INNOVATION > CLOUD

Public Interest Tech Research Vs. Corporate Studies

By **Adrian Bridgwater**, Senior Contributor. ⓘ I track enterprise software applic... ⌄   Follow Author

Published Sep 11, 2025, 01:44pm EDT

Share   Save   Comment

Which was should we go?
TERESA FOSTER

Surveys abound. Enterprise technology corporations simply can't help themselves when it comes to using the time-honored survey as a tool in the marketing communications arsenal. Positioned as a means of studying the adoption, trends, uptake or indeed the dearth of some aspect of technology, tech vendors delight in telling us that their "independent" research studies (that they will have inevitably funded and paid an analytics organization for in cold hard cash) show how user trends are being shaped.

As detailed before here, it's not uncommon for a cloud-native testing and orchestration platform specialist to conduct a study and come up with headline "findings" such as: 88% of businesses are haemorrhaging IT stack costs due to lack of cloud-native testing and orchestration services. No disrespect to the testing and orchestration community; they all do it.

But is there a better way?

Public-Interest Tech Research

Sounding rather close to the fantasy Coalition Of Ordered Governments that features in Gears Of War, the Coalition for Independent Technology Research focused on the way technology is actually shaping our lives. The CITR says that the weight of corporate-funded research is leading us to a point where independent researchers are both sidelined and silenced. Further, the CITR proposes action to treat public-interest tech research as essential public infrastructure i.e. on a par with public health and education.

Clarified in its "The State of Independent Technology Research 2025: Power in Numbers" study (yes, another survey, but judging by the coalition's membership list, the organization underpins its work via non-profits, public welfare groups, human rights movements and centers of ethics, society and democracy), the CITR calls out "shrinking funding, institutional censorship, legal threats, harassment and surveillance" as factors hindering public-interest tech research.

MORE FOR YOU

Saturn Glows And A 'Diamond' In The Sky: The Night Sky This Week

The coalition states that it is a network of more than 471 scholars, civil society researchers, technologists and journalists across more than 45 countries working to protect and advance independent research on technology and society. Although the coalition doesn't take a direct swipe at any individual IT corporate, it does say that "trillion-dollar technology companies have outsized influence on how we learn, work, communicate and govern"... so that covers a wide base of vendors in the cloud, database and the still-burgeoning AI space.

If I Had A Trillion Dollars

"The gap between what these companies are worth and what we as a society invest to understand their impact is staggering," said Brandi Geurkink, executive director of the Coalition for Independent Technology Research. "What we are witnessing is the dismantling of the independent checks we need on the most powerful technologies in human history. This is dangerous for our society and democracy."

Geurkink insists that there is a need for independent research as a cornerstone in free society to enable laypeople (and indeed other technologists) to get a view inside what she calls "the opaque technical systems" shaping our lives. This is advocated as the route to allowing consumers and communities (alongside policymakers, because the wider impact of this understanding should filter upwards) to make more informed choices about technology.
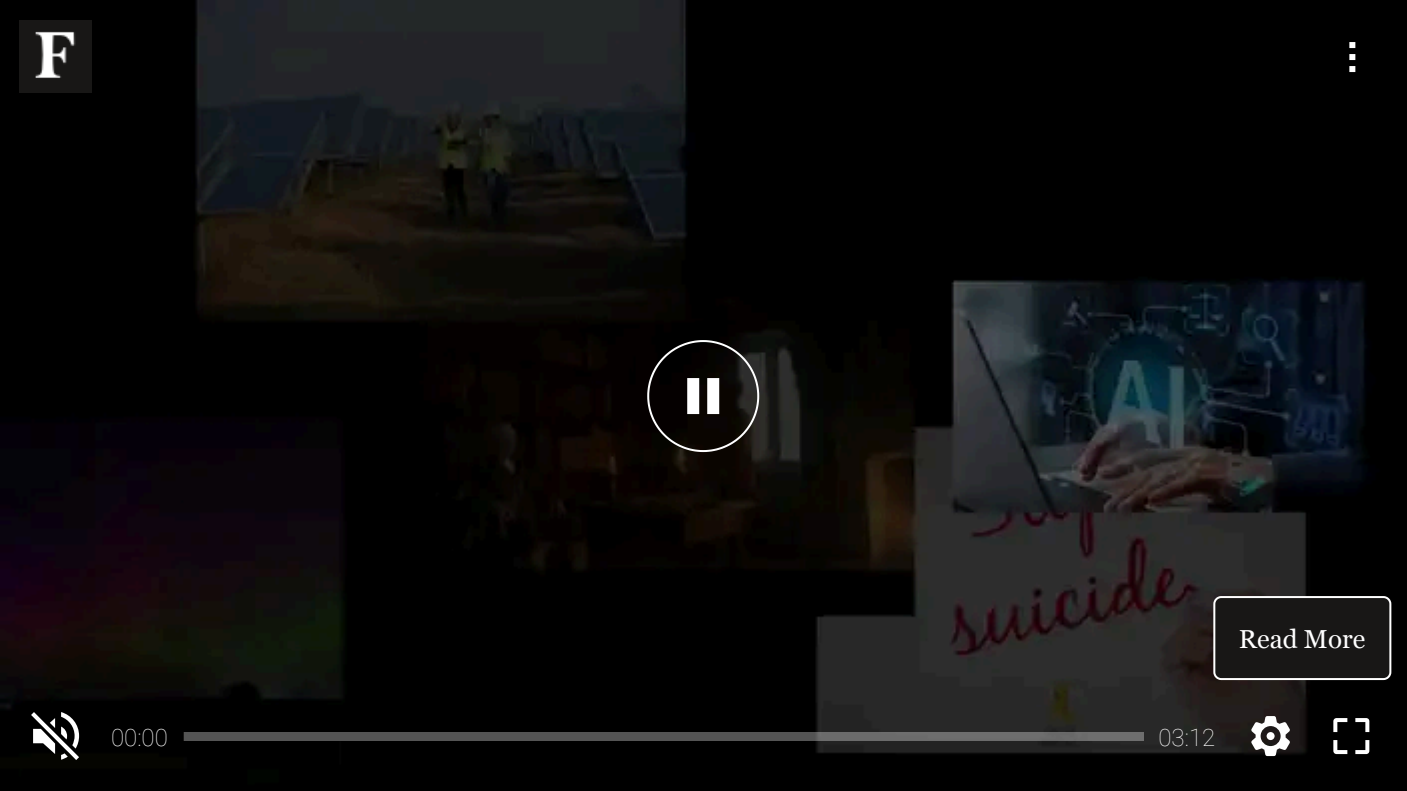
Key Issues: Mental Health & AI Bias

The report surveyed independent researchers behind some of the most important tech accountability stories - from harm to children's mental health, to algorithmic bias, to AI's risks to labor and civil rights - and found they are typically underfunded, lacking infrastructure and exposed to risk.

"The report draws on dozens of interviews, surveys, and case studies from across six continents to document an unprecedented crisis facing independent technology research. While this level of pressure on researchers is new in the tech sector, it echoes long-standing patterns seen in fields like climate science, chemical safety and tobacco, where independent inquiry has historically clashed with powerful commercial interests," argues Geurkink and team.

One gets the impression that the CITR likes to talk in grand terms to highlight the plight it seeks to address. The consortium says that we live in a world that is experiencing the "systematic erosion of independent oversight over the most powerful technologies in human history", with that last note most likely being a nod to AI.

The difficulties associated with carrying out independent research, apparently, are access to data out IT's impact on society, the fact that philanthropy and public funding are insufficient in comparison to industry-dominated research agendas... and (scarily, we are told) the suggestion that independent researchers face personal and professional retribution, including harassment and legal threats, both from the technology industry and political actors.

"This is not only a crisis for researchers, it's a crisis for our rights to information about how technology is impacting our children, our communities and our societies at large," said Nabiha Syed, a CITR board member and media lawyer. "Independent researchers play a critical role in holding powerful technology players to account. But without support and protection, their work and the public's ability to understand and respond to tech's impact is at risk. We need to treat independent tech research as a public good, just like public health or education," she said.

The CITR says that coalition members are currently "building collective power" to defend the right to research and free information. They are doing this through coordinated advocacy, mutual aid, cross-border solidarity and public education.

Should Corporate IT Have A Voice?

For balance, what do external technology analysts and major IT corporates think about this predicament? Should we consider the database services company survey that tells us how important secure and scalable database automation updates are with a bit more merit? Is it so hard to read between the lines and extract the trends that are clearly being seen in the market?

"There's a place for both independent and corporate research in the tech ecosystem," insists Rich Waldron, co-founder & CEO of Tray. "When done transparently, grounded in real-world user data and supported by a valid sample size, I would argue that vendor-led studies can deliver a degree of clarification and point to tangible trends across platforms inside user marketplaces. If any analytical study (albeit vendor-driven) is to have any real worth, it needs to come from a perspective where it is not necessarily designed to drive headlines; it should stem from a pledge to help organizations make business decisions, help shape better products and forge stronger industry standards. Public interest and commercial insight are not, after all, mutually exclusive."

Singular Direction Of Travel

According to Amanda Brock, CEO at OpenUK, a global non-profit focused on open source software, hardware, data and AI... her organization is determined not to any one company to influence the "direction of travel" (as she puts it) in survey and market analysis activities.

"Instead, we seek to lead the direction of travel by doing work that's necessary i.e. we effectively help vendors ensure that although they cannot control the content, other competitors are equally not able to direct our approach either," said Brock. "By providing this basis for research that understands and is cognizant of potential bias, researchers can work with vendors to support data being gathered and used but avoid providing vendors with that opportunity to steer things solely in their preferred direction ... whilst a vendor cannot control direction, we ensure that the vendor's competitors also don't have their hands on the steering wheel."

VP of engagement and field CTO at technology analyst house GigaOm is Jon Collins. He insists that all research in this space is a "form of futurism" and that an unusual feature of the tech industry is that no company has infinite resources; instead, they make a series of bets.

"I recall Scott McNealy describing the bets that Sun Microsystems used to take. Much research, therefore, is about either validating existing trends to reduce the risk of those bets, or priming the market. Sometimes it even looks a little like stock-pumping: once you've made a bet, you talk up its importance to increase the likelihood it pays off. But, of course, there are no guarantees," said Collins. "Second, many corporates end up drinking too much of their own Kool-Aid. We're all guilty of that at times, but with AI, for instance, we see a lot of self-fulfilling prophecy research: "How much is AI going to change the world?" is asked without first questioning whether it will change the world. Independent organizations aren't immune to this either, but corporate research is particularly prone to it."

Least Sexy, Most Fundamental

Collins is also clear about the marketing spin factor here and says that a lot of research is produced for PR purposes i.e. to promote whatever the company wants to be known for. The effect of this is that important but less "sexy" areas may be under-researched. Bread-and-butter issues like how security practices are evolving, or how compliance regulations are changing, don't get the same attention as trendier topics.

"We saw this with social media: for years, research largely ignored its societal impact, because it didn't map directly to big corporate spending, even though it has been hugely consequential," said Collins. "So while I don't agree with equating tech company research with tobacco industry research, there are still biases we must acknowledge. Corporate research and research sponsored by corporates (including analyst firms), tends to reflect corporate interests. Meanwhile, independent research can also carry methodological biases: online surveys, for example, are often self-selecting."

The real question, then, is how we can build as objective a picture as possible: which trends genuinely matter, how corporate interests are shaping or following those trends, and where the systemic or societal forces lie. Being aware of those biases - and separating the leading signals from the noise - is essential if research is to be useful.

Editorial Standards | Reprints & Permissions

Find Adrian Bridgwater on LinkedIn and X.

Follow Author