unlimited discretion' and little obligation to implement due process (Suzor, 2019, pp. 6–7). Platforms, including crowdfunding services, therefore find themselves adjudicating on issues that were once the exclusive privilege of governments. They are effectively, as Klonick (2017) observes, 'the New Governors', sitting between the state and its citizens, exercising power over what is expressible, to whom, and under what circumstances.

Crowdfunding platforms typically focus their harm mitigation efforts on preventing outright fraudulent and illegal campaigns (Zenone & Snyder, 2019). However, as with any form of platform governance, ethical dilemmas are common. For example, although campaigns supporting illegal activities are typically removed without controversy, those deemed to be legal but harmful, or supporting contested acts of civil disobedience are more complicated to resolve. Such dilemmas hinge on tensions around *avoiding complicity but retaining legitimacy*. In other words, what restrictions can be implemented without being perceived as unjustly blocking free expression, betraying persistent—though rightly much criticized—ideals of platforms as 'town squares' (Haggart & Keller, 2021)? Alternatively, if funds raised are used to commit harms, to what extent are crowdfunding platforms complicit? Self-governance has too readily allowed platforms to be weaponized for misinformation and radicalization purposes, adopting narrow operational models of 'harmful content' that perpetuates symbolic violence in witnessing injurious causes being willingly hosted (and thus tacitly legitimized) by platforms (DeCook et al., 2022). Among crowdfunding platforms, ethical stances differ sharply on balancing legitimacy and complicity, with GoFundMe and GiveSendGo adopting radically divergent strategies, as examined in the following.

Methodology

In this study, we employ critical discourse analysis to explore how crowdfunding platforms negotiate their potential complicity in harm with their obligation to accommodate 'free speech' when hosting fundraisers for political movements. Critical discourse analysis explores relations between, '(1) discursive practices, events and texts and (2) wider social and cultural structures … to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power' (Fairclough, 1995, p. 132). To this end,

we focus on socio-epistemological claims regarding the validity of the Freedom Convoy's cause, specifically those 'interpretations pronounced *during* an event that turn back … to actually shape it as it unfolds' (Wagner-Pacifici, 1986; see also Wagner-Pacifici, 2017). These discursive tussles and 'successful crediting or discrediting of interpretations' (Wagner-Pacifici, 1986) between the protestors and other actors *regarding what the Freedom Convoy even was* proved crucial in either resisting or justifying drastic interventions by both platforms and the state. The Freedom Convoy was effectively a 'morality play' and 'social drama' (Wagner-Pacifici, 1986), with the occupiers attempting to garner popular support against their claimed oppression, while government authorities dismissed these claims to victimhood, framing key participants as dangerous radicals with potentially insurrectionist intent. Although criminal and civil proceedings are ongoing at the time of writing, this study's primary focus is the real-time contestation over an event laden with combustive potential, tracing how platforms attempt to carefully frame shared perceptions in ways that emphasise their responsible upholding of core values and principles.

Data was collected between 20 January 2022—when the Freedom Convoy first received news media coverage—to 31 March 2022, after the occupation was dispersed and immediate recriminations completed. Using the Factiva database, we analysed 626 relevant news articles, focussing specifically on debates relating to GoFundMe and GiveSendGo's complicity in aiding the Freedom Convoy, and contestations over their legitimacy as platforms in being either unjustly censorious or irresponsibly permissive. In addition, we analyzed GoFundMe and GiveSendGo's public pronouncements during this period, through their respective Twitter accounts and blog posts, to examine how they articulated their policies and values in relation to the Freedom Convoy. Although GoFundMe were reticent to make public announcements—only doing so when the reputational harm of silence was greater—GiveSendGo posted frequently, eagerly keen to shape the 'aesthetic structuring of the event' in the wider discursive sphere (Wagner-Pacifici, 1986). This study therefore also adopts a multimodal analytical lens (Kress, 2012), observing how GiveSendGo's evocative social media content stoked popular support as a bulwark against state intervention, earnestly rallying 'affective publics' (Papacharissi, 2015) for what they envisioned was an epoch-defining stand against censorship and oppression. Finally, we analyzed government inquiries into the handling of the Freedom Convoy occupation, including the extensive public inquiry into the ordering of the Public Order Emergency, led by Justice Paul Rouleau. Now widely considered a failure of national security (Roach, 2022; Sabin, 2022) and even federalism itself (Rouleau, 2023a, p. 248), the Freedom Convoy indicated growing domestic extremism (Ahmed, 2022) and exposed troubling regulatory gaps in the governance of fundraising platforms.

Findings: How the Freedom Convoy reveals a widening ideological divide in the governance of crowdfunding platforms

This study presents three main findings. First, crowdfunding platforms possess unique governing powers in determining why, when, and how to intervene in political action supported by fundraising. However, the way that policies are used to justify such decisions reflect tensions in balancing *legitimacy* and *complicity* (i.e., the desire to remain 'open' platforms, while avoiding implication in significant harms). Second, platforms are never 'neutral' intermediaries (Gillespie, 2018), and their varying willingness to intervene in some circumstances (and not others) reveals their underlying ideological values. In the case of GoFundMe and GiveSendGo, their policy decisions are profoundly shaped by incompatible models of 'free speech' that favour either individual liberty or collective safety. Third,

disputes around safety-first approaches (i.e., avoiding complicity with potentially harmful campaigns by limiting personal liberty) has resulted in growing backlash against legacy 'Big Tech' companies, fomenting *a reactionary movement towards an alternative internet and 'parallel society'*. The following sections discuss each finding in detail.

How platforms reveal their underlying values through (non-)intervention in political movements

Despite presenting itself as a worker-led movement solely to resist Covid-19 vaccine mandates, critics argue the Freedom Convoy was *always* driven by key actors pursuing more extremist aims (Broderick, 2022; Fisher, 2022; Ling, 2022b; Rouleau, 2023a). The organisers of the initial GoFundMe campaign were not truck drivers, but rather Tamara Lich—a prominent Canadian separatist and antigovernment activist—and B.J. Dichter, a former Conservative Party candidate who claimed that 'political Islam is rotting away at our society like syphilis'. Other central figures included Pat King, a white nationalist, who declared, in response to Covid-19 public health measures, that 'the only way this is going to be solved is with bullets'; James Bauder, an antivaccine advocate, who sought the immediate overthrow of the Trudeau Government; and Romana Didulo, a QAnon-supporting conspiracy theorist who proclaims herself 'Queen of Canada' and allegedly ordered her followers to 'shoot to kill' any health practitioners administering Covid-19 vaccines to children (Sarteschi, 2022). Consequently, the Freedom Convoy was less of a protest against public health measures than an effort to build a sovereign citizen movement, with the truckers used as a more palatable means of generating popular support, enticing supporters through an 'affective alignment' with ideals of personal freedom and sovereignty (Farokhi, 2022). As early as 27 January—the day of the first major arrival of convoy participants in Ottawa—the Canadian Security Intelligence Service warned that 'some ideologically motivated violent extremism followers in Canada have seized upon this rally' to pursue outright antidemocratic aims (Ling, 2022a). For example, the Freedom Convoy was James Bauder's second attempt at what he dubbed 'Operation Bear Hug'; choking the capital to a standstill until the government would sign his 'memorandum of understanding' or—if they refused—thus legitimize his Canada Unity organization to seek their removal by other means (Rouleau, 2023a, pp. 34–35). Other far-right collectives who participated in the protests included Les Farfadaas, La Meute and Diagolon, with followers of the latter allegedly involved in the foiled plot to murder Royal Canadian Mounted Police (Ling, 2022a; Rouleau, 2023a, p. 87).

As the Freedom Convoy grew in size and intensity, Canadian police voiced concerns over growing far-right elements among the protestors (Connolly & Boutilier, 2022), along with noting that 'the tone of the protests was becoming increasingly hostile' (Rouleau, 2023a, p. 200). Ottawa councillor, Diane Deans, declared them 'a threat to our democracy' and police chief Peter Sloly acknowledged that Ottawa had become, 'a city under siege'. Still, there was reluctance to undertake high-risk policing and military actions that could escalate tensions and result in violent outcomes. This reluctance was later praised by the Rouleau Inquiry for avoiding the potentially disastrous consequences of a force-based intervention (Rouleau, 2023a, p. 179). Instead, political pressure shifted toward GoFundMe, as the first Freedom Convoy fundraiser was generating funds sufficient to sustain the occupation for many months, perhaps even years. Over CAD$5m had already been raised *before* the first significant convoy arrivals in Ottawa. Soon after the occupation began, the Ottawa Police (2022) implored GoFundMe to halt donations, and would later publicly thank the company 'for listening to our concerns as a City and a police service. The decision to withhold funding for these unlawful demonstrations is an important step and we call on all crowdfunding sites to follow'. Similarly, one week into the occupation, the Canadian House

of Commons Public Safety and National Security Committee called on GoFundMe to testify 'as soon as possible' to explain what measures were in place to 'ensure the funds are not being used to promote extremism, white supremacy, anti-Semitism and other forms of hate, which have been expressed among prominent organizers for the truck convoy' (Thompson, 2022).

Placing pressure on GoFundMe via such mechanisms proved a pragmatic tactic, as platforms give themselves wide remit to undertake immediate interventions, relative to the slow proceduralism of careful judicial review (Suzor, 2019, p. 146). Indeed, as discussed below, on the day following the parliamentary summons GoFundMe removed the Freedom Convoy fundraiser permanently. However, this immediacy of action available to platforms can also drastically undermine due process, consolidating power among very few operators, who may have conflicting priorities regarding what is in the public interest and what may alternatively grow their platform (van Dijck, 2013, pp. 24–44). Therefore, despite ostensibly seeking to uphold public safety and avoid complicity in harms, platforms may try to avoid decisive actions that provoke mass user backlash or set policy precedents that are onerous to enforce.

To illustrate this hedging strategy in practice, although the original Freedom Convoy campaign had raised far more funds, only $1m was initially released to the organisers by GoFundMe (and only after they were given a plan on how the funds would be disbursed). Given the threat of the Convoy was arguably unclear at this stage, this was an attempt by GoFundMe to remain 'neutral' *and* mitigate any complicity in potential harms, while also avoiding antagonising either local authorities or Convoy supporters. Concerned about both fraudulent conduct and empowering dangerous figures, GoFundMe repeatedly beseeched Tamara Lich and her advisors to attest that any funds would not be spent on items outside of strict parameters (e.g., food, fuel, accommodation), and that no funds would be given to figures likely to partake or incite illegal or overly disruptive activity (Rouleau, 2023b, pp. 358–367). However, as tensions continued to rise and security concerns increased, soon after releasing the $1m GoFundMe paused donations, stating the campaign was 'under review to ensure it complies with our terms of service and applicable laws and regulations'. By this stage, the campaign had raised more than CAD$10m. GoFundMe released a statement declaring that although they were 'an open platform … We strictly prohibit user content that reflects or promotes behaviour in support of violence' (GoFundMe, 2022). They continued:

> As the activity surrounding the protest evolves, we have been monitoring the fundraiser to ensure the funds are going to the intended recipients and … remains within our Terms of Service. Our monitoring includes maintaining close communication with the organizer as well as collaborating with local law enforcement … If the fundraiser does violate our Terms of Service … we will remove it from the platform.

Far from insistently operating as a 'neutral' intermediary, GoFundMe reluctantly embraced its 'New Governor' role, seeking to minimize their complicity in harm. The following day, four weeks after the Freedom Convoy fundraiser was first established, GoFundMe ended the campaign, stating that 'the previously peaceful demonstration has become an occupation, with police reports of violence and other unlawful activity.' As discussed further below, GiveSendGo seized the opportunity to step in and support the Freedom Convoy, thus building their 'free speech' credentials.

It is significant to note the sharply contrasting responses of governing authorities to GoFundMe and GiveSendGo. Whereas in Canada more criticism was directed towards GiveSendGo for their seeming complicity in harm, in the United States GoFundMe was

targeted for their apparent lack of legitimacy as a fair and unbiased platform. Such diametrically opposed judgments reflects the continuing theoretical relevance of the 'two Western cultures of free speech' (Carmi, 2008), where the common US insistence on individual liberty-based models of free expression jarringly collides with collective safety and dignity-based models of other Western liberal democracies. These broad cultural preferences hold true when it comes to online platforms, with Europeans preferring greater self-regulation by platforms and wider scope for government intervention, while Americans view both law enforcement and platforms as less obliged to intervene, opting instead to prioritize free speech (Riedl et al., 2021). GoFundMe, seeking to build institutional partnerships and positive brand reputation within a global context, has gradually shifted to more interventionist, safety-based approaches by restricting campaigns that may cause harm (Wade, 2022). GiveSendGo, meanwhile, adopt a liberty-at-all-costs approach, doubling down on 'free speech' as a Christian virtue and aligning themselves with a primarily American 'parallel Christian economy' movement.

These respective stances—intervention to ensure safety v. nonintervention to protect liberty—were strikingly evident in subsequent Canadian parliamentary inquiries, with GoFundMe and GiveSendGo probed on their complicity in aiding extremist activities (SECU, 2022). In combative exchanges, GiveSendGo's co-founders Jacob Wells and Heather Wilson reaffirmed their refusal to suspend the Freedom Convoy campaign, stating it was the state's responsibility—not GiveSendGo—to determine when a demonstration was not permissible. Furthermore, when queried on whether GiveSendGo would allow a hate-based organization—such as the Ku Klux Klan—to use their platform, Jacob Wells responded in the affirmative, stating that 'We believe, completely to the core of our being, that the danger of the suppression of speech is much more dangerous than speech itself.' Alternatively, GoFundMe's President, Juan Benitez, adopted a deferential stance, explaining that GoFundMe's decision to suspend the Freedom Convoy campaign was based on 'concerning' information provided by local officials. Benitez also highlighted GoFundMe's aspiration 'to be the benchmark for responsible operations in the social fundraising industry.' When pressed on why the fundraiser was permitted at all, Benitez stated that their initial review indicated it was acceptable within their terms of service, but 'what had been begun as a peaceful protest shifted into something else'.

Both GoFundMe and GiveSendGo stipulate in their terms of service that fundraisers may not promote hate, violence, or intolerance. Crucially, however, GiveSendGo (2022e) *draws a distinction between the beneficiary and the cause*. That is, if the role of the fundraiser is not *directly* promoting violence or intolerance, then it is permissible, regardless of whether the organisers themselves—such as the Proud Boys, a neo-fascist group that employs 'violent acts of antagonism' (Kriner & Lewis, 2021)—ultimately pursue intolerant ends. This distinction made by GiveSendGo, couched in appeals to 'freedom' and nonjudgemental Christian accommodation, implies that a free-for-all 'marketplace of ideas' is not only preferable, but *virtuous*, something to be actively defended in pursuit of *truth*. For co-founder Jacob Wells, it is 'in the conflicts of ideas, even extreme ideas, that we actually get to truth' (Rosenberg, 2023). GiveSendGo wholly stake their legitimacy on this stance, adopting a form of Christian libertarianism in believing souls may be saved through a refusal to judge others and deny access to their platform. Instead, GiveSendGo valorizes 'the libertarian assumption that the answer to bad speech is more speech' (Suzor, 2019, p. 31). GiveSendGo lean heavily on these ideals, with Wells connecting his military service to their uncompromising mission:

> I'm a military veteran … I know what that sacrifice is … Literally, men and women have given up their lives … to see freedom exist in this country. GiveSendGo will always stand for freedom … That freedom was first bought at

the cross for us. But it was also maintained by the blood of courageous men and women who killed their lives so that we could live in freedom (Wallace, 2022).

Other 'Big Tech' platforms, GiveSendGo argue, are capricious, hypocritical, and beholden to 'cancel culture', while their platform:

> … is a place for ALL people to raise money … whether we agree with the campaign or not. Isn't that the fairest way? … That's the difference between GiveSendGo and other platforms. No matter what you believe, who you are, or what you've done, our platform will be open and readily available for you to use (GiveSendGo, 2022a)

In this manner, GiveSendGo insist they are 'not here to take sides' and 'don't necessarily condone on our platform a campaign any more than when you tweet on Twitter that Twitter somehow agrees with you' (de Puy Kamp & Glover, 2021). Yet, this is a specious analogy, for there is a substantive difference between a microblogging platform and a *venture-funding service*. The issue is not simply allowing problematic speech, but actively *facilitating causes* under the auspices of defending 'freedom'. This insidious permissiveness risks harms at an extraordinary scale.

Incompatible models of 'free speech' result in drastically different governance approaches among crowdfunding platforms

GoFundMe's decision to end the Freedom Convoy campaign provoked an expected backlash, but another decision proved far more impactful in unwittingly shifting the occupation into a global movement against 'Big Tech'. In the same announcement ending the fundraiser, GoFundMe stated, 'we will work with organizers to send all remaining funds to credible and established charities chosen by the Freedom Convoy 2022 organizers', along with allowing donors to request a refund. This decision to redirect donations to charities sparked outrage, with a number of prominent critics—including Donald Trump, Jordan Peterson and Elon Musk—describing it as 'theft' and declaring GoFundMe 'an authoritarian enemy of open discourse in a democratic society' (Rhea, 2022). GoFundMe's CEO, Tim Cadogan, ultimately closed his Twitter account after extensive harassment, criticized as a 'coward that knows he's on the wrong side of history' (Blaze, 2022). As pressure mounted, GoFundMe reversed their decision and refunded all donations. This enabled GiveSendGo, working directly with Tamara Lich, to create an alternative Freedom Convoy fundraiser, leveraging the global attention to promote their brand. It was later revealed that Jacob Wells used his own Stripe account (GiveSendGo's payment processor) to speed up the process, and for a brief time held USD$4.9m of the Freedom Convoy funds in a personal bank account (Sheppard, 2022, p. 35). These responses starkly demonstrate how GoFundMe tries to avoid becoming a proxy platform in wider ideological struggles, while GiveSendGo *invites* such controversy, actively building their brand on their refusal to deny access to divisive causes.

Two key precursors to the Freedom Convoy further illuminate these distinct strategies. The first was GiveSendGo hosting a campaign supporting the legal defence of Kyle Rittenhouse, who fatally shot two people during a civil unrest in Wisconsin (which occurred after the fatal shooting of a young Black man by a police officer). Rittenhouse quickly became a 'cause célèbre across conservative media', framed as a courageous defender of law and order (Wilson, 2021). GoFundMe, in accordance with their policy against fundraising for legal defence of violent crimes, removed fundraisers for Rittenhouse, but

GiveSendGo permitted a campaign. As Rittenhouse's trial became a tense rallying point around wider ideological struggles (e.g., 'Black Lives Matter' v. 'All Lives Matter') the fundraiser quickly became the most significant in GiveSendGo's history. Jacob Wells (2021) claimed it proved fundamental in establishing GiveSendGo's particular mode of legitimacy:

> … we were inundated with a ton of hate about how we ought to take this [Rittenhouse] campaign down. And we said no; he deserves a voice just like everyone else does … That freedom that we're afforded is actually great for dialogue, because guess what? You're not God and neither am I, and I don't know everything and neither do you.

By purportedly acting as defenders of free speech, GiveSendGo argue their approach 'can actually move the discussion further' and foster more productive public discourses. Wells claims that 'Big Tech' companies have 'taken it upon themselves to be the arbiters of truth', whereas GiveSendGo are respecting 'a natural pushback from many people because America was founded on these ideas of freedom' (Wallace, 2022). Hence, rather than *directly* supporting any controversial causes, GiveSendGo (2022g) instead emphasize their nonjudgmental Christian accommodation, humbly appealing to defending fundamental rights and upholding patriotic duties. Through this careful self-framing, GiveSendGo have largely avoided the loss of key service providers and other operational impacts imposed on comparable predecessors (e.g., Hatreon). Furthermore, any action that undermines GiveSendGo's functionality could adversely impact otherwise admirable causes they host. As a result, on GiveSendGo 'hate groups can prosper amid fundraising campaigns for homeless nuns', for any efforts to curtail the platform 'risks raising the ire of a grievance-drunk right-wing media ecosystem primed to detect the traces of anti-Christian prejudice' (Lavin, 2021). In other words, GiveSendGo is held in particularly high regard among the Christian right, especially in the United States, granting the company a protected status relative to their more antagonistic predecessors. Thus, though some companies (such as PayPal) have expressed hesitancy to be associated with GiveSendGo—and excepting some significant security breaches by vigilante hackers—the platform has avoided significant operational impacts.

GiveSendGo was closely scrutinized following the 6 January Capitol attack, with investigations revealing they hosted 168 campaigns linked to the insurrection (ADL, 2023). Unlike GoFundMe, which typically removed fundraisers spreading claims of electoral fraud relating to the 2022 US Presidential election—under the rationale that they promoted misinformation—such campaigns were willingly hosted on GiveSendGo (Choi, 2020). These injunctions to 'Stop the Steal' culminated on 6 January 2021, when Trump supporters stormed the Capitol Building. Five people died as a direct result, at least 138 police officers were injured, and four would die by suicide in the months following. Many far-right activists charged for their involvement fundraised their legal defences on GiveSendGo, collecting more than $USD3.5m (Wilson, 2022). Among the most prominent were members of the Proud Boys (ADL, 2023).

Even before the Freedom Convoy, GiveSendGo's most successful campaigns leaned heavily towards far-right causes, including approximately 75% of all funds in campaigns raising over $100,000 (Bergengruen & Wilson, 2022). At least nine different crowdfunding platforms have been implicated in aiding domestic extremism. However, of the 324 campaigns identified as supporting extremist causes between 2016 and mid-2022, almost three-quarters were hosted on GiveSendGo, collecting more than 85% of all funds raised (ADL, 2023). In their defence GiveSendGo claim they simply get 'the kickback of the campaigns that won't be allowed on GoFundMe … We're just allowing the freedom' (Stone, 2021b). Such appeals to 'freedom' gained traction among supporters, who displayed

increasing antagonism towards GoFundMe, accusing the platform of unjustly blocking conservative causes (Nerozzi, 2022). As these sentiments grew, the Freedom Convoy exposed the growing ideological divide between GoFundMe and GiveSendGo, igniting debate on whether crowdfunding platforms should prioritize 'free speech' or minimize mass harms.

Reflecting in stark fashion the aforementioned 'two Western cultures of free speech' (Carmi, 2008), GiveSendGo was sharply rebuked by Canadian government authorities for their complicity with the Freedom Convoy. Alternatively, in the United States, GoFundMe was targeted for their apparent lack of resolve to protect individual liberty by continuing to host the Convoy. Shortly after the occupation ended, 28 US State Attorneys General signed an open letter, stating that GoFundMe's terms of service allow them to 'subvert that altruistic relationship' between donors and causes, and that GoFundMe 'should not be empowered to unilaterally make decisions' relating to blocking, freezing or redirecting contributions. Texas Attorney-General Ken Paxton claimed GoFundMe's actions 'should ring alarm bells' for 'any American wanting to protect their constitutional rights' (Lindell, 2022), and Senator Ted Cruz (2022) likewise requested the Federal Trade Commission investigate, describing the convoy participants as 'patriots' unjustly thwarted by 'thieves in Silicon Valley'. The clear implied threat from US legislators is that regulation will be imposed if GoFundMe did not alter their policies (including showing greater leniency toward campaigns that may render them complicit in harms).

Thus, in the 'lawless' age of internet governance (Suzor, 2019), GoFundMe found themselves wedged; in trying to prevent complicity in antidemocratic actions, they instead attracted the ire of legislators seeking to make an example of censorious 'Big Tech' platforms. Meanwhile, a growing competitor, GiveSendGo, saw an opportunity to usurp them by establishing an alternative Freedom Convoy campaign. Donor comments on GiveSendGo's campaign reverberated with anger at GoFundMe, claiming their individual freedoms were suppressed, and pledging to never use GoFundMe again. Users also explicitly noted that their donations were no longer solely in support of the protests, but an act of resistance against 'Big Tech'. Importantly, the origins of the donations also shifted. In the original GoFundMe campaign, 86% of the donors were from Canada. However, in the later GiveSendGo campaign, only 35% of the donations originated from Canada, with 59% coming from donors in the United States (Rouleau, 2023a, pp. 101–102). As GiveSendGo's campaign garnered worldwide attention, Jacob Wells and Heather Wilson appeared regularly in conservative outlets, chastising GoFundMe and other 'Big Tech' companies for their 'authoritarian style of social platforms' (Wallace, 2022). GiveSendGo also adopted an irreverent 'meme wars' style of public engagement (Donovan et al., 2022) to further emphasize their stance on 'censorship' (Figure 1).

GiveSendGo resolutely tether their brand identity to an ideological stance of upholding individual liberty and fostering the free circulation of funds. However, as the final finding discusses, if governments threaten to undermine these aims GiveSendGo may even pursue state-evading technologies.

The promise of 'Alt-Tech' as an intervention-resistant 'parallel society'

Targeting GoFundMe as the easiest to supplant, co-founder Jacob Wells envisions GiveSendGo as part of a wider movement to take down 'Big Tech':

> I really believe that GiveSendGo is the tip of the spear in this technology revolution going against Big Tech, because I think GoFundMe is the weakest of

FIGURE 1 GiveSendGo (2022a), Facebook Post, 30 March 2022.

the Big Tech oligarchs […] People aren't on it all the time, so people aren't as connected to it. (Bokhari, 2022)

Wells repeatedly invokes this 'tip of the spear' analogy, claiming GiveSendGo are part of 'a tsunami of technology that is pushing back against this authoritarian style of social platforms' (Wallace, 2022). Such visions are shared with companies like RightForge, a web hosting service that resists 'Big Tech censorship' by building 'the Internet of Free Speech'. Co-founder Christopher Bedford (2021) frames their aspirations as nothing less than 'a second internet … governed by the principles enshrined in our Declaration, Constitution, and Bill of Rights.' In a Fox News interview broadcast during the Freedom Convoy, Bedford. (2022) criticized Big Tech while celebrating RightForge's partnership with GiveSendGo:

… these Big Tech companies like GoFundMe, or the companies that are censoring Covid information—like Twitter or Facebook—they've chosen the side of the government to crack down on any kind on an opposition party. So it's been great to see GiveSendGo and other companies step up. We've been working with them … to scale them up, to defeat hacker attacks against them … it shows, these protests, that there's really hope out there, because a lot of people are still willing to fight for it.

By building alternative infrastructures the overarching aim is to resist *any* future interference, leaving the state with *no* recourse to intervene. Broadly, such aims reflect techno-political struggles not between 'liberal' and 'authoritarian' visions, but rather *centralization v. decentralization* of the Internet's infrastructural foundations and governance (Pohle & Voelsen, 2022).

Significantly, during the Freedom Convoy occupation, GiveSendGo *already considered themselves beyond the reach of the state*. In what proved an act of hubris, they mocked the idea that the Canadian Government could prevent disbursal of the Convoy funds (Figure 2).

Nonetheless, with the GiveSendGo fundraiser totalling $13m and the occupation threatening to stay indefinitely, the Trudeau Government invoked the *Emergencies Act*, effectively designating the Freedom Convoy a terrorist organization. Money laundering and terrorist financing laws were also expanded to include crowdfunding platforms (Gallant, 2022). As a result, GiveSendGo could no longer accept donations for Freedom Convoy-related campaigns, and any disbursed funds were now frozen. In response, the
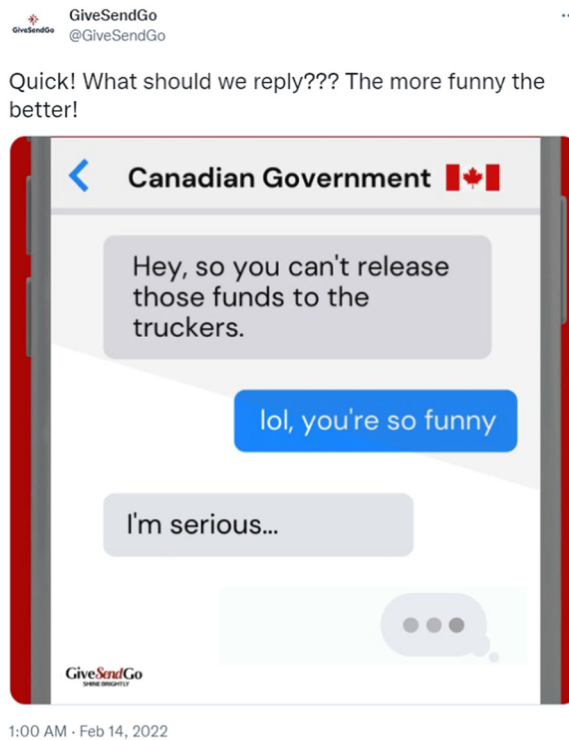
FIGURE 2 GiveSendGo (2022d) Tweet, 14 February 2022.

messaging from GiveSendGo shifted to a graver tone, calling people to join their 'movement' to resist government oppression, control and censorship (Figure 3).

Eventually, GiveSendGo announced they were refunding donations, stating that 'The Canadian government has criminalized the receiving of funds from the Canadian trucker campaigns and now are trying to seize the funds to redistribute'. This was followed with righteous anger, framing the intervention as a betrayal of democratic ideals (Figure 4).

Critics raised concerns over invoking the *Emergencies Act*—the first time since its introduction in 1988—arguing its use to defund the Freedom Convoy set a worrying precedent and needlessly antagonized many citizens (Jerema, 2022). By taking drastic steps, the Canadian government successfully thwarted this movement, but potentially inspired a far more dangerous one, motivated by the pursuit of complete technological 'exit' and 'jurisdictional sovereignty' (Smith & Burrows, 2021).

One means by which this 'escape' is being pursued is via alternative currencies. Far-right groups have long held an interest in cryptocurrencies as a means of evading state intervention or de-platforming by payment processors and web hosting services (Argentino et al., 2023; CASIS, 2022). White supremacist Richard Spencer dubbed Bitcoin 'the currency of the alt-right' and Andrew Anglin, editor of *The Daily Stormer*, has received cryptocurrency donations totalling millions of dollars (Kinetz & Hinnant, 2021). Stormfront and the Traditionalist Worker Party have likewise raised funds through Bitcoin from as early as 2015, and Gab relies on cryptocurrency donations for a considerable part of its revenue, with CEO Andrew Torba proclaiming that 'Bitcoin is Free Speech Money'. Several key far-right participants in fomenting the Capitol insurrection also received substantial Bitcoin donations (Stone, 2021a).

FIGURE 3 GiveSendGo (2022b) Tweet, 22 February 2022.

Subsequently, when the Canadian Government invoked the *Emergencies Act*, Freedom Convoy supporters quickly pivoted to alternative fundraising avenues. This included an ultimately failed attempt to establish a 'Freedom Convoy Token', a new cryptocurrency that would fund an entity called the Freedom Convoy Foundation (Sheppard, 2022, p. 18). A newly established crypto-based crowdfunding platform, Tallycoin, received around $1.2m in Bitcoin donations in support of the Convoy, of which $800,000 was distributed to truckers (Tunney, 2022). A significant proportion of these funds ultimately evaded seizure by state authorities. Meanwhile, GiveSendGo— chastened by the ease with which the Canadian Government seized their funds—are actively pivoting towards cryptocurrency, promising new features to enable crypto-based donations (Wells & Wilson, 2022). Wells (2022) claims cryptocurrencies and GiveSendGo are philosophically aligned, with both 'centred around an idea of freedom, sovereignty, individualism'. In short, rushed state interventions—although needed to mitigate potentially catastrophic harms—may incentivize Machiavellian innovation in peer-to-peer fundraising and wider efforts to establish alternative infrastructure for unimpeded political expression.

A key driver of this Alt-Tech movement is aforementioned Gab CEO, Andrew Torba, who is one of GiveSendGo's most prominent supporters. Gab promotes itself as a champion of free speech, attracting a substantial far-right userbase. However, rather than simply being a Twitter clone, Gab aspires towards a suite of technologies 'that powers a parallel Christian
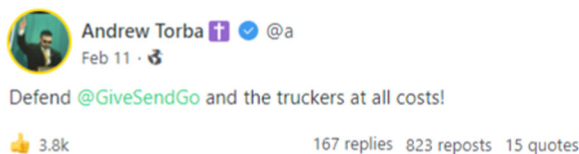
FIGURE 4   GiveSendGo (2022f) Tweet, 13 March 2022.

FIGURE 5   Torba (2022) gab post—11 February 2022.

economy' (Fox, 2022). These tools include their social networking platform, streaming services, and payment processing, which together, argues Torba, offer 'a chance to participate in the development of a bold and defiant new society … grounded on the firm foundation of our faith in Jesus Christ'. The overall aim is a 'Silent Christian Secession' achieved not simply by building an alternative social media platform, but rather an entire 'alternative internet' (Silverman, 2021). Unsurprisingly, Torba was an ardent support of GiveSendGo's Freedom Convoy fundraiser (Figure 5).

In praise of GiveSendGo's willingness to welcome those excluded from other crowdfunding platforms, Torba declared that 'this is what a parallel society looks like … an ecosystem of media, communications, actual journalism, fundraising, advertising, and technology working together to get the truth out' (Jenkins, 2021). By appealing to vague but broadly resonant values (e.g., truth, freedom, faith, patriotism), Alt-Tech companies like Gab and GiveSendGo are pursuing a mass migration of users (Kor-Sins, 2021). But where they ultimately hope to migrate is not simply to another 'platform', but another internet entirely.

CONCLUSION: WHY WE NEED A 'DIGITAL CONSTITUTIONALISM' APPROACH TO CROWDFUNDING

This study has examined how crowdfunding platforms address their potential complicity when hosting controversial political causes, and in their varying responses reveal their underlying governing values. Drawing on the Freedom Convoy as a case study, we employed critical discourse analysis to identify three main findings. First, given the uncertain risks posed by rapidly evolving political demonstrations, urgent critical questions emerge regarding when and how crowdfunding platforms ought to intervene. When does a social movement shift from being tolerably divisive (e.g., resisting vaccine mandates), to potentially harmful (e.g., spreading mis/disinformation and undermining public health initiatives), to outright dangerous (e.g., inciting insurrectionist and other extremist ideas)? Second, incommensurable models of 'free speech'—prioritizing either individual liberty or collective security—entail that crowdfunding platforms necessarily *choose* what values to uphold. If permissive towards controversial causes, they risk rendering themselves complicit in harm. Alternatively, more restrictive policies can undermine their perceived legitimacy as 'open' platforms. Third, state interventions and de-platforming efforts can counter-productively further radicalize groups by encouraging platform migration and alternative infrastructures. These were the governance dilemmas presented by the Freedom Convoy, which was not ostensibly driven by false claims, nor directly advocating violence, yet undeniably led by figures exploiting antivaccine sentiments for a wider antidemocratic agenda that risked catastrophic consequences.

Given these complex risks, allowing platforms to conduct their own internal audits with little transparency is problematic. For example, when $1m of the funds raised on GoFundMe was released to Tamara Lich, GoFundMe (2022c) offered reassurances that Lich and the Freedom Convoy organisers 'provided a clear distribution plan … and confirmed funds would be used only for participants who travelled to Ottawa to participate in a peaceful protest'. Little was offered beyond this explanation, indicating a lack of due process in ensuring how funds raised are ultimately used. Later investigations (see Sheppard, 2022; Rouleau, 2023b, 2023b, 2023c) revealed GoFundMe could do little more than (a) write pleading emails to the Convoy organisers, relying on their word that no funds would be distributed to those committing—or likely to commit—violent or incendiary acts or (b) take direct action themselves, suspending the campaign and halting the disbursal of funds. As this paper has demonstrated, the former action risks complicity in catastrophic harms, while the latter undermines a platform's perceived legitimacy, generating 'Big Tech' backlash and spurring development of state-evading 'Alt-Tech'.

Similarly troubling was a lack of clarity around the expected obligations for other key entities involved. GiveSendGo's payment processor, Stripe, sought reassurances from GiveSendGo that any disbursed funds would not be used in support of unlawful activity, to little avail, and HSBC Canada likewise struggled to understand their own potential complicity due to a lack of insight into GiveSendGo's operations (Rouleau, 2023b, pp. 378–380). Canadian bank CEOs even urged for greater government intervention, which Canada's deputy prime minister and Finance Minister, Chrystia Freeland, acknowledged was a remarkable occurrence (Rouleau, 2023c, pp. 82–83). Unfortunately, the Canadian government's subsequent post hoc scramble to implement policies to halt the Convoy's extraordinary fundraising success generated 'confusion, misinformation, and controversy' (Gallant, 2022, p. 293). Not only do such rushed and drastic measures risk undermining trust in state institutions, but these legislative gaps, auditing shortfalls, and communication failures require urgent redressing, lest crowdfunding platforms and other financial entities—intentionally or otherwise—find themselves weaponized by extremist causes.

Domestic Financial Intelligence Units (FIUs) are the 'backbone' in preventing money laundering, terrorist financing, and similar risks relating to suspicious or anomalous transactions (Davis, 2020). Typically, reporting entities—such as banks and other financial services companies—are required to report transactions that meet specified thresholds to FIUs. However, peer-to-peer fundraising entities have largely been excluded from the remit of domestic FIUs, despite their clear potential for financing dangerous activities. Given this 'legislative gap', Chrystia Freeland admitted that Canada's domestic FIU, FINTRAC, had methods and a mandate 'appropriate for a 20th-century economy, but not for a 21st-century economy' (Rouleau, 2023a, pp. 245–246). Amid the unprecedented Public Emergency Order, rapid efforts were made to incorporate crowdfunding platforms as reporting entities for FINTRAC. However, the Rouleau Inquiry deemed this came too late to prove effective.

Domestic FIUs that do not include peer-to-peer fundraising platforms in their remit should therefore urgently consider expanding their scope, mandating reporting obligations to ensure timely identification of anomalous fundraising campaigns. Also, as legal scholar Michelle Cumyn urged in a submission to the Rouleau Inquiry, more clarity is needed on obligations crowdfunding platforms must uphold in verifying identities and maintaining client records (Rouleau, 2023d, pp. 15–16). Similarly, greater cooperation between private and public entities is needed, for a damning finding was a lack of coordination between police, intelligence agencies, and private firms (Rouleau, 2023c, pp. 277–311). It is worth noting that GoFundMe were aware of the Freedom Convoy fundraiser within hours of its creation, almost two weeks before the first significant arrivals in Ottawa (Rouleau, 2023b, p. 359). However, by initially drawing only on their own resources they were not able to perceive the threat the campaign posed. Earlier reporting to intelligence agencies may have enabled a brief window of opportunity to intervene before it gathered unstoppable momentum. Similarly, though we are not accusing Jacob Wells of any impropriety, under no circumstances should he have personally held funds raised on their platform. Wells' brief control of $4.9m of the Freedom Convoy funds is a troubling revelation of regulatory shortcomings that could be easily addressed.

Furthermore, given hate-based groups and other domestic extremists are increasingly adept at disguising their intentions (McKelvey et al., 2023), it is crucial to reconsider reliance on narrow, legalistic conceptions of 'harm'. GiveSendGo may claim they 'do not condone any illegal behaviour' (Stone, 2021b), but abiding by the law is not equivalent to avoiding harm; what is legally permissible may also be incredibly harmful. Similarly, the notion that some harmonious consensus might be achieved by welcoming all causes is dangerously fanciful and wilfully complicit in normalizing extremist ideas. There are no simple solutions and abounding competing interests to consider in managing public settings where extremism may be found. Delicate sociolegal and ethical dilemmas on what regulations could be implemented are compounded by technical limitations on what can actually be achieved. Preventing fundraising for domestic extremism is a problem plagued by complexity, uncertainty and value divergence, all the distinctive hallmarks of 'wicked' policy problems (Head, 2022). Nonetheless, in the wake of the tragedy at Charlottesville in 2017, dedicated deplatforming efforts by public and private stakeholders resulted in fundraising for extremist causes becoming much more difficult. Substantial gains were made. However, given extremist interests seek to maintain a foothold in 'mainstream' spaces—especially for potential commercial gain (see Miller-Idriss, 2019)—we should remain vigilant towards extremism sneaking in under the banner of 'free speech' and patriotic vigor.

This vigilance is rendered more urgent in recognising that the extraordinary use of emergency powers required to end the Freedom Convoy may not always be possible. Future research and collaborative initiatives must therefore work towards a new 'digital constitutionalism' (Suzor, 2018), one that ensures crowdfunding platforms operate consistently, transparently, and with due process, avoiding both arbitrary interventions

and lax governance. As Suzor (2019, p. 170) notes, 'digital constitutionalism does not mean we would want to treat private intermediaries as if they were exactly like nation-states', as this would prove impractically onerous. However, as already outlined above, there is a wide spectrum of risk-mitigating initiatives that can be explored. Future research and initiatives should therefore pursue the possibility of a publicly funded 'independent clearinghouse' (ADL, 2023), jurisdictional 'ombudsperson' (Daskal et al., 2020), or 'Oversight Board', akin to the one implemented by Meta (Klonick, 2020). Though imperfect, Meta's Oversight Board is a remarkable development, achieving significant positive outcomes during its brief existence (see Klonick, 2022; Wong & Floridi, 2023). In 2020, along with making 91 recommendations (of which measurable progress has been made on 125), the Oversight Board also issued 12 major decisions—on matters ranging from the Russian invasion of Ukraine to reporting on sexual violence against children—overturning Meta's original decision in nine cases (Oversight Board, 2023). Not only could an independent authority of this kind advise and adjudicate on sensitive fundraising causes, but also provide guidance on related matters, reducing unintended consequences within the increasingly complex charitable, philanthropic, and nonprofit space.

Of course, such oversight mechanisms can be undermined (see Hemphill & Banerjee, 2021), and the platforms arguably most in need of risk-mitigation are precisely those likely to resist external arbitration. Moreover, though pragmatic arguments suggest a human rights-based framework offers reasonably firm grounds on which to build substantive models of platform governance (Suzor et al., 2018; Suzor, Dragiewicz, et al., 2019), it is inevitable that even 'good-faith actors' will interpret such rights 'in radically different ways' (Haggart & Keller, 2021, p. 4). Similarly, thought-provoking and praiseworthy calls for 'a new social contract' for internet regulation (Srinivasan & Ghosh, 2023) may prove hard to operationalize in irreconcilably Manichean contexts where one platform doggedly insists on personal liberty while another prioritizes collective safety. This was apparent in GiveSendGo's insistence that the suppression of speech is more dangerous than any speech itself, which clashed sharply with GoFundMe's harm minimizing stance. Many Alt-Tech companies, like GiveSendGo, will contemplate complete escape from the state before acquiescing on 'free speech'. Still, in settings where domestic terrorism is accelerating, gaining sympathizers and causing more deaths than foreign actors (see Gurule, 2021), doing nothing is the riskiest option of all. Accumulating trends in giving practices—including massive growth in online giving, more peer-to-peer donations, and less direct giving to established institutions—has resulted in a compounding lack of safeguards. Increasingly, funds are given to largely unknown entities, with unclear ends, with little accountability, and with shrinking means to recoup funds in cases of criminal activity. In networked worlds where money buys voice, voice fosters ideas and ideas generate realities, renewed efforts to establish stronger boundaries in online caused-based giving are urgently needed.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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