CS541 AI
Book Review: *World Without Mind* (Franklin Foer)
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Though Franklin Foer's *World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech* is certainly tinged with bitterness over the author's experience as New Republic editor under Chris Hughes, of Facebook fame, the book offers a valuable critique of the giant tech companies and their (often hidden) agendas. While it is important to be skeptical of "sky is falling" claims on the part of journalists as well as of utopian claims on the part of tech companies, Foer sheds light on important issues which have been largely ignored. The rise of big tech is remarkable in part for the speed and ease with which these companies have taken over the landscapes of business and information. At least in the US, there has been no significant government resistance to the rapid growth of Apple, Amazon, Google, and Facebook, to a size so great that it allows these companies to drastically reshape markets for advertising, publishing and media, retail, and others. This rise has happened so quickly that there has not been a robust debate about what it means, and whether the "success" of these companies is consistent with democratic ideals. Foer's book helps frame this much needed debate, and makes it clear that the beneficent image presented by the big tech companies is skillful marketing that has lulled us into complacency about the dangers that they pose.

One of Foer's most important contributions with this work is telling histories that are otherwise unfamiliar to many of us. His discussion of Stewart Brand illustrates the strong ties between Silicon Valley and the psychedelic-utopian-communal ethos of the 1960's counterculture. This helps us to understand how so many many children of the 60's embraced the emerging technology of computing, machines which at the time, "looked perfectly malevolent"[1]. This is one of the many points of "tension in the dream"[2] - the contradictions between the almost messianic view of technology which characterizes the leadership of the big tech firms (and their rhetoric of openness and free knowledge) and the massively corporatist

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[1] Foer, Franklin. World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech. Penguin Press, 2017. p. 16.
[2] Ibid., 22.

form those companies have taken. The discussion of Google's relationship with the work of Ray

Kurzweil and the vision of a technological singularity reveals that the leadership of the big tech

companies is driven by a well-formed set of beliefs that they are not always transparent about[3].

Google's support for the Singularity University, and Larry Page's fervent belief in Kurzweil's

program, are shared by many in Silicon Valley - and they should not be casually written off as

science fiction or a new form of religion. But the implications of these ideas is too far-reaching to

allow them to go unquestioned, not to have a debate about whether the vision of singularity is

one which we as a society wish to follow.

World Without Mind also sheds light on the practice of "corporate gamesmanship, with

all the established tricks."[4] In this sense, as well, Apple, Google, Amazon, and Facebook are the

new face of monopolies, putting to use tactics developed a hundred years ago by the titans of

business, and refining those tactics even further. This is one area where the "tension is the

dream" is perhaps most obvious. Amazon's original pedigree as a bookstore helps the company

to lay claim to being an advocate of free (or cheaper) knowledge, a force for good as well as a

force for profit. But Amazon's business practices belie this beneficent or public-spirited image.

Witness the company's negotiations with the publisher Hachette, which Foer discusses in detail.

He explains that

> I watched as Amazon punished Hachette's writers in its effort to make the publisher feel
> pain. Books, the products of years of passionate labor, were prevented from
> reaching the market. Amazon used its bully's arm to delay their shipments or direct
> readers to older books on similar subjects, as well as a raft of other vengeful tactics.[5]

Then, when Foer published an article exposing these tactics, and advocating for the

government to more actively pursue antitrust action against the company, Amazon brought the

fight even closer to him, attacking the *New Republic* by withdrawing advertising support for one

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[3] Ibid., 36.
[4] Ibid., 56.
[5] Ibid., 72.

of its projects. It is difficult to see how these cutthroat tactics are anything but damaging to a competitive marketplace, and to democracy, but as Foer explains, public concern over monopoly has largely disappeared in the last few decades.

It is important to have an honest examination of the effects that these companies have had on business, politics, and culture, an examination that has largely been overlooked in the focus on the tech companies' massive market success (read: profitability). One clear impact has been to diminish the quality of media across the whole industry. Here Foer's experience at the New Republic under owner Chris Hughes (Mark Zuckerburg's college roommate) offers valuable insight into the changes in the media business. The rise of big tech, its impact on the advertising market, the pressure on content generators to tailor their content to Facebook and Google's news algorithms - these have, in Foer's telling, created a "race-to-the-bottom" environment in media and publishing. The emphasis on engineering click counts is a key part of this account. Foer argues that,

> The core insight of Upworthy, BuzzFeed, Vox, and the other emerging Internet behemoths was that editorial success could be engineered—that if you listened to the data, it was possible to craft pieces that would win massive audiences. This was an insight embraced across the industry, even at sober places like the Washington Post. And it was an insight the wormed its way into the New Republic.[6]

The undeniable effect is that despite the proliferation of media across the internet, ironically the forces put in place by Big Tech are driving all media to look the same. And at a time of great political polarization, when serious reporting - the kind that isn't easy to produce, and doesn't usually win the competition for clicks - is urgently needed, the media industry is moving away from a focus on this type of editorially-driven content.

And these political implications cannot be overlooked. One point of relevance in Foer's book is its discussion of the 2016 election. He argues that the forces (discussed above) that have in recent years been shaping the media industry are a key factor in Trump's success.

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[6] Ibid., 82.

"Stories about Trump," he explains, "yielded the sort of traffic that pleased the Gods of Data and benefited the bottom line."[7] Many other commentators have discussed this fact - that Trump's political success would not have been possible in previous (more sober) media environments. Foer informs the debate in an important way, by showing not just how media have embraced "reality" culture and lowered their standards, but by examining the concrete ways in which the increasing power of the Bit Tech firms has shaped this cultural change and driven media towards the lowest common denominator.

The other element that cannot be overlooked in the last election is foreign interference - and Big Tech's enabling of it. The recent congressional hearings on election interference suggests growing awareness (including on the part of the companies themselves) of the possibility that Big Tech was complicit in undermining the integrity of our democracy. Mark Zuckerburg initially dismissed the notion that Facebook might have had an impact on the election as, "a crazy idea". But this defense is disingenuous at best - enabling the spread of information, and offering a platform to magnify its impact, is in fact one of Facebook's key missions. Perhaps it is the perversity of the outcome that Zuckerburg and others take issue with. In fact Foer presents a hypothetical case[8] (not strictly hypothetical, though, since Google in particular actively assisted the Obama campaigns) of a down-to-the-wire election in which Mark Zuckerburg uses the power of Facebook to assist his preferred candidate. Perhaps even more disturbing, though, is what really happened - social media being used to elect a candidate that none of the leadership of Big Tech supported; it seems that these platforms have grown beyond even the control of their creators.

One of Foer's most valuable insights is that though the big tech firms claim to want to eliminate the gatekeepers of knowledge, this claim is disingenuous - they really want to

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[7] Ibid., 87.
[8] Foer, 74.

eliminate the *other* gatekeepers of knowledge to establish themselves as the sole gatekeepers of information and commerce[9]. Foer's historical analysis gives valuable perspective on the history of monopoly, American perceptions of it, and government's attempts to regulate it. But the book is much less forward-looking than backward-looking. If we take Foer's arguments about the danger of monopolistic tech companies seriously, the obvious questions is what should be done about those monopolies. Foer's only specific recommendation on the policy front is the creation of a data protection authority, analogous to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau created in the wake of the last financial crisis[10]. This recommendation seems decidedly paltry when viewed against alongside Foer's nearly apocalyptic view of the tech monopolies. Foer does an admirable job acquainting the reader with past American efforts to prevent the rise of monopolies, so it is surprising that he does not more directly argue for the revival of this program in the modern era. As Foer reminds us, at one time in the past the government's enforcement of antitrust laws was vigorous - in 1940 it brought nearly a hundred cases, but this has fallen to two cases in the whole Obama administration.

At a time when the ascendance of the huge tech companies seems complete and unchallengeable, Franklin Foer's call to pay closer attention to those companies' methods, and the implications of the role they have made for themselves in politics and business, is valuable. Foer's own unpleasant experience at the *New Republic* clearly informs his passionate defense of traditional media. His media industry perspective provides important perspective on the issues at stake - Foer is able to give an insider's view of what he sees as the gradual and destructive remaking of the entire media industry under the influence of Amazon, Google, and Facebook. We should not blindly accept his claims of "existential threat" - the market value of these companies clearly reflects, in part, the value of the products and services they offer to

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[9] Ibid., 75.
[10] Ibid., 113.

their customers, and it is difficult to imagine a future without large tech companies that integrate many products and services in one package. But neither should we accept at face value the claims of neutrality, benevolence, and high-mindedness on the part of Big Tech. Foer skillfully shows many of the ways in which practical effects these companies have had on business, information, and politics, are at odds with their rhetoric and stated goals. Though *World Without Mind* falls short on offering specific policies to address the problems he identifies, the book is still an important contribution to the growing debate on the proper role of these companies in our collective life.