

The Psychology of Silicon Valley, Katy Cook, 2020

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1. Introduction

Social media platforms increasingly dominating econ, polit & social life. SVs promise to make the world a better place seems increasingly hollow as it becomes clear that its values and intentions have been corrupted by a system that continues to prioritise the wrong things: profits, shareholders, consumption.

2. Identity

Bay area an 'ideas culture' (13). Extreme wealth offset by extreme economic inequality and financial hardship (15) that no longer work for the average person ... (the system) favours the rich and powerful (17). (The earlier) democratic, utopian vision ... began to break down with the commercialisation of the internet in the early 2000s (19). Tech was becoming a playground for the counterculture, who saw in it the opportunity to create a more inclusive, distributed, and pro-human future. But established business interests only saw new potentials for the same old extraction ... They 'set up the wrong financial incentives.' (20).

Two of the most salient values throughout SV are a dedication to problem-solving and big ideas (which most often comes) in the form of technical solutions. ... Engineering work in particular is often associated with a mathematical and logical way of envisioning solutions (22). (Hence) two key profile traits characteristic of programmers (are): an interest in solving puzzles and a dislike of or disinterest in people (23). So the industry (selects for) antisocial, mathematically inclined males... (24). Hence 'those with autism or autistic traits are over-represented in these disciplines, particularly engineering and mathematics. (24) Correlations with Asperger's-type traits, including 'obsessive interest in a single object or topic to the exclusion of any other.' Often seen as 'a major asset in the field of computer programming.' (25). More recent work suggests

alexithymia – characterised as ‘an inability to identify emotions in the self and others, which is characterised by a lack of emotional awareness, dysfunctional patterns of relating and a lack of empathy (26).

The Hubris Bubble. Industry arrogance may stem ‘from a belief that no problem existed that tech could not solve.’ Also that execs ‘were the smartest and best suited to solve the problems they were tasked with’ and ‘unaware exceptionalism:’ the ‘perception of doing something new and radical was often accompanied by a sense of hubris and, in extreme cases, almost an expectation of worship’ (29). Hence SV as ‘an industry that does not understand itself in a variety of important ways’ (30).

3. Culture and Environment

Salient features of any environment are ‘the people who comprise it and the quality of the relationships that occur within it’ (37). SV has ‘a staggering amount of unconscious bias.’ Three primary issues:

- Tech tends to be an uncommonly homogenous culture, marked by a lack of diversity and an unwillingness to embrace pluralism.
- It is rife with discrimination, including sexism, ageism, and racism, as well as harassment.
- There is a disturbing level of immaturity that permeates many corporations, often emanating from the highest levels (39).

The homogeny, bias, and, at times, hostile culture towards those who don’t ‘fit’ have forced SV companies to acknowledge an industry-wide working environment that is fundamentally broken and unhealthy, and which no amount of free lunches or company perks can fix (44). Unconscious assumptions (47). When gender issues are included the SV culture has been described as ‘male bravado’ + ‘unchecked arrogance’ + ‘a laser focus on growth and financial success while ignoring workplace regulations’ (50).

O’Neil and the way that bias is built into algos (51). Hence ‘as algos increasingly take on ever more significant jobs, they will not only perpetuate grossly racist and sexist stereotypes, but will also have profound, tangible effects on people’s lives’ (53).

4. Myths and Stories

Our actions, beliefs and behaviours are informed, in large part, by the narratives we believe to be true about the world around us. ‘Humans prefer power to truth’ (Harari). Since narratives are developed ‘not necessarily to inform, but to ensure psychological cohesion and social cooperation, our stories often come at a price and there is often a tension between the stories we tell and the facts we encounter’ (66). ‘SV is full of myths. Some of which are true, many of which are not’ (67). Indeed, marketing experts have quietly ‘advanced a narrative that has shaped how the world sees SV and how the Valley perceives itself’ (68). List of SV myths. Sound bites (may) seek to reflect the ‘lofty aspirations’ and ‘benevolent ideals’ of SV but they are also, to varying degrees, ‘false and toxic aphorisms designed to mask the true intentions of the companies who craft them’ Such slogans ‘are a distraction from the true corporate aims of the industry, which is to ‘bring in the largest amount of users, for the longest period possible, at the most

frequent rate.’ Overall CV ‘has managed to paint a self-serving picture of itself that fails to reflect the reality of its priorities and intentions’

‘Corporations (are) designed to turn a profit – not to make your life better, and not to be your friend.’ A further myth is that ‘tech can not only change the world but, in the process, make it a better place’ (70). Making the world a better place?? No. (Rather it) ‘multiplies the returns and financial dominance of those who already enjoy immense power.’ Furthermore. ‘the success of the show depends on the promulgation of a culture that is distracted’ (71). G & FB leaders ‘may seem to some like benevolent plutocrats, but, in fact, they are malevolent and without ethics’ (T-Bone Burnett 2019). SV ‘gives us the illusion that it’s solving big problems while in fact addressing utterly trivial ones’ (Morozov). All-in-all ‘there is very little world-changing going on. There is, however, a lot of selling stuff’ (72).

The ‘growing incongruence between what tech says and what it does’ (Tarnoff). The original aims and ideals of the tech community still linger ... but they have been corrupted and misaligned from their original intent’ (73). ‘Capital doesn’t want to change the world. Capital wants to make more capital’ (74). ‘A lot of design energy has been spent finding problems that aren’t problems’ (76). ‘Tech’s rallying cry to “change the world” ... proves not so much false as misleading’ (77). The most pressing, and interesting contradiction: while promising one world that offers “happiness, peace, prosperity and even eternal life,” tech has delivered another, fraught with problems and challenges none of us could have envisioned’ (78). Re: FB et al ‘the primacy of growth ... precludes the possibility of responsible innovation.’ ‘Venture capitalists have ... spent years looking the other way.... (80) (Griswold). (It is) ‘the twin totems of speed and aggression that animate many programmers and venture capitalists in the US tech industry’ (82) (Larson).

A critical shortcoming of the industry: ‘the tendency to grow without necessarily maturing, and the willingness to assume the most important professions of the digital age without assuming the corresponding moral demands those roles entail’ (83). The ‘dangerous discrepancy between the responsibility with which the industry has been entrusted and the hands-off approach it assumes.’ *The disruption myth...* Disruption for the sake of growth is neither a pardonable nor a permissible ideology. *Tech knows best* (two underlying beliefs): those leading the tech industry know what’s best ... and that *they are trustworthy, upstanding custodians of our wellbeing*. Neither is correct (85). Technopaternalism (86). Some evidence that these popular myths are being dismantled by ‘tech’s “series of scandals around fake news, platform bias, foreign interference and privacy concerns” (87).

Summary: We have collectively allowed and set a precedent that needs to be reversed as soon as possible and replaced with a better, healthier, and more mature narrative based on awareness, fact, and more sophisticated thinking about cultural health (89).

5. Motivation

Motivations are shaped by the values we hold (96). Distilling those of the (SV) industry allows us to appreciate the most basic and problematic discrepancy in SV: the tension of socially liberal values and technocapitalist incentives. Adam Smith highlighted not only

the need for free trade, private ownership and competition but also the necessity of ethics (97). The modern cap paradigm has gone 'off the rails' in pursuit of short-term gains. It requires 'both a new narrative and a new ethical foundation' Mackey & Sisoda (98). The way that technocapitalism monetises our personal lives, info, and on a global scale raises a number of Qs, particularly when the world's richest corps are not transparent about their motives, do not act in accordance with their stated values, and conceal their business practices in negligent actions. ... The tech industry's transgression is not its for-profit and corporate priorities, but a gross misrepresentation of its motives (99). SV has spent years and billions of dollars persuading the public to worship an industry that claims to have its best interests at heart.

The tech industry is driven by the same market forces as any other market-driven industry. ... Placing greater importance on making money than on taking care of people's needs results in a society with deeply unhealthy values, in which people come second to financial objectives. A society built on such values loses a great deal of its capacity for humanity (101). We have allowed the tech industry, through a lack of regulation and the proliferation of unhealthy behavioural norms, to become the bastion of an economic order that has abandoned morality in favour of dividends for an elite few (105).

Control. Power re-wires our brains in a way that ... is comparable to a traumatic brain injury. Research has found evidence of an inverse relationship between elevated social power and the capacity for empathy and compassion. Tech goes to Washington: influx of money into the U.S. lobbying industry. A healthy portion of lobbying budgets for G, FB & their tech counterparts have been used to oppose consumer privacy initiatives and online advertising regulations. The only new piece of U.S. legislation has been the Honest Ads Act (108). Tech-government employee exchange – SV influence. Also found in U.S. defence bodies. 'Soft power' techniques include: funding thinktanks, research bodies, trade assocs whose findings or influence further the industry's objectives (110).

Happiness fallacy & myth of consumerism. VG Harari quotes: 'hypercapitalism encourages consumption at the expense of collective wellbeing.' 'This narrative is informed not only through bad values, but also outright deception' (110). Hence, W culture 'defined by extreme individualism, competitiveness and isolation' (113). BUT 'the control and power held by hypercapitalist corporations, such as those that dominate the tech industry, are only as powerful as long as we collectively believe in what they are selling...' (115).

6. Truth, information and democracy

Chapter considers global and then more individual ones. In Oct 2000 G began selling ads on its platform embracing the very business model that, less than two years previously, Brin & Page had warned against. This departure 'illustrates a significant shift in motivation' (128). They became 'ad brokers.' FB does not sell your data – it protects it. It leases access to you, via ads, over and over again. 'Nothing has lit the fire under capitalism more in the past century than the ability to tech giants to target consumers, using the very data their users agree to give away for free. The purpose of ads is to change behaviour (130). 'The true cost of free services is far steeper than anyone had anticipated' (131). But 'it is actually too high. It is literally destroying our society because it incentivises automated systems that have these systemic flaws. The problem

with FB is FB' (132). The erosion of democracy (VG quote) due to a 'widening gap between what is needed for democracy to function effectively and the disruptive tech factors at play. 'While there has always been inaccurate info in circulation, never before has there been so much, and never before has it been weaponised at scale' (133). Impacts are highly corrupting: spread of mis- and dis-info, prioritisation of sensationalised content, filter bubbles & micro-targeting of individuals. Plus normalisation of propaganda and evisceration of traditional journalism... Now 'lies spread faster than truth ... (136).

Differences between *propaganda* (some basis in reality but presented in misleading way intended to influence attitudes or behaviour); *disinformation* (disseminating deliberately false info in which the sharer is aware and complicit) and *misinformation* (although false, the individual or group is unaware of its inaccuracy). Examples from Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, India, Brazil, Philippines. These practices are 'at the heart of the internet's collision with democracy, civic order and the degradation of human rights (139-40). Currently ... there is no unified position on how to treat false info online (141). Zuck / FB responses provide evidence of an 'extremely literal understanding of harm, free from nuance, and more social contextualised understanding (142).

Denialism – once confined to the fringes of public discourse, they now occupy a much more visible and central position as a result of the internet's global reach and interconnectivity. It is a 'post-enlightenment phenomenon' in which 'the world is (re)fashioned to take on any form the narrator desires' (143). D represents not only the erosion of info, but also the collective breakdown of order, truth, and the psychological orientation these provide' (144). These all tie back to the industry's focus on individualism, profit and ad-driven business model. Bold claims attract attention and trigger emotions. These are shared more which in turn results in more engagement and more profit (145). *Filter bubbles*: we tend to gravitate towards ideas that confirm what we already believe, which eventually blocks out the info that is not in line with our existing opinions' (146). Staying inside (them) hinders our ability to think differently, consider another's perspective or intelligently defend our own. Confirmation bias.

The innate desire to share. As social beings we constantly seek connection with others. But sharing can go one of two ways: agreement can lead to entrenchment, disagreement to defensiveness. A slippery slope from reasoned debate to outrage and moral fury (149). Increased callousness. Volatility heightened by the reduced social costs of such exchanges. Polarisation ... leads to widespread declines in trust and social capital. Filter bubbles seen as the biggest problem with FB. Digital misinformation now ranked among the top global risks for our society (150). What social media companies have failed to take account of ... is that the human brain is wired to collaborate locally ... and instinctively dislike or act with hostility toward strangers. FB's ambition to connect 2Bn people ... has actually driven intense polarisation, distrust and prejudice. ... Amplifying the universal tendency toward tribalism (152). Add in troll farms, auto and semi-auto accounts ... and you get the disasters of the US election and Brexit...

Democracy began declining in 2006/7. 2006 was the year Twitter was launched, FB was released to the public, and G acquired You Tube. In June the following year the iPhone made its debut. FB is abusive by design (157).

7. Economic inequality and employment

Automation itself is not the problem. It is the economic and social insecurity of those who will be affected by it (169). The most pressing problem is ... the skills gap ... and the ability of organisations and governments to help prepare, educate and transition workers to new roles (172). It is not technology that will displace humans from their jobs but the values at play in the corporations driving technological change. 'Social change is driven by decisions we make about how to organise our world. Only later does technology sweep in, accelerating and consolidating those changes' (Hyman, 173).

The gig economy's central premise: 'the notion of autonomy and the idea that people can choose to work when and where they want.' Hence 'Uber's creation of "driver partners." The haves and have nots. 'The fact that such a small group has been allowed to accumulate such extreme wealth is hugely problematic.' The US is 'the most unequal rich country in the world' (178). Hence the US is 'becoming less a capitalist society and more a feudal society' (181). Need for higher taxes. The example of Amazon (which has) fought to keep its workers from unionising. All of which is actually due to 'a series of policy failures at the very highest levels of government' (184). The game is rigged. Info is 'the most valuable resource in the world. What to do?

- Stop believing that tech companies are any different to other multinational corps,
- Ensure billionaires (etc) are appropriately taxed and regulated.

Overall 'capitalist values, when taken to an extreme, directly contribute to a decline in social wellbeing, a decrease in social capital, and an increase in psychopathology throughout society' (186). Unequal societies tend to abandon interest in the collective good. Pickett & Wilkinson (The Inner level) show that highly unequal societies suffer far worse outcomes in nearly every measurable category, including happiness. They conclude that happiness comes down not to how much money a country has, but how its wealth is distributed.

8. Mental health, relationships & cognition

It has taken decades and millions of cases of death and disease to begin to undo the damage done by research funded by special interests. The most prolific lobbying force in the US.

'The eruption of digital technologies into every corner of our lives has upended the social norms that science tells us are good for our health: deep connections, thoughtful communication, strong relationships and a sense of commitment' (202). Central to the problem of technology is its false promise of sociability. The false equation of social media with true connection is compounded by the nature of interactions online: divisiveness, anger, toxicity etc are high dangerous. (Noble, 2018) found that 'unregulated social platforms cause serious harm across a number of mental health categories.' Root cause of anxiety 'uncertainty about the future, magnified by an unprecedented number of accelerating social changes' (205).

The science of addiction. FB referred to as ‘an empire built on a molecule’ in ref to ‘the dopamine high the social media rely on to keep its captives – I mean customers, coming back for more’ (Parkin, 207)). Former FB president Sean Parker acknowledges that they knowingly and purposefully exploited human psychology for the purpose of growth, engagement and profit (208).

The Fogg model of the dopamine loop. *Motivation* – the drive to use the product. *Ability* – how user-friendly it is. And *Trigger* – what keeps you coming back for more (a signal, reward, notifications etc). The key to designing for addiction lies in offering variable rewards that eventually become so engrained they become second nature to our daily functioning (209). BUT, dopamine is not related in any way to either contentment or happiness. By contrast serotonin is non-addictive, long-term, ethereal and generally a shared experience... (211). The moral failing of the tech companies and consumer culture that displaces true foundations of happiness to the hypercapitalist economic system. Ayn Rand’s part in this whole disaster (my words).

Information discretion as ‘both a critical and necessary modern skill’ (216).

Characteristics of good relationships that are central to their health include: open communication, emotional intelligence, authenticity, intimacy, respect, trust, the ability to listen and be present, a tolerance for individual differences, and a caring, appreciative approach to others (219). (Gottman). Human beings are social creatures who have evolved to spend time together; (but) as we continue to divert our interactions from face-to-face online environments, our friendships flatten, our conversations become less deeply engaged, and our relationship become more connections. ... The depletion of close relationships in the US, decreased social interaction, and increased social isolation have deep consequences: numerous studies have linked isolation to both physical and mental ill-health (222).

9. Ways forward

Lack of **emotional Intelligence** (EI) is at the heart of the vast majority of SV’s problems. As demonstrated by Zuck (239). Goleman: **EI has 5 core skillsets: self-awareness, emotional control, self-motivation, empathy and relationship skills**. Zuck represents the tech industry by appearing to be ‘clueless and self-absorbed.’ Hence ‘lack of understanding or perhaps wilful ignorance of the emerging issues & challenges created by their products, services and business practices have rendered the industry increasingly unaccountable, untrustworthy and profoundly unaware (241). FB’s ignorance of the fact that ‘the machine (they’ve) built is being used to tear (people) apart’ (242). Hence O’Toole quote re: *the paradox of power*: as an individual’s power grows, his willingness to listen and capacity for empathy shrink, problematising the feedback loop and the cultivation of self-awareness. Growing the qualities necessary to enrich the industry’s self-awareness will require building a culture of continual self-improvement and prioritising qualities such as humility, collaboration and reflection.

Emotional control. The industry’s failure to self-regulate is hugely problematic (243). The tech industry may be many things but socially gifted is not one of them... Social skills encourage strong relationships, facilitate learning, build trust, compassion and collaboration, and a sense of mutuality between oneself and others (245).

Empathy. SV has a distinct lack of this. While tech change oft associated with progress, new tech also represents the displacement of jobs and the destruction of legacy industries.

Leadership. The values of technocapitalism are not the values that will make the world a better place; they are the values that will line the pockets of those who hold the most stock in the biggest companies (249). FB's DNA is based on the unchallenged power of an exceptional but morally flawed - or at least dangerously immature - leader who sees the world as a gigantic monetarisation playground (250). How can 'privacy' co-exist with FB's business model?

Values. The primary ethical threat posed by SV is that it is utterly unaware of its values. ... It represents a 'troubling dynamic' in that this 'most influential industry in the world is organised around speed rather than reflection and planning, convenience over connection, and individualism above social good *253). Can big tech be trusted? If we are to base our response on the data associated with its pattern of behaviour, the answer is no.

Why tech can't fix itself.

- Tendency to address flaws with more tech.
- Taking the steps necessary is at odds with how most companies generate growth and revenue, and,
- Perpetuating the thinking that got the industry into its current predicament.

The notion that more tech is the answer to bad tech is psychologically curious at best, irrational and self-serving at worst; and yet it happens constantly, not only within tech but throughout society (255). Social media platforms cannot solve the societal problems they have created because, ultimately, doing so will hurt their revenues and growth. Ref to HL Mencken's observation re: "the impossibility of getting someone to understand a proposition if his income depends on him not understanding it" (257).

"Tackling today's social and tech challenges requires the ability to think critically about their human context, rather than simply engineer solutions." And: "The act of aligning tech with human values will be paramount in ensuring that future technologies serve rather than undermine human progress" (Wadwa) (260).

Power to the people. It is our responsibility to express our disapproval, not only in principle but in practice. ... The number one means of immobilising companies like FB is to diminish their user base (261). Also 'scrutiny from employees at all levels' (269).

Regulation. Core statement re: govt's laissez-faire approach to regulation VG. VG. (271). Lasting and effective change must be the product of both a shift in the approach and strategies of legislation... Conclusions: Currently the financial punishments against big tech are not commensurate with the scale and illegality of their actions. The vast differences between the countries who levy them (273). New, more specific laws are necessary (274).

The EU and the GDPR (2018). Anti-trust reform. More sensible taxation. Anti-trust legislation must be adopted which frames the anti-trust argument in terms of the broader impacts of monopolies (276). Regulating companies begins with better understanding of their business model, social impacts and corresponding responsibilities (277).

Conclusion

We are standing in the midst of an unprecedented transition, standing at a crossroads, the stakes of which are incredibly high... (291) No one company or individual orchestrated the more nefarious impacts of tech knowingly. The negative consequences of tech are the result of the social and economic systems in which the tech industry operates and are unintended side effects of tech progress. So we:

- Need to understand what went wrong in the first place;
- Understand the psychology and values driving the industry ... (believing) that the world can be a better place; and,
- Ensure the industry moves forward with better values and healthier psych norms (which, in turn) requires a revisioning of the tech industry's ethical foundations.

Amazon's factories ... are symptoms of a profound democratic deficit inflicted by a system that prioritises the wealth of the few over the needs and desires of the many. ... Greed is one of the chief values in the industry we should aim to eliminate, along with speed and misogyny. The importance of growing our emotional intelligence and awareness, which are cornerstones of progress and psych development. (We also need) a more sophisticated model of thinking about how to improve tech (which includes) the capacity to think systematically and across disciplines (293).

(Overall) consider the impact ... of reimagining the collective psychology of the world's most influential industry such that its values and behaviours were aligned with social good. The example of Tim Berners-Lee and Solid.

Cook, K. (2020) *The Psychology of Silicon Valley*, London: Palgrave Macmillan

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