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Will democracy survive technology? An urgent TED Talk from Carole Cadwalladr at TED2025

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“We are watching the collapse of the international order in real time, and this is just the start,” says investigative journalist **Carole Cadwalladr**. In a searing talk — the first published from [TED2025: Humanity Reimagined](#) — she details a fast-moving technological coup and the rise of the “broligarchy”: an unprecedentedly powerful class of tech executives (like Elon Musk) who are complicit in dismantling democracy and enabling authoritarian control across the world. She shares a guide on how to digitally disobey in this age of runaway corporate power, data harvesting and mass surveillance — and reminds you that you have more power than you think. [Watch the full talk on TED.com](#).

America’s Slide into Authoritarianism, as seen from TED 2025

The main message from TED 2025 wasn't the talks, but America's rapid slide into authoritarianism.

by Dave Troy

Historians (if they exist in the future and any records of this period survive) will note this month as one where the United States slipped fully into authoritarianism. Incompetence, luck, and real leadership may yet intervene, but we have already crossed several “red lines” warned about by experts.

At the TED conference this past week in Vancouver, British Columbia, about 1,700 multidisciplinary thinkers gathered to hear and discuss dozens of prepared talks. But the real action was among the attendees, who gathered all week in impromptu salon discussions to share their concerns about the state of the world and what can be done to change course. Here are some of the most discussed topics and themes.

It’s a Coup

Carole Cadwalladr, a journalist who has reported on tech overreach and the rise of data-driven authoritarianism, delivered a powerful talk in which she correctly stated what many are afraid to admit: *It’s a coup*. The purchase of an American president (and American sovereignty) by Elon Musk is unprecedented, and it appears to be advancing unabated.

In her conference-opening **talk**, she also confronted OpenAI CEO Sam Altman about the theft of her intellectual property to train the company’s AI systems. When TED’s Chris Anderson brought up this concern with Altman in an **interview** during the final conference session (with Cadwalladr applauding) Altman’s response directed to her was, “Clap all you want to about that. Enjoy.” When Cadwalladr confronted him again privately backstage, he waved her off, citing “fair use.”



Chris Anderson in conversation with Sam Altman at TED 2025. (Photo: David Troy)

While the TED community is comprised of a wide range of people, a broad majority of participants appeared to align with Cadwalladr, agreeing that AI companies are overreaching, and violating property laws. Shortly after the interview with Altman, Twitter cofounder Jack Dorsey seemed to offer support for Altman's view, **posting** "delete all ip law" on X, with Elon Musk replying, "I agree."

Crossing the Rubicon into Authoritarianism

In the course of just a few days, Americans have cataloged a laundry list of signs that the country has reached a tipping point into authoritarianism: SignalGate; "Liberation Day" tariffs; reversal of (some) tariffs (maybe); **deportations** to El Salvador; **defiance** of the Supreme Court; asserting that "**home grows**" (aka citizens) are next; taking control of Columbia University by placing it into **receivership**; **bullying** law firms to provide pro-bono services supportive of the regime; indiscriminate **revocation** of student visas; calling for the **revocation** of the broadcast license for CBS over dislike of *60 Minutes* content; attempts to **criminalize** media figures like Norm Eisen; investigation of former Trump administration officials Miles Taylor and Chris Krebs on grounds of **treason**; **forcing** Americans to use X to interact with the Social Security administration; widespread DOGE cuts of programs and agencies without Congressional approval; decline of the dollar under pressure from tariffs and market chaos. The list goes on and on.

People also expressed grave concerns about interacting with US Customs, and discussed strategies for dealing with their devices at the border crossing. One TED speaker, a comedian, returning to the States was asked if they made any mention of politicians in their talk. Other attendees discussed strategies for locking down their computers and phones (“create a user account with nothing special in it” or “turn off Face ID and decline to provide a PIN.”) Some discussed mailing their devices home to avoid having them on their person. Regardless of the details, it is a massive red flag that law abiding citizens of any country are having to consider such strategies, with most expressing deep alarm at that fact.

Many also shared their intention to establish residency outside the United States. While the stereotype of liberals fleeing conservative regimes goes back decades, concerns now transcend mere political displeasure.

Some involved in media, non-profits, relief work, science, and other efforts requiring international coordination are now wondering if they will be able to remain in the United States without interference. Large, established non-profit organizations now face the prospect of having their tax status revoked, which can be executed as an administrative action within the Internal Revenue Service with no due process.

The United States has transformed into a fully authoritarian kleptocracy. If the government can take control of a private university (Columbia), independent non-profits ([US Institute of Peace](#)), detain and search citizens at the border without a warrant, disappear residents (and soon citizens) to a prison another country with no recourse, and defy the Supreme Court, it's clear that the Constitution simply no longer applies.

Canada Isn't Having It

Speaking with Canadians, they are re-energized at the thought of recasting Canadian identity in contrast to their delinquent neighbors to the south. Where the Canadian flag was, a year ago, a symbol of right-wing nationalism, today it represents level-headed liberalism. In Vancouver, it is not uncommon to see the maple leaf flag displayed proudly beside a flag for Ukraine — unthinkable a year ago.

The selection of Prime Minister Mark Carney seems to have been a stroke of genius that may ward off the advances of the [lab-grown](#) libertarian Pierre Poilievre, who otherwise might have had a better chance to move Canada more in the direction of Trumpian policy. People here do not take the idea of Canada becoming a “51st State” even remotely seriously, and when one considers the diversity and density of Canada's largest cities, it's obvious that any Americans floating this idea have no idea what they're talking about. Canada's [national election](#) on April 28 will offer a clearer idea about where the country is headed, but right now it appears to be on a hopeful trajectory.

Living in the Matrix?

Being TED, the idea that we might be living in a simulation naturally came up amongst the assembled technologists, philosophers, and scientists. But most concluded that no such exotic explanation was necessary to explain what we observe.

Individuals with high agency (such as Musk, Trump, Putin) have simply decided to ignore consensus reality and the laws and norms that previously shaped it. They are following their own agenda and we're all being dragged into a new reality, whether we like it or not.

In fighting it, we are lured into engaging with the old systems — wasting time spinning the knobs labeled *checks* and *balances*, finding they do nothing. What may happen next is anyone's guess. But we're running out of time.

State level remedies (think Attorneys General and State Legislators taking action against Musk and friends) and actions by other countries (200% tariffs on Tesla in Europe, anyone?) might be solutions that can slow the grinding of our institutional gears.

Conferences Are *People*

There's plenty else going on in the world of TED, as usual — talks touting advancements in science, AI, the arts, medicine, and the like. You'll see those talks online soon. TED itself is in the process of **gifting itself** to a new owner, and they're reviewing proposals for that now. Some of the talks and sessions inadvertently advanced some unsavory agendas. And there's plenty of room for principled **critique** of TED and its model, with its tendency towards a glossy blend of feel-good slacktivism and McLuhan-cool presentations.

But the conference itself is loaded with smart, interesting people from around the world, genuinely trying to do good and useful work. The real conversations are in the hallways, at the bar, and at dinner. And never in sixteen years of attendance at various TED events have I heard those people more concerned about the state of the world.