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# Facing the Great Reckoning Head-On - OneZero

*danah boyd*

12–15 minutes

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**‘I benefited from the generosity of men who tolerated and, in effect, enabled unethical, immoral, and criminal men.’**



OZ



Courtesy of danah boyd



Last night, I was honored by the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Alongside Oakland Privacy and William Gibson, I received a [2019 Barlow/Pioneer Award](#). I was asked to give a speech. As I reflected on what got me to this place, I realized I needed to reckon with how I have benefited from men whose actions have helped uphold a patriarchal system that has hurt so many people. I needed to face my past in order to find a way to create the space to move forward.

This is the speech I gave last night. I hope sharing it will help others who are struggling to make sense out of current events.



I cannot begin to express how honored I am to receive this award. My awe of the Electronic Frontier Foundation dates back to my teenage years. EFF has always inspired me to think deeply about what values should shape the internet. And so I want to talk about values tonight, and what happens when those values are lost, or violated, as we have seen recently in our industry and institutions.

But before I begin, I would like to ask you to join me in a moment of silence out of respect to all of those who have been raped, trafficked, harassed, and abused. For those of you who have been there, take this moment to breathe. For those who haven't, take a moment to reflect on how the work that you do has enabled the harm of others, even when you never meant to.

<silence>

The story of how I got to be standing here is rife with pain and I

need to expose part of my story in order to make visible why we need to have a Great Reckoning in the tech industry. This award may be about me, but it's also not. It should be about all of the women and other minorities who have been excluded from tech by people who thought they were helping.

The first blog post I ever wrote was about my own sexual assault. It was 1997 and my audience was two people. I didn't even know what I was doing would be called blogging. Years later, when many more people started reading my blog, I erased many of those early blog posts because I didn't want strangers to have to respond to those vulnerable posts. I obfuscated my history to make others more comfortable.

I was at the MIT Media Lab from 1999 to 2002. At the incoming student orientation dinner, an older faculty member sat down next to me. He looked at me and asked if love existed. I raised my eyebrow as he talked about how love was a mirage, but that sex and pleasure were real. That was my introduction to Marvin Minsky and to my new institutional home.

My time at the Media Lab was full of contradictions. I have so many positive memories of people and conversations. I can close my eyes and flash back to laughter and late night conversations. But my time there was also excruciating. I couldn't afford my rent and did some things that still bother me in order to make it all work. I grew numb to the worst parts of the "Demo or Die" culture. I witnessed so much harassment, so much bullying that it all started to feel normal. Senior leaders told me that "students need to learn their place" and that "we don't pay you to read, we don't pay you to think, we pay you to do." The final straw for me was when I was

pressured to work with the Department of Defense to track terrorists in 2002.

After leaving the Lab, I channeled my energy into V-Day, an organization best known for producing “The Vagina Monologues,” but whose daily work is focused on ending violence against women and girls. I found solace in helping build online networks of feminists who were trying to help combat sexual assault and a culture of abuse. To this day, I work on issues like trafficking and combating the distribution of images depicting the commercial sexual abuse of minors on social media.

By 2003, I was in San Francisco, where I started meeting tech luminaries, people I had admired so deeply from afar. One told me that I was “kinda smart for a chick.” Others propositioned me. But some were really kind and supportive. Joi Ito became a dear friend and mentor. He was that guy who made sure I got home OK. He was also that guy who took being called-in seriously, changing his behavior in profound ways when I challenged him to reflect on the cost of his actions. That made me deeply respect him.

I also met John Perry Barlow around the same time. We became good friends and spent lots of time together. Here was another tech luminary who had my back when I needed him to. A few years later, he asked me to forgive a friend of his, a friend whose sexual predation I had witnessed firsthand. He told me it was in the past and he wanted everyone to get along. I refused, unable to convey to him just how much his ask had hurt me. Our relationship frayed and we only talked a few times in the last few years of his life.

So here we are... I’m receiving this award, named after Barlow

less than a week after Joi resigned from an institution that nearly destroyed me after he socialized with and took money from a known pedophile. Let me be clear — this is deeply destabilizing for me. I am here today in-no-small-part because I benefited from the generosity of men who tolerated and, in effect, enabled unethical, immoral, and criminal men. And because of that privilege, I managed to keep moving forward even as the collateral damage of patriarchy stifled the voices of so many others around me. I am angry and sad, horrified and disturbed, because I know all too well that this world is not meritocratic. I am also complicit in helping uphold these systems.

What's happening at the Media Lab right now is emblematic of a broader set of issues plaguing the tech industry and society more generally. Tech prides itself in being better than other sectors. But often it's not. As an employee of Google in 2004, I watched my male colleagues ogle women coming to the cafeteria in our building from the second floor, making lewd comments. When I first visited Facebook in Palo Alto, I was greeted by a hyper-sexualized mural and a knowing look from the admin, one of the only women around. So many small moments seared into my brain, building up to a story of normalized misogyny. Fast forward 15 years and there are countless stories of executive misconduct and purposeful suppression of the voices of women and sooooo many others whose bodies and experiences exclude them from the powerful elite. These are the toxic logics that have infested the tech industry. And, as an industry obsessed with scale, these are the toxic logics that the tech industry has amplified and normalized. The human costs of these logics continue to grow. Why are we

tolerating sexual predators and sexual harassers in our industry?  
That's not what inclusion means.

I am here today because I learned how to survive and thrive in a man's world, to use my tongue wisely, watch my back, and dodge bullets. I am being honored because I figured out how to remove a few bricks in those fortified walls so that others could look in. But this isn't enough.

I am grateful to EFF for this honor, but there are so many underrepresented and under-acknowledged voices out there trying to be heard who have been silenced. And they need to be here tonight and they need to be at tech's tables. Around the world, they are asking for those in Silicon Valley to take their moral responsibilities seriously. They are asking everyone in the tech sector to take stock of their own complicity in what is unfolding and actively invite others in.

And so, if my recognition means anything, I need it to be a call to arms. We need to all stand up together and challenge the status quo. The tech industry must start to face The Great Reckoning head-on. My experiences are all too common for women and other marginalized peoples in tech. It's also all too common for well-meaning guys to do shitty things that make it worse for those that they believe they're trying to support.

If change is going to happen, values and ethics need to have a seat in the boardroom. Corporate governance goes beyond protecting the interests of capitalism. Change also means that the ideas and concerns of all people need to be a part of the design phase and the auditing of systems, even if this slows down the

process. We need to bring back and reinvigorate the profession of quality assurance so that products are not launched without systematic consideration of the harms that might occur. Call it security or call it safety, but it requires focusing on inclusion. After all, whether we like it or not, the tech industry is now in the business of global governance.

“Move fast and break things” is an abomination if your goal is to create a healthy society. Taking shortcuts may be financially profitable in the short-term, but the cost to society is too great to be justified. In a healthy society, we accommodate differently abled people through accessibility standards, not because it’s financially prudent but because it’s the right thing to do. In a healthy society, we make certain that the vulnerable amongst us are not harassed into silence because that is not the value behind free speech. In a healthy society, we strategically design to increase social cohesion because binaries are machine logic not human logic.

The Great Reckoning is in front of us. How we respond to the calls for justice will shape the future of technology and society. We must hold accountable all who perpetuate, amplify, and enable hate, harm, and cruelty. But accountability without transformation is simply spectacle. We owe it to ourselves and to all of those who have been hurt to focus on the root of the problem. We also owe it to them to actively seek to not build certain technologies because the human cost is too great.

My ask of you is to honor me and my story by stepping back and reckoning with your own contributions to the current state of affairs. No one in tech — not you, not me — is an innocent bystander. We have all enabled this current state of affairs in one way or another.



Thus, it is our responsibility to take action. How can you personally amplify underrepresented voices? How can you intentionally take time to listen to those who have been injured and understand their perspective? How can you personally stand up to injustice so that structural inequities aren't further calcified? The goal shouldn't be to avoid being evil; it should be to actively do good. But it's not enough to say that we're going to do good; we need to collectively define — and hold each other to — shared values and standards.

People can change. Institutions can change. But doing so requires all who harmed — and all who benefited from harm — to come forward, admit their mistakes, and actively take steps to change the power dynamics. It requires everyone to hold each other accountable, but also to aim for reconciliation not simply retribution. So as we leave here tonight, let's stop designing the technologies envisioned in dystopian novels. We need to heed the warnings of artists, not race head-on into their nightmares. Let's focus on hearing the voices and experiences of those who have been harmed because of the technologies that made this industry so powerful. And let's collaborate with and design alongside those communities to fix these wrongs, to build just and empowering technologies rather than those that reify the status quo.

Many of us are aghast to learn that a pedophile had this much influence in tech, science, and academia, but so many more people face the personal and professional harm of exclusion, the emotional burden of never-ending subtle misogyny, the exhaustion from dodging daggers, and the nagging feeling that you're going crazy as you try to get through each day. Let's change the norms. Please help me.



Thank you.

*we're all taught how to justify history as it passes by  
and it's your world that comes crashing down  
when the big boys decide to throw their weight around  
but he said just roll with it baby make it your career  
keep the home fires burning till america is in the clear*

...

*i think my body is as restless as my mind  
and i'm not gonna roll with it this time  
no, i'm not gonna roll with it this time  
— Ani DiFranco*