



Amazon Web Services (AWS) Fact Sheet

What is Amazon Web Services (AWS)?

If you use the Internet, odds are you're using Amazon Web Services (AWS). AWS is a cloud platform that according to its website is a “connected network of secure digital storage systems” that are stored remotely and can be accessed from anywhere, 24/7. The Cloud enables the storage of large amounts of data and the ability to rapidly organize and analyze data with machine learning and artificial intelligence, among other technologies. As detailed by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)'s *Investigate*, AWS is the largest provider of cloud storage services in the world, controlling about one-third of the global market. As of 2020, sales from AWS alone totaled \$45 billion, which amounted to over 50% of Amazon's operating income. Moreover, as explained by Ryan Gerety, interim director of Athena, AWS is Amazon's computational power, and it is the heart of Amazon's empire. And what's more, this empire is located in Northern Virginia, already home to a “constellation of intelligence agencies and defense contractors,” and where of course it is now also joined by HQ2.

AWS & the U.S. Federal Government

Amazon maintains a version of AWS specifically for the federal government, called AWS GovCloud. Built with additional security in mind, AWS GovCloud is the largest cloud provider for the U.S. government, including the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The U.S. Department of Defense has also solicited proposals from Amazon and other tech companies for a multi-billion-dollar cloud contract. According to *Investigate*, as of 2021, AWS GovCloud serviced 6,500 government agencies and has 725 authorizations to provide government with cloud services, which it does both directly as well as through third parties. From 2007 to August 2021, Amazon was directly awarded 1,415 contracts by the U.S. government, amounting to a potential worth of \$1.4 billion. Amazon was further indirectly awarded at least \$6.3 billion via other companies, in which a third party company would contractually include the AWS platforms. This figure, however, is likely underreported. Moreover, as detailed by Ryan Gerety, just a few weeks into the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic, nine federal agencies and 14 states transferred their operations to Amazon Cloud.



Amazon Web Services (AWS) Fact Sheet

AWS & Immigration Enforcement

AWS GovCloud plays a crucial role for the agencies at the heart of this country's settler colonial and white supremacist immigration enforcement – Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). In 2019, DHS began to migrate the system it uses to search for people, by way of biometric data, to Amazon's cloud. Officials who have access to this database include DHS, other federal agencies, as well as international agencies.

Additionally, as investigated by Mijente, Amazon is directly complicit in ICE's detention and deportation of migrants from the U.S. Namely, DHS utilizes Palantir's software, which is called the Investigative Case Management (ICM) system and is hosted by AWS, to organize data that DHS uses to track migrants for deportation. AWS also powers a software called ATLAS that is used by DHS to "scan the records of millions of immigrants" which "can automatically flag naturalized Americans to potentially have their citizenship revoked based on secret criteria." Moreover, in summer of 2018, Amazon pitched its facial recognition software to ICE, which the agency could use to target and identify immigrants. More recently, ICE solicited a \$100 million+ deal for cloud infrastructure to be hosted by both AWS and Microsoft Azure.

In addition, in March 2021, Amazon became a partial owner of Air Transport Services Group Inc. (ATSG), which according to The Intercept is a "power player in the air cargo industry that has helped the United States forcibly deport thousands of migrants," in which passengers have been subjected to horrific violence and abuse.

AWS & Police Departments, Prisons and Jails

AWS hosts Amazon Ring, which despite only being acquired in 2018 is currently contracted with over 2,000 (or one in ten) law enforcement departments around the country to purportedly help police reduce and solve crime, though to little effect



Amazon Web Services (AWS) Fact Sheet

while at the same time expanding its capability for warrantless searches. Ring's Neighbors app has also been used to make racist comments and reports, contributing to the gentrification, criminalization and displacement of Black and Latinx and low income communities across the DMV. AWS also hosts Amazon's voice recognition and voice to text technology, which is currently used in dozens of prisons and jails around the country to surveil and monitor the phone calls of incarcerated people and their families. Generally speaking, AWS seeks to innovate and improve the "agility" of law enforcement's criminalization and violence against Black and Indigenous people, and countless communities marginalized by white supremacy and capitalism.

AWS & Israel

It's important to underscore that the so-called U.S. isn't the only settler colonial government that Amazon provides AWS to. According to Investigate, as of April 2021, both AWS and Google Cloud Platform are developing a new cloud infrastructure for the Israeli government, called Project Nimbus, for \$1.2 billion. The companies will provide cloud infrastructure to help the Israeli government (including their military, police, prison service, and land authority) continue Israel's occupation and brutality against the Palestinian People.

What Powers AWS? Data Centers.

According to *Data Center Frontier*, over the last decade, Amazon has built up a massive presence in Northern Virginia with its data centers – and it continues to do so. Over the past 10 years, AWS has spent \$35 billion on cloud computing infrastructure in Northern Virginia, where it currently operates over 50 data centers, known as the AWS US-East cloud region – *“the largest single concentration of corporate data center infrastructure on earth.”* In addition to AWS' already established data centers, the company continues to purchase more and more land in the DMV –



Amazon Web Services (AWS) Fact Sheet

the ancestral lands of many Indigenous Nations and Tribes, including the Piscataway, Nacotchtank, Pamunkey, Doeg-Tauxenants, and Manahoac Peoples — for the purposes of constructing even more data centers. The water and energy costs of maintaining data centers is very high. Some of the largest data centers use the same amount of electricity that could power 80,000 households. In 2009, Amazon estimated that a 15 megawatt data center can require up to 360,000 gallons of water a day in order to cool the machine equipment. Amazon has since pledged to be more environmentally sustainable, but many activists and researchers have criticized many of Amazon's efforts as nothing more than greenwashing.

But so what?

What if tomorrow AWS didn't host the CIA? Or the surveillance technology utilized by pol(ice)? Would we still care about AWS? The answer is **YES**, because AWS is not a neutral force. As detailed by Ryan Gerety, because AWS now controls so much of the Internet infrastructure, Amazon is able to make decisions about who can and cannot be on the Internet. As Amazon continues to drive the rise of artificial technology, it must be recognized that Amazon is currently the only technology company with enough server capacity to harness the massive amounts of computational power required of artificial intelligence technologies.

As Gerety warns, the next generation of technology built and funded with public funds will be dominated by only a small number of companies, and that will certainly include Amazon. This means that Amazon will continue to drive the privatization of technology through contracts with government entities, paid for by public funds, that Amazon will profit from and re-invest into its warehouse expansion, tech development (such as facial recognition), and hiring more government and military officials to procure more government and military contracts. Thereby creating a



Amazon Web Services (AWS) Fact Sheet

continuously escalating cycle of profit and technology driven by carceral logics of white supremacy, capitalism and ableism. In so doing, Black, Indigenous, Muslim, disabled and all marginalized communities will continue to bear the brunt of Amazon's state-funded technological tools of surveillance and punishment.

In light of all of this, what truly does Amazon's vacuous support of Black Lives mean? Its empty pledge to protect the climate? Its hollow criticism of the Muslim and African Ban? We know Amazon has taken positions to try to indicate that it's on the right side of justice, but we truly need not look any further than Amazon's own actions and statements to know this couldn't be further from the truth. And this is precisely why we must take a stance and fight back.