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Move Fast, Break Trust: The Ethical Decay of Tech Giants

In a time where digital technology increasingly shapes our lives, the boundary between voluntary participation and passive exposure to surveillance becomes more difficult to define. Platforms once designed to connect and inform have evolved into intricate systems that are designed to collect, analyze, and monetize user data. Often, consumers are unaware of the scope of their agreements, and are influenced towards accepting their practices without pushback. In this case, consent becomes murky as a concept, less of an informed and voluntary agreement and more of an empty procedural exercise used to justify the extraction of user data. Users are often caught in a cycle of passive acceptance, not because they truly consent, but because saying “no” is simply not an option. This condition is an example of tacit consent, where agreement is obtained not through explicit communication, and exists only through assumption: either from silence, inaction, or participating while no viable alternatives are available. When all tech products are built in such a manner, this assumed consent becomes just another step in using any product. In the digital age this form of consent is increasingly weaponized; it is used by corporations to justify invasive practices and by users to absolve themselves of ethical responsibility for their participation in this system.

In *Move Fast and Break Things*, Jonathan Taplin explores how libertarian ideology, particularly its emphasis on minimal government regulations, individual autonomy, and free market supremacy, took root in Silicon Valley's formative years. He asks how the proliferation of this culture has impacted industry giants like Facebook, Google, and Amazon, creating an environment with little accountability and oversight. His book is told through the story of many of Silicon Valley's famous figures. Peter Thiel, a prominent venture capitalist, and Facebook's first outside investor, exemplifies this ethos, and has undertaken tremendous effort to export and amplify the counterculture ethos originating from the 1960s. In the tech industry, this meant prioritizing fast-paced disruption over stability, and individualist desire to create over collective good–the "move fast and break things" mindset that later became Mark Zuckerberg's credo. This brand of libertarianism, founded by Ayn Rand, is the ideology that has informed the development of the tech industry.

Jonathan Taplin digs into this with another case study, this time chronicling Napster and its brainchild, Thiel-follower Sean Parker. Napster was a revolutionary peer-to-peer file-sharing platform that allowed users to index and share music online at a scale never before seen. He decentralized the ability to share music, he bypassed traditional gatekeepers of music (music labels), allowed users to contribute and enlarge the platform, while acting within a legal gray zone. Taplin, recounting his time as manager of the highly successful group *The Band*, observed in real time the impacts of piracy on songwriters and performers. In the 60s, he recounts, musicians generally could expect to make a living off of their productions. By the end of *The Band*'s members' lifetime, an artist could no longer sustain themselves off the royalties they earned. One of their members, Levon Helm, died after being unable to afford cancer treatments.

Though Napster soon shuttered, the damage dealt was permanent: Parker had blown open the modern age of digital music piracy, and the industry would never recover. "Since 2000," Taplin writes, "US recorded music revenues have fallen from $19.8 billion to $7.2 billion per year" (Taplin 12). Since then, hundreds of copycat sites have executed the same idea of stealing art and posting it online, at tremendous cost to its creators. But this wasn't all: Napter's libertarian spirit–prioritizing freedom of access over respecting artistic creation and ownership–echoed a broader, new development in tech's values: user empowerment at the cost of creator livelihoods. Napster's innovative technology brought with it a new, insidious form of exploitation.

Taplin's investigations into the birth of modern tech culture poses a question regarding tacit consent. Do we as consumers really have the ability to consent? In most philosophical texts, consent requires both perfect information and autonomy. In most cases we are tacitly consenting because despite agreeing to the terms of services, most of us do not properly read through such documents. Neither do we have the autonomy to perfectly consent to such a decision either. When monopolies are constant within the tech sphere, alternatives are typically non-options. Theoretically, we can use a different search engine at any time. However, Google's combined ecosystem containing Gmail, Maps, Calendar, and many other services makes it costly in time and energy to actually do so. The existing alternatives are generally inferior, and do not benefit from connectivities like those between these services. Taplin explains the strategy Google uses here as building "businesses that have 'network effects.' Thiel's first two major investments, PayPal and Facebook, both benefited from having millions of users who want to connect with each other." (Taplin 65). PayPal dramatically grew once it branched out from Palm Pilot add-on software to eBay's payment method. The network effect is the generating force that allows tech companies to become uniquely powerful; user growth encourages further user growth on its own, eventually stifling competition. Google actually engages in an even more aggressive version of the strategy: it integrates accounts across services, allows Google accounts as a replacement login to most websites, and routinely buys out smaller competitors to cement its control over search and video.

As John Stuart Mill posited, a just society must aim for the greatest happiness of the greatest number, but one must also weigh the distribution of that happiness. In the case of Youtube and Facebook, it is clear that primary beneficiaries are the corporate stakeholders who profit from behavioral data and advertising dominance; this model pays out relatively little to the creators themselves. But YouTube, Facebook, and today TikTok are the only video platforms with large enough viewership for an individual to even consider content creation. Publicly traded companies like these are forced to generate profits for stakeholders, often at the expense of both the company and consumers. Even though these companies generate some of the largest revenues ever seen–Google and Facebook have amassed tens of billions in cash reserves–the benefits are constrained largely to the shareholder class, and come at the cost of creator's' wellbeing.

Furthermore, from a Kantian perspective, digital advertising models like those used by Google, and Facebook are problematic because they typically treat users as means to an end–namely, profit. Kant argues that you should treat other individuals as autonomous beings that have inherent worth and not as tools to be exploited. When platforms streamline the collection of user data without fully informing the individual or without consenting with their full knowledge and autonomy, they reduce users to mere data points within their economic system.

In 2011, Texas Representative Lamar Smith introduced the “Stop Online Piracy Act” (SOPA), a bill that would strengthen copyright protections by allowing content owners to strike down pirating sites from search engines. In response, Google, in conjunction with a team of other major internet platforms such as Reddit and Wikipedia, organized a blackout protest, replacing the engine's functionality with information arguing against the bill. Google included a direct link for users to contact their local representatives, and in the coming days, thousands of complaints overwhelmed these politicians' offices before SOPA was withdrawn. At the time, Google made millions in profit from advertising on these content-stealing websites. More recently, TikTok made a similar play, mobilizing its 170 million American users through in-app notifications when threatened with a national ban. Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla and richest man in the world, contributed nearly $300 million to Trump's presidential campaign, scoring multi-billion dollar government contracts for his various companies. These flashy, overt manipulations of the political process are rare, as tech companies prefer to avoid drawing attention to their power. These companies have other tools at their disposal, though. Amazon, for example, has monopsonistic power over the bookstore industry, acting as the sole buyer of digital books. It sabotaged the publisher Hachette after failing to secure favorable negotiations for itself, raising prices and delaying shipments of their books. Amazon has put hundreds of brick-and-mortar bookstores and dozens of publishers out of business abusing this power. However, the tech industry has collectively engaged in much larger, subtler efforts to undermine democratic institutions.

All of the book's major tech giants (Facebook, Amazon, and Google) engage in multi-million dollar lobbying efforts every year. Each does so to influence legislators to vote with their interests on issues of antitrust, regulation, and oversight. Google has especially close ties to the government and policy shaping; as of 2017, more than 50 of their employees have joined top government roles. Among these are the Justice Department's antitrust division, assistants to the chair of the FCC, the director of the US Patent and Trademark Office, and many other offices (Taplin 113). Similarly, many ex-government officials have joined Google. Moves like these have enabled tech giants to minimize or fully dismiss any attempts at curtailing their power, as Google did when sidestepping a $500 million settlement for advertising illegal pharmaceuticals. Similarly Youtube avoided any legal consequences, particularly during the height of terrorist propaganda circulation that peaked around 2014. Rather than taking any immediate and comprehensive actions, they instead continued to profit off of the engagement these videos generated through their algorithms. To this day discussions are still taking place on whether or not Youtube should have been legally rephrended.

At the heart of libertarianism is an ideal of individual freedom: the ability to act without any form of external influence or pressure, especially from the government. This extreme view of freedom drives tech leaders, and is summarized by Ayn Rand's philosophy of "Who will stop me?". Tech leaders have acted without concern for users and society in their government overreach. Locke asserts that the consent of the governed is the ultimate source of power. But the aforementioned behaviors by monopolists fundamentally alter the connection between government and governed. The laws and rules binding the people cease to be those chosen and agreed to by the people, and instead become those chosen by the monopolies. Economist Paul Krugman noted that "The larger Amazon gets, the more its rules…can come to be regarded as the most important regulations governing commerce," (Taplin 69). In other words, Amazon (and the other tech companies) have replaced the traditional system of governance with a new model, in which they are the sole arbiter of decisions on personal privacy, digital freedom, and consumer welfare.

We do have an existing model of a contract between the individual and corporation, in the form of terms and conditions of service. However, the law fails to protect the end users here:

terms can be vaguely written, have broad-reaching provisions, and can contain deceptive language. Their cumbersome nature is by design: most users scroll directly past them without considering their contents. This model lacks the rigid backbone of legal enforceability.

The libertarian may retort that corporations and their aims are merely reflection of the people's will and interests: that people choose what they value and the market (or companies) simply respond to this. Therefore, people are acting freely and receiving what they desire. But this argument fails when you recognize that consumer choice is manufactured: the tech companies have systematically eliminated any other alternatives to what they present. When all viable alternatives are bought out, and when the choice is between accepting an intentionally opaque ToS and losing access to a product, the market is no longer behaving freely. None of Facebook, Amazon, or Google would have been allowed to attain their immense size, power, or unity without subverting democracy through political subterfuge. Under contractualism, true autonomy requires the existence of multiple paths of action, and the empowerment of the individual to meaningfully distinguish between and act upon them.

What emerges from Taplin's critique is more than just an account of tech's rise, but rather a diagnosis of systemic ethical failure. The foundational principles of the pre-Internet world: individual consent, fair compensation, and civic duty all have been hollowed out by monopoly power and the ideology of exploitation. To reimagine a future in which technology again serves the general good, we must strengthen the tools of governance to curtail these giant's practices and influence. In doing so, we may again place the power in the hands of the individual, to shape and choose their digital reality.

Works Cited

Taplin, Jonathan. *Move Fast and Break Things.* Little, Brown, 2017.