

RACIAL EQUITY AUDIT: Google

1. What is a racial equity audit?

A racial equity audit is an analysis of products, policies, and procedures as well as the workforce and environment to help corporations determine where they must most urgently dedicate their time to further racial justice and equity within their company. Racial equity audits are one of the recommendations under the “Increase Transparency” pillar of Color Of Change’s Beyond the Statement: Tech framework.

Tech workers collectively have power. The Beyond the Statement: Tech framework emphasizes empowering all workers to hold everyone accountable at a company to racial equity goals.¹

2. What do racial equity audits cover?

Google’s products that have failed to center racial justice in their design are routinely built and deployed. This has emerged in its algorithms **encoding racial biases in search results and other products, shaping our online presence without control, and leading to real-world harm:**

Products and services:

- a. Google advertising services have financially benefited white nationalists while excluding Black creators.^{2,3}
- b. Google Photos has tagged Black people as gorillas.⁴
- c. Google Search has returned hypersexualized and pornographic results and advertisements for an Images search for “Black girls.”⁵ Also, Google Search contributed to the rapid radicalization of white supremacist Dylann Roof, who murdered nine Black

churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015. Google suggested white supremacist content in Roof’s search results for “black on white crime” after learning about Trayvon Martin’s murder, leading Roof down a rabbit hole of white supremacy that shaped his beliefs until he eventually murdered nine Black people.⁶

Labor practices:

- a. Black employees make up just 5.3 percent of Google’s workforce; only 3.5 percent of tech staff are Black, of which Black women account for a mere 1.1 percent.⁷
- b. Google is not transparent about its diversity at the executive level.⁸ However, Urs Hölzle—a Google executive and one of Larry Page and Sergey Brin’s first hires—tweeted that there is financial merit to buying and selling people, which is, in a word, slavery.^{9,10} Leaders who unknowingly make arguments for slavery are also responsible for shaping Google culture and products. As a result, Google’s Black workers must contend with a hostile work environment, lower pay, and limitations to their professional advancement.¹¹
- c. Google has fired workers who were both organizing around ethical concerns, such as the company’s handling of sexual harassment and contracts with immigration enforcement agencies, and trying to unionize to hold the company accountable. This was part of Google’s secret union-busting campaign, known as “Project Vivian,” that ran from 2018 to 2020.¹²

3. Who else is doing racial equity audits and who conducts them?

After years of pressure from Color Of Change and its members, Facebook underwent a civil rights audit in 2018, conducted by Laura Murphy, former American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) director, and Megan Cacace, a civil rights attorney.^{13,14} The results were made public on July 8, 2020.¹⁵

Laura Murphy also conducted Airbnb's 2016 racial equity audit.¹⁶

In April 2022, Amazon announced a racial equity audit to be conducted by Loretta Lynch, former Attorney General for the Obama administration.¹⁷ However, this proposed audit is not comprehensive enough as it does not cover the full scope of Amazon's discriminatory impact and harms from its products, executive decision-making, law enforcement contracts, and warehouses on Black communities.

Other companies, including Apple, Uber, Match Group, are making progress towards fulfilling a commitment to a racial equity audit.^{18,19,20} While the majority of Google's shareholders are in support of an audit, Google's unequal voting structure allows for Larry Page, Sergey Brin, and Eric Schmidt to continue to block the resolution.²¹

4. What kinds of recommendations do auditors make in racial equity audits?

The Facebook auditors made recommendations for the platform to address its issues with

- a. civil rights accountability structure
- b. elections and the 2020 census
- c. content moderation and enforcement
- d. diversity and inclusion
- e. algorithmic bias
- f. privacy

Specific recommendations to address white nationalism—within content moderation and enforcement—include prioritizing the prohibition of references to white nationalist or white separatist ideology, removing hate organizations, and redirecting users away from extremist organizations' efforts.²²

After its audit, Airbnb committed to a series of policy and product changes, including creating

- a. an anti-discrimination policy
- b. a permanent anti-discrimination product team
- c. an optional anti-discrimination training for hosts
- d. Project Lighthouse - an ongoing effort to work with civil rights groups to measure and study discrimination on the platform

Under the Airbnb community commitment, Airbnb will hold hosts who discriminate against guests accountable. If

a host rejects a guest's request for booking, then Airbnb will block reservations for that same time period. This is to prevent the recurrence of instances where guests reported seeing listings advertised as vacant but were told by the host that they were not available, only to find out that these listings were made available for the same trip to guests of a different race.²³

5. What kind of pushback to racial equity audits has there been?

Companies often cite their donations to racial justice organizations and other efforts to engage with Black communities, such as recruitment at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), as justification for avoiding racial equity audits.

- a. Google states it has donated over \$40 million in cash grants and 50,000 pro bono hours to support organizations in the fight for racial justice since 2015.²⁴
- b. Google has also met with leaders from HBCUs after terminating Dr. Timnit Gebru (former Google artificial intelligence researcher) and April Curley (former Google diversity recruiter), both of whom have been transparent about the company's treatment of their current and potential Black workers.²⁵

However, these efforts do not resolve persisting issues at Google that result in its discriminatory impact and harm; Google remains silent on undergoing a racial equity audit.

If you'd like to learn more about how to advance a racial equity audit at Google, you can securely reach our team at coc.tipline@protonmail.com

¹"Tech Framework," Beyond the Statement, <https://beyondthestatement.com/tech-framework/>.

²Craig Silverman and Isaac Arnsdorf, "How Steve Bannon Has Exploited Google Ads to Monetize Extremism," ProPublica, November 29, 2021, <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-steve-bannon-has-exploited-google-ads-to-monetize-extremism>.

³Leon Yin and Aaron Sankin, "Google blocks advertisers from targeting Black Lives Matter YouTube videos," The Markup, April 9, 2021, <https://themarkup.org/google-the-giant/2021/04/09/google-blocks-advertisers-from-targeting-black-lives-matter-youtube-videos#youtube-justice-terms>.

- ⁴ James Vincent, “Google ‘fixed’ its racist algorithm by removing gorillas from its image-labeling tech,” *The Verge*, January 12, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/1/12/16882408/google-racist-gorillas-photo-recognition-algorithm-ai>.
- ⁵ Safiya Umoja Noble, “The Enduring Anti-Black Racism of Google Search,” *OneZero*, July 14, 2020, <https://onezero.medium.com/the-enduring-anti-black-racism-of-google-search-d024924bff77>.
- ⁶ Rebecca Hersher, “What happened when Dylann Roof asked Google for information about race?” *NPR*, January 10, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/01/10/508363607/what-happened-when-dylann-roof-asked-google-for-information-about-race>.
- ⁷ “2022 Diversity Annual Report,” Google, <https://about.google/belonging/diversity-annual-report/2022/>.
- ⁸ Tracy Jan, “The Striking Race Gap in Corporate America,” *The Washington Post*, December 15, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/interactive/2021/black-executives-american-companies/>.
- ⁹ Martin Coulter, “A longtime Google executive provoked criticism from colleagues after posting and deleting a tweet about buying and selling people for profit,” *Business Insider*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/google-exec-urs-holzle-buying-and-selling-people-tweet-2022-3>.
- ¹⁰ Hugh Langley, “A Google executive apologized to employees after tweeting about the merits of buying and selling people for profit. ‘The connections to slave trading that should have been obvious to me simply weren’t,’ he wrote,” *Business Insider*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/google-executive-apology-backlash-urs-holzle-alphabet-buying-selling-people-2022-3>.
- ¹¹ Guardian staff and agencies, “Google gives Black workers lower-level jobs and pays them less, suit claims,” *The Guardian*, March 18, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/mar/18/google-black-employees-lawsuit-racial-bias>.
- ¹² Lauren Kaori Gurley, “Google settles with 4 engineers over complaint it fired them for organizing,” *Vice*, March 21, 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/88gbjz/google-settles-with-four-engineers-over-complaint-it-fired-them-for-organizing>.
- ¹³ “Color Of Change secures agreement from Facebook to create civil rights accountability infrastructure,” *Color Of Change*, https://colorofchange.org/press_release/color-of-change-secures-agreement-from-facebook-to-create-civil-rights-accountability-infrastructure/.
- ¹⁴ Rebecca Heilweil and Shirin Ghaffary, “Why Facebook Failed Its Civil Rights Audit,” *Vox*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/7/9/21318896/facebook-civil-rights-audit-hate-speech-failed-zuckerberg-white-nationalism-sheryl-sandberg>.
- ¹⁵ “Facebook’s Civil Rights Audit — Final Report,” July 8, 2020, <https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Civil-Rights-Audit-Final-Report.pdf>.

- ¹⁶ Laura Murphy, “Airbnb’s Work to Fight Discrimination and Build Inclusion,” September 8, 2016, https://blog.atairbnb.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/REPORT_Airbnbs-Work-to-Fight-Discrimination-and-Build-Inclusion.pdf.
- ¹⁷ Saijel Kishan, “Amazon to Undergo Racial Audit, Led by Former AG Lynch,” *Bloomberg*, April 18, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-18/amazon-to-undergo-racial-audit-led-by-former-ag-loretta-lynch>.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Ellen McGirt, “Uber has agreed to a civil rights audit, but will the results lead to any social change?” *Fortune*, May 10, 2022, <https://fortune.com/2022/05/10/uber-civil-rights-audit-social-change-race-gender-safety/>.
- ²⁰ Fola Akinnibi, “Amazon and Match Are Among Firms Asked by New York Pension for Racial Audit,” *Bloomberg*, January 19, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-19/amazon-match-among-firms-asked-by-ny-pension-for-racial-audit>.
- ²¹ “2022 Annual Meeting of Stockholders,” Alphabet Investor Relations, <https://abc.xyz/investor/other/annual-meeting/>.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ “Racial Justice,” Google.org, <https://www.google.org/racial-justice/>.
- ²⁵ Chauncey Alcorn, “Google CEO to meet with Black college leaders following racism allegations,” *CNN*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/19/business/google-sundar-pichai-hbcus/index.html>.