‘Musk needs to be adored … Zuckerberg is out of his depth’: Kara Swisher on the toxic giants of Big Tech

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“This is about love gone wrong,” says Kara Swisher, looking back on a life spent studying the giants of Big Tech. “I saw the possibilities of tech being the saviour of humanity – or at the very least, really helping people, in terms of community and knowledge and education. And instead, you know …” She pauses, and wearily exhales. “It’s like that old expression: ‘They promised us jetpacks, and this is what we got?’ Like, are you kidding me?” But, she adds: “The problem isn’t tech. It’s people.” Swisher is essentially a business journalist, but her speciality is human beings and what they do with wealth and power. She has been scrutinising Silicon Valley for around three decades – writing ferociously and insightfully for the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times, founding the tech news website Recode, and blazing a trail into podcasting. Her writing has always struck a delicate balance between insider knowledge and biting irreverence. Now, though, her iconoclastic side has won out, given free rein in an extremely readable memoir, Burn Book. The title, she tells me, comes from the 2004 movie Mean Girls, in which the leading characters keep a shared diary full of slights and gossip about their classmates. As well as telling her own story, the book centres on pen-portraits of people – men, mostly – she has closely observed as their wealth and influence has ballooned: Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and Sergey Brin and Larry Page, the founders of Google. A few of them emerge as rounded, deep-thinking people who at least understand the huge questions of power that swirl around them. Others, by contrast, are more cuttingly portrayed – as “fresh-faced wunderkinds I had mostly rooted for” who eventually made the author “feel like a parent whose progeny had turned into, well, assholes”. Swisher talks to me on video call from her home in Washington DC, but she still has a house in San Francisco, and says she spends as much time as she can there. And she insists, again and again, that she still has faith in tech’s liberating, knowledge-enhancing potential: “I still believe in it. Stuff around generative AI, for example: I’ve talked to so many doctors and they’re like: ‘This could change the whole game on cancer entirely.’ Or climate change technologists who say: ‘We can now really begin to understand solutions to this.’” She also says she remains a believer in what she calls “the most vaunted parts of the American experience”: the US system of democracy, and the idea that anyone can become a success (“It’s full of hypocrisy, and at the same time it’s very true”). But in Burn Book, these two articles of faith are sorely tested by the moment she uses to symbolise tech’s spectacular fall from grace: 14 December 2016, when many of the executives and company founders she had on speed-dial met the newly elected president on the 25th floor of Trump Tower, in New York. Even now, she talks about this in the pained manner of someone recalling eating rotten food: it was a hugely significant moment, in the worst possible way. “My issue, if you can believe it, wasn’t really with Trump,” she says. “I get

him. He's very easy to read. He's a racist, he's a homophobe – he's everything terrible about the United States. My issue was with the tech people who knew better, didn't like him, but wanted money. More money. They wanted less regulation and the ability to grow, unrestricted. They knew he was bad. He was very anti-immigration, and this was an industry built on immigration. All I wanted them to do was say something publicly, like: 'We're going, but let me tell you, Mr president-elect, we are going to do everything to fight you on your immigration statements.' They could have done anything. But they snuck in. They really did." She then mentions the pithy statement of supposed corporate ethics still enshrined in Google's code of conduct. "'Don't be evil.' Well, evil's sitting in front of you. You might want to have a word." Swisher is 61, a bit older than most of the tech bros she has spent so much time chronicling. The sense of an insider-outsider is compounded by her upbringing in Long Island, which seems to have leavened her embrace of California optimism with a very north-eastern kind of sarcasm and scepticism. In a world still dominated by straight white men, moreover, her gender and sexuality also set her apart, having played a big role in her pre-tech backstory. Her initial ambition, she says, was to follow the example set by her father, who had served in the US Navy, and work as a strategic analyst for either the military or the CIA. But as she writes, "pushing against the anti-gay tide was nearly impossible at the time, and the ferreting out of gays in the military continued for over a decade". She began making her way in journalism. By 1996, she was dedicatedly reporting about the new world taking shape in northern California, and what she calls "supremely odd but compelling people". "Like the Google guys – they always had strange clothes and they said odd things to you and … wandered away," she says. "They would have kind of weird and wacky headquarters. A lot of toys, which actually was a signal to me, and not a good one. I was like: 'What are they doing?' The idea of being childlike – they loved that. A lot of their clothes were very juvenile. So was their food. There'd be, like, pogo sticks. A lot of graffiti on the walls, but paid-for graffiti. And ping-pong tables." In the book, these regressive tendencies reach their jaw-dropping nadir at the baby shower held in 2008 by Google co-founder Brin and his wife. Guests, Swisher recounts, could wear "a diaper with an oversized comical pin", "a ruffled baby hat that came with a rattle" or "adult-sized footy pyjamas accessorised with a teddy bear and a sucker". She refused all the sartorial options, but soon encountered Wendi Deng – then the wife of Rupert Murdoch, who Swisher calls "Uncle Satan" – wearing "leather pants and stiletto boots under the giant Pampers". All this weirdness, Swisher says, was there, whether consciously or not, to smooth over the fact that the new tech industry was not the big-hearted humanitarian project its founders often talked about, but something much more straightforward: the latest iteration of rapacious capitalism. "I thought it was all performative. It was like: 'Aren't we different?'; and I was like: 'You're not really that different.' I was irritated by the performative nature of it all, you know: all soft and squishy, but hard as nails on the inside. And that's what these people were, right? They were always killers. Every one of them." This leads on to another of her book's big themes. If people like this acquired any degree of power, they were probably always going to be out of their depth – a point that seems to apply particularly vividly to Zuckerberg. When she first met the-then boss of Facebook, she was struck by the fact that he looked "like a newborn something, all fawn-like eyes and wide forehead", and was painfully socially awkward. But he also "craved power and historical significance from the get-go". Does she think he ever feels any fear about the huge responsibilities that ought to come with what he has built? She answers emphatically. "Yes. I think every now and then you see that he knows he's in over his head." She mentions an interview she did with Zuckerberg in 2018, for her Recode Decode Podcast, in which he expressed the somewhat startling opinion not only that Facebook (since folded into the giant company that Zuckerberg named Meta) should host content put up by Holocaust deniers, but that such people were "not intentionally getting it wrong". "He was so out of his depth, and you could see that he kind of knew it," she says. "But he kind of walked into it: like: 'I can handle this.' I'm like: 'You cannot handle hundreds of years of antisemitism – I'm telling you that you can't. You need some real experience.' And that was my issue: someone who was so ill-prepared was making decisions that affected all kinds of people and unleashed an enormous amount of toxic waste." She describes his recent appearance in front of the judiciary committee of the Senate, also attended by parents who had lost their children to suicide after horrific experiences online. "They were there," Swisher tells me, "and they had pictures of their kids. They held them up, these photographs. I saw him look at the entire group. And you could see – like: 'Oh my God.' But he couldn't bring himself to apologise directly. He had to say: 'I'm sorry for what was done to you.' And that's not an apology. I don't know what that is." She pauses. "It's an acknowledgment of pain." What does that say about him? "It says he still can't take responsibility. You could see in his eyes that he was just like: 'Whoa, whoa, whoa.'" He could see the impact. But he couldn't say: 'I'm sorry.' They were saying: 'Things you did directly, decisions you made, helped kill my child.' And he couldn't address that. It's so passive." Meta's president of global affairs, let us not forget, is the former Lib Dem leader Nick Clegg. Has she had any dealings with him? "Yes. Of course. Nick. Smoothie Nick. I've never interviewed him: he won't give me an interview because he's smart. I just feel like: 'Do you believe anything you're saying?' I don't know. He's such a pretty sayer of things. I'm sort of like: 'What do you actually believe in here? What is your goal?' That's what I often think of with him." In the book, Swisher says Zuckerberg is "the most damaging man in tech". Elon Musk, by contrast, is maligned as the "most disappointing", which reflects Swisher's long period of thinking of the co-founder of Tesla and founder of SpaceX as one of the tech industry's most promising sons. In 2016, she contacted him ahead of the big meeting with Trump, warning that the president-elect would "screw" him; two years later, Musk told her she had been right. All told, she seemed to believe that he operated on a higher level than most of his peers. "Here's someone who actually was doing serious things," she says. "There's a lot of people in Silicon Valley who are always doing a dry cleaning app. He was thinking of everything from cars to space to solar. Even the silly stuff like [his imagined high-speed

transport system] Hyperloop: what a great idea. What an interesting idea." She also mentions Neuralink, the venture working on computer interfaces that can be implanted in people's brains. "How could we upgrade our intelligence? That's a big, fascinating problem." Initially, she thought his ownership of X would be a good thing: "He used the product and he understood it. And he's a guy who got things done." But then came a rupture: in October 2022, she tweeted about a Washington Post article that questioned his work on the satellite-based internet system Starlink, and he emailed her the eloquent words: "You're an asshole." Soon after, he began opening X up to the kind of far-right voices that had been banned, and plunging into conspiracy theories – as she puts it, "going off the rails every day of the week and twice on Sunday". She says she is saddened by all this. "The drug that's hurting Elon Musk is all his enablers, who suck up to him. And needing to be adored. That'll kill you." And she watched it happen, tweet by tweet: "You could see him getting more and more radicalised. He suddenly got obsessed with the woke mind virus, whatever the hell that is, and angry all the time." Given its huge financial problems, does she think X will eventually fold? "Why would it? He's the world's richest man. It's like having a mega-yacht: it's expensive, but he's got the money to keep it up. And they'll give him loans … so it will only go down when he decides to stop paying for it." Does he think he will? "No! I think he loves it. He desperately needs attention. Trump is running for president because he desperately needs attention, among other things. And Musk really needs attention. If he owns X, he becomes quantumly more interesting to people across the globe." Which brings us to one of the biggest questions of all. As that summit with the titans of Big Tech proved, Trump is arguably the quintessential politician of the internet age. Whether Musk explicitly supports him or not, X's reshaping as something of a right-wing hellscape will be a sizable help to his re-election campaign. Come November, does Swisher think he'll win? "No. No. This is where I believe in the American people. There's an angry strain through the American experience that's never left us. We're an angry people, in many ways. But we're also hopeful people. And people have had enough of him, especially women. "They're tired of being groped. They're tired of being cheated. They're tired of loudmouths. Biden is not the ideal candidate, but he's a decent man and he's done a lot of stuff, and it will sink in enough to get rid of Trump." Swisher has not spent the last 90 minutes mincing her words, and so it proves again. "He might be in jail, and I hope he is," she says. "I hope they put him away and throw away the key." Burn Book by Kara Swisher (Piatkus, £25) is out now. To support the Guardian and the Observer, buy a copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply.