Bits of Freedom: Shifting the Power of Tech to People

Strategic plan 2025 - 2027

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Introduction

This plan outlines our focus, the change we want to achieve, and the way we will do so. It also describes how our organization will need to develop in order for us to achieve our goals. Additionally, it marks the beginning of a shorter multi-annual cycle of 3 instead of 5 years.

1. OUR MISSION AND VISION

There are many ways to live together. In the Netherlands we live together in a democracy governed by the rule of law. We are committed to the constitution and international human rights conventions. Bits of Freedom is convinced that this is the system in which an open and free society has the best chance to succeed.

A democracy governed by the rule of law comprises two elements. A state under the rule of law strives for justice, equality and human rights. Its citizens grant the government executive powers through a democratic process. Without the rule of law, a democracy is nothing but the rule of the majority, and without a democracy the people would have no say in how the state under the rule of law is defined.

This constitutes a paradox in that the government, once elected, could theoretically dismantle both the rule of law and democracy. A democratic state governed by the rule of law is not a natural phenomenon, after all, but the outcome of a series of agreements by which the people and the government abide voluntarily. This means the government has a vital responsibility, i.e. to control itself and to allow itself to be restrained and audited. By parliament, regulators and advisory bodies, by courts, the media and the general public.

In practice this often goes wrong, and when it does technology plays a significant role.

Over the past years the government has given itself more and more power. In the shape of new powers and technological means that enable more extensive violations of citizens' rights and liberties. And in the shape of information: the government collects and processes more and more data on citizens that allows for more detailed classification, control and monitoring. While authorities, hiding behind spreadsheets and algorithms, become increasingly powerful and non-transparent, citizens become trapped.

At the same time the Dutch government more and more often refuses to let itself be restrained and held to account. These past years legal violations, for instance by security and intelligence services, were tolerated and sometimes even rewarded. Firm advice from regulators like the Dutch Data Protection Authority and the Council of State were brushed aside. The government, directly and indirectly, discourages journalists, NGO's and citizens from holding government accountable.

Anyone who still speaks out and takes on the powers to be is at the mercy of an online communication landscape largely governed by a handful of big tech companies. Their revenue models and practices subject people to even more surveillance and manipulation. Extremist content is amplified, and the public debate fragmented by personalized algorithms.

We expect that these issues will only intensify over the next few years, turning up the pressure on the rule of law and on the democratic state. Citizens' rights and liberties will be stripped away and counterpowers curtailed. Allies within the government will be constrained and face unsafe work environments. Government will eventually wake up to, and appropriate the immense power of Big Tech and its potential to surveil and control citizens. At some point the last bit of freedom of communication for citizens will disappear.

We want to reverse this trend.

We believe that a strong democracy governed by the rule of law is a prerequisite for living together in freedom and equality. The power of technology should be in the hands of the people who strive for this. That is what Bits of Freedom is committed to making happen.

2. OUR THEORY OF CHANGE

The power of technology in the service of a democratic state under the rule of law. But how? For a long time, directly influencing policy has been our main tool. Although we will continue to influence Dutch and European legislation that regulates the development and use of technology, it will no longer be the main jumping-off point for our work.

Instead, we will focus on participatory action research and mobilization. Through action research we will put the interests of the groups hit hardest by technology center stage. By working together with those groups, and having them inform us, we will build wide-spread societal resistance to repressive digitization. We will also shape the development of technology at the source: by mobilizing consumers and public opinion to compel tech companies (and by extension the government) to better their policies.

We have a mix of tools at our disposal and distinguish five change routes:

1. **Research –** we use research to reinforce our information position and that of affected communities with regards to the abuse of tech.
2. **Movement building** – we use movement building to strengthen the impact of civil society actors on decisions about technology.

3. **Communication and campaigns** – we use communication and campaigns to make the specific impact of digitization accessible and to mobilize wide-spread resistance.
4. **Advocacy** – we use advocacy to optimize how legislation protects people.
5. **Legal action** – we use legal action to call companies and authorities to account and to put a halt to harmful practices.

3. OUR FOCUS

In an information society the rights to privacy and to freedom of communication are essential to increase the power of the people while curtailing that of authorities and companies. Between 2025 and 2027 we will be focusing on those rights, and operating within the following four overlapping programs.

Security

Authorities collect and generate vast volumes of data on people. Intentionally and unintentionally, the use of those data – to monitor, predict and influence behavior – results in unwanted interference and unequal treatment, at an ever younger age. The right to privacy and data protection should protect people against an abuse of power and unequal treatment. When this fails, regulators and informed citizens should be able to call the government to account.

1. **Only social algorithms for social services.** The more interaction you have with the government, the higher the risk of unpredictable and unlawful treatment. This risk appears greater for people with low incomes, bi-cultural backgrounds, or people identifying as female. Examples have been discrimination by the Tax Administration, the Education Executive Agency DUO and the city of Rotterdam. Algorithmic discrimination of people, intentional or unintentional, by the government has to stop. We will research discriminatory algorithms used by local authorities. Together with the general public we will campaign to get them to stop. If necessary we will go to court.
2. **No discriminatory and unconstitutional surveillance.** Certain groups of people, such as people of color, Dutch Muslims and activists, are treated as suspect by default. We want this to stop, and for government to stop surveilling innocent citizens. We will raise as much attention as possible to the work of the intelligence and security services, and prevent their powers from being expanded. We will also call attention to the politicization of their work.

3. **Action research: data and the social government.** We want (welfare) organizations providing direct support to people to contribute to the conversation about the government's use of data and technology. Through action research we will identify the ways in which the use of algorithms and data threaten the livelihood of people, and collaborate on a road map for future work.

Civic space

A democratic state under the rule of law is never finished. Civic space is needed to safeguard and foster this system. Our legal and technological infrastructure should facilitate that space and civil society actors should be able to move freely within it.

1. **Pluriformity in the online information landscape.** Our dependence on Big Tech makes us vulnerable to corporate manipulation, and to surveillance and control by the government. We'll explore the options of defining a positive duty of care for the state as regards a pluriform online information landscape. If possible, we will take legal action.
2. **Free and safe participation in the public debate.** As long as we're stuck with Big Tech., we need people to move in those spaces as freely and safely as possible. We'll therefore challenge two particularly harmful Big Tech tactics: its personalized advertisement engine and its manipulative design practices. In this area, too, we are wary of government interference, like encryption constraints. Big Tech cannot become a one-stop shop for surveillance of our communications.
3. **Legislative framework.** We'll monitor the development of legislation regulating journalists' and NGO's freedom of movement, like the Civil Society Organizations Transparency Act (*Wmto*), the Settlement of Large-scale Losses or Damage (Class Actions) Act (*WAMCA*) and the Open Government Act (*Woo*). We'll contribute to alliances of civil society actors to take joint action against any threats.

Young adults and technology

We want young adults to be able to develop in freedom, taking advantage of the possibilities offered by the internet. We want to prevent technology from being used to supervise, manipulate and discriminate young adults. All children and young adults should have equal opportunities.

1. **Free and safe online.** We will impact legislation that affects young adults online. We will stop measures that shrink the online space of young

adults while encouraging measures that protect young adults against online manipulation, profiling and discrimination by Big Tech.

2. **Protected against the state.** The profiling and discrimination of young adults by the government has to stop. We will research algorithmic systems like the Top400, a so-called crime-prevention program run by the municipality of Amsterdam, and will go to court to stop them. This work overlaps with our Security program.

3. **Action research: technology and the future.** We want to get more young adults involved in tech policy that affects them. Together with young adults we will use action research to chart what they need to evolve in freedom. We will collaborate on a road map for future work.

Outside our current scope:

1. Education: We want young adults to be able to learn and study free from surveillance and discriminatory algorithmic systems.
2. Job market: We want unpredictable and discriminatory algorithmic systems not to interfere with job searches and job holdings.

Bodily integrity

Everyone has the right to self-determination about their own body. And similarly data about our bodies should be protected against unwanted interference and usage.

1. **Control over health data.** Health apps collect and generate huge amounts of sensitive data, making women in particular vulnerable. We will protect the health data of people with a womb against the profiling advertising industry and by extension against snooping authorities. We will investigate popular apps that capitalize on those data and will litigate to stop them. At the same time we will mobilize consumers to exert pressure on the apps they use.

2. **No exploitation of body data.** Our faces and bodies are increasingly datafied. Those data are used for products that are not employed to our advantage. Think, for instance, of face recognition search engines, deep fakes, or 'smart' cameras used to classify people in the street. Experience shows that once tech is introduced, security services cannot restrain themselves. For that reason we are no longer focusing on the end-users but on the companies supplying this technology. We will call them to account, influence public perception and ensure that the use of their products becomes unacceptable.

3. **Action research: limits to the use of our body data.** We want to get a widespread movement going against the exploitation of our body data. Through action research we will make a list of where our physical traits are converted into data, what those data are used for, and what we can do to stop that.

4. OUR ORGANIZATION

Founded in the Netherlands in 1999, Bits of Freedom has a staff of permanent employees, a board and an advisory council. Every year hundreds of volunteers help us do our work. We receive financial support from thousands of private donors, dozens of corporate sponsors, and from funds and project subsidies. We do not accept funding from governments or Big Tech.

How we effect change

The following methods will help us exert pressure in the years to come:

1. **Research.** We will expand our research capacity. In addition to legal research, we will intensify our action research and technological research, focusing on algorithms used by local authorities and Big Tech platforms.

2. **Movement building.** We need widespread public resistance to repressive digitization. Resistance that should be designed and driven by society. Parallel to our action research we will focus on building coalitions with young adults, and on the topics of bodily integrity and social welfare.

3. **Public communication and campaigning.** We have to improve our marketing and get people on our side. When necessary we want to be able to quickly reach a critical mass, to mobilize our followers and allies. We are developing several accessible and convincing narratives based about our work and our organization. In addition, we will try out new ways of data-driven campaigning. Part of that will involve showing that we are a growing movement supported by thousands of donors and volunteers. We will also increase media exposure for our organization and the topics we work on. We will do so by creating our own news (for instance by publishing reports) and by asserting ourselves not just as experts but also as opinion leaders when it comes to appealing and current topics.

4. **Advocacy.** Bits of Freedom has a solid reputation and a strong network, which enables us to have an outsized impact on the formation of legislation. In the years to come we will develop and pursue a proactive, overarching advocacy strategy revolving around our own narratives. We will develop several

new tools that provide better support for agenda-setting, including research reports and events. With that, our focus will come to lie more and more on the medium to long term.

5. **Legal action.** We will continue to handle minor proceedings and complaints in-house. In case of strategic litigation, we will continue to cooperate with external (*pro bono*) law firms.

6. **Growing organization.** We want to be able to take on more work and to add new strategies to our toolkit. This requires sustainable growth, whilst maintaining a diverse funding mix. We will also restructure the organization.

Growth

Bits of Freedom needs to grow from about 11 FTE to at least 20 FTE during this multiyear cycle.

While retaining our policy capacity we will enlarge our research capacity by adding two technical researchers and three action researchers. We will also increase our communication capacity and operations capacity.

It is our ambition to enhance leadership within the organization and to make leadership positions more accessible and more attractive. We will introduce a co-director model and create a role for a tech lead.

Although the board and the advisory council will remain intact, we will explore the desirability of a different board model. We will also introduce a new youth advisory council.

This growth is possible only if we give sufficient consideration to the transition to a bigger organization and a new way of working. This includes attention to the structure of our organization, our culture and processes and the growing dependence on partner organizations. On a final note, it is important to involve our current followers and supporters in the developments and to make space for them in the new Bits of Freedom.

Employer practices

Our employer practices will continue to rest on the following five pillars:

- Social and economic security
- Equal opportunity
- Work autonomy
- Healthy work/life balance
- Professional development

In the next three years our focus will be on:

1. Attracting more team members with lived experience.

2. Supervising two working students and two interns every year, starting in 2026. This will contribute to diversity within our field of activity, making it easier to recruit strong staff and making sure that we keep a fresh outlook on the organization.

3. Relocating to a building that is better suited to neurodiversity. As a rule we work at the office, but we have the option to work from home 25% of our time. The time spent-in-office is well-structured.

4. Addressing the professional development of the team and the board, in terms of decolonization and soft skills, among other things. In addition, we'll provide external coaching for new staff.

5. Increasing attention for planning and the measurability of our work to reduce workload and increase pleasure at work.

6. Reviewing our personnel policy (2025) and remuneration policy (2026/2027) in the build-up to a new multiyear cycle.

5. OUR FINANCES

We expect that by 2027 our team will cover some 20 FTE (compared to 10 FTE in 2023).

On the cost side, our multiyear budget provides for a growth in staff number, and the relocation of our office. On the income side, allowance is made for a sizable increase in fund contributions and an initially conservative estimate of the growth in the income from donations. This means that we expect that the share of funding is likely to grow. Ultimately we expect that our work will become more visible and that more people will understand the usefulness of what we do, which we aim to use as the foundation for an ambitious donor expansion.

We do not take money from governments, and apply rigorous criteria when accepting donations from companies. However, we do accept money from foundations that are (in part) financed by the government. Although we do not accept funds directly from lotteries, we will accept donations through foundations that are (in part) financed by lotteries.

Bits of Freedom fights for your freedom and privacy on the internet.
These fundamental rights are essential for your development, for technological innovation and for the rule of law. But this freedom isn't self-evident. Your data is being stored and analysed. Your internet traffic is slowed down and blocked.

Bits of Freedom makes sure that your internet is your business.

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