



Big Tobacco Tech

February 2026

Dear Friends & Colleagues,

I hope your new year (and new semester) is off to a great start.

I am very happy to see that Big Tech is going on trial. Meta, Snap, TikTok, and YouTube are facing a series of lawsuits from a whole range of plaintiffs that include school districts, states, and individuals. In a series of [upcoming bellwether trials](#) these companies — which are all valued in the hundreds of billions or trillions of dollars — may finally be held to account for their platforms that are [addictive](#) and harmful, especially to young people.

If you're a parent or teacher, you've probably already seen firsthand how addictive and damaging social media can be, and there's new evidence that big tech companies have known this for some time now — although they have done nothing to address the devastating effects of digital addiction on young people's mental health, body image, self-esteem, and social wellbeing.

Ever since it was written for the early internet of the 1990's, [Section 230](#) of the Communications Act of 1934 has operated as an impenetrable liability shield for technology companies. To date, this part of the law has allowed these huge multinationals to claim that they are not responsible for the content that they push out and sell advertising on.

However, as these companies have perfected algorithms to capture and hold our attention, it has become clear that they are not, in fact, neutral arbiters of online content. For over a decade now, we've known that social media companies use an ["outrage to engage"](#) strategy that isn't healthy for anyone (and bad for democracy, too). In addition, the new lawsuits point out that specific features such as infinite scroll, push notifications, likes, and limited time access (e.g., "Snapstreaks") are all intentionally designed to exploit human psychology to keep us engaging with their platforms for as long as possible.

The big tech companies' attorneys are now saying that any number of factors can cause mental health problems and that it's impossible to prove a direct causal link to social media. However, this argument seems less and less plausible at a time when there are documented cases of AI-assisted suicide and Body Dysmorphic Disorder occurring with young people who spend several hours a day applying online filters to their faces and bodies.

I am so grateful for the courage and hard work of educators and parents who are struggling to help young people deal with all this. For example, the Rowland Fellows who teamed up to create [Digital Wellness: Building a Healthy Relationship with Technology](#). Or the positive framing and support for students around "cellphone freedom" at U-32 High School, led by Principal Becca Tatistcheff and her dedicated teachers.

If Congress is not going to defend us from Big Tech with legislation, I'm at least grateful that our court system may give us some recourse as we try to keep our kids healthy — the same way we campaigned against smoking and held Big Tobacco liable a generation ago. It's time we stopped hoping that our kids self-regulate themselves away from a 24/7 onslaught of dopamine bait that was specifically designed to hook them.

The great writer Zadie Smith still doesn't own a cell phone and jealously protects her mental sovereignty. She put it this way in a [recent interview](#),

"My emphasis has been on, to put it baldly, mind control. I think what's been interesting about the manipulations of a digital age is that it is absolutely natural and normal for people to be offended at the idea that they are being manipulated. None of us like to feel that way... we are all being manipulated. Me, too . . . Once we can all

admit that, on the left and the right, then we can direct our attention to who's been doing this and to what advantage."

I wish you and your loved ones many phone-free, in real life (IRL) moments this weekend, and during the next school vacation too. You deserve it.

Take care and see you soon,
Mike

P.S. Thanks to everyone for sending their personal, professional & family news! It's great to hear from you. And keep sharing your courtesy posts! We'll be glad to share them with our Rowland Foundation network.

P.P.S. Wasn't Baratunde an awesome keynote speaker last fall? A record number of conference-goers said we should invite him back in the exit survey. Do you agree? **Send me an email to let me know what you think.** I've been appreciating [Baratunde's responses](#) to Ken Burns's new docuseries [The American Revolution](#). Also, check out Baratunde's latest *Life with Machines* episode, "[AI Therapy Exposed: Your Health is Monetizable.](#)"



Updates

Rowland Women's Leadership Retreat

More Info Coming Soon!



Calling all Rowland Women Fellows! Stay tuned for an invite to this year's **Rowland Women's Leadership Retreat** in May or June, with the theme "Together We Rise." Seen here at last year's convening (left to right) **Emily Gilmore Hurwitz (RF17)**, **Lindsey Cox (RF17)** & **Kathy Cadwell (RF16)**.

Please contact **Samantha Mundt (RF21)** & **Gretchen Muller (RF17)** with any questions or suggestions: samantha.mundt@wswsu49.org, gretchen.muller@mmuusd.org

Rowland Fellows at Work

2025 Cohort Meeting in White River Junction



The **2025 Cohort of Rowland Fellows** met at White River Craft Center last month to learn from each other's Rowland Fellowship work at their schools around the state. Seen here (left to right) are **Jonah Ibson, Becca Osborne, Julia Beerworth, Matt Hennen, Anne Koplinka-Loehr & Danielle Berg.**

Rowland Fellows at Work

Hartford High School Exhibition Night



Hartford High School's Exhibition Night celebrates student voice and learning through a variety of place-based projects, exploring student interests, local work opportunities, and the history, culture, ecology, and future of our region. It has become a cornerstone of **Melissa Wyman's (RF24)** Rowland Fellowship work, providing a space to amplify student stories and strengthen connections between school and community.

Rowland Fellows at Work

Rowland Short Films Project

Special thanks to **Sam Bromley (RF22)**, **Lissa Knauss (RF18)** & **Carrie Gilman (RF23)** for taking time out of their busy days at school to give veteran Fellow interviews for our Rowland Short Films Project. Sincere gratitude to Sam, seen here with Lissa & [filmmaker Ned Castle](#), who helped us film interviews in the Montpelier High School Cooking Lab — and also provided warm chocolate chip cookies to keep us going.

Diversifying the Educator Workforce

DEW Scholars Meet in Burlington



DEW Mentor Bonnie Johnson-Aten (*on left*) met with Rowland DEW Scholars this month in Burlington, all of whom are already working in schools in different capacities or on provisional teaching licenses as they pursue licensure in Vermont. Seen here (*from left*) **Tim Vorachak, Tyler Boone, Jenna Walker & Rosa Atienza.**



Celebrations



Congratulations to Kathy Cadwell (RF16)! With her Braver Angels VT Co-Chair, Lincoln Earle Centers, she will offer a workshop for legislators at the Vermont Statehouse on Wednesday, April 15 from 5:00–7:00 pm called [Managing Difficult Conversations with Constituents and Colleagues](#). Sincere gratitude for Kathy's ongoing contributions to education and democracy around our state.



Congratulations to Lauren Parren (RF12) (*above left*), who was recently named a Vermont Community Fellow, through the Vermont Folklife Center. With her friend and co-applicant Eugnie Doyle from Last Resort Farm, she will be spending twenty hours a month or more for the rest of the year, documenting farming in Monkton, both past and present. In her application Lauren mentioned that the Rowland Fellowship taught her the strengths of a long-term, deeply committed collaborative learning relationship: "One of our group's biggest realizations was that the 'gift of time' to go deep is crucial." Vermont Folklife's cohort of eight projects from around the state will "apply collaborative ethnographic methods and practices learned in workshops to engage in a process of inquiry grounded in their own community." The results of their work will be housed in the new Monkton History Museum where Lauren spends hours each week, currently planning a new exhibit on what life was like in Monkton from 1760-1780, seen through the eyes of four characters: an Indigenous Woman, a man who became a Loyalist, a man who became a Green Mountain Boy, and the real-life story of a woman in Monkton whose husband was killed during the Revolution.



Gratitude



Tara Cariano (RF17), seen here with her husband Jeremy in Corcovado, is grateful for a recent trip to Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula where she felt "truly nurtured in nature." They explored, relaxed, swam in the ocean, spent many hours bird-watching, ate delicious food, leaned into the Costa Rican culture, and attended a yoga retreat, where Tara did some scouting for a future Costa Rica retreat this coming fall or winter.



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