The New Atlantis
A Journal of Technology & Society

The Tech Backlash We Really Need

L. M. Sacasas

When Facebook co-founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg appeared before Congress in April, it was the culmination of a months-long rolling publicity debacle for the social media company. Most of the criticism directed at Facebook focused on the platform's impact on the 2016 election. Initially, concerns were raised about the ease with which false or misleading stories circulated through the platform, giving rise to the remarkably elastic term "fake news." Then, it became clear that Russian agents used Facebook's advertising tools to target particularly vulnerable voters in key districts with false stories and ads designed to stoke racial and political tensions. Finally, the Cambridge Analytica story broke. More than 87 million users had their data harvested under false pretenses by the political consulting firm for the purpose of precision targeting of ads for a number of political campaigns. It was this last scandal that finally led to Zuckerberg's appearance before Congress. It also led to the short-lived #DeleteFacebook movement and to the company's drop in market value by $75 billion within the space of a week—although their share price quickly recovered and is now nearly as high as it's ever been.

Zuckerberg's testimony was less than enlightening. Predictably, he excelled at the non-answer and the deflection of responsibility. What the congressional sessions chiefly revealed was that many members of Congress were not adequately prepared to question Facebook's CEO about his company's practices regarding privacy and user data, a dynamic that Zuckerberg used to his advantage. When Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah asked him how Facebook made money without charging its users, Zuckerberg, with well-calibrated bemusement, replied, "Senator, we run ads." Those watching the hearings might have been forgiven for wondering whether their best interests were any better served by Congress than by the social media company that played fast and loose with their personal data.

Zuckerberg's testimony also served as a key moment in what has come to be popularly known as the tech backlash, or "techlash." Facebook was

L. M. Sacasas *is a fellow of the Greystone Theological Institute and the director of its Center for the Study of Ethics and Technology, and a teacher in Winter Park, Florida. He writes about technology at The Frailest Thing (TheFrailestThing.com).*

not the only technology company dealing with mounting public criticism throughout 2017 and the early months of 2018. Last October, representatives from Google, Facebook, and Twitter appeared before Congress to answer questions about Russian interference in the 2016 campaign. This January, Apple was called upon by two major groups of investors to address the allegedly addictive nature—particularly for children—of its iPhones. In March, Uber and Tesla were in the public's critical eye for fatal accidents involving their autonomous vehicles, and YouTube was strongly criticized for disturbing content on its children's channel. Twitter has for months been criticized for allowing its service to be used by white supremacists and anti-Semitic hate groups. Algorithms used by corporations and civil institutions to help determine everything from loan eligibility to criminal sentencing have also been subject to greater scrutiny by scholars, journalists, and advocacy groups.

These public outcries over egregious cases of malevolent use of digital tools or of ethical negligence on the part of tech companies themselves have been reinforced by a steady chorus of *mea culpas* issuing from current and former Silicon Valley executives and designers. Many of these confessions have amounted to the belated admission that digital platforms driven by ad revenue models were designed for addiction in order to perpetuate the stream of data collected from users, a standard feature of what has come to be known as "surveillance capitalism." Sean Parker, Facebook's first president and a co-founder of Napster, stated Facebook's early motivation plainly: "How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?"

These are the broad outlines of the tech backlash. But against what, exactly, is the backlash? Is it against the ascendency of technology as the driving principle of modern society? Are we in the midst of a radical reordering of the way individuals relate to the devices, processes, and systems that increasingly order their lives? A closer look will reveal something far more modest: a limited series of reactions to specific cases of carelessness or overtly unethical behavior by tech companies. Indeed, we have been here before—recall, for example, the outrage in 2014 over Facebook's mood manipulation experiments on unsuspecting users—and we have good reason to expect that the current tech backlash will not amount to the substantive critique of contemporary technology that we very much need. Although some have said, and not entirely without justification, that this time is different, early indications strongly suggest that the tech companies will successfully navigate the storm and that technology's place in contemporary society will be undisturbed.

The Magnificent Bribe

The tech backlash can be framed, in part, as a reaction to the technological accident. "When you invent the ship," the French tech theorist Paul Virilio wrote, "you also invent the shipwreck; when you invent the plane, you invent the plane crash.... Every technology carries its own negativity, which is invented at the same time as technical progress." This negativity, the ever-looming accident, is the potential for harm that every new technology inevitably brings into existence.

Along these lines, one type of critique of the Cambridge Analytica scandal described it as the event that should awaken the field of computer science to the ethical ramifications of its work, in the same way that other disciplines have had their own moral wake-up calls, some of them deliberate outcomes and others accidents. For chemistry, perhaps it was the invention of dynamite and later poison gas, for physics the atomic bomb, for civil engineering bridge and dam failures, for biology eugenics, and for medicine the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study. Now computer science has had its own moment of reckoning, should it choose to perceive it as such, one that should spur the development of a professional code of ethics and institutional safeguards against unethical design practices.

The tech backlash can also be understood as a backlash against corporations and bad actors rather than technology *per se*. The problem, on this view, does not lie with the nature of digital technology's progress, but rather with the corporations that have designed, developed, and deployed digital tech for the sake of their bottom line, or else with malevolent users who have used it to unethical ends. In their own often specious defense, companies or bad actors may then talk about "accidents" and "unintended consequences" in order to deflect and diffuse responsibility for their actions.

These interlocking framings of the tech backlash are not altogether wrong, but they are incomplete and sometimes misleading. Focusing on the technological accident or intentionally malicious use can obscure what matters most: how a technology, used well and as intended, ultimately settles into the taken-for-granted material infrastructure of our daily lives.

Technology is a key component of the material infrastructure of our moral and political lives. It is most consequential precisely when it fades from notice and assumes a taken-for-granted status. Accidents and malicious use, in fact, often have the effect of foregrounding technologies and systems that have become invisible to us precisely because of their smoothly functioning ubiquity. We may be momentarily discomfited by

the newly perceived fragility or vulnerability of the technologies upon which we depend; rarely, however, do we reconsider the nature and extent of our dependence.

Lewis Mumford, in the 1964 article "Authoritarian and Democratic Technics," warned of a "magnificent bribe" at the heart of modern technology. Although its democratic aspects are "highly favorable," it is nevertheless authoritarian:

> Under the democratic-authoritarian social contract, each member of the community may claim every material advantage, every intellectual and emotional stimulus he may desire, in quantities hardly available hitherto even for a restricted minority: food, housing, swift transportation, instantaneous communication, medical care, entertainment, education. But on one condition: that one must not merely ask for nothing that the system does not provide, but likewise agree to take everything offered, duly processed and fabricated, homogenized and equalized, in the precise quantities that the system, rather than the person, requires.

It is a compelling image that helps us understand why tech backlashes, however powerful they may sometimes appear, never amount to much. It may be too late to refuse the bribe altogether—but we would do well to understand its terms if we are to make sense of our situation and the possible futures available to us.

How the Tech Backlash Fails

Social media platforms are the most prominent focal point of the tech backlash. Critics have understandably centered their attention on the related issues of data collection, privacy, and the political weaponization of targeted ads. But if we were to imagine a world in which each of these issues were resolved justly and equitably to the satisfaction of most critics, further questions would still remain about the moral and political consequences of social media. For example: If social media platforms become our default public square, what sort of discourse do they encourage or discourage? What kind of political subjectivity emerges from the habitual use of social media? What understanding of community and political action do they foster? These questions and many others—and the understanding they might yield—have not been a meaningful part of the conversation about the tech backlash.

We fail to ask, on a more fundamental level, if there are limits appropriate to the human condition, a scale conducive to our flourishing as the sorts of creatures we are. Modern technology tends to encourage users

to assume that such limits do not exist; indeed, it is often marketed as a means to transcend such limits. We find it hard to accept limits to what can or ought to be known, to the scale of the communities that will sustain abiding and satisfying relationships, or to the power that we can harness and wield over nature. We rely upon ever more complex networks that, in their totality, elude our understanding, and that increasingly require either human conformity or the elimination of certain human elements altogether. But we have convinced ourselves that prosperity and happiness lie in the direction of limitlessness. "On the contrary," wrote Wendell Berry in a 2008 *Harper's* article, "our human and earthly limits, properly understood, are not confinements but rather inducements to formal elaboration and elegance, to *fullness* of relationship and meaning. Perhaps our most serious cultural loss in recent centuries is the knowledge that some things, though limited, are inexhaustible."

We also often fail to question our commitment to the power of tools and technique. The Cambridge Analytica scandal revolved around the unethical manner in which data was collected from unsuspecting Facebook users by exploiting Facebook's terms of service as well as around Facebook's complicity and failure to acknowledge responsibility for its role in the affair. When Zuckerberg appeared before Congress, the few pointed questions he was asked also centered on Facebook's responsibility to protect user data. While privacy is clearly important, the questions offered little concern about the legitimacy or advisability of data-driven politics—about the acquisition and exploitation of voter data and the manipulation of increasingly sophisticated means of precision advertising. No one seemed to worry that the political process is being reduced to this type of data sophistry. While Congress rightly condemned a particularly nefarious method of data acquisition, the capture of political life by technique remained unchallenged.

This line of questioning opens up a broader set of concerns about the project to manage human life through the combined power of big data and artificial intelligence. In an earlier age, people turned to their machines to outsource physical labor. In the digital age, we can also outsource our cognitive, emotional, and ethical labor to our devices and apps. Our digital tools promise to monitor and manage, among other things, our relationships, our health, our moods, and our finances. When we allow their monitoring and submit to their management, we outsource our volition and our judgment. We seem incapable, however, of raising any deeper concerns than whether the terms of service are intelligible and our data secure.

The tech backlash, in other words, leaves untouched the consequences of technologies that are successfully integrated into our social milieu. From this perspective, the tech backlash is not so much a rejection of the machine, to borrow an older, more foreboding formulation, but, at best, a desire to see the machine more humanely calibrated. It reveals, in fact, how deeply committed we are to our technologies. It reveals as well how thoroughly our thinking and our public debates unfold within parameters determined by a logic that may justly be called technological.

Consider some of the proposed remedies that have emerged in connection with the tech backlash. In the immediate aftermath of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, a spontaneous movement began on Twitter using the hashtag #DeleteFacebook. It gained modest traction and spurred online debates about the moral and political merits of abstaining from the platform. A number of prominent tech writers, notably Siva Vaidhyanathan, a University of Virginia media scholar and author of the forthcoming *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*, argued that individual decisions to abandon the platform were ineffective and even counter-productive. Vaidhyanathan, among others, argued that deleting Facebook was a privilege that many users, especially those in developing countries for whom Facebook provides their only access to the Internet, could not afford. "If the people who care the most about privacy, accountability and civil discourse evacuate Facebook in disgust," Vaidhyanathan wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed, "the entire platform becomes even less informed and diverse."

Ultimately, the movement sputtered, proving the critics partly right. Less than a month after the scandal became public in mid-March, a widely reported survey of 1,000 Americans (not all of whom had Facebook accounts) found that nine percent claimed to have deleted their accounts. A reporter for *TechRadar* did the seemingly incredible math—apparently 19 million Americans had deleted their accounts. The implication was dubious, as the survey did not specify a timeline, or ask users about their response specifically to the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Indeed, the latest publicly available analytics reports actually suggest an *increase* during April in the number of U.S. Facebook users compared to the previous year, and rising daily use compared to March. Moreover, as noted earlier, Facebook's stock price has already fully recovered. The bribe remained too enticing for the vast majority of users and investors.

Those who find deleting Facebook an inadequate and unrealistic response often present regulating the big tech companies as the only way forward. It is almost certainly true that individual decisions by consumers

will not lead to meaningful reform of the tech industry. It is also true that the tech companies are unlikely to regulate themselves in the best interest of their users. Where regulatory interventions can secure more just and equitable outcomes, they ought to be pursued. Mark Zuckerberg himself has said that government regulation is "inevitable." Questions remain, however, about the scope of such regulations and whether or not there is sufficient political will and competence to make them a reality.

More importantly, legal remedies will not address the deeper and abiding moral and political consequences of digital tech. Not every problem with technology is amenable to legal or political remedy, especially when the contours and contexts of political debate have already been shaped by the technologies in question.

A More Humane Technology?

One of the more interesting responses to emerge in connection with the tech backlash is the founding of the Center for Humane Technology. The center is principally the work of Tristan Harris, one of the most prominent former Silicon Valley insiders now working to reform the industry. The center aims "to realign technology with humanity's best interests" and focuses its work on the erosion of human attention, on technology that "hijacks our minds." By "creating humane design standards, policy, and business models that more deeply align with our humanity and how we want to live," the center hopes to solve the problems Silicon Valley has created.

On its website, the center outlines four planks of action: inspiring humane design, applying political pressure, creating a cultural awakening, and engaging tech industry employees. In many respects, its efforts embody the best the tech backlash can offer. Its vision, however, presupposes broad public agreement about what exactly constitutes more *humane* technology. It trades, in other words, on a shared vision of human flourishing that may not actually exist. It speaks of "our humanity" and "how we want to live," but it is not altogether clear that it offers a meaningful answer to the questions of what constitutes humanity, of how we want to live, of what *we* means. It is not clear either that the center has reckoned with the power of the magnificent bribe.

Moreover, as is the case with regulation, so also with the center's efforts: As useful as they may prove to be, they will not finally touch upon the deepest consequences of our emerging technologies. They do not raise the most searching questions that should be asked of any technology,

particularly those that impact the lives of hundreds of millions of users worldwide. They take for granted the existing configuration of the techno-human milieu and that it must proceed, more or less, along the same trajectory. Their aspirations, bold as they may seem, are in reality modest. They amount to a recalibration of the system, not a challenge or reimagining.

This is unfortunate, for the center does come close to what is really needed: a way toward a more humane technology. But it has not accounted for the relationship between modern technology and the liberal democratic project. Liberal democracy professes a fundamental neutrality regarding competing visions of the good life, offering instead to protect basic human rights while creating the context for individuals to flourish with maximal freedom. In the space created by this professed neutrality, modern technology has flourished, unchecked by a robust and thick understanding of human flourishing. Paradoxically, modern technology may now be undermining the assumptions, social structures, and institutions required by liberal democracy.

The tech backlash, emerging as it has within this centuries-old trajectory, will not achieve the perspective necessary to offer a substantive evaluation of our technological disorders. The critique emanates from within the system, assumes the overall beneficence of the system, and serves only to maximize the system's power and efficiency by working out its bugs. Meanwhile, the big tech companies can rest ever more assured of their ability to withstand an occasional public battering and emerge unscathed so long as the bribe remains sufficiently enticing. So far, the tech backlash seems likely not to weaken the tech industry but to strengthen it, enhancing the power of the present techno-social configuration.

This is not, however, a case for either inaction or despair. It is, rather, a plea to make the most of the present moment when the curtain has been pulled back ever so slightly on the industry that does so much to shape our world. A backlash will not be enough; by definition it is sudden and fleeting and its course is determined by the forces against which it reacts. What is needed is a more sustained and clear-eyed reconsideration of our situation and a renewed capacity to imagine alternative configurations of the technological order.