DISPATCHES

THE DESPOTS OF SILICON VALLEY

The tech world has its own ascendant political ideology, and it's past time we call it what it is.

BY ADRIENNE LaFRANCE

If you had to capture Silicon Valley's dominant ideology in a single anecdote, you might look first to Mark Zuckerberg, sitting in the blue glow of his computer some 20 years ago, chatting with a friend about how his new website, TheFacebook, had given him access to reams of personal information about his fellow students:

> ZUCKERBERG: Yeah so if you ever need info about anyone at Harvard
> ZUCKERBERG: Just ask.
> ZUCKERBERG: I have over 4,000 emails, pictures, addresses, SNS

FRIEND: What? How'd you manage that one?

ZUCKERBERG: People just submitted it.

ZUCKERBERG: I don't know why.

ZUCKERBERG: They "trust me"

ZUCKERBERG: Dumb fucks.

That conversation—later revealed through leaked chat records—was soon followed by another that was just as telling, if better mannered. At a now-famous Christmas party in 2007, Zuckerberg first met Sheryl Sandberg, his eventual chief operating officer, who with Zuckerberg would transform the platform into a digital imperialist superpower. There, Zuckerberg, who in Facebook's early days had adopted the mantra "Company over country," explained to Sandberg that he wanted every American with an internet connection to have a Facebook account. For Sandberg, who once told a colleague that she'd been "put on this planet to scale organizations," that turned out to be the perfect mission.

Facebook (now Meta) has become an avatar of all that is wrong with Silicon Valley. Its self-interested role in spreading global disinformation is an ongoing crisis. Recall, too, the company's secret mood-manipulation experiment in 2012, which deliberately tinkered with what users saw in their News Feed in order to measure how Facebook could influence people's emotional states without their knowledge. Or its participation in inciting genocide in Myanmar in 2017. Or its use as a clubhouse for planning and executing the January 6, 2021, insurrection. (In Facebook's early

days, Zuckerberg listed "revolutions" among his interests. This was around the time that he had a business card printed with I'M CEO, BITCH.)

And yet, to a remarkable degree, Facebook's way of doing business remains the norm for the tech industry as a whole, even as other social platforms (TikTok) and technological developments (artificial intelligence) eclipse Facebook in cultural relevance.

To worship at the altar of mega-scale and to convince yourself that you should be the one making world-historic decisions on behalf of a global citizenry that did not elect you and may not share your values or lack thereof, you have to dispense with numerous inconveniences—humility and nuance among them. Many titans of Silicon Valley have made these trade-offs repeatedly. YouTube (owned by Google), Instagram (owned by Meta), and Twitter (which Elon Musk insists on calling X) have been as damaging to individual rights, civil society, and global democracy as Facebook was and is. Considering the way that generative AI is now being developed throughout Silicon Valley, we should brace for that damage to be multiplied many times over in the years ahead.

The behavior of these companies and the people who run them is often hypocritical, greedy, and status-obsessed. But underlying these venalities is something more dangerous, a clear and coherent ideology that is seldom called out for what it is: authoritarian technocracy. As the most powerful companies in Silicon Valley have matured, this ideology has only grown stronger, more self-righteous, more delusional, and—in

the face of rising criticism—more aggrieved.

The new technocrats are ostentatious in their use of language that appeals to Enlightenment values—reason, progress, freedom—but in fact they are leading an antidemocratic, illiberal movement. Many of them profess unconditional support for free speech, but are

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vindictive toward those who say things that do not flatter them. They tend to hold eccentric beliefs: that technological progress of any kind is unreservedly and inherently good; that you should always build it, simply because you can; that frictionless information flow is the highest value regardless of the information's quality; that privacy is an archaic concept; that we should welcome the day when machine intelligence surpasses our own. And above all, that their power should be unconstrained. The systems they've built or

are building—to rewire communications, remake human social networks, insinuate artificial intelligence into daily life, and more—impose these beliefs on the population, which is neither consulted nor, usually, meaningfully informed. All this, and they still attempt to perpetuate the absurd myth that they are the swashbuckling underdogs.

Comparisons between Silicon Valley and Wall Street or Washington, D.C., are commonplace, and you can see why—all are power centers, and all are magnets for people whose ambition too often outstrips their humanity. But Silicon Valley's influence easily exceeds that of Wall Street and Washington. It is reengineering society more profoundly than any other power center in any other era since perhaps the days of the New Deal. Many Americans fret—rightfully—about the rising authoritarianism among MAGA Republicans, but they risk ignoring another ascendant force for illiberalism: the tantrum-prone and immensely powerful kings of tech.

THE SHAKESPEAREAN drama that unfolded late last year at OpenAI underscores the extent to which the worst of Facebook's "move fast and break things" mentality has been internalized and celebrated in Silicon Valley. OpenAI was founded, in 2015, as a nonprofit dedicated to bringing artificial general intelligence into the world in a way that would serve the public good. Underlying its formation was the belief that the technology was too powerful and too dangerous to be developed with commercial motives alone.

But in 2019, as the technology began to startle even the people who were working on it with the speed at which it was advancing, the company added a for-profit arm to raise more capital. Microsoft invested $1 billion at first, then many billions of dollars more. Then, this past fall, the company's CEO, Sam Altman, was fired then quickly rehired, in a whiplash spectacle that signaled a demolition of OpenAI's previously established safeguards against putting company over country. Those who wanted Altman out reportedly believed that he was too heavily prioritizing the pace of development over safety. But Microsoft's response—an offer to bring on Altman and anyone else from OpenAI to re-create his team there—started a game of chicken that led to Altman's reinstatement. The whole incident was messy, and Altman may well be the right person for the job, but the message was clear: The pursuit of scale and profit won decisively over safety concerns and public accountability.

Silicon Valley still attracts many immensely talented people who strive to do good, and who are working to realize the best possible version of a more connected, data-rich global society. Even the most deleterious companies have built some wonderful tools. But these tools, at scale, are also systems of manipulation and control. They promise community but sow division; claim to champion truth but spread lies; wrap themselves in concepts such as empowerment and liberty but surveil us relentlessly. The values that win out tend to be the ones that rob us of agency and keep us addicted to our feeds.

The theoretical promise of AI is as hopeful as the promise of social media once was, and as dazzling as its most partisan architects project. AI really could cure numerous diseases. It really could transform scholarship and unearth lost knowledge. Except that Silicon Valley, under the sway of its worst technocratic impulses, is following the playbook established in the mass scaling and monopolization of the social web. OpenAI, Microsoft, Google, and other corporations leading the way in AI development are not focusing on the areas of greatest public or epistemological need, and they are certainly not operating with any degree of transparency or caution. Instead they are engaged in a race to build faster and maximize profit.

None of this happens without the underlying technocratic philosophy of inevitability—that is, the idea that if you can build something new, you must. "In a properly functioning
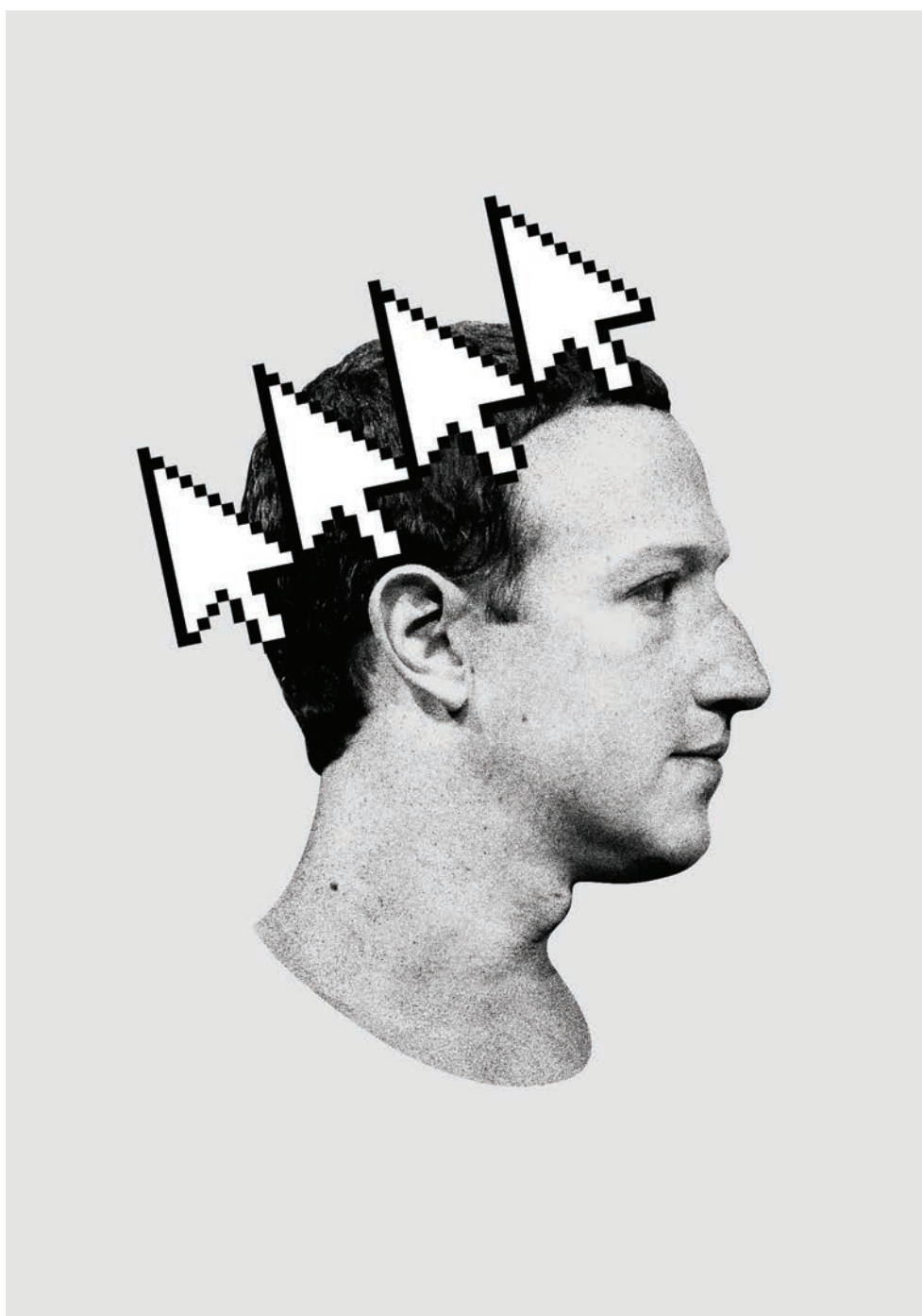
world, I think this should be a project of governments," Altman told my colleague Ross Andersen last year, referring to OpenAI's attempts to develop artificial general intelligence. But Altman was going to keep building it himself anyway. Or, as Zuckerberg put it to *The New Yorker* many years ago: "Isn't it, like, inevitable that there would be a huge social network of people? … If we didn't do this someone else would have done it."

TECHNOCRACY FIRST blossomed as a political ideology after World War I, among a small group of scientists and engineers in New York City who wanted a new social structure to replace representative democracy, putting the technological elite in charge. Though their movement floundered politically—people ended up liking President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal better—it had more success intellectually, entering the zeitgeist alongside modernism in art and literature, which shared some of its values. The American poet Ezra Pound's modernist slogan "Make it new" easily could have doubled as a mantra for the technocrats. A parallel movement was that of the Italian futurists, led by figures such as the poet F. T. Marinetti, who used maxims like "March, don't molder" and "Creation, not contemplation."

The ethos for technocrats and futurists alike was action for its own sake. "We are not satisfied to roam in a garden closed in by dark cypresses, bending over ruins and mossy antiques," Marinetti said in a 1929 speech. "We believe that Italy's only worthy tradition is never to have had a tradition."

Prominent futurists took their zeal for technology, action, and speed and eventually transformed it into fascism. Marinetti followed his *Manifesto of Futurism* (1909) with his *Fascist Manifesto* (1919). His friend Pound was infatuated with Benito Mussolini and collaborated with his regime to host a radio show in which the poet promoted fascism, gushed over *Mein Kampf,* and praised both Mussolini and Adolf Hitler. The evolution of futurism into fascism wasn't inevitable—many of Pound's friends grew to fear him, or thought he had lost his mind—but it does show how, during a time of social unrest, a cultural movement based on the radical rejection of tradition and history, and tinged with aggrievement, can become a political ideology.

In October, the venture capitalist and technocrat Marc Andreessen published on his firm's website a stream-of-consciousness document he called "The Techno-Optimist Manifesto," a 5,000-word ideological cocktail that eerily recalls, and specifically credits, Italian futurists such as Marinetti. Andreessen is, in addition to being one of Silicon Valley's most influential billionaire investors, notorious for being thin-skinned and obstreperous, and despite the invocation of optimism in the title, the essay seems driven in part by his sense of resentment that the technologies he and his predecessors have advanced are no longer "properly glorified." It is a revealing document, representative of the worldview that he and his fellow technocrats are advancing.

Andreessen writes that there is "no material problem," including those caused by technology, that "cannot be solved

with more technology." He writes that technology should not merely be always advancing, but always accelerating in its advancement "to ensure the techno-capital upward spiral continues forever." And he excoriates what he calls campaigns against technology, under names such as "tech ethics" and "existential risk."

Or take what might be considered the Apostles' Creed of his emerging political movement:

We believe we should place intelligence and energy in a positive feedback loop, and drive them both to infinity …

We believe in *adventure.* Undertaking the Hero's Journey, rebelling against the status quo, mapping uncharted territory, conquering dragons, and bringing home the spoils for our community …

We believe in nature, but we also believe in *overcoming* nature. We are not primitives, cowering in fear of the lightning bolt. We are the apex predator; the lightning works for us.

Andreessen identifies several "patron saints" of his movement, Marinetti among them. He quotes from the *Manifesto of Futurism,* swapping out Marinetti's "poetry" for "technology":

Beauty exists only in struggle. There is no masterpiece that has not an aggressive character. Technology must be a violent assault on the forces of the unknown, to force them to bow before man.

To be clear, the Andreessen manifesto is not a fascist document, but it is an extremist

one. He takes a reasonable position—that technology, on the whole, has dramatically improved human life—and warps it to reach the absurd conclusion that any attempt to restrain technological development under any circumstances is despicable. This position, if viewed uncynically, makes sense only as a religious conviction, and in practice it serves only to absolve him and the other Silicon Valley giants of any moral or civic duty to do anything but make new things that will enrich them, without consideration of the social costs, or of history. Andreessen also identifies a list of enemies and "zombie ideas" that he calls upon his followers to defeat, among them "institutions" and "tradition."

"Our enemy," Andreessen writes, is "the know-it-all credentialed expert worldview, indulging in abstract theories, luxury beliefs, social engineering, disconnected from the real world, delusional, unelected, and unaccountable—playing God with everyone else's lives, with total insulation from the consequences."

The irony is that this description very closely fits Andreessen and other Silicon Valley elites. The world that they have brought into being over the past two decades is unquestionably a world of reckless social engineering, without consequence for its architects, who foist their own abstract theories and luxury beliefs on all of us.

Some of the individual principles Andreessen advances in his manifesto are anodyne. But its overarching radicalism, given his standing and power, should make you sit up straight. Key figures in Silicon Valley, including Musk, have clearly

warmed to illiberal ideas in recent years. In 2020, Donald Trump's vote share in Silicon Valley was 23 percent—small, but higher than the 20 percent he received in 2016.

The main dangers of authoritarian technocracy are not at this point political, at least not in the traditional sense. Still, a select few already have authoritarian control, more or less, to establish the digital world's rules and cultural norms, which can be as potent as political power.

IN 1961, in his farewell address, President Dwight Eisenhower warned the nation about the dangers of a coming technocracy. "In holding scientific research and discovery in respect, as we should," he said, "we must also be alert to the equal and opposite danger that public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific-technological elite. It is the task of statesmanship to mold, to balance, and to integrate these and other forces, new and old, within the principles of our democratic system— ever aiming toward the supreme goals of our free society."

Eight years later, the country's first computers were connected to ARPANET, a precursor to the World Wide Web, which became broadly available in 1993. Back then, Silicon Valley was regarded as a utopia for ambitious capitalists and optimistic inventors with original ideas who wanted to change the world, unencumbered by bureaucracy or tradition, working at the speed of the internet (14.4 kilobits per second in those days). This culture had its flaws even at the start, but it was also imaginative in a distinctly American way, and it led to the creation of transformative, sometimes even dumbfoundingly beautiful hardware and software.

For a long time, I tended to be more on Andreessen's end of the spectrum regarding tech regulation. I believed that the social web could still be a net good and that, given enough time, the values that

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best served the public interest would naturally win out. I resisted the notion that regulating the social web was necessary at all, in part because I was not (and am still not) convinced that the government can do so without itself causing harm (the European model of regulation, including laws such as the so-called right to be forgotten, is deeply inconsistent with free-press protections in America, and poses dangers to the public's right to know). I'd much prefer to see market competition as a force for technological improvement and the betterment of society.

But in recent years, it has become clear that regulation is needed, not least because the rise of technocracy proves that Silicon Valley's leaders simply will not act in the public's best interest. Much should be done to protect children from the hazards of social media, and to break up monopolies and oligopolies that damage society, and more. At the same time, I believe that regulation alone will not be enough to meaningfully address the cultural rot that the new technocrats are spreading.

Universities should reclaim their proper standing as leaders in developing world-changing technologies for the good of humankind. (Harvard, Stanford, and MIT could invest in creating a consortium for such an effort—their endowments are worth roughly $110 billion combined.)

Individuals will have to lead the way, too. You may not be able to entirely give up social media, or reject your workplace's surveillance software— you may not even want to opt out of these things. But there is extraordinary power in defining ideals, and we can all begin to do that—for ourselves; for our networks of actual, real-life friends; for our schools; for our places of worship. We would be wise to develop more sophisticated shared norms for debating and deciding how we use invasive technology interpersonally and within our communities. That should include challenging existing norms about the use of apps and You-Tube in classrooms, the ubiquity of smartphones in adolescent hands, and widespread disregard for individual privacy. People who believe that we all deserve better will need to step up to lead such efforts.

Our children are not data sets waiting to be quantified, tracked, and sold. Our intellectual output is not a mere training manual for the AI that will be used to mimic and plagiarize us. Our lives are meant not to be optimized through a screen, but to be lived—in all of our messy, tree-climbing, night-swimming, adventuresome glory. We are all better versions of ourselves when we are not tweeting or clicking "Like" or scrolling, scrolling, scrolling.

Technocrats are right that technology is a key to making the world better. But first we must describe the world as we wish it to be—the problems we wish to solve in the public interest, and in accordance with the values and rights that advance human dignity, equality, freedom, privacy, health, and happiness. And we must insist that the leaders of institutions that represent us—large and small— use technology in ways that reflect what is good for individuals and society, and not just what enriches technocrats.

We do not have to live in the world the new technocrats are designing for us. We do not have to acquiesce to their growing project of dehumanization and data mining. Each of us has agency.

No more "build it because we can." No more algorithmic feedbags. No more infrastructure designed to make the people less powerful and the powerful more controlling. Every day we vote with our attention; it is precious, and desperately wanted by those who will use it against us for their own profit and political goals. Don't let them. 𝒜

Adrienne LaFrance is the executive editor of The Atlantic.