

Review of “The People vs Tech: How the Internet is Killing Democracy (and How We Save It)” by Jamie Bartlett

Tim Posada

人民与科技：互联网如何扼杀民主（以及我们如何拯救民主）

The People vs Tech: How the Internet is Killing Democracy (and How We Save It) by Jamie Bartlett. New York: Dutton, 2018. 256 pp., £8.99 (p/b), ISBN 978-1785039065.

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Democracy is under fire thanks to advances in Silicon Valley technologies such as social media, artificial intelligence, and cryptocurrency, argues Jamie Bartlett, veteran tech journalist and director of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media. The metathesis in “*The People vs Tech: How the Internet is Killing Democracy (and How We Save It)*” is a warning about the current trajectory of unfettered technological progress without regulation or ethical concerns. While his book’s subtitle parenthetically provides hope for the future, such suggestions only occur in an appendix following the conclusion as an abridged list, featuring ideas like “policing” algorithms, expanding the middle class, and regulating bitcoin, all of which expose the book’s unclear audience, as most general readers do not have the ability to spread wealth across a socioeconomic class or revise media law. With the exception of this afterword, Bartlett’s book is not hopeful but pessimistic, aligning it with recognizable media texts like Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) and Kalle Lasn’s *Culture Jam* (2000). Generally, Bartlett questions the optimism of Silicon Valley’s desire to create a “global village” and chastises the middle class’ acceptance of tech privatization – focusing on examples

现在进步的科技不受道德约束

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the United States and the United Kingdom – that allows rich corporations and individuals to dictate the terms of use.

The People vs Tech is an introduction to a series of topics commonly addressed in mass media survey courses. Bartlett even draws upon crowning moments from media history like the invention of the Gutenberg printing press, Marshall McLuhan's memorable phrase "the medium is the message," and the 1960 Nixon/Kennedy debate. He also attempts to layer several key points with critical theory, drawing upon the philosopher Jeremy Bentham's analysis of the panopticon in chapter 1, "The New Panopticon," though he only refers to the term a few times without a clear definition and never calls attention to Michel Foucault's more in-depth usage of the concept within political discourse. In chapter 5, "The Everything Monopoly," he even warns about the pending dangers of "cultural hegemony," invoking Antonio Gramsci's key concept without citation, misinterpreting it as something that could happen, what he calls the "final stage" of "economic power," when Gramsci used *hegemony* in his *Prison Notebooks* to describe the ruling class' dominance present in a cultural context right now, always and already present.

Bartlett's primary weakness is sourcing, which affects his choice of language. He relies more on ethos as an argumentative tool, assuming his personal experience supports claims made without factual support. For example, again in chapter 5, he claims Google "killed" the Stop Online Piracy Act through an online protest campaign. Such a statement without citation ignores the other major online organizations like Wikipedia, AOL, Facebook, Reddit, and Yahoo, along with the other 7,0000 websites, who participated in the same campaign. Therefore, when he follows this statement with concern that too much power resides in one company's hands, Google here, his point rings untrue or remains questionable without evidence.

His ethos also leads to another key problem with his writing: speculation without proof. In the introduction, for example, he claims the future will become "a shell democracy run by smart machines and a new elite of 'progressive' but authoritarians technocrats," a statement reinforced in chapter 6, "Crypto-Anarchy." He sees a doomsday scenario in which "your smart coffee machine will be hacked with ransomware – and you are asked to pay a small ransom just to regain access to your morning caffeine." Whether this is hyperbole or a joke remains unclear, and it serves as one of many examples of prediction loosed from evidence. In addition, Bartlett sets up several topics, like artificial intelligence or cryptocurrency, by first stating he is not an expert – "I am not a futurist, but," he says before inserting his opinion in a futurist topic – and then

predicts what will happen next in those areas. A more problematic contradiction occurs in his analysis of tribalism, or "re-tribalism" as he calls it in chapter 2, "The Global Village." **He notes how the internet brings together like-minded groups, from Black Lives Matter to alt-right ones.**

While he clearly says these groups are not morally equivalent and can be beneficial in uniting folks behind a cause, he later asserts the opposite.

"Tribalism is understandable," he says in a concluding remark on the topic, "but ultimately it is damaging to democracy, because it has the effect of magnifying the small differences between us, and transforming them into enormous, unsurpassable gulfs." In essence, he argues Black Lives Matter, whom he clearly identifies as tribalist, merely *magnifies small differences* (racial inequality for Bartlett is a "small difference"), which is both a gross oversimplification of systemic prejudice and the myriad functions of digital spaces.

Even though Jamie Bartlett's central argument does not pass rigorous academic muster, it remains a beneficial introduction to many topics related to online media, and it is strongest when he draws upon his own experiences. Particularly in chapter 2, he provides a detailed, first-person encounter with the marketing team of the United States' president, Donald Trump, and its dealings with Cambridge Analytica, who together data minded Facebook users' accounts to target key voters during the 2016 presidential election campaign. Bartlett's experiences in evolving media are beneficial; however, his efforts to diagnose the current and future state of all media and technology's impact on democracy mark him as one of many "male" tech authors, *The Guardian's* Emily Bell says in her review of *The People vs Tech*, who converts from "techno-optimist to techno-sceptic to techno-panicker." This "panic" favors exaggerated language like the fear he expresses about British citizens' use of the *iSideWith* app as a resource when voting. Removing voter agency entirely, Bartlett overdetermines the app's influence on the public without concrete proof, assuming users rely on it entirely regarding ballot choices. "The fact that five million people asked an app that they barely understood how to fulfill their most important duty as a citizen bothered exactly no one," he writes. This final example shows that *The People vs Tech* is written free of jargon, making complicated ideas simpler to understand; nonetheless, Bartlett often simplifies his many topics at the expense of a more nuanced analysis of the current state of technology and democracy.