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Conclusion

There is a quote from Theodore Parker, often attributed to Martin Luther King Jr., which states, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”¹ Despite some evidence to the contrary, I tend to agree with Parker—perhaps because I have to; it would certainly be harder to get up in the morning if it seemed we were going backwards.

The rather solemn truth, which I know you can handle if you’ve read this far, is that this moment demands a great deal of us. We are in the midst of an unprecedented transition, standing at a crossroads, the stakes of which are incredibly high. Climate change, economic inequality, job displacement, civic unrest, and the corruption of truth and our social wellbeing each impel us to act, collectively and quickly, to avoid a range of potential catastrophes. Ady Barkan, a healthcare activist and Director of the Center for Popular Democracy’s Fed Up Campaign, explains the significance of our historical moment:

We will either become a society that works exclusively for the rich and powerful, or we will enact large-scale structural reforms that restore fairness to our economy and political system. Each of us is called to do everything we can to ensure our society winds up in the right place.... The wealthy and the powerful in this country want nothing more than for us to tune

out... get cynical and lose hope, because that only solidifies their grip on all of this. We need to fight that instinct, hold onto hope, and keep fighting for a better future.²

How do we follow Barkan's advice, hold onto hope, and fight for a better future in the face of such profound and sweeping change?

Before we run to act, it is worth pausing to acknowledge (or at least assume) that no one company or individual orchestrated the more nefarious impacts of technology knowingly. The negative consequences of technology are the result of the social and economic systems in which the tech industry operates and are unintended side effects of technological progress; it follows that these are also unplanned for. No one anticipated Facebook data could be weaponized to psychologically profile its users and incite white nationalism; YouTube would send whole cultures down rabbit holes of extreme and false information; or that a few, mostly white, mostly male billionaires would financially benefit from the digital revolution at the cost of economic stability and a bifurcated job market. It's understandable that we have yet to illustrate the playbook we use to set these and other problems right and it's worth reiterating that we're all in this together.

In order to address the consequences of the digital world we so enthusiastically adopted, we need to understand what went wrong in the first place. Carl Jung observed, of a different but equally perilous impending catastrophe, that "[i]t is not the bomb that is the danger, but the psychology of the men who control it."³ Identifying the priorities, beliefs, and psychology of Silicon Valley that drive the problems created by tech is the first step to solving them.

Once we understand the psychology and values driving the industry, our responsibility rests on one simple thought: a belief that the world can be better than it currently is. This is our second, most difficult, and perhaps our most crucial task. Demanding a better future in the face of those that often seem to want nothing more than our fear, oppression, and complacency requires hope, resilience, and a shared reliance on each other for support.

Our third and final duty is to ensure the industry moves forward with better values and healthier psychological norms. This demands not only

an awareness of the factors that have led us to this critical point, but also a collective re-envisioning of the tech industry's ethical foundations, such that we can proceed in the most appropriate and socially healthy way possible. The informational chaos of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube; the bifurcation of the job market by Uber and others reliant on the gig economy; and the miserable working conditions in Amazon's factories share a central commonality, according to Ben Tarnoff and Moira Weigel: they "are profitable. If they were not, they would not exist. They 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."⁴ The greed described by Tarnoff and Weigel, according to technology strategist and activist Andrew Rasiej, is one of the chief values in the industry we should aim to eliminate, along with speed and misogyny, while those we should attempt to instill include empathy, diversity, and equity.⁵ To Rasiej's thoughtful list I would add the importance of collectively growing our emotional intelligence and awareness, which are the cornerstones of progress and psychological development.

In the same way positive thoughts can advance a prosocial agenda, negative thoughts can derail one. Our current political climate, combined with the ease of online outrage and a collective nervousness about the future, makes immobilizing our negative thoughts even harder than holding onto our positive ones. It's never been easier to backslide into feelings of fear and anger. It's worth bearing in mind, however, that panic and blame in particular "can distract us from looking at the whole system"⁶ and taking meaningful action. As Hans Rosling explains, when we retreat to our respective corners, point fingers, and "identify the bad guy, we are done thinking. And it's almost always more complicated than that. It's almost always about multiple interacting causes—a system. If you really want to change the world, you have to understand [it]."⁷ A more sophisticated method of thinking about how to improve technology demands not only emotional intelligence and psychological maturity, but, as Rosling outlines, perspective and the capacity to think systemically and across disciplines.

A revolution of systems and values may not sound as exciting as traditional social uprisings (unless you're me, who would consider a values reformation downright sexy). Such an evolution of thinking, behaviors,

and ethics, however, could considerably mitigate the formidable task ahead of us, course-correct an unsustainable, hypercapitalist system, and help us to avoid actual, real-life, Age of Revolution-esque uprisings. Maintaining a functional, peaceful society lies in creating a safe, economically secure, equitable culture informed by prosocial values. Consider the impact, then, of reimagining the collective psychology of the world's most influential industry such that its values and behaviors were aligned with social good. Where priorities like privacy, facts, and wellbeing outweighed tracking, click-bait, and the exploitation of our attention. Where arrogance and insularity were supplanted by openness and collaboration, and pursuit of profits and power was replaced by a prioritization of ethics and emotional intelligence.

The creator of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee, has repeatedly expressed his dismay at the current state of his invention and a desire to restore the more prosocial foundations of the internet as he intended it to be. "I want to challenge us all to have greater ambitions for the web," Berners-Lee states, "I want the web to reflect our hopes and fulfil our dreams, rather than magnify our fears and deepen our divisions."⁸ Berners-Lee is currently working on Solid, a decentralized online ecosystem that will give users power over their data and revive the peer-to-peer, open protocol on which the internet was originally developed. Solid is an example of technology built on the foundations of values and shared social good that gets us closer to the world as many of us imagine it could be—a world where we trust each other again, feel safe in our environments (both online and off), and use technology to create the best future for the greatest number of people, rather than an elite few. Are we up to the task? I believe we most certainly are. But only if we can appreciate how we got here, define a new narrative based on shared human values, and build up the parts of our psychology and humanity that will get us where we want to go.

Notes

1. Parker, T. (1918). Justice. In J. H. Holmes, H. D. Brown, H. E. Redding, & T. Goldsmith (Eds.), *Readings from Great Authors* (p. 18). New York: Dodd and Mead. (Martin Luther King, Jr., referenced Parker's quote in a 1958 article and again in a 1964 commencement ceremony.)

2. Favreau, J. (2019, May 2). *Pod Save America*. Retrieved from <https://open.spotify.com/episode/02yFiyQATJQdnaCl9mKbEe?si=0-sMfVY9TBmVbVkD3i-jMA>
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4. Tarnoff, B., & Weigel, M. (2018, May 3). Why Silicon Valley Can't Fix Itself. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/may/03/why-silicon-valley-cant-fix-itself-tech-humanism>
5. Rasiej, A. (2018, September). *Interview with Andrew Rasiej* (K. Cook, Interviewer).
6. Rosling, H., Rosling, O., & Rosling Rönnlund, A. (2018). *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong about the World—And Why Things are Better Than You Think* (p. 214). London: Sceptre.
7. Ibid., p. 221.
8. Berners-Lee, T. (2018, March 12). The Web is under Threat. Join Us and Fight for It. Retrieved August 18, 2018, from World Wide Web Foundation website: <https://webfoundation.org/2018/03/web-birthday-29/>

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