

# Project Liberty

An Interview with Frank H. McCourt, Jr.,  
Executive Chairman, McCourt Global and Founder and Executive Chairman, Project Liberty,  
and Martina Larkin, Chief Executive Officer, Project Liberty

**EDITORS' NOTE** Frank McCourt is a civic entrepreneur and the Executive Chairman of McCourt Global, a private family company committed to building a better future through its work across the real estate, sports, technology, media, and finance industries, as well as its significant philanthropic activities. He is a fifth-generation builder who is extending his family's 130-year legacy of merging community and social impact with financial results, an approach that started when the original McCourt Company was launched in Boston in 1893. McCourt is a passionate supporter of multiple academic, civic, and cultural institutions and initiatives. He is the founder and Executive Chairman of Project Liberty, a visionary effort to transform the internet through a new, equitable technology infrastructure and rebuild social media in a way that enables users to own and control their personal data. The project includes the development of a groundbreaking, open-source internet protocol called the Decentralized Social Networking Protocol (DSNP), which will be owned by the public to serve as a new web infrastructure. It also includes the creation of the McCourt Institute, launched with founding partners Sciences Po in Paris and Georgetown University in Washington, DC, to advance research, bring together technologists and social scientists, and develop a governance model for the internet's next era. In 2020, McCourt launched and became CEO of Unfinished, an initiative that aims to strengthen civic life in the digital age by redirecting technology, especially social media, to fuel collaboration over division; renew and strengthening civic institutions to accelerate inclusive problem-solving; and grow a fairer economy. McCourt has served on Georgetown University's Board of Directors for many years and, in 2013, made a \$100 million founding investment to create Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy. He



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expanded on this project in 2021 with a \$100 million investment to catalyze an inclusive pipeline of public policy leaders and put the school on a path to becoming tuition-free. McCourt owns the French football club Olympique de Marseille and formerly owned the Los Angeles Dodgers. With family roots in the construction business dating back to the late 19th century, he has built upon this history with initiatives ranging from the development of Boston's Seaport to large, mixed-use projects in Dallas, London, New York City, and elsewhere. McCourt graduated from Georgetown University, and is a proud father of six.

Martina Larkin assumed the role of CEO of Project Liberty in December 2022, following an international career working at the intersection of public policy, geopolitics, economics and innovation. She is an experienced leader and recognized expert well versed in innovation and international economics and politics. Prior to joining Project Liberty, she was Vice President for Global Issues at System, an artificial intelligence and data science company based in the United States. Before that she spent 16 years at the World Economic Forum, most recently as Head of Europe and Eurasia where she oversaw the Forum's activities in 56 countries, working with business leaders across all sectors, as well as representatives

from governments and international and civil society organizations. Previously she led the Forum's think tank, the Global Agenda Councils, and the Young Global Leaders Foundation. Earlier in her career, she was Associate Vice President at Lazar & Company, an investment bank, and held positions at Nestlé Switzerland. Larkin has helped launch numerous innovative initiatives and global networks addressing emerging technologies, the environment, education, and economic and political development. She has forged successful interdisciplinary regional and global coalitions, working with diverse groups of stakeholders to effect change. She is a member of several nonprofit boards, including the European Institute of Innovation and Technology of the European Commission; the international advisory panel for the Future of Science and Technology of the European Parliament; SITRA, Finland's innovation think tank; Deusto University and Circulo de Empresarios, in Spain. She is also a member of the European Council on Foreign Relations. Larkin holds a degree from Fordham University, an MBA from ESCP in Paris and was awarded the prestigious Yale World Fellowship from Yale University in 2011. She speaks English, French and German fluently, and lives in London with her family.

**PROJECT BRIEF** Project Liberty ([projectliberty.io](http://projectliberty.io)) aims to create a new civic architecture for the digital world that returns the ownership and control of personal data to individuals, embeds ethical values into technology, and expands economic opportunities for web users and developers alike. The initiative seeks to accelerate the world's transition to an open, inclusive data economy that puts citizens in control—a future in which all people, not just the few, directly benefit from their participation and contribution. The success of this work depends on many people and organizations actively working together to shape a better future.

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**What was your vision for creating Project Liberty and how do you define its mission?**

*McCourt:* Over a period of time, I came to the conclusion that if we were going to fix, or maybe even save, democracy, we needed to fix the technology that now underpins how we live, learn, work, do business, and communicate. Technology has such an important role in society and unfortunately the way the current technology architecture was designed is not conducive at all to democracy. It has enabled a few major companies and executives to consolidate significant power. Our technology today is great if you want to support autocracy, but it is not so great if you want to support individual rights and the freedoms and liberties assorted with democracy. We feel that the current tech architecture is fundamentally flawed. Fortunately, we are at a moment when the web is evolving from Web 2.0 to Web 3.0, and we have an opportunity to reset and redesign. This is a great opportunity because 30 years ago not many people knew what the internet was about, and now people do know so instead of pointing fingers, we are focused on coming forward with a comprehensive, people-centered solution and getting it right.

I would also add that social media, which is a product of the current tech design, has unleashed very unhealthy things on society. When you have social media platforms that are focused on advertising revenue and keeping people online – and anger and rage is one way to keep people online – this is not healthy for individuals, families, and children in particular, and is certainly not healthy in order to keep a society woven together. Social media today is optimizing for polarization and this type of addictive behavior online, which is very destructive. We need to step back, assess what is going on, and go to the core of the problem in order

to fix the design and fix the infrastructure, and then start building beautiful things on top of it.

**Martina, what excited you about the opportunity to lead Project Liberty and made you feel it was the right fit?**

*Larkin:* I spent several decades working at the intersection of tech, society, and geopolitics, so when this opportunity came along it was super exciting. The mission of Project Liberty resonates with me, and the timing is right since this is the moment when there is an opportunity to really do something with the technology that is out there that we did not have ten years ago. We have also seen a decline in democracies around the world in regard to civil discourse and individual rights. I thought it was a unique opportunity that was at the intersection of the areas that I had spent my career involved in, and the team behind Project Liberty is very impressive. It is important to have a mission and then to have the right people working with you in pursuit of that mission, and that is all present with Project Liberty.

**You have referred to Project Liberty as a movement. Will you elaborate on the concept of this effort creating a movement?**

*McCourt:* The last time around, when Web 2.0 became a novelty with all of these amazing things being built, there was an infatuation with it and we led with the tech. It was very much a “move fast and break things” mentality. There is nothing wrong with moving fast, but I think a big step was skipped in not bringing in key parts of society to understand governance issues and ethical issues that would result from the tech. The policymakers were another group that was left behind since the tech happened so fast that our policymaking apparatus today is still playing catch up.

The movement piece of Project Liberty is about how we engage civil society and

citizens who right now are really being treated as subjects and being targeted with their data being exploited and monetized without sharing the benefits, and that data is now even being weaponized. People are being manipulated, which is not democratic, and it has happened in a way where there has not been a lot of transparency. The tech led and everything followed.

My company, McCourt Global, is in the infrastructure business, and we build projects around the world. We do not build a project and then ask someone to create the design that replicates what we built. We are deeply concerned about the design of our projects and collaborate with great designers and engineers on these projects. What is always first with a building project of any kind? Safety. Whether it is highway safety or bridge safety or airport safety and so on, it is about safety first. You design safety into the infrastructure from the beginning. Too often, with technology, safety has not been a consideration. Democracy has not been a significant consideration. Truth has not been a substantial consideration.

We need to fix the tech, but fixing the tech alone will not save democracy. We are focused on a project that brings forth innovations in the technology, but also has a governance track and policy track and, perhaps most importantly, a people track. We think of it as a campaign and a way to engage civil society so that people understand why this effort should matter to them and hopefully will matter to them. We are beginning to see this evolve with more awareness around the impacts of social media on mental health of young people. This feels similar to the recognition years ago with drinking and driving when Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) showed up. Imagine the idea of mothers against the negative impacts of social media – that is what we need. We need the realization of the

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impacts that this is having on our children and families and communities, and for people to be talking about it at the dinner table, rather than focusing on some crazy tweet that has people entertained.

The internet is awesome – there is plenty of room on the internet to provide all sorts of entertainment and news for people – but how about embedding some values and principles around what is appropriate and what is not appropriate. This is going to mean that civil society needs to be involved in shaping technology and digital governance.

**Who are the stakeholders in this effort?**

*Larkin:* Society at large. It is about working with academia, business, and social impact leaders, policymakers – everyone is impacted by the internet. We need to engage anyone who is willing to get involved and we want to have open doors to bring others in to shape this with us. This is about benefiting and empowering people, rather than platforms.

*McCourt:* I think that many people are asking if this is how they want the internet to work, or if there is a better design that still provides all of the benefits but is a more coherent and supportive internet. We live in a democratic society and need to take advantage of this moment when decentralization is in play and there is new technology that will allow decentralization to become a reality, but let's not let the tech run it, rather let's get the social scientists and civil society at the table with the technologists so that it is designed

with clear results in mind. You consider truth and safety in the design before you start building it.

This is becoming one of the most important geopolitical issues in our day, and as Martina said, this is hugely important for societies, for governments to be able to govern, and for democracies to be able to thrive and survive.

**Where is Project Liberty on its journey to create a new civic architecture for the digital world?**

*McCourt:* I think society is well down the line in beginning to understand the problems and is aware that something is not working. On the other hand, I think we are in the early innings in getting people to understand that the internet does not need to work the way it works now. It works the way it works because of some very basic protocols that we all agreed to adopt – now what if we added other protocols so that it was designed to work differently, starting with giving people ownership and control of their data. I think that agency is fundamental to a reengineered internet, and we have the ability to return agency to individuals.

*Larkin:* I totally agree with Frank. We want people to understand that there is a solution, but also understand that it is necessary to educate people about what this means and how we are embedding values as we look at the design. It is about getting back to basics and bringing people on board to join the movement.

**How important is it to explain this effort in a simple and clear way that people can relate to?**

*McCourt:* I think that this is one of the real challenges that we have at Project Liberty and one of the things we are working on. I do not think it is a single way – it is multiple ways to communicate with different constituencies that are thinking about this problem from different perspectives. Some are thinking about it at the level of democracy, others are thinking about it at the level of geopolitics, and many are thinking about it in regard to how it impacts them personally as well as their children and their families. We need to have different approaches with different constituencies to tell this story in the most effective way.

I think a way to illustrate the challenge and the opportunity is to go back to the early 1990s when my family started a telecom company that was an early mover with the internet and was the first to bundle phone, television, and internet service. It was very well received by customers who were interested in leaving the carrier they were on to come over to the service we had started. People were excited until it came time to sign the contract and they asked to keep their same telephone number, and we had to tell them this was not possible because the baby bells at the time owned their number. Most people wanted to wait until they could keep their same number, and in 1996 the Telecommunications Act was passed and telephone numbers became portable. I mention this

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because at that time a phone number, which has little value, had a lot of emotional importance to people. They would not change the carrier they were on unless they could bring their phone number with them.

Now, here we are 30 years later, and people have an entire digital identity – what I call a digital DNA. It is your digital life, which is worth a lot more than a phone number, and I think a challenge and an opportunity is to create that same emotion and attachment that people had with their phone numbers in the 1990s to how they feel about their digital identity today. If that happens and people start to say all that data should be their own, and that they should have access and control of it and decide what to do with it, that is the game changer. This is the bridge that we need to create and cross in my opinion, and I believe this will happen as people understand more and more about the value of their digital archive that is everything from the time you are born all the way through your lifetime.

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**How important has it been to build the team at Project Liberty and to build partnerships?**

*Larkin:* It is critical. This is not something we can shape on our own. A range of people and partnerships are needed to inform and advance this effort. We are thinking of many milestones ahead and it takes a great team to

get there. We talk about 2024 as the year of democracy because there are approximately 70 elections taking place around the world and this is a time for Project Liberty to show up. We are working on what that means and how we are going to make a critical impact that will move the needle in terms of strengthening democracy, restoring trust, and empowering people.

**What made you feel the time was right for a leadership transition at Project Liberty?**

*McCourt:* I had said privately to my leadership team at McCourt Global a year ago that by the end of this year I wanted to essentially flip how my time was being used, and rather than spending 90 percent of my time on our businesses around the world and 10 percent of my time at Project Liberty, I wanted to essentially flip this time allocation. I needed to bring someone into the business to replace me as CEO at McCourt Global, and we made the announcement that Shéhérazade Semsar-de Boissésou is joining the company as CEO in January 2023. I also realized that I did not want to go from the CEO of one place to the CEO of another place because there is a lot of responsibility that a CEO has, and it takes up a lot of time. I wanted to free myself up to be able to have the time to actually push this project out and to be able to engage with people to bring them to the point of belief that this is possible. The fact that we were able to attract someone of Martina’s caliber with a lifetime of experience in this area who will do a better job than I would as CEO is

reassuring and gives me the confidence to make this leadership transition.

**Martina, how do you describe your leadership style?**

*Larkin:* When you are leading this type of visionary project, you need to give people the freedom to do their work. I am focused on building a high-performing team and am here to help guide them. I see it as co-leading and working together as a team to achieve our mission.

**Do you enjoy the process and take moments to celebrate the wins?**

*McCourt:* I don’t feel that we have a lot of time to reflect on what we have accomplished, but I am hugely grateful for everyone’s efforts in making it happen. This is a huge undertaking and I have a viewpoint that this can happen much more quickly than people realize because the one thing about technology is that once the mindset shifts, things can happen very fast. The technology that supports this project is happening and it has created an incredible amount of possibilities for the future of the Web.

I would say that one thing that I am very proud of and grateful for is getting to the point in my life where I am able to bring in seasoned and accomplished executives that share my ambition and goals and values. For them to have the confidence in what we are doing, both on the McCourt Global side and the Project Liberty side, with Shéhérazade and Martina coming on to take over the reins, that is an accomplishment. ●

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