Why and how is the power of Big Tech increasing in the policy process?

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Background

The growing digitalization of society has led to a meteoric rise of large technology companies (Big Tech). Through their ownership of large digital platforms, Big Tech have amassed tremendous resources enabling them to redefine communication, commerce, and even culture. Big Tech's influence is further accelerated by potentially transformative breakthroughs in generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) and its impact on people and organizations worldwide.

Rise in prominence of Big Tech is also likely to increase their influence in policymaking process. This project extends our understanding on role of Big Tech in policymaking. More specifically it answers the following questions:

1. What are the mechanisms through which Big Tech is influencing policymaking?

2. What are the potential implications of Big Tech's influence on policymaking?

Research Framework

### Multiple Streams

Problem stream

- What problems are important?
- How do we understand these problems?
- Actors: academics, media personnel

Policy stream

- Which policies are technically feasible?
- Which policies are acceptable?
- Actors: consultants, administrators

Politics stream

- Which interest groups are prominent?
- What is the general national mood?
- Actors: political parties, politicians, legislators
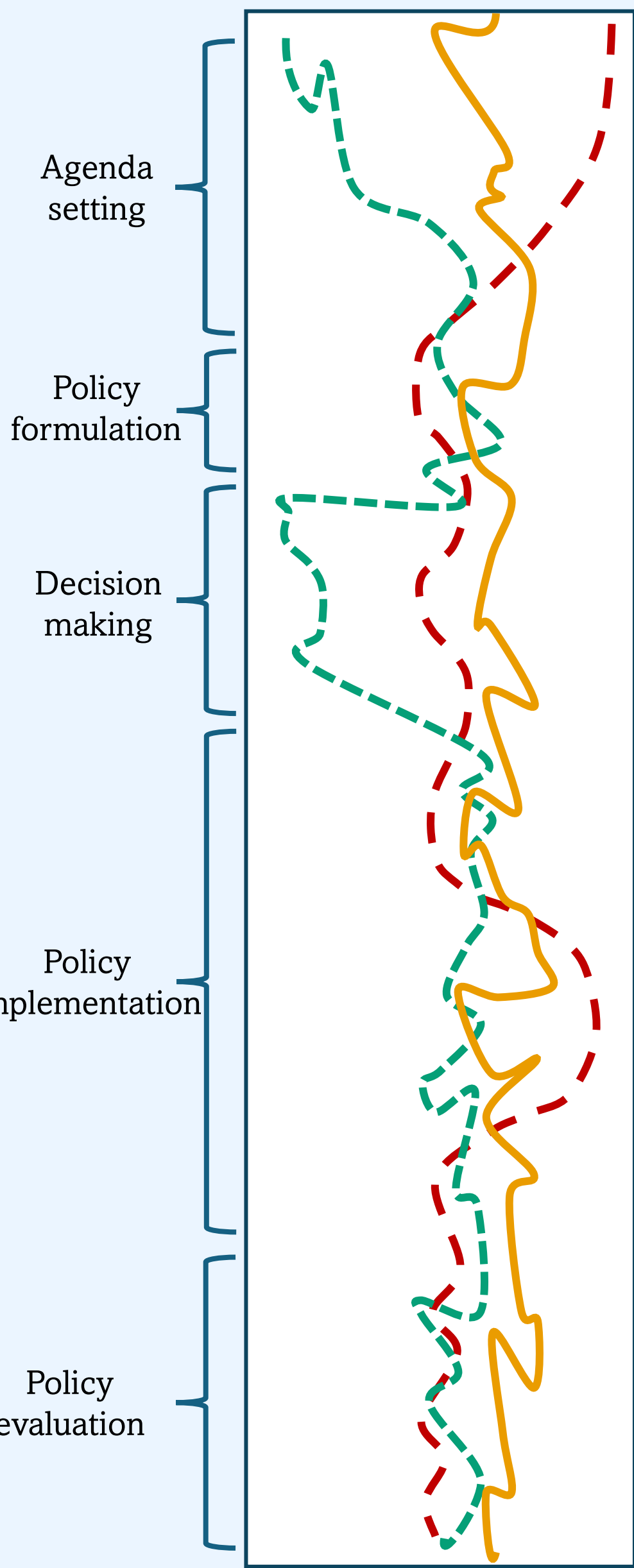
Big Tech

Large technology companies own, or control and operate digital platforms characterized by:

- Monopoly/rent inducing network effects
- Increasing potential for digitalization of our preferences and behavior

As a consequence, such technology companies are privy to enormous human, financial and physical resources.

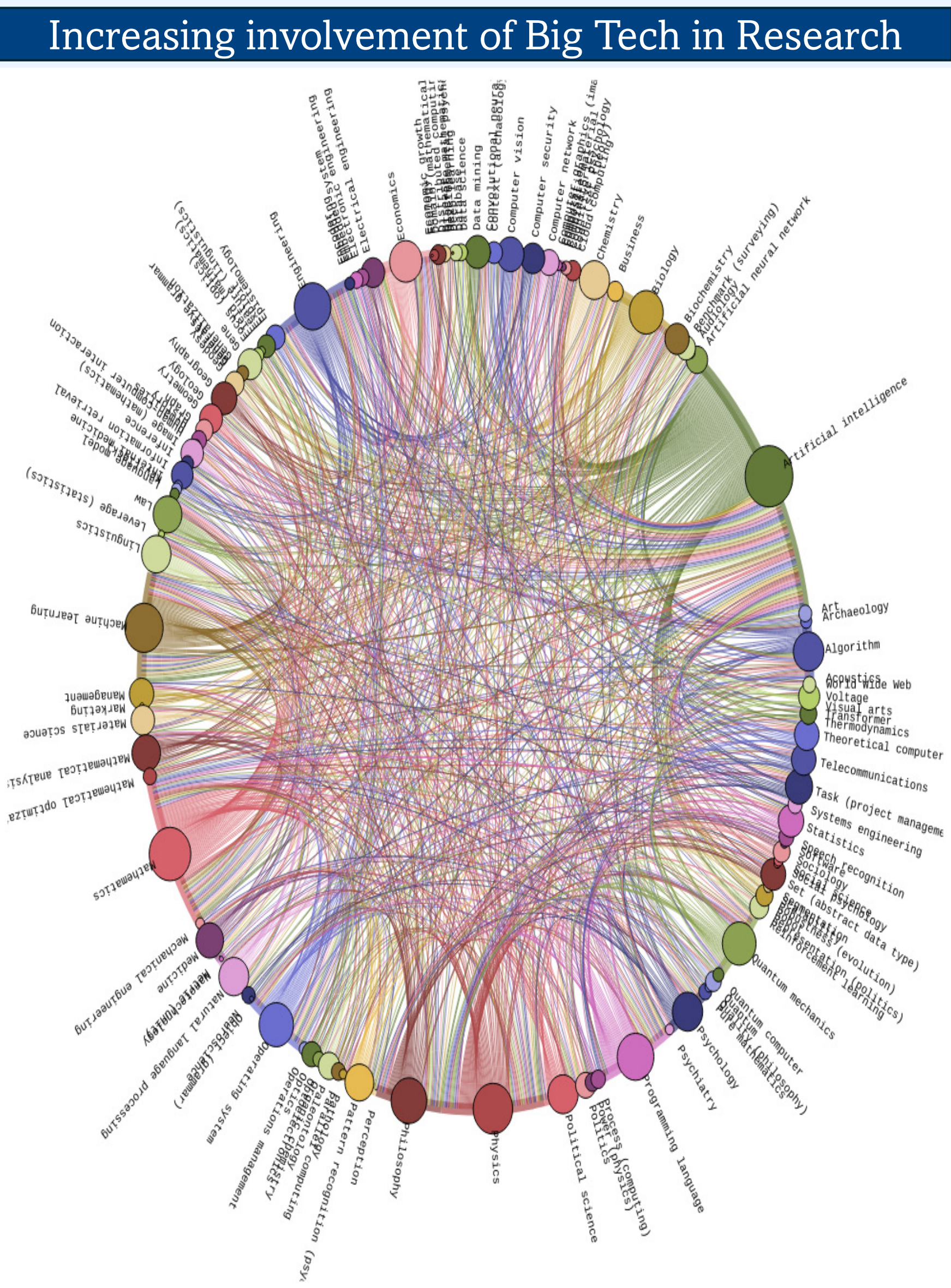### Digital Platforms and Big Tech
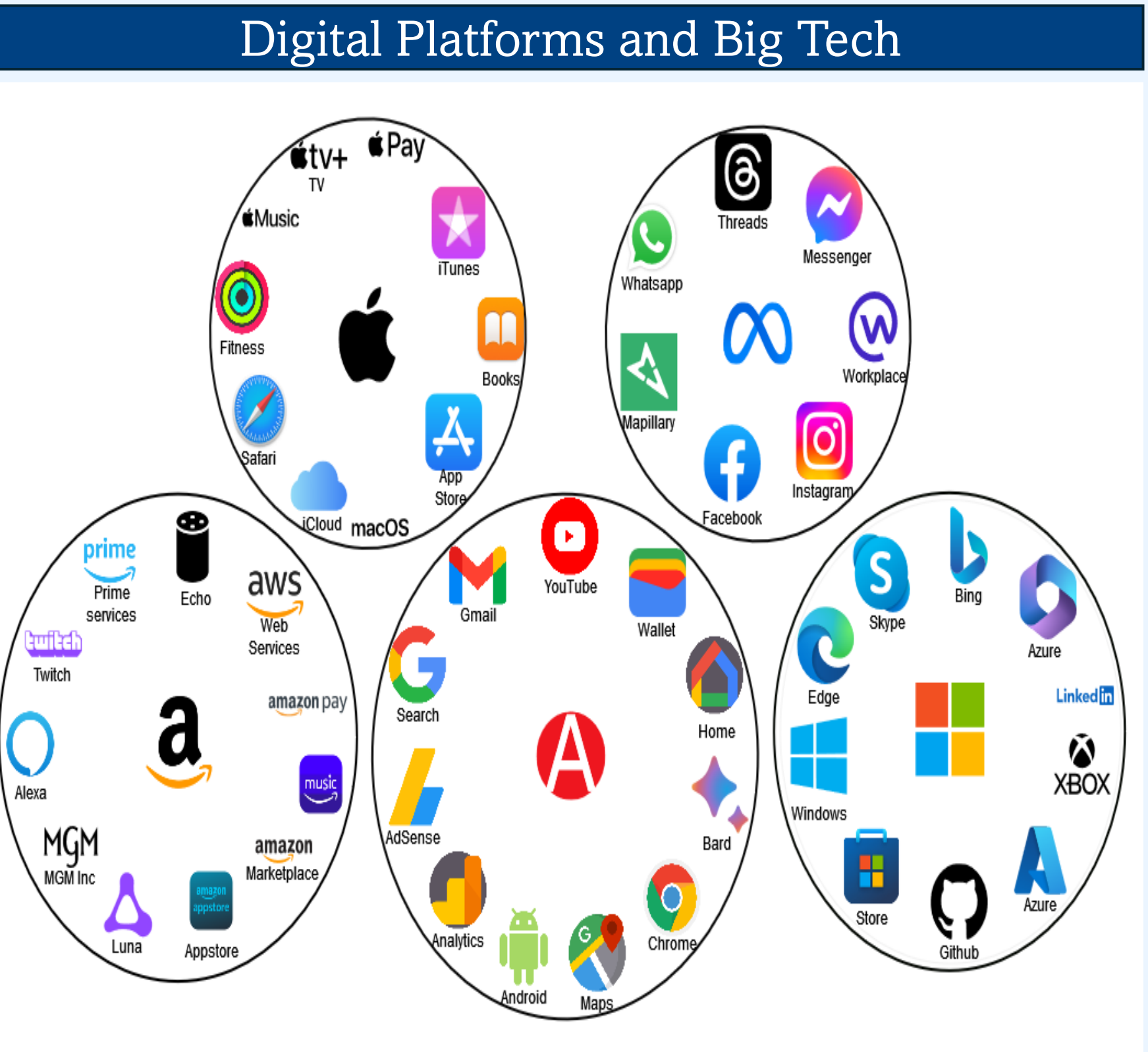
Problem Stream

Big Tech's research influence is steadily rising:

- Big Tech is hiring the best researchers, and increasing funding for academic research, experts are concerned about possibility of 'academic capture'
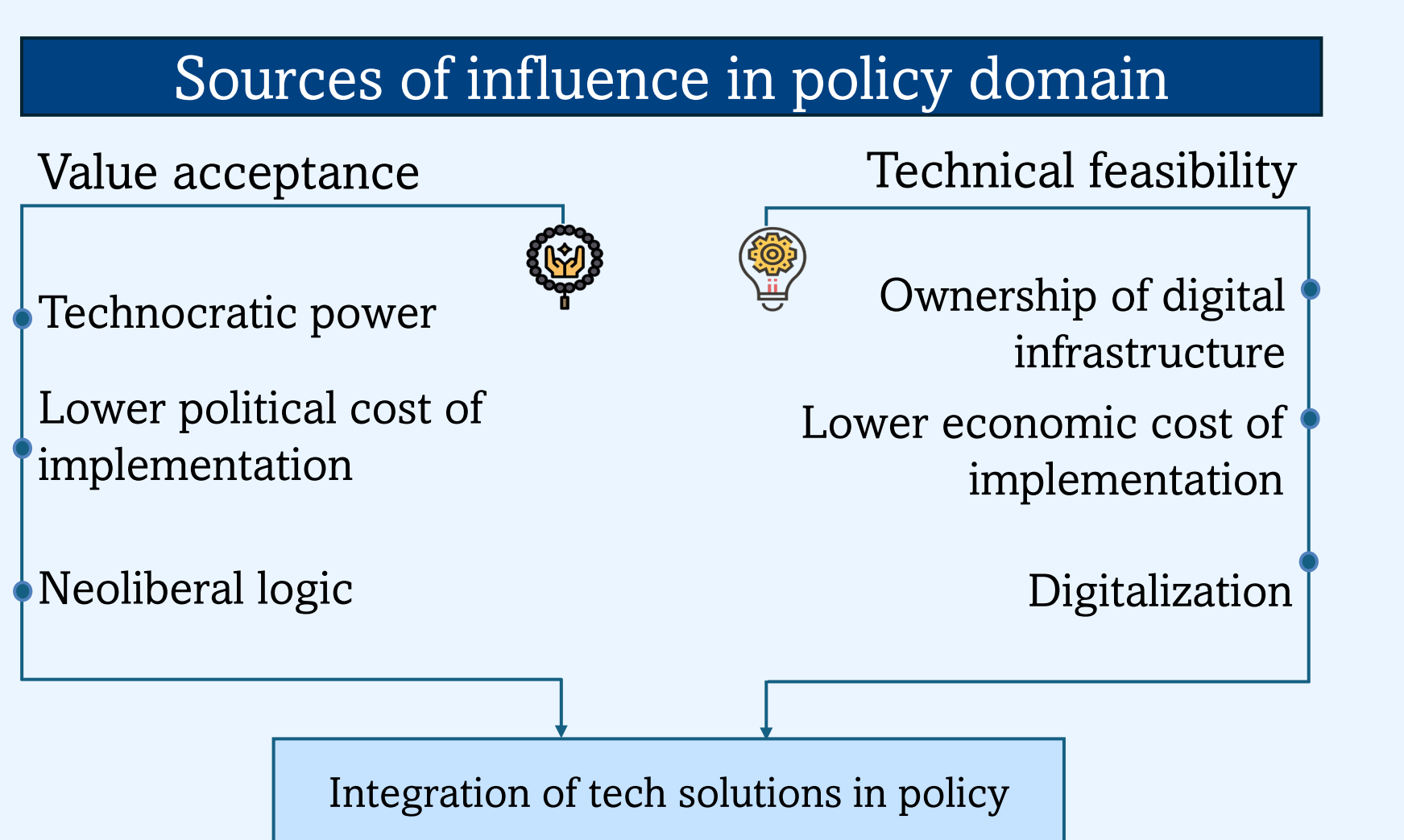
Platforms have changed the media landscape:

- Metrics and search engine optimization are leading to media convergence
- Platforms are among largest advertisers and directly sponsor journalistic activities

This has led to growing popularity of 'technological solutionism' as a social belief where knowledge critical of Big Tech is constrained by its foothold in research and journalism

Increasing involvement of Big Tech in Research
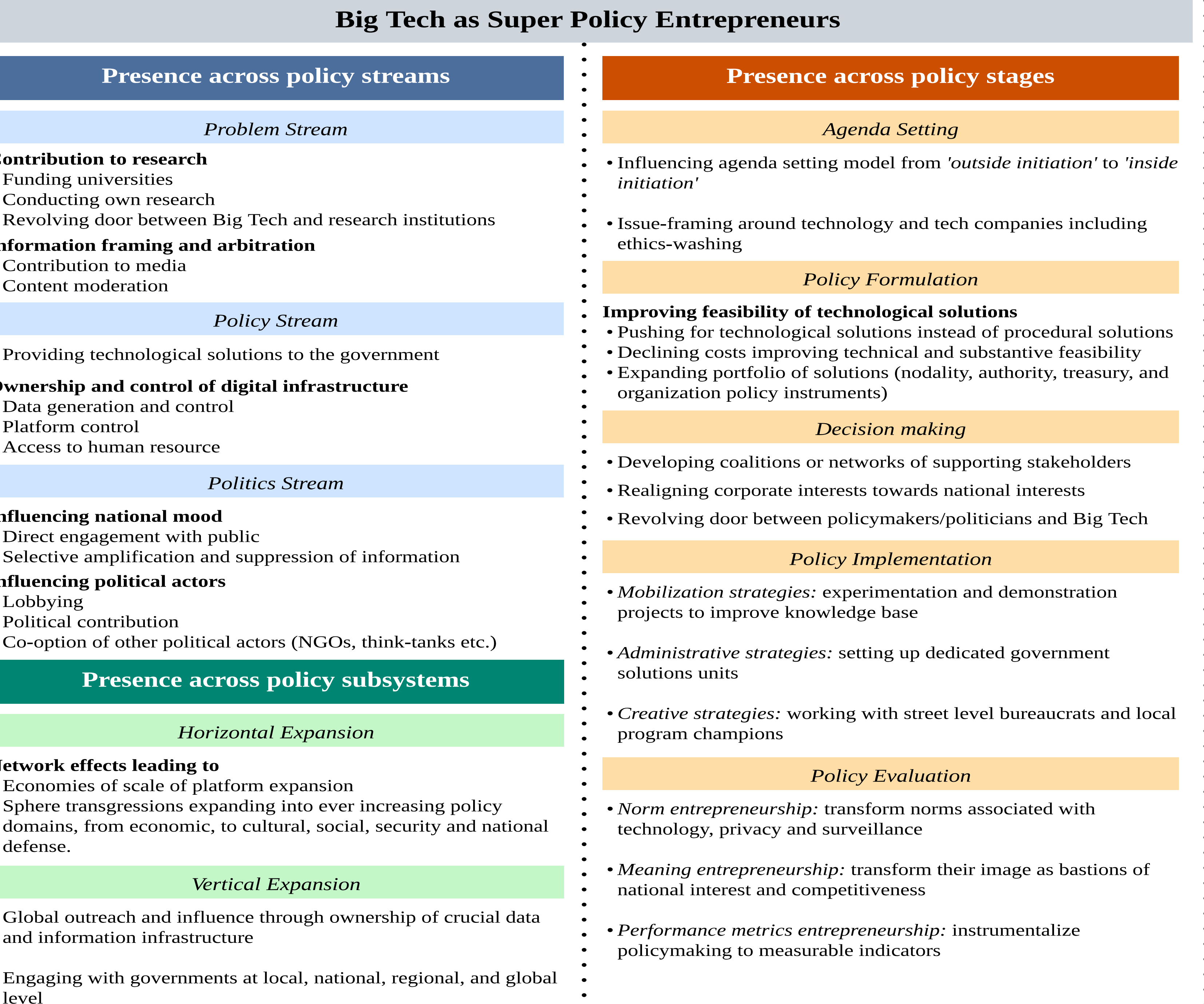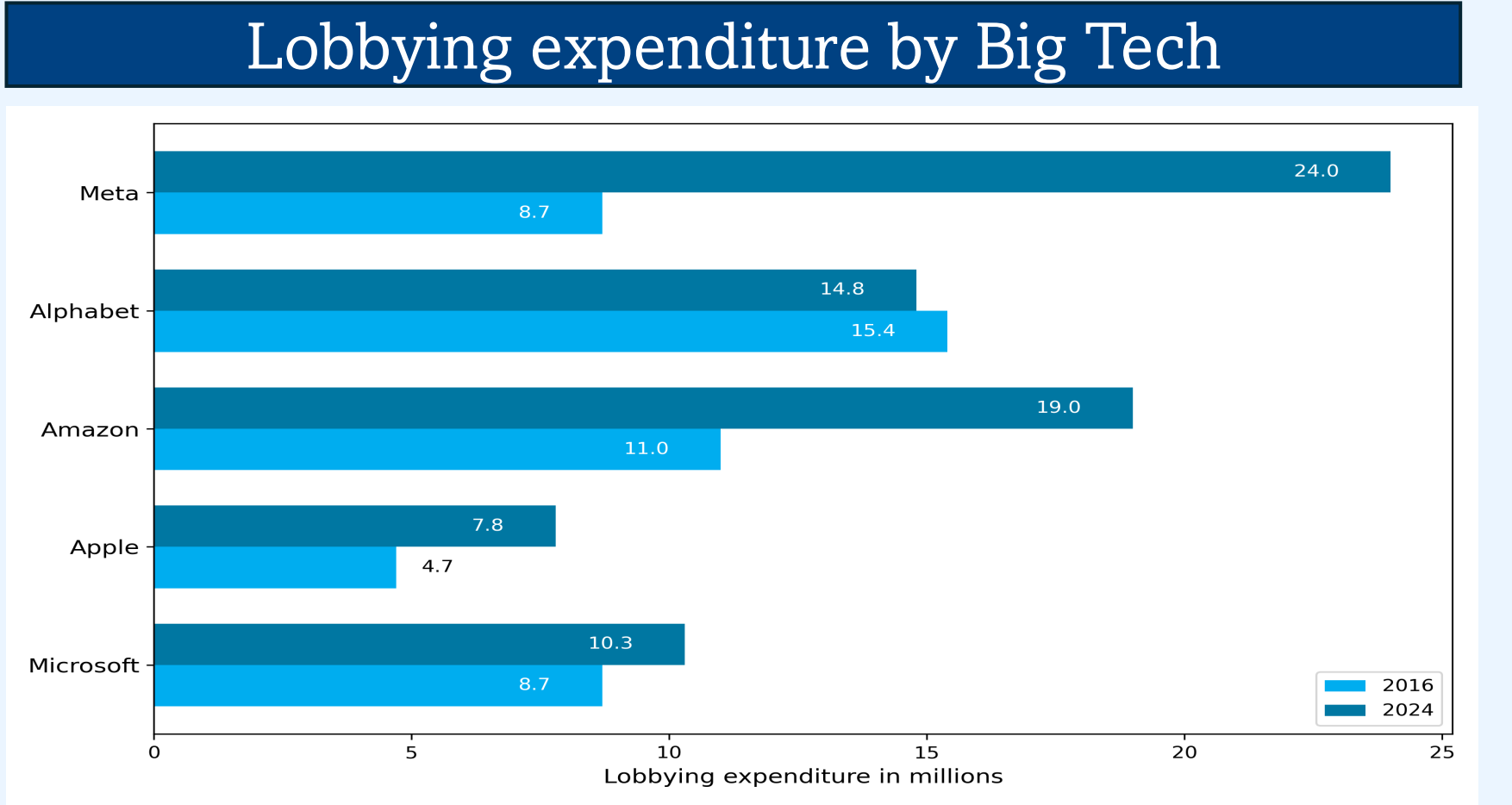

Policy Stream

- Tech solutions to social problems increase Big Tech's influence
- Big Tech work with governments at local, national, and international level
- Big Tech provide solutions on variety of social and economic domains

Sources of influence in policy domain

Value acceptance	Technical feasibility
Technocratic power	Ownership of digital infrastructure
Lower political cost of implementation	Lower economic cost of implementation
Neoliberal logic	Digitalization

Integration of tech solutions in policy

Politics Stream

- Indirectly, Big Tech influence public and political discourses through platforms
- Directly, they finance political actors, lobbying agencies
- *Revolving door* phenomenon is steadily rising

Lobbying expenditure by Big Tech

Lobbying expenditure in millions

	2016	2024
Meta	8.7	24.0
Alphabet	15.4	14.8
Amazon	11.0	19.0
Apple	4.7	7.8
Microsoft	8.7	10.3

Big Tech as Super Policy Entrepreneurs

Presence across policy streams	Presence across policy stages
Problem Stream	**Agenda Setting**
Contribution to research · Funding universities · Conducting own research · Revolving door between Big Tech and research institutions **Information framing and arbitration** · Contribution to media · Content moderation	· Influencing agenda setting model from *'outside initiation'* to *'inside initiation'* · Issue-framing around technology and tech companies including ethics-washing
Policy Stream	**Policy Formulation**
· Providing technological solutions to the government **Ownership and control of digital infrastructure** · Data generation and control · Platform control · Access to human resource	**Improving feasibility of technological solutions** · Pushing for technological solutions instead of procedural solutions · Declining costs improving technical and substantive feasibility · Expanding portfolio of solutions (nodality, authority, treasury, and organization policy instruments)
Politics Stream	**Decision making**
Influencing national mood · Direct engagement with public · Selective amplification and suppression of information **Influencing political actors** · Lobbying · Political contribution · Co-option of other political actors (NGOs, think-tanks etc.)	· Developing coalitions or networks of supporting stakeholders · Realigning corporate interests towards national interests · Revolving door between policymakers/politicians and Big Tech
Presence across policy subsystems	**Policy Implementation**
Horizontal Expansion	· *Mobilization strategies:* experimentation and demonstration projects to improve knowledge base · *Administrative strategies:* setting up dedicated government solutions units · *Creative strategies:* working with street level bureaucrats and local program champions
Network effects leading to · Economies of scale of platform expansion · Sphere transgressions expanding into ever increasing policy domains, from economic, to cultural, social, security and national defense.	
Vertical Expansion	**Policy Evaluation**
· Global outreach and influence through ownership of crucial data and information infrastructure · Engaging with governments at local, national, regional, and global level	· *Norm entrepreneurship:* transform norms associated with technology, privacy and surveillance · *Meaning entrepreneurship:* transform their image as bastions of national interest and competitiveness · *Performance metrics entrepreneurship:* instrumentalize policymaking to measurable indicators

Implications

- Independence of streams is compromised concentrating power in private actors
- As the companies grow more powerful, governments will face challenge to hold them accountable

References

Khanal, S., Zhang, H., & Taeihagh, A. (2025). Why and how is the power of Big Tech increasing in the policy process? The case of generative AI. Policy and Society.

Acknowledgements