**Harvard
Business
Review**

TECHNOLOGY

The Other Digital Divide

by Walter Frick

FROM THE MAY–JUNE 2017 ISSUE

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n the new film *The Circle,* based on the 2013 novel by Dave Eggers, a young woman joins a Google-like company and is awestruck by its amenity-filled campus, talented employees, and mission to unify and simplify people's online lives. We soon realize, however, that The Circle's influence on the world outside is less benign: Its leader urges people to live-stream their entire lives, and those who don't suddenly find themselves watched, judged, even sometimes pursued by angry mobs.

Eggers did little research for the book, which bothered some in the tech community. But just four years after its release, the story seems weirdly prescient in its depiction of the gulf between the people who make technology and everyone else—those who want to "reinvent our world" and those experiencing that change and feeling threatened by it. Indeed, several works of nonfiction out this year explore the same increasingly problematic divide.

In *The Upstarts,* the journalist Brad Stone offers histories of the tech darlings Airbnb and Uber, providing a glimpse into worlds that nontechies seldom get to see. We watch Airbnb employees playing Ping-Pong at the office, taking yoga breaks, rallying for kickball games, and championing CEO Brian Chesky's vision of bringing people together. Signs in the office read "Belong Anywhere" and "Airbnb Love," and in one scene Chesky tells employees that although he first laughed at a colleague's suggestion that the Airbnb community might one day win a Nobel Peace Prize, he's come to think it isn't that crazy an idea. (For the record, it is.)

Uber offers its own perks. The company has a long tradition of paid "workations," which in 2015 meant taking 5,000 people to a four-day retreat in Las Vegas. Participants attended seminars and listened to CEO Travis Kalanick outline a new values statement centered on improving cities through more-efficient transportation; they also volunteered at a local food bank and enjoyed special entertainment at night, including a private concert by Uber investor Beyoncé.

Stone shows, however, that outside Silicon Valley, the view of Airbnb and Uber is less rosy. In 2012, for example, a New York man who rented his room on Airbnb's platform was charged with running an illegal transient hotel; although the company filed a brief on his behalf, it declined to offer legal services. Other hosts have faced similar fates, and researchers have found alarming discrimination on the site: Black would-be renters are much less likely than white ones to be accepted. Uber has been accused of flouting local transportation laws, destroying licensed taxi drivers' livelihoods, endangering passengers, and failing to offer adequate pay and benefits to its own drivers. Earlier this year Kalanick was even

caught on video arguing with one of them about compensation. (And the problems aren't just external: The company has recently been under fire for allegedly ignoring sexual harassment.)

Other tech darlings are facing increased criticism too: Facebook has been charged with helping fake news to flourish; Twitter has failed to address bullying on its platform; Google continues to fight antitrust battles in Europe. The tech world as a whole has eroded privacy and contributed to income inequality by enabling automation of what was once human work.

And consider the contrasting portraits painted in two other new releases: *Valley of the Gods,* by the journalist Alexandra Wolfe, and *The Complacent Class,* by the economist Tyler Cowen. Wolfe focuses on PayPal's founder, Peter Thiel, and a cohort of teenagers selected by his foundation to forgo college and start companies, but she also lets us peek into a variety of tech subcultures—from seasteaders to polygamists to those who, like Thiel, chase immortality through investments in life-extending technology. The suggestion isn't that these pursuits are inherently flawed; it's that they stem from a single-minded desire to push boundaries—technological and social.

Meanwhile, in the rest of the country, Cowen argues, most "Americans are in fact working much harder than before to postpone change, or to avoid it altogether." For instance, while lots of start-ups continue to be founded in the nation's tech hubs, new-business creation in the rest of the country has been trending down for decades.

Will the tech world try to bridge this gap, moving from the old "move fast and break stuff" model to one that remains agile and innovative but also considers the broader, long-term societal consequences? I'm not sure. Uber's response to its critics has so far relied largely on what Stone calls "Travis's law": If the product is good enough, consumers will demand it, and that support will allow you to

succeed. Airbnb has maintained a friendlier public image, but Stone chronicles its bare-knuckle tactics, from spamming potential hosts in its early days to fighting New York's request for data on its customers.

In January, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced his goal of meeting people in every state he has not yet visited—a sign of outreach. But some of his peers have darker preoccupations. Thiel has told the *New York Times* that he supports "Calexit," the tech-led proposal that California literally secede from the United States. And, according to the *New Yorker,* the new hobby in Silicon Valley is doomsday prepping: buying land, supplies, and even weapons to maximize the chances of surviving a disaster.

There is tremendous danger here. The tech world cannot sequester itself—inside corporate campuses and coworking spaces today; who knows where tomorrow—and refuse to grapple with inequality, diversity, and other social issues. By the same token, the rest of society must resist its tendency to defend jobs and neighborhoods as they once were and to favor preservation over renewal. We need to find a middle ground.

In *The Circle,* an insider does try to eliminate the danger posed by technology, but he is ultimately thwarted—and in any case, no mysterious heroes are waiting to save us in the real world. Silicon Valley has to work harder to ensure that it plays a productive role in society, and outsiders must accept that although change is difficult, technology can bring progress, not just disarray.

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