

Your Startup is Broken

Inside the Toxic Heart of Tech Culture

Collected Essays by Shanley Kane

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Author's Note

This collection explores tech culture -- not the myth of it, the glamour and lies of it, but its hidden and toxic heart.

The propaganda around tech culture is seductive; it is a propaganda of wealth, of power, of geek revenge, of exceptionalism, “meritocracy,” “innovation”, “disruption”. In the tireless, vast hype machine of Silicon Valley, the meaning of culture as a word, as the underlying structure of systems, as the propelling logic of the industry, is reduced to superficialities, to office perks and sycophantic slogans, to glittering, profitable shit.

Where is the truth in this miasma of Series As, exits, acquihires, corporate campuses, in the shadow of a looming bubble? Where is examination of tech culture as endemic dysfunction, abuse of power, uncritically applied dogma, structural inequality? Of its destructive hierarchies, failing political structures, micro and macroaggressions, nepotism, incompetence, corruption ... of other assorted, resilient, pervasive brokenness?

Tech culture, in the end, is about the things no one will say.

These essays are about saying those things.

Your Startup is Broken comprises work written between early 2013 and mid-2014. It is divided into four sections: Culture, Teams, Management, and finally Misogyny.

In *Culture* we begin to separate out the manufactured sheen of tech culture from its underlying functions and motivations, exploring the ruling mythologies of the industry, the memes of “founder” and “10x engineer,” and the secret lives of popular organizational strategies, from distributed teams to “flat” companies. In *Teams* we catalog the dysfunctions of people working together. There are analytical tools for uncovering the true lives of teams, lists of the warning signs in systemic communication problems, and documen-

tation of known antipatterns in group behavior. In *Management* we look at values for better management, and management as a site of both abuse and of industry change. Finally, we critique attempts at management reform in Silicon Valley. In *Misogyny*, we look at the gendered violence, abuse and discrimination that is a fundamental structure of tech culture. The final essay discusses how to start thinking about our workplace diversity in a more holistic and ultimately productive way.

Its contents written over about the course of a year and half, *Your Startup Is Broken* is in places uneven, disjoint, incomplete. The essays themselves were written across several jobs, in the in-between hours of long weeks. A few were written in the early months of the media company I founded in late 2013.

As I suppose we always will upon re-reading our own writing -- some of it much, much later -- I find many things I wish I had written differently, expanded on, expressed more eloquently. When I look over these essays as a body of work, I see that I'm still a new writer and it shows. Much of the work similarly reflects a certain immaturity in my early political stance. In the time many of these essays were written, I was watching - no living - my career and dreams, my mental health and stability, my relationships and sense of self being torn apart by tech industry misogyny. I was very focused on "women in tech" as an identity position, as an area of political inquiry -- it was what was hurting the most in my life, and I wrote that. I now acknowledge the focus on women as a necessary but insufficient aspect of a diversity in technology movement which requires more inclusion, broader community-building, and a true intersectional practice to be both just and triumphant.

Despite its many flaws, this collection is my contribution to the contemporary body of resistance to tech culture as it now exists. In retrospect, it is clear to me that this work was in many ways the foundation for what is now Model View Culture - one of the industry's only independent media platforms focusing on tech, culture and diversity. This early writing, and its many readers,

made abundantly clear to me the need for cultural critique in tech, for representation of diverse voices, and for an alternative to the existing tech media.

Thank you for purchasing this collection. The proceeds will go to redesigning ModelViewCulture.com for the next stage of our growth.

I hope you enjoy the essays. I hope that they have value to you in your own work, and your personal resistance against tech culture.

-- Shanley

Culture

What Your Culture Really Says

Toxic lies about culture are afoot in Silicon Valley. They spread too fast as we take our bubble money and designer Powerpoints to drinkups, conferences and meetups all over the world, flying premium economy, first class, ad nauseam. Well-intentioned darlings south of Market wax poetic on distributed teams, office perks, work/life balance, passion, “shipping”, “iteration,” “freedom.” A world of startup privilege hides blithely unexamined underneath an insipid, self-reinforcing banner of meritocracy and venture capital. The revolt of programmers against traditional power structures within organizations manifests itself as an (ostensibly) radical re-imagining of work life... but the new boss is suspiciously like the old boss.

The monied, celebrated, nuevo-social, 1% poster children of start-up life spread the mythology of their cushy jobs, 20% time, and self-empowerment as a thinly-veiled recruiting tactic in the war for talent against internet giants. The materialistic, viral nature of these campaigns have redefined how we think about culture, replacing meaningful critique with symbols of privilege. The word “culture” has become a signifier of superficial company assets rather than an ongoing practice of examination and self-reflection.

Culture is not about the furniture in your office. It is not about how much time you have to spend on feel-good projects. It is not about catered food, expensive social outings, internal chat tools, your ability to travel all over the world, or your never-ending self-congratulation.

Culture is about power dynamics, unspoken priorities and beliefs, mythologies, conflicts, enforcement of social norms, creation of in/out groups and distribution of wealth and control inside companies. Culture is usually ugly. It is as much about the inevitable broken-

ness and dysfunction of teams as it is about their accomplishments.

Culture is exceedingly difficult to talk about honestly. The critique of startup culture that came in large part from the agile movement has been replaced by sanitized, pompous, dishonest slogans.

Let's examine popular startup trends that are being called "culture" and look beneath the surface to find the real culture that may be playing out below. This is not a critique of the practices themselves, which often contribute value to an organization. This is to show a contrast between the much deeper, systemic cultural problems that are rampant in our startups and the materialistic trappings that can disguise them.

We make sure to hire people who are a cultural fit

What your culture really says: We have implemented a loosely coordinated social policy to ensure homogeneity in our workforce. We are able to reject qualified, diverse candidates on the grounds that they "aren't a culture fit" while not having to examine what that means - and it might mean that we're all white, mostly male, mostly college-educated, mostly young/unmarried, mostly binge drinkers, mostly from a similar work background. We tend to hire within our employees' friend and social groups. Because everyone we work with is a great culture fit, which is code for "able to fit in without friction," we are all friends and have an unhealthy blur between social and work life. Because everyone is a "great culture fit," we don't have to acknowledge employee alienation and friction between individuals or groups. The desire to continue being a "culture fit" means it is harder for employees to raise meaningful critique and criticism of the culture itself.

Meetings are evil and we have them as little as possible

What your culture really says: We have a collective post-traumatic stress reaction to previous workplaces that had hostile, unnecessary, unproductive and authoritarian meetings. We tend to avoid projects and initiatives that require strict coordination across the company. We might have difficulty meeting the expectations of enterprise companies and do better selling to startups organized like us. We are heavily invested in being rebels against traditional corporate culture. Because we communicate largely asynchronously and through chat, it is easy to mentally dehumanize teammates and form silos around functional groups with different communications practices or business functions.

We have a team of people who are responsible for organizing frequent employee social events, maintaining the office “feel”, and making sure work is a great place to hang out. We get served organic, vegan, farm-raised, nutritious lunches every day at work.

What your culture really says: Our employees must be treated as spoiled, coddled children that cannot perform their own administrative functions. We have a team of primarily women supporting the eating, drinking, management and social functions of a primarily white male workforce whose output is considered more valuable. We struggle to hire women in non-administrative positions and most gender diversity in our company is centralized in social and admin work. Because our office has more amenities than home life, our employees work much longer hours and we are able to extract more value from them for the same paycheck. The environment reinforces the cultural belief that work is a pleasant dream and can help us distract or bribe from deeper issues in the organization.

20% of the time, or all of the time, people can work on whatever they want to

What your culture really says: We have enough venture funding to pay people to work on non-core parts of the business. We are not under that much pressure to make money. The normal work of the business is not sufficiently rewarding so we bribe employees with pet projects. We're not entirely sure what our business objectives and vision are, so we are trying to discover it by letting employee passions take root. We have a really hard time developing work that takes more than a few people to release. We have lots of unfinished but valuable projects that get left behind due to shifts in focus, lack of concentrated effort, and inability to organize sufficient resources to bring projects to completion.

We don't have managers and the company is managed with no hierarchy

What your culture really says: Management decisions are siloed at the very top layers of management, kept so close to the chest they appear not to exist at all. The lack of visibility into investor demands, financial affairs, HR issues, etc. provides an abstraction layer between employees and real management, which we pretend doesn't exist. We don't have an explicit power structure, which makes it easier for the unspoken power dynamics in the company to play out without investigation or criticism.

We don't have a vacation policy

What your culture really says: We fool ourselves into thinking we have a better work/life balance when really people take even less vacation than they would if they had a vacation policy. Social pressure and addiction to work has replaced policy as a regulator of vacation time.

We are all makers who are focused on shipping

What your culture really says: Features are the most important function of our business. We lack processes for surfacing and addressing technical debt. We have systemic infrastructure problems but they are not relevant because we are more focused on short-term adoption than long-term reliability. We prioritize fast visible progress, even if it is trivial, over longer and more meaningful projects. Productivity is measured more by lines of code than the value of that code. Pretty things are more important than useful things.

Closing

Culture runs far deeper, and is far more complex, than the symbolism and VC spoils we parade under its name. In culture we find the most intractable dysfunctions of our companies and teams, as well as their greatest strengths. Without honest and critical examination of culture within ourselves and within each other, it destroys the value in our employees, products and organizations; creates rampant inequality across our industry; and threatens the future of Silicon Valley and technology itself.

But hey, you have a beer keg in the office.

The Startup Mythologies

Trifecta

At the heart of tech is a trifecta of mythologies: the myth of programming as the most important force within the industry; the myth of the financial opportunity available to startup employees; and the founder mythology – a collection of tropes which position founders and their work at the center of the field.

These three mythologies drive access to all of tech's resources, and provide a rubric for distributing its wealth and opportunities. These glamorized, simplified, *falsified* images, these manufactured tropes and stories, make it easy to justify differences in how people and roles are valued, and create systems that bestow very particular groups of people with power, money and social capital. They work together in concert, and in practice, function to exclude and marginalize minorities in tech.

Myth One: Technical talent – and specifically programming - is the most important skillset in the industry and within companies.

The privileging of technical talent, and the centering of it in the culture, is pervasive. It is visible in the higher salaries engineers often command compared to other roles, and in the different standards of behavior they are often held to compared to other employees. It appears in statements by venture capitalists about the talent they look for in founders, and is common in mass media depictions such as recent blockbuster *The Social Network* and the new HBO show *Silicon Valley*.

Why It Happens

In practice, people who have programming ability that is valued by the culture often come from privileged backgrounds that include early access to computers and technical education, participation

in prestigious academic programs, and in the case of “self-taught” programmers, base resources and often copious amounts of time. Sexism and racism often keep other groups out of these career paths. Privileging technical talent thus functions to automatically maintain the position of the already dominant class – straight white men from privileged backgrounds. The privileging and prestige of the role also provides a distraction from any actual or perceived tension between management and the programming workforce – including technical units’ actual vs. perceived autonomy, outsourcing of programming positions, corporate desire for programmers to work beyond what constitutes a reasonable work/life balance, etc.

In addition, the construction of programming as the creative and corporate power center within organizations helps the management of tech companies - especially large ones - recruit and retain programming talent despite the fact that the actual amount of influence and autonomy programmers can exercise may be much lower than what the myth itself suggests.

The Reality

Programming is just one part of what constitutes a functional and successful tech company – ignoring or devaluing other aspects can, and often does, lead to widespread company dysfunction. Many programming, development and engineering positions don’t involve coming up with product concepts or designs, or even anything new at all – in fact, they often involve implementing the concepts and direction of other business units, or maintaining or marginally improving existing software. Much of programming is repetitive, rote, extraordinarily time-consuming, and may be very tedious and frustrating. Actual engineering operations and management positions bear very little resemblance to the popular image of programming as exciting, creative work where you get to come up with, and implement new things most of the time. Despite this fact, the image of the autonomous, creative programmer remains the primary trope used to describe and promote engineering positions.

Why It's Especially Untrue for Underrepresented and Marginalized Groups

These groups tend to be particularly underrepresented in programming, even within the tech industry itself, and attrition rate is high due to discrimination, abuse and lack of advancement opportunity. Additionally, these groups are less likely to make it to senior positions where most creative decision-making power is centralized - i.e. positions where they can make the high-level product and business decisions that are implied by the pervasive image of programming as a creative force. They may also have less free time to use their technical skills for side-projects or to bootstrap a company, where they can actualize this mythology in some capacity. And in a world where the “coding founder” is one of the most valued tropes and VC firms consistently exhibit discriminatory funding practices, marginalized people are also less likely to attain the capital they need to found startups.

Myth Two: Being an early startup employee is a good way to make a lot of money.

The tech trade press focuses largely on startups raising large amounts of money or obtaining vast wealth through IPO or acquisition. Our most cherished public figures in tech tend to be those who grew extraordinarily rich from founding, or working as early employees for, tech companies. Their stories are embellished, glamorized and re-contextualized into an entire genre of startup lore propagated by companies, venture capitalists and press alike. Money is also positioned as the predominant underlying motivation of starting and growing tech companies, and much of the direction of the industry is driven by the investment of venture capitalists whose sole priority is making more money. And, money is the ultimate scale on which the overall value of startups is determined - regardless of other potential measures, such as positive impact on society.

Why it Happens

The chance of earning disproportionate wealth through some element of skill, timing and luck is a pillar of the belief in meritocracy, which provides both an individual psychological mechanism to explain the achievement of this wealth, and a justification for the ongoing disparities within the industry. This myth convinces early startup employees to give up many years of their lives where-in startups are their sole focus... a pattern which often benefits investors far more than employees. This myth also helps convince tech workers to join small, unstable startups rather than larger companies which may have more resources to provide good benefits, a better work-life balance, a concrete career path, more reliable income and other clear advantages.

The Reality

Very, very few early startup employees get any significant money out of their stock options - especially not enough to make up for the often years of under-compensation justified by equity. Early employees' stock also tends to get heavily diluted over years as the startup takes subsequent rounds of investment. Further, purchasing their stock when they leave companies may cost a significant amount of money and incur a large amount of taxes that may actually economically disadvantage early startup employees. Despite the fact that many will readily acknowledge that most people do NOT get rich from startups, there is very little examination of how this system manipulates and takes advantage of startup employees, and there remains a pervasive and often unsubstantiated belief of people in the dominant groups that they are special, important and smart enough to beat the odds.

Why It's Especially Untrue for

Underrepresented and Marginalized Groups

Most of the VC money in tech flows to startups that are dominated by white men, who tend to hire other white men as early employees. Often, people from marginalized and underrepresented groups

aren't hired until much later, when there is much less equity available; and due to the fact they are under-compensated compared to the dominant group in tech, might receive less equity anyways.

Myth Three: The Founder Mystique

Founders are covered more frequently in tech press than people in any other position. Opulent and expensive events, dinners, conferences, clubs and even online networks are dedicated specifically to this role. Many founders brag about the access they have to the prestigious network of other founders and venture capitalists. And tech's "celebrities" are almost universally founders. This myth is very much intertwined with the idea that founding a startup is incredibly glamorous, exciting and fulfilling work.

The Reality

The focus on founders obscures the importance and contributions of dozens, hundreds, thousands and even tens of thousand of people involved in a company's success. Many founders are incompetent, abusive or both; often startups succeed in spite of them, not because of them. Founders become great as much through the systems of privilege and access around them as their personal volition and attributes. In addition, running a startup is not particularly glamorous. Most startups do not experience explosive growth, have access to hundreds of millions of dollars in capital, and get the immediate fame and notoriety granted to certain startups who fit a particular niche or image. Running a startup requires a tremendous amount of administrative work and acumen - from incorporating, to taxation, book-keeping, payroll, payment processors, finding and maintaining an office, etc. Even if the startup employs external help, managing these constitutes a non-trivial amount of time, and is directly opposed to the glamorized image of the job.

Why It Happens

For many VCs, especially those using a "spray and pray" strategy or doing early-stage investment, maintaining the prestige around

founders feeds into their ability to get large amounts of startup equity for relatively small investments of money. The “cult of personality” that develops around startup founders and the mythical image that accompanies the role of being a “founder” also helps to justify the often disproportionate wealth, fame, access and power they may attain, and ensure that this wealth remains distributed across a relatively small group of people. Regarding the idea of running startups as a “glamorous” thing, most of the “non-glamorous” labor in startups is disproportionately performed by people from marginalized and underrepresented groups in tech - therefore it is de-valued and even made “invisible” by the dominant narratives.

Why It’s Especially Untrue for Underrepresented and Marginalized Groups

Because these groups are massively discriminated against by venture capital and the industry, because they have less access to the wealth, access and resources needed to bootstrap a company, and because of higher tolls on their time and energy, these groups start companies less and thus often can’t attain the founder position in the first place. Also, people from marginalized/underrepresented groups aren’t given the prestige, respectability and access granted to many founders, even when they DO start their own companies.

Deconstructing the Trifecta

These mythologies all work in concert. The tropes elevating programming talent feed into the prestige given to founders. The glamorous image of founders and startups helps feed the myth around the “get rich quick” trap of startup equity. The privileging of technical talent influences who gets to become founders; and those founders help determine who even has a shot at what is often termed the “startup lotto.”

These myths also have motivations in common – often, they can

conceal, justify or distract from actual or perceived tensions and power relationships – whether it be between VCs and potential founders, non-technical and technical employees, or management and the workforce.

Ultimately, understanding what the mythologies are vs. the reality, how these myths are created and propagated, how they work together, and how they disproportionately punish and exclude minorities in tech is critical to tearing down some of the structures underlying tech's inequalities.

10x Engineer

“I was a 10x engineer for 7 months and then I was a 0x engineer for a year and a half. You burn the candle at both ends. You end up with alcoholism and depression. You’re talking about a very small subset of people. And they might end up in divorce and financial ruin. When people think you’re a 10x engineer, they think you have skills that you don’t. You invariably let people down.”

— Anonymous

The Mythology Begins

Any endeavor to track down the origin of “10x engineer” will end up at *Exploratory Experimental Studies Comparing Online and Offline Programming Performance* by Sackman, Erickson and Grant. It was published in 1968. Computers were expensive and slow. Often, programs were written “offline,” without the programmer ever touching the computer. Instead, programs were scheduled and run by an operations team to ensure effective resource utilization. Allowing direct interaction of the programmer with the computer was far too expensive. Still, another approach blossomed:

Time-sharing developed out of the realization that while any single user was inefficient, a large group of users together was not. This was due to the pattern of interaction: Typically an individual user entered bursts of information followed by long pauses; but a group of users working at the same time would mean that the pauses of one user would be filled by the activity of the others. - Wikipedia

At the time of this foundational study, a debate raged.

Time-sharing allowed programmers more direct access to the computer, but required “expanded hardware and more extensive software.” *Exploratory Experimental Studies* sought to explore the productivity benefits of such an approach despite the increased cost.

The research was conducted with a mere 21 individuals across two studies. Programmer performance in writing two types of program was measured—one, a program to find a route through a 20x20 cell maze; another, to interpret teletype-inserted, algebraic equations. In addition to testing productivity across “online” (direct access to the computer) vs “offline” conditions, the study found large individual variances in the performance of the tasks—“typically by an order of magnitude.” As the authors state:

... one poor performer can consume as much time or cost as 5, 10 or 20 good ones. Validated techniques to detect and weed out these poor performers could result in vast savings in time, effort and cost.

The mythology of the 10x engineer was born.

The Mythology Grows

The research conducted in *Exploratory Experimental Studies Comparing Online and Offline Programming Performance* was deeply flawed, as the authors themselves acknowledge in the original paper:

“Before drawing any conclusions from the results, consider the scope of the two studies. Each dealt with a small number of subjects—performance measures were marked by large error variance and wide-ranging individual differences, which made statistical inference difficult and risky. The subject skill range was considerable, from programmer trainees in one study to highly experienced research and development programmers in the other. The programming languages included one machine language and two subsets of JOVIAL, a higher order language.... The representativeness of [the problems tested] for programming tasks is unknown.”

However, this didn’t stop anyone from wildly extrapolating its results, selectively quoting from the paper and carelessly amplifying its tenuous “order of magnitude” message across the tech industry,

even years later.

The Mythical Man Month was published in 1975 by Fred Brooks. In many ways, it is a memoir. The memoir of the development of OS/360, a batch processing operating system from IBM. The book's theme, as many of you will recognize, is that adding manpower to a late software project makes it later.

Here is the epigraph of Chapter 3:

"These studies revealed large individual differences between high and low performers, often by an order of magnitude."

- Sackman, Erickson and Grant

The author expounds:

"Programming managers have long recognized wide productivity variations between good programmers and poor ones. But the actual measured magnitudes have astounded all of us. In one of their studies, Sackman, Erikson, and Grant were measuring performances of a group of experienced programmers. Within just this group the ratios between best and worst performances averaged about 10:1 on productivity measurements and an amazing 5:1 on program speed and space measurements! In short the \$20,000/year programmer may well be 10 times as productive as the \$10,000/year one."

The myth had now exited an uncertain adolescence, destined for greater things.

The Mythology Becomes Entrenched

In the decades since the original paper, additional studies have been added to the "10x engineer" canon. They, too, are rife with problems and, like the original study, have been heavily criticized. For example:

- Many studies look at highly problematic metrics, such as lines

of code or time to find and correct specific bugs in a Fortran program. These metrics aren't necessarily indicative of true value production or productivity.

- Much of the cited research was conducted in a very different time, in a very different context, leveraging very different technologies and facing very different problems than programmers of 2014.
- The research tends to focus on very specific programming tasks, but is generalized by the culture to overall competency and contribution.
- Many referenced studies were conducted across a relatively small sample size or with poorly controlled conditions that bring into question the accuracy of the results.

Unfortunately, these studies nonetheless get cited extensively in other texts, which themselves get cited in other work, and so and so on. You end up in a self-referential, naval-gazing miasma of bad research, faulty conclusions and acculturated mythologies. For example, let us look at Steve McConnell, who has written extensively on the 10x engineer. Despite leaning heavily on the original 1968 research and other problematic and highly suspect research, McConnell has been quoted everywhere from the vastly popular Coding Horror blog to recent, widely-circulated presentations on scaling engineering organizations.

While an exhaustive critique of all the research in this area is outside the scope of this post...

There is no conclusive body of scientific research to suggest that the 10x engineer is in fact a real phenomenon, much less one that provides us with a deep and actionable understanding of the factors, conditions and stipulations of their existence.

Yet we continue to regurgitate the mythology, over and over again. Why?

I talked to some members of the tech industry on Twitter in Au-

turn of 2013 to get their thoughts. Some are included, along with comments, in the remainder of this essay.

The Power of Memes

Perhaps we use “10x” engineer and other variations on the concept—“superlatives”, “volatiles”, “rockstars”, “ninjas”—because they give us a pithy shorthand to describe the very real differences in contribution, value created, and competency in people we’ve worked with:

“There’s variance in skill levels, that doesn’t make a 10x engineer a thing any more than a 10x lawyer or a 10x plumber is a thing”

-@alex_gaynor

“generally over-hyped (and way too many believe they are that 10x) but I’ve met a few who build things most others could not”

-@graysky

“there is a distribution on productivity, intelligence and on the self assessment of those. Mostly these are not coincident.”

-@possiblywrong

The Mythology, Poisoned

The problem is that, just the way the “culture fit” meme covers up many more complex and interrelated factors, so does the “10x” meme erase a number of factors related to situation, culture, experience level, motivation, opportunity for growth, and more. Here’s what happens when we use a gross simplification of these complex factors instead of a critical, conscious approach:

1. It keeps us from having to specifically define what we actually value in programmers, preventing us from critical reflection on what we need in our teams, companies and

community.

“Programmer productivity is impossible to measure in any meaningful sense - 10x what? Where does craftsmanship, mentoring, etc. fit?” -@nycplayer

“depends on the metric, right? Is it sloc, or a person who makes colleagues better but doesn’t write a ton, or what?”
-@drjackbennett

“but yeah, the whole topic implies that there’s even a good thing to measure. LoC? Features shipped? Bugs closed? Fires put out?”
-@moonpolysoft

“No one says 10 times what. Productivity is so subjectively defined here. One might suspect its on purpose. #fragileegos”
-@gwensharp

“Also their metrics probably heavily penalize being non white or male. Because you know life.” -@FotoVerite

2. It over-focuses on the role of the individual and individual contribution in success, reinforcing Silicon Valley’s tendency towards hero worship, elitism and destructive individualism while ignoring the context of situation and privilege.

“Feels like biological essentialism applied to engineering. I don’t believe anyone I work with is 10x better” -@dddagradi

“it’s a convenient myth to justify hero worship, unicorn hunting, and exercising at-will termination.” -@computationist

“All of that plus it’s very situational. Even if/when true it’s non-transferable.” -**@joecharis76**

“the idea of a manager trying to isolate all responsibility for worker performance away from the organization’s contributions...”
-**@brianvan**

“entirely dependent on environment. one company’s 10x is another’s 5th column.” -**@moonpolysoft**

“what this popular cliché does is create an underclass of programmer. It’s the thing humans do in every category.”
-**@polotek**

“On the rare occasions I’ve seen real 10x it relied on a huge bunch of factors, talent being only a minor one.”
-**@kittylst**

3. It can provide a cover for destructive and abusive behavior by the “10x engineer”.

“it sounds to me like the same attitude companies use to justify engineers who act like assholes. ‘Oh yeah but he’s really good’”
-**@charleshoooper**

4. It erases many of the essential team and cultural dynamics involved in true productivity.

“cultural factors can constrain a 10x, or unleash one.”
-**@jhammond**

“talent is nothing if it isn’t backed up by a team solid at doing the day-to-day stuff. Orgs need maintainers as much as builders.”

-@andrewfhimself

“It’s relative impact. For given task+team, A may very well be 10x B. Doesn’t mean A is always 10x B. There are no superheroes”

-@jtuple

“however I do think some of the most effective programmers are the ones that improve everyone around them.”

-@computationist

“YES THIS so much this. creativity doesn’t take place in a vacuum - it’s an emergent property of person+environment.”

-@wirehead2501

5. It erases discussion of the individual’s journey towards higher levels of contribution and the role of mentorship, experience and personal growth in that journey.

“Good vs. great is a much smaller delta. And you can train starting at good.” -@n01s3

“and it leaves people outside that circle without any way to become ‘10x’ because no process is put in place for improvement”

-@stoverben

“it’s when you hear ‘We’ve measured the productivity and some are better’, and ‘We have no idea how to find good people’” -@tef

“fourth I don’t think anyone who has embraced this concept has made a serious investment in worker training & platform stabilization” -@brianvan

6. In the individual's desire to live up to the “10x” mythology, or the culture's expectations that individuals be extreme performers, workers may succumb to a variety of destructive tendencies including drug use, workaholism, heroism and alcoholism.

“Also I don't think you can address the topic without a discussion of perf enhancing drug use in startups.” -@moonpolysoft

“Also encourages super unhealthy habits; shaming for not working hard enough/surpassing expectations/super heroics” -@dddagradi

Death of a Mythology

The technology industry is full of memes, mythologies and metaphors that give us tools to communicate, to structure the world, to enforce our values, to shape our work and construct the way we see ourselves and our industry. “10x engineer” is one of those mythologies.

By unpacking it, we both see our culture more clearly and are more equipped to intervene in it—asking questions about what we truly value in engineers, what we need in teams and companies to make them succeed, and how we can stop contributing to harmful team and individual dynamics.

Downfalls of Distributed Startups

There is an ever-larger body of work dedicated to the benefits of distributed teams. This is not a contribution to it.

This post is a look at the biggest downfalls of distributed startups—specifically the rise of monoculture, siloing of the workforce, isolation of management, expense of communication, and loss of group context.

It is about how these problems are exacerbated by the shape of the team, and it is about ways to prevent or solve them. Co-located teams are far from immune to the issues discussed in this post—but they can get particularly ugly for distributed teams. They can emerge more quickly and be harder to solve. They require different types of solutions and abide by a different set of constraints. They are less documented, far less discussed. There are fewer people in the tech field with experience in solving them. Yet the spread of the model continues unabated, without critical examination of its risk factors.

Monoculture

In distributed teams, communication oscillates toward online, text-based, asynchronous chat to accommodate the inevitable variety of time zones, working hours, habits and schedules of workers. Being inescapably human, creatures of the social herd, we form connections, even relationships using what comes down to an often narrow window into the soul: a screen name and a few lines of text. To make it work, we create elaborate webs of inside jokes, shared speech norms, memes, emoticons, image macros. Mythology of the company and mythology of each other. In order to function as tools of connection and belonging, these “in-group” mechanisms must lose granularity, variety and evolution in their need to medi-

ate wide, loosely connected groups, replace in-person relationships and survive the medium's irregular and unreliable nature.

As we observe in online communities functioning under similar conditions, (IRC channels, Reddit, Hacker News, etc.), monoculture can rise quickly. “Brogramming” can fester as male-dominated startups turn to hereto-normative male bonding to form relationships. The stabilization of these communication norms can make the company less accessible and friendly to new teammates. Differences between groups are submerged to create team normativity. The false homogeneity can lead to submergence of conflict, illusions of unanimity, and the disenfranchisement/silence of “dissenting” employees. Culture can stagnate as we hold to our old norms to maintain a sense of team and community.

Solutions for Distributed Teams

Create opportunities for team members to bond in places besides group chat—regional meetups, video chats, etc. where possible can humanize and evolve the culture. Insist on maintaining professional rapport even in online communications—it's a job, not a frat house. Fire employees who engage in abusive behavior, inappropriate language, exclusionary behavior and discriminatory slurs in the company's virtual spaces. Avoid a workaholic culture where teammates rely on work for social connections they should be getting outside of work, which can exacerbate monoculture. Create a code of conduct to help encourage healthy communication and outline expectations.

Because of the propensity for monoculture in distributed teams, diversity is absolutely critical. Being able to hire people regardless of geographical location should open up more possibilities, even for specialized roles. Team full of white men even though you have a distributed company? That sucks, what's your excuse?

Actively source new employees from outside of existing employee networks, which can lead to homogeneous hiring even in distributed teams. Explicitly discourage and call out brogrammer behav-

ior—women in your team might not feel comfortable doing this. Male allies must intervene. Prevent virtual cliques by disrupting too-comfortable teams. And finally: Openly discuss the virtual culture of the company. Otherwise, it too easily goes unexamined and untreated.

Silos

As companies struggle to grow, succeed and execute with a distributed workforce, emphasis too easily falls on functional team dynamics, leaving cross-team dynamics neglected. The high coordination cost of distributed work, loss of shared context, diaspora of tools, difficulty of forming online relationships across skill sets and creation of in-team culture can result in ugly and seemingly intractable silos. All too often, people in one skill-based area of a distributed team have never met or spoken to people in other groups. Introductions and socialization tend to happen purely within teams, not across teams. Communication easily gets completely siloed off into different tools that aren't accessible or valuable to all groups (i.e., engineers using Github, marketers using Google Docs, sales people using Salesforce).

As this occurs, even ambient knowledge transmission and communication can be lost. Communicating across groups is often less urgent, and feels less important, than coordinating within functional groups. These silos are self-reinforcing—over time and with growth, less cross-team initiatives are begun and completed as there are no visible models, history, or standards for doing this work.

Solutions for Distributed Teams

Insist on some shared tools that workers from multiple teams can use to share information, status, results, news and projects. Make it mandatory - by directive or by culture—for all teams to actively participate in these channels. Experiment with using communications tools in new ways so more people gain visibility into the workflow of other teams: i.e., how can your marketers and sales

team get value from GitHub? How can your engineers get value from customer data usually seen only by account-side team members? Open up in-team functions like status calls, reports and training to other teams—chances are, they'll engage if invited and welcomed.

Recognize and maximize opportunities where cross-team collaboration is a natural fit: new product development, launches, partnership integration and documentation efforts are great junctures to break down silos in the company. Use these opportunities to create temporary cross-functional working groups with regular chances for collaboration and feedback. Make this work extremely visible and iterate on process to provide cultural precedent for cross-team effort.

Expensive Communications Loops

In distributed teams, much stands in the way of a tight communications loop. There is often an absence of shared working environment. Technology for sharing problem spaces and collaborating online remains error-prone, buggy and unwieldy. Workers are typically in different time zones, with different working hours. Soft interrupts—getting the attention of the person across from you, quick whiteboarding sessions, questions lobbed across a room—become hard interrupts in the form of chat messages, Skype calls, scheduled meetings. These factors multiply in situations where multiple people, multiple sources of feedback, and multiple functional teams are required to complete projects.

Distributed teams can carry a much larger coordination cost than centralized teams. Planning meetings, holding meetings, struggling with shitty collaboration and conferencing technologies, creating and distributing status updates, cross-company communication, and the cost of ambient online chatter adds up fast. Suddenly tasks like getting approvals, doing design and content reviews, gut-checking an idea, introducing a new project, brainstorming and whiteboarding, and other work that benefits from a tight commu-

nications loop become time-consuming and frustrating. Because getting things done is more likely in very small, in-functional-team pairings, work that requires higher degrees of coordination is often not done or simply abandoned, carrying great opportunity cost.

Solutions for Distributed Teams

Have some periods of the day—something like “office hours”—shared across teams and the company (assuming such shared hours can be found, considering time zones and other factors). During these hours, people should be online, available, and free for collaborative work. People, often managers, who are critical path for approvals and shipping must maintain strict and fast turnaround times. Managers must not stand in the way of their teams getting things done under any circumstances.

To replace the generative opportunities for spontaneous collaboration that can occur in an office, regional in-person meetups for distributed teammates creates space for white-boarding, collaborating and innovation—work that can be difficult when separated by distance, time and mediocre tools. Note, however, that this is not a panacea, and particularly if not all members of a team can participate, strategies and accommodations for better inclusion must be created. Finally, continually evaluate and demo new tools for online collaboration; this is a fast-changing space and good tools can alleviate some of the coordination overhead created by distributed teams.

Loss of Emotional Context

When around other humans, we often use a variety of non-verbal cues to communicate and connect. But distributed teams can create a nonverbal vacuum. Without these cues, without frequent in-person experiences, it can become much harder to create shared emotional state. Shared emotional state can perform critical functions: amping groups up for big projects or push periods, creating a shared sense of urgency or excitement, celebrating accomplishment, experiencing the consequences of failure. And without nonverbal cues, it is easier to dehumanize the people we see as

blocking us from completing projects, insulting us, undermining us, ignoring us. It's easier to hate a screen name than a person. Reconciling is harder as it is easy to ignore conflict and avoid confrontation in chat logs. There are many places to hide in a distributed team. It can be much harder to identify unhappy, disenfranchised, and disengaged employees when you can't see them. Silos of negativity can fester as negative emotions can be amplified and spread faster in online communities than in-person groups. As we interact using online avatars, sarcasm, crudeness, and even cruelty can become routine.

Solutions for Distributed Teams

Hanging out with each other once in awhile is useful for capturing emotional context and humanizing our teammates. Even as you grow, you should be willing to invest the time and often substantial amounts of money it takes to make in-person meetings possible—in both all-hands meetups and smaller gatherings. Think about ways to make those gatherings as inclusive to all teammates as possible - by making accommodations for people who may have difficulty attending, picking inclusive activities, and finding ways for people to participate even if unable to attend in-person (there are many creative options for this, especially as technology improves!). If your company is spending marketing budget on events, these are great opportunities to get cross-functional teammates in the same space.

Additionally: Despite being distributed, teams need to find some way to celebrate successes and discuss failures in healthy ways, as this is essential to bonding. Establish ways to resolve online conflict, possibly through mediation. And managers must learn to monitor employee satisfaction without constant in-person communication.

Management Isolation

Distributed teams pose new challenges that managers are often untrained and inexperienced in. Ensuring your distributed team

members are all happy, engaged, have sufficient access to you, and are performing well requires different approaches than those for in-person teams. Monitoring and managing team state requires navigating the lack of nonverbal context, different timezones, bad technologies, and lengthy communication loops. Managers can easily become isolated from their teams in this context.

Perhaps the most insidious of all challenges faced by distributed teams lies in upper management. Upper management must not only guide individual groups, but the entire company based on shared goals and strategies. Access to upper management can be cut off far sooner in the growth of the startup by the asynchronous, siloed nature of distributed teams. Further, there is often an emotional sense of disconnection, as employees have often barely met, seen, or spoken to members of upper management, or seen evidence of their engagement.

Upper management may struggle to share and consistently communicate cross-company goals and their context, or to gather the information they need to make good decisions—requiring coordination with product, engineering, marketing, sales and other groups.

Solutions for Distributed Teams

Hire managers with experience in distributed teams. This should not be every manager's first time doing their job in such conditions, or avoidable mistakes and significant collateral damage awaits. Without experience, managers may not be able to create the healthy teams and processes they need to succeed. For new managers, provide management training that specifically addresses the issues created in distributed teams.

From a high-level leadership perspective, upper management must set an example of transparency and communication. Explicitly communicate decisions, status, and company direction. Provide lots of venues for employees to give feedback on strategy. *Lots* of them. Management at all levels needs to spend a lot of time com-

municating (a **lot** of time), helping employees succeed in distributed environments, taking feedback, connecting and traveling to see people. Move toward *more* transparency rather than less: Often unintentionally, management in distributed teams seems secretive, uncommunicative, and inaccessible simply because it is not spending sufficient time and effort communicating.

Towards Maturation of Dialogue

I've worked on, sometimes loved, and sometimes hated distributed teams for the better part of my career. So have an increasing percentage of my friends, colleagues, and professional acquaintances. Certainly, we agree, distributed teams can attract more specialized talent, make employment more accessible, achieve broader marketing and evangelism coverage, optimize production for certain types of work, provide a better quality of life for employees, and sometimes even reduce expenditure on new employee acquisition and company operations. But there is an ugly side.

Distributed teams are good—but they are hard. It is irresponsible to view them as a panacea, without weighing their risks, their challenges, their insidious costs, their inevitable constraints. I look forward to the maturation of dialogue around distributed teams—a dialogue in which we stop singing their praises without critical thought, stop prescribing them for all companies and all situations ...and start being honest about we can fail and succeed with the new nature of teams.

Silicon Valley's PRISM Problem

There is a road through all of Silicon Valley. Far into it is the satellite bowl in the Stanford foothills, ribbed and dilating in the sky. The only reservoir is eerie, still, aquamarine. The fat black dots of cows. The pastoral charm over it all. Hawks hunting on the rising heat of a thousand expensive cars. Towns that swell around the highway. Up the road is San Francisco, in the fog. Shining city on a hill.

Along this road are over half a dozen companies named in the broadest civilian surveillance initiative in public memory.

PRISM is not something we acknowledge and feel deeply to be *our* problem, even though the majority of the data, technology and access it runs on comes straight from us. PRISM asks us to examine our contact and contract with larger social systems, yet our public response migrates between distraction, denial and disinterest. While there have been compelling works around our recourse and responsibility, there is also an alternate dialogue in which we in the tech industry are by turns apologist and absurd. Laborious meat-headed critiques of NSA Powerpoints. Hands wrung on the inevitability of mass surveillance. Morbid fantasies of Steve Jobs as the last vanguard of resistance against government intervention in Paradise. We even fawn with renewed vigor over ever flamboyant, impotent “hacktivism”.

This discourse marks an industry refusing to meaningfully engage in problems that are, at least in part, of its own making. Similar patterns can be observed in our arms-length treatment of Silicon Valley's obscene wealth gap, gentrification of neighborhoods and cities, overt racism and sexual harassment, burgeoning monopolies on social data, and refusal to find meaningful ways for users to control that data.

Turns out Silicon Valley is uniquely capable of navigating the tenuous moral ground of PRISM without self-condemnation. Silicon Valley mythology, fermented internally and exported broadly, is one of rugged individualism and proud isolation from the tired corruption of bread-and-butter American capital. Our story is of founding companies in the rich firmament of SV innovation and culture, building empires from its dust. The story is part nerd pornography, part imperialist reality. It can be read - simultaneously, opportunistically - as capitalist, libertarian and socialist.

The triumph of the individual in the market, achieving wildly disproportionate wealth through merit, is a capitalist fantasy. Yet the text around escaping bland conformist American corporatism for a separatist, Galt-ish paradise of unregulated opportunity is decidedly libertarian. Then there's the cultural narrative designed to assuage the entire labor/capital tension inherent in an economic system that relies on enormous gaps in wealth and power - a narrative of worker's rights and enlightenment, of fitter, better, happier employees, working on hard and interesting problems. Together, these mythologies form a malleable, escapist lens from which we view in safety and comfort the varied moral and political crises of our industry without claiming them as our own.

The myopic focus on individual achievement as the core unit of economic and social value leaves us struggling to address the systemic. We can relate to tech giants through the lens of individual triumph while rejecting their roles as behemoth forces in politics and the market as "from-us-but-not-of-us." Our view of such titans as the mere end-state of geek revenge fantasy makes us both disinterested in, and alienated from, their moral failings... despite the hundreds of thousands of us they employ. In our ongoing "pretend", we imagine ourselves operating outside of traditional wealth, power and social structures, then find ourselves unable to either locate or examine our role in them.

Of course, the very publics whose privacy is most impacted by PRISM are the publics we have most isolated ourselves from.

We are separated from them by access to education and skills, by wealth, by class, by race. We have been protected from the rest of the country's deep recession in a self-made retreat of upward mobility. We slowly gentrify the cities and the towns we touch, living in both economic and physical seclusion from other groups. Ultimately, when we are implicated in crisis which affects other communities, we are unable to relate to those problems or feel responsible for solving them.

And so Silicon Valley leaves its golden childhood, marked by economic crisis, for a far darker adolescence, marked by moral crisis. It is a sign of maturity in some ways, as no moral crisis is possible without moral consequence. And certainly, PRISM isn't the only touchstone for moral conflict in the golden Valley. We begin to contend with the realization that our beloved meritocracy was a lie all along... a realization in part precipitated by unprecedented levels of feminist organization in our field. There too are the signs of a more encompassing form of activism within technology that is inclusive of race, gender identity, sexuality, disability and other factors and their intersections. There is a growing backlash against the mythologies of startup culture, now openly caricatured and critically examined.

Perhaps the timing of PRISM is auspicious as we finally become capable of deeper critique.

But first we must find a way to relate to moral crisis as our problem, even as our own mythologies let us see ourselves more in Edward Snowden than in the Silicon Valley he named... the one we work in.

Tech Workers, Political Speech and Economic Threat

In the tech industry, we conflate individual identity and speech with the brand, product, social and ultimately economic production of employers.

Many tech companies have developed an overt or implied cultural expectation that all employees function as evangelists and brand ambassadors for the company. Startups adopt this as an explicit company value, bloggers have been waxing poetic about turning your startup employees into public evangelists for years, and books like *Boy Kings: A Journey Into the Heart of the Social Network* by Kate Losse document how the personal identity of early employees at companies like Facebook is used to gain early adoption of product.

In San Francisco, Silicon Valley and the Bay Area, the streets are teeming with evidence of the phenomenon: startup workers wear “staff” swag, hoodies and t-shirts emblazoned with their company brand everywhere they go. Corporate identity takes over the physical presentation of its workers, on the clock and off. Even in online spaces, tech worker bios often state their role and employer solely, or before any other biographical or identity information. And individual profiles on Github, Twitter and even personal blogs are all declared the new resume.

In tech, it’s hard to know where companies end and we begin.

Overt and Implicit Threats

There are many threats to social justice discourse in tech. For example, feminist speech is frequently targeted by loosely coordinated online hate groups, groups which execute attacks that direct-

ly threaten the physical safety of their targets. Such “incidents” constitute both acts and public performances of violence that can reach an enormous audience as they are covered by the patriarchal tech and mainstream media in search of sensation - simultaneously creating consciousness while they construct a climate of implicit threat to feminist organization.

However, examining or even eliminating these overt threats will not be sufficient to address the more insidious and formally organized mechanisms that threaten social consciousness and speech in tech. Tech culture’s transformation of personal identity into a company asset and site of economic exchange between employee and corporation goes largely unexamined, even though it is one of the most powerful forces threatening political speech across the industry -- both enforcing silence and isolating activists, critics, feminists, allies and many others who speak out from tech’s economic and social opportunities.

Identity as Labor?

The conflation of individual and corporate identity is widely believed to be the natural output of a dedicated and passionate tech workforce, rather than an artificial and deliberate corporate strategy. Of course, the ideal of the “passionate and dedicated workforce” so cherished in tech culture relies on the image of the workforce as a self-actualized, united body with no dividing line, much less tension, between the power structure and the individual. At worst, the conflation is seen as a symbiotic relationship in which both company and employees gain access to social opportunity - i.e., working for high visibility companies often results in personal visibility for their employees, and vice versa. As employees draw parts of their social identity and capital from the company, so do employers draw the fruits of that social identity and capital back into the company’s economy.

Yet the cultural expectation that demands employees fulfill public evangelist, marketing, brand, support and community work through their personal and community identity ties those identities

explicitly to the economic and power structure of the corporation. This is particularly troubling in the murky spaces of online speech platforms like Twitter, Hacker News, Reddit, Slashdot and Github, where professional discourse, corporate identities, personal identities, technical production and social congress co-exist in the same spaces and are performed in front of the same audiences. For example, an individual might contribute to both corporate open source repositories and personal ones, engage with both personal and professional contacts on public and semi-public forums, and use the same tools, platforms and communities for expressing personal opinions and identities as for performing company-specific acts like online support, technical and brand evangelism, and corporate representation.

Through this system, the company is able to benefit from the social capital of employees and spread marketing responsibilities - which are neither formally negotiated nor compensated for - across a much larger surface area of the company. Ultimately, this trend further destroys the barriers between personal space and company space that are epitomized in perk culture, and supports a scenario in which almost all employee facets occur in context of, as a tool of, and under the surveillance and control of the company.

Financial Coercion of Identity and Speech

We end up in a scenario where the individual's identity, community, popularity and influence - their self and attendant social capital - becomes part of an economic transaction with the company, and subject to its related benefits (for dominant groups) and threats (towards marginalized groups). By becoming a marketing, support and community platform for the company, the employee's speech in public arenas becomes intimately, explicitly or implicitly related to their economic and employment status. For example, social capital - particularly in the sense of being well-known, influential and visible in the community - can contribute to the hireability and compensation level of employees in a variety of tech sectors and companies. Particularly for technology companies whose success stems from industry influence, adoption and visibility, these candi-

dates are particularly attractive.

Coercion occurs as a result of tying the individual's speech and activity within the community to the economic structure of employment. It places all personal expression of employees that occur within community spaces under ownership or potential ownership by the company, and transforms identity into a company asset. As a result, discourse which threatens the status quo of labor/capital, oppression, inequality and other political issues within the industry occurs directly in the domain of employers. Such speech is automatically and immediately situated within a context of ownership and value exchange that is generally anathema to that speech, as most existing employers within tech benefit from the status quo and are heavily invested in avoiding social justice controversy.

Consequences for Individuals & Communities

What we need to ask ourselves is this: How many don't talk about inequality in tech because talking about it is "a career limiting move"? How many people never share their thoughts and feelings about systemic inequality in tech because they are expected to support their employers, and thus the overall system that those employers benefit from, in their personal time, space and identity? How many acts of passionate speech are stifled because passion is the sole purview of our experience as workers? How much do we stay silent because we know our employers and potential recruiters are watching us and what we say in community spaces, and that our jobs and economic positions are tied to what we say there?

Ultimately, how does the company's increasing encroachment on the mind, heart, soul, speech and body of the employee impact us?

Disproportionate Impact on Under-Represented and Marginalized Persons

It's critical to note that there are several functions of the overall industry which ensure these dynamics disproportionately impact tech workers who are marginalized by race, gender, sexuality, class or other systems and their intersections. People in these groups often

carry the most burden for creating social consciousness in the community and are most likely to suffer from its lack. For example: Due to systemic inequalities, marginalized people are less likely to achieve high-paying leadership positions in tech, and are more likely to be let go and fired. Marginalized people in technology are paid less than dominant groups, in part because of the way technology jobs are gendered and racialized. The fact that VCs don't invest in minorities at anywhere near the rate they invest in white men, means that minorities in tech are denied access to some of its most vital wealth mechanisms. Because of these dynamics which work together to deny economic stability and access, the economic threat of conflating corporate and personal identity can carry more weight.

The speech acts of marginalized and underrepresented people are also more likely to be tone policed, pathologized and subject to other techniques which discredit via representing them as irrational, angry, unreliable, etc - representations that are particularly likely to get them deemed as "unemployable" by tech companies who lack the social context to interpret these responses, despite the fact that they are well documented in academic, feminist, anti-racist and management texts.

People in tech occupying positions of privilege are often rewarded for political speech, while people occupying positions of marginalization and underrepresentation are often punished for the same types of speech. I.e., white men in technology who support initiatives for women in tech are often lauded as heroes while women doing the same (or more!) advocacy are villainized, harassed, and considered a social liability to the organization and community.

Because of gender roles and norms in the tech community, women are more likely to occupy positions with a specific focus on social and/or caretaking work and community support. They are also held to more restrictive and gendered expectations around politeness and nurturing. Their political speech is thus more likely to be seen as both deviant and threatening to employers.

Devil's Advocacy

When discussing protection of political speech in tech, we inevitably arrive at the “devil’s advocate” argument: if employees’ political speech must be protected, then we also have to protect faux-political speech acts like discriminatory remarks and jokes that have occasionally (but not often enough) resulted in the termination of persons in high profile positions within tech, such as Pax Dickinson, former CTO of Business Insider.

Ultimately, these arguments create a false equivalence between political speech and discrimination, abuse and harassment. Employees whose behavior and biases threaten the equal rights, access and safety of people in the community and in the workplace are a danger to our companies, co-workers and community members. People that engage in behavior that is discriminatory and abusive, or are known to hold values that support such behavior, pose a direct and immediate threat to their co-workers and to the technology community overall. It is for those grounds that such employees are and should be dismissed from their employment, NOT because they are engaging in political speech.

Response AND Representation As a Site for Critique

In discussion of increasing social and critical consciousness in tech, the erasure of diverse technologists and makers from industry representations and consciousness is a critical element. Yet in the conversation about representation, or lack thereof, we must also discuss *response* to speech around social justice and diversity in tech and how that affects the success, viability and continuity of consciousness-raising efforts. Social and cultural criticism, and discussion of structural and interpersonal inequality, is foundational to reform, or even revolution, in the technology sector.

Creating conditions within the technology community that encourage political expression is as pressing as ensuring its representation.

Tech workers need to work *against* the conflation of their personal identity and speech with their economic status within companies. This is an entrenched cultural value in Silicon Valley and must be attacked by external and internal critique, more explicit contracts between labor and capital, and more open discussion about the implications of the “employee-as-evangelist” model.

Until we can address both the overt violence aimed at political speech in tech AND the underlying economic systems that silence it, we will also not be able to extend true community protection and support to the activists, writers, artists, critics and organizers at the forefront of bringing this consciousness into our practice of technology. And we will fail to create the conditions necessary for widespread critical consciousness in the community and industry.

Teams

How the Productivity Myth is Killing Your Startup

You have to admire the insipid, dogged, naive devotion people have to believing they are going to get this huge list of things done. Even when presented with releases that slip by weeks and months, objectives and projects that slip by quarters, commitments that never materialize as brutal sacrifices are made on the altar of underestimation and overconfidence—even then, they will cheerily present their plans and strategies, dripping with ambitious and doomed optimism.

Why do we keep believing we're going to get so much done?

Each day is given only 24 hours. Even with the bare minimum of coordination costs, cut down by your tools and your processes and your homegrown blend of agile, whole hours of that day are lost to meetings, status updates, course correction, revision, company chatter, building consensus, setting and measuring, iterating and reporting. Life decimates your team with unerring and unrelenting creativity. Pregnancy, paternity/maternity leave, illness, death, burnout, vacations, weddings, seasonal variants of the flu. Then there are the inevitable bugs that would make shipping irresponsible at best and dangerous at worst. Urgent customer issues. Scope creep and intervening crisis. The combined weight and force of your team bleeds the blood of a thousand paper cuts. As studies show:

- People predictably overstate how much they work, especially when they're working long weeks
- Working more than 40 hours a week may well be useless any-

way

- Even minor interruptions take 15-20 minutes or more to recover from
- People spend a ridiculous amount of time doing non-work things at work
- People are absolutely terrible at estimating how long it will take them to complete any sort of task imaginable, and not in a good way, like, “surprise wow that took less time than we thought,” but in an “oh fuck that took way longer than we thought” way.

If you think your startup employees are somehow an exception to these rules, or you can somehow contain enough of these factors to significantly alter the result, you are a fool.

The Consequences of the Productivity Myth

- Team 1 tells Team 2 they are going to do X, Y and Z on t timeline, and Team 1 only did X and it took them two times t, and now Team 2 is SOL on Y and Z, which they needed for A and B, and now their project is late and on top of that, they deeply distrust Team 1 and will avoid any dependencies on Team 1 going forward, not trust a single word out of Team 1’s mouth and believe Team 1 to be entirely incompetent.

The myth of productivity breaks inter-department communication, cooperation and collaboration; jeopardizes all work that requires bridging functional units; and often irreparably damages trust between colleagues.

- Group sets out on 10 different projects to be achieved this quarter. Group starts out working in parallel on all 10 projects, believing with foolish wholeheartedness they can complete all projects within the given period. Of course they are wrong. Projects inevitably begin to slip and fall through the cracks. Over time, desperate re-allocation of resources and last-minute compromises are made. All 10 projects are delivered late and

half-assed. This is most sad for project number 4, which was the most important project of them all, and could have been completed and done damn well if everyone had just worked on that.

The myth of productivity means you won't complete the most important things because group parallelization will occur based on erroneous scoping and estimation.

- Team perceives slack in the assessment of time and resources and provides implicit or explicit permission to fill this slack with non-core work. Team begins producing a number of interesting, cool or fun but ultimately completely worthless demos and projects that die because they aren't tied to company priorities, can't get resourced and are passed over as the false slack inevitably yields to crunch time.

The myth of productivity means you will hemorrhage what precious output you have with reckless abandon into dozen of disconnected initiatives, pet projects, and low-priority tasks.

- Team takes on five high-touch partnerships believing they have the bandwidth to cover all of them. Suddenly a minefield of unexpected obligations and emergencies appears: last-minute launches, production downtime, integration hell, customer negotiation and on boarding, etc. This slows response time, carries a large opportunity cost as additional partnerships aren't pursued, and scatters attention across many partnerships that aren't creating equal value.

The myth of productivity makes more external commitments than you can fulfill, introducing more urgency but no more value to your work, preventing new opportunities, and dooming medium-term projects to the murky unforgiving sea of "long term projects."

- Management concocts a company strategy that takes into

consideration how much work the company can reasonably be expected to complete. A number of decisions are made based on this strategy, ranging from budget to allocation of resources to hiring to parallel product initiatives.

The myth of productivity means your management will make decisions, set goals and judge progress made on fundamentally inaccurate projections.

Out of Self-Deception

The reality of the myth of productivity is this: You don't have that much time to work with. You are going to get a very few number of things done. You are going to get way fewer things done than you think you're going to get done. And those things will take you much longer than you plan for.

You must talk to your team about the myth of productivity: Start with thought experiments. Next time a roadmap is presented, imagine a world where each release slips (and it will!) by weeks and months late. How does that change priorities, resource allocation, how you feel about what is important?

When you make decisions about the next three months, six months, year, think about what happens if it takes you twice as long to do everything you want to do. (It will!)

Challenge the assumptions of your company about productivity — when a team tells you their goals, push back on them to prioritize more strictly and cut down their list. My rule of thumb is to take a list of to-dos, cut it in half, and double the time estimate. Most of the time, it's eerily on point. Hey, you can always add more things to do in. This is always less expensive than taking things out.

Create a culture of truthfulness about productivity by continually comparing plans, roadmaps, and strategies to their actual results — often the number of things that were cut, late, or done poorly will shock and awe. What would you have done differently if you

knew what was actually possible from the onset? Only by constant confrontation of evidence that we estimate incorrectly, that we bite off way more than we can chew, that we are wrong about productivity can we change our belief in the myth.

Try reducing parallelization of tasks in favor of serialization that forces action to align with clear and ruthless priorities —this is a powerful technique that acknowledges the productivity myth and focuses on doing the most important things first.

Often, initial estimates and assumptions about time and resources are never revisited — try open, ongoing assessment and communication of how timelines, priorities and plans are changing. Minimize the cost of poor planning by changing the plan as soon as better information is available.

Getting out of the productivity delusion is more powerful than any tool, methodology, rune or religion for getting more things done. It creates a pervasive approach of measurement and honesty. It yields more effective decision making. It results in clearer priorities and aligns work and resources with those priorities. It can be a true force multiplier on results as strategy, priorities and effort align with reality.

But by far my favorite effect is FOCUS. By cutting out the lies we tell ourselves about productivity, by prioritizing and planning and allocation better, we focus more on the things that actually matter.

And *that* is the most important thing, after all.

Five Tools for Analyzing Dysfunction in Engineering Culture

Fairy tales first emerged as oral and written short stories. Later, they became plays, musicals, movies, art, pervasive elements of our culture. For children and adults alike, fairy tales serve critical social functions, teaching morality, values, history, traditions. And they also have an ugly side, long criticized for the ways they perpetuate inequalities and stereotypes, compel children to reproduce dominant culture, and normalize sexism, racism and classism.

This cultural study of fairy tales has produced a vast body of analysis and critique. Through tools like the Aarne-Thompson classification system, Vladimir Propp's morphology, and feminist, psychoanalytical and Marxist frameworks, we can reveal their hidden world.

Much as with fairy tales, we tend to only see the surface area of things unless we have the tools to deconstruct them. Take engineering organizations, and the work that they do. The work of deciding what to build, how to build it, and what to use — the work of making technical decisions and managing their consequences. We like to believe our behavior as individuals and as a team are driven by technical reasoning, by logical reasoning. But just the way that fairy tales are more than bedtime stories, technical decisions themselves are cultural artifacts—informed by signals, messages, interactions and beliefs within the culture.

In this post, we'll look at five tools you can use to interrogate and critique your technical culture. By exploring your team along these axes, you can get past the surface space of function and dysfunction to a deeper, more generative understanding of how you work.

1. Reward

A fairy tale is in part constructed by the things characters are rewarded for, and what they are rewarded with. For example, rewards of money, land, ascension to the throne, or a beautiful husband/wife can communicate the importance of wealth, aristocracy and heteronormative gender roles.

In engineering culture, rewards can be material things like raises and titles, or they can be things like recognition, popularity, social capital, a place on good projects. What we are rewarded for can have a big impact on how we make technical decisions:

In today's community and workplaces, we can attain social capital and other rewards for coming up with new products, ideas and prototypes, for being the inventor, for starting something novel. This reward system ties into our individualist mythology and geek revenge fantasies, our belief in meritocracy, our fixation on celebrity founders. But in a technical culture where genesis and individual creation is what we most reward, can we end up with teams that can't work together, that can't focus, that can't successfully commit to products and markets, that invest a ton of time into projects that never get past the early stages, that build technology that is "hip" but doesn't accrue to higher-level goals?

"Shipping": one of the most successful memes of our technical generation. If this is the foremost thing our team is rewarded for, is anyone taking care of long-term manageability? Are we developing healthy ops teams? How much technology selection is driven by the speed to ship, not inclusive of concerns like scale and maintainability? Are we shipping products that aren't coherent, but rather jumbles of smashed-together features?

What about when we reward acts of heroism — recovering from severe outages, working unreasonable hours, emerging triumphant from a "death march?" When such acts of heroism are very visible and rewarded, do we end up with a situation where people are incentivized to manifest the very conditions of catastrophe that allow

them to be heroes? At what point are we actually incentivized to create unrealistic deadlines, work at an unsustainable cadence, even cause production issues?

2. Values

What is the value system of the fairy tale? Perhaps modesty, chastity, virginity, physical beauty, or hard work despite poverty are core values that help form its subtext.

In engineering culture, we have technical values, each playing a core role in how we make decisions. Almost always, these values involve tradeoffs, or choosing the most important out of several important things. What are our technical values, what do they mean, and how can we discover them?

Oftentimes, it's hard to determine our technical values by what we say. After all, **our true culture is made primarily of the things no one will say**. Luckily, the software evaluation process can be a great way to get insight into our technical values. What aspects do we pay the most attention to? Spend the most time on? Report to the broader group? Perhaps we focus on easy-to-use APIs, robust querying, and beautiful clients. If those are our foremost values, are we paying attention to how queries may be tied to properties of the underlying software, and how that may affect performance and viability over time? Has the software been tested at scale, its operational characteristics considered? Have we ended up picking a software solely on the basis of its interfaces?

Openness, portability, interoperability, and standards: a set of technical values virtuous on the surface, but uniquely deadly to product development in early markets. If these are your foremost technical values, do you end up working on things the market is too early for? Are you wasting critical time on standards boards for things no one is using yet, or prematurely optimizing for portability of something there are no significant implementations of yet?

Technical values come from places—they do not emerge, fully formed, from the combined heads of our team. What is your team reading, sharing, and discussing from the broader tech community? Are you passing around blog posts about trivial implementations someone got off Hacker News? Does everyone idolize the latest manchild savant off Twitter dot com, but refuse to engage with true experts in the field? Or are you reading academic papers and case studies from large-scale systems or stable, production implementations?

3. Power

Who has power, and how power is constructed and enforced, tells us a lot about the hidden worlds in fairy tales. Similarly, an examination of power in engineering teams can tell us a lot:

In the most classical examples, you find situations where technical decisions are excessively influenced or even made outright by people who won't actually be implementing, building and running the software, and probably have no place to. Of the many problematic effects, perhaps most toxic is that the power in this situation isn't appropriately tied to responsibility. The incentive structure needed for success is thus utterly missing.

There are kinds of power besides dictation and delegation, however. Each engineering organization has those unicorns—people who are uniquely charismatic or convincing, carrying a great deal of social weight. Even beyond those individuals, every team has its own social dynamics. Influence is never evenly distributed. This is natural and even healthy, but you must be aware of how allegiances, loyalty, senses of belonging, in/out groups and other social dynamics are affecting team decisions.

How is power enforced and maintained on your team? Is dissent punished, is public shaming business as usual, is microaggression omnipresent, creating a culture of fear and blame? Can this result in risk avoidance, failure to report and escalate problems, or endemic dishonesty on the team?

One way that power can be exerted over engineering teams, particularly by other groups in the organization, is by creating enormous pressure around deadlines, dates, timetables and roadmaps. Often this is symptomatic of insecure executives, ongoing turf wars, or management that doesn't understand technical tradeoffs. But ultimately, it can result in burn-out, poor decision-making and low-quality software that is focused more on dates than utility.

4. Homogeneity

We can tell a lot about a fairy tale by looking at things that characters in it have in common. In the workplace, the commonalities between workers—their attributes, skills, shared backgrounds—not only affect our day-to-day experiences, but also informs our technical choices.

We would be remiss not to discuss the overwhelming homogeneity of most technical teams—predominantly white, male, straight men. Without any diversity or the empathy for other kinds of people that comes with, can you team innovate, diversify, reach new markets or break out of an early adopter segment? Indeed, can they even build products for any type of audience besides themselves?

Another aspect of homogeneity is that of shared competencies and how skills are distributed across your team. When the foremost competencies of your team are examined, how do they split out across different skillsets—such as front-end development, distributed systems, operations, performance engineering? How might that bias your team towards certain types of technical decisions? What's missing in the composition of your team as you grow?

To go a layer deeper, what are the team's common architectural beliefs, approaches to building services, methodologies for operating teams, and strategies for evaluating software? How is this affecting what you produce? Are there any dissenters that can offer different perspectives, preventing destructive group-think? And since people tend to do what they already know how to do, what perspectives or opportunities may we be missing?

5. History

Historical context tells us a lot about the meaning of a fairy tale. For example, the Pied Piper tells the frightening story of a large group of children, disappeared from a village forever by a mysterious and vindictive piper. Historical context leads us to believe the story may be a metaphor for a plague, a mass emigration, or even a Children's Crusade.

In engineering organizations, the history of a team — its patterns and context — is equally important to deconstructing meaning:

Every team has traumatic events that shape how it functions. What are the traumatic events in your team—firings, layoffs, bad hires? Massive outages and failed projects? How are those elements affecting your team now? Are they making people scared to try new things or move forward? Are they causing interpersonal issues that are breaking down communication today? What were the lessons people took away from these incidents, and were they the right ones?

Similarly, what are the past technical successes on your team and how have they trained you to think? We tend to repeat those things that were successful in the past. But will those patterns serve us well as we grow our team, try to build new products, or make significant changes in the way we operate? Could our successes themselves be holding us back from pursuing new technical approaches and opportunities?

Duality

Exploring the role of reward, values, power, homogeneity and history in our teams can be difficult and uncomfortable. It is profoundly challenging to approach questions of culture and dysfunction with honesty.

Generally, this is not how we are taught to work. In fact, we are often incentivized to submerge conflict, uncritically accept existing

power dynamics, and avoid difficult subjects to reduce friction and drama in the team. Yet doing the very opposite of these things can lead us to be more productive, happier, and better functioning. So how do we get there? How should we approach the difficult work of intervening in culture?

Approaching these topics with a shared sense of *duality* can be transformative in how we work together on fixing our teams. While we must get joy, happiness, fulfillment and positivity from our work, we must also be able to critique, to move towards greater honesty. Acknowledging and allowing space for both, and allowing each to coexist in our practice, is fundamental.

Ultimately, there is no escaping brokenness within teams, or its effects — both direct and indirect — on the software we build and use. Our work is complex, and multi-faceted, and impacted by rewards, values, power, homogeneity, history and many other factors in good and bad ways. But we can become less broken, or evolve towards different kinds of brokenness, by examining our teams and our decision-making critically, and using tools to see beneath the surface to what is really going on.

What To Look for in Team Communication

Who does the talking?

Pay attention to relative speaking time across various types of meetings, informal communication, and even in digital speech.

Is the manager talking most of the time, giving little room for other people on the team to share their thoughts, opinions and other contributions? Are there certain members of the team who do the majority of the talking, and if so, what are their characteristics? I.e. are they mostly men (typical in male-dominated groups), mostly white? Are more introverted, less boisterous/overly confident or non-domineering members of the team given a chance to talk too? What about junior workers? Are there people on the team who aren't talking at all?

Significant differences in the amount of “speaking space” members of the team take, or are allowed, can indicate dysfunctions ranging from subtle sexism and racism, to narcissistic management that doesn't listen to its employees, to value systems that prioritize confidence and volume over experience or logic. What are the risks, missed opportunities, and long-term consequences of these inequalities?

How is conflict handled?

Conflict is a normal part of human and team dynamics.

If conflict isn't occurring on your team, that can be a warning sign in itself: are people too fearful, dominated, disinterested or disempowered to surface and resolve conflict?

Think about how your team handles conflict when it comes up. Is conflict—whether disagreements about direction and strategy, in-

terpersonal dynamics, or breakdowns in communication—openly discussed, or gossiped about in private?

If it isn't being addressed openly, what are the root causes (i.e., conflict-averse teams/management, fear of retaliation, etc.)?

When conflict is surfaced, does it result in aggressive arguing, passive-aggressive lashing out, or maybe long periods of coldness and disengagement?

Ultimately, poor handling of conflict can contribute to long-term and intractable trauma on teams. Conflict resolution should be one of the major concerns of a team, as it is both inevitable over time and difficult to navigate.

What does the flow of information look like?

How is information asymmetry functioning in your team? Do managers or other members of a team hold vital information back, or use information asymmetry as a powerplay?

Who is always the first to know, who is always the last to know, and how quickly or slowly does important information flow across the team? What information is achieved directly vs through a grapevine, gossip or other indirect channels?

Where does information on your team come from? What data or context might be missing? (I.e., is lots of information coming via third parties instead of directly from customers? Does your team get lots of information from one group in the company but not from others?)

How is information relevant to your team displayed and shared? What information, data and context is easy for your team to get to, what information, data and context is difficult to get? What ISN'T displayed or shared in useful formats? What information is explicit vs implicit?

Information flow across a team is critical to efficient and successful decision-making, equality and fairness across team members, and the speed and quality of overall team communication. As such, it is an extremely relevant topic when looking at team dynamics.

What are the isolation vs integration dynamics across functional teams?

Looking at the communication dynamics WITHIN teams is not sufficient. Teams need checks and balances, contact and context, with and from other parts of the company and other parts of the management structure.

How much does your team work with other teams? Isolated teams can lack critical contextual information from the rest of the company, and may eventually become unable to effectively collaborate across the company.

In the case of serious team dysfunctions and instances where middle management is ineffective or abusive, lack of access to the rest of the management structure can mean that there is no visibility or recourse for people on the team.

Who is getting micro-aggressed and by who?

Especially in the white male-dominated teams of the tech industry, it is best to assume that microaggressions are occurring against marginalized and underrepresented groups—however, microaggressions are not limited to these groups.

Overall levels of microaggressions functioning in the environment may reflect other issues on the team as managers or other team members use microaggressions to address conflict, process tension, assert authority, gain a sense of security, or punish team members for dissent.

The Startup and the Enterprise

The prevailing culture within startups jeopardizes their ability to sell to enterprises. Anti-patterns:

- Narrow focus on early adopter audiences (i.e., indie web devs, other startups); related lack of empathy for other customer and user types
- Inability to broaden and re-contextualize techniques used in organic growth and adoption (i.e., open source community building) to enterprise sales and marketing
- Difficulty communicating effectively with users in a much larger and different organizational structure
- Belief that the superiority of the product is the sole or primary factor in market success, leading to an aversion or rejection of sales, marketing and other non-engineering functions

The resulting impulse is to functionally isolate the people involved in production (engineering, product) from the people involved in distribution (sales, marketing). Unfortunately, success of enterprise sales is profoundly shaped by cross-functional work, communication and empathy. In this post, we look at some of the defining cross-functional competencies of startups that successfully sell technical products to enterprises.

1. They have an efficient supply chain for getting technical knowledge to the customer.

The ways enterprises evaluate, deploy and operate technology presents a level of complexity that makes consistent, timely and accurate delivery of information to them very difficult. These pro-

cesses may be carried out across numerous departments, subject to changing organizational dynamics, and involve many people with no direct contact with the vendor. People involved in the buying process often have unpredictable and wildly varying levels of knowledge, even competence.

Building an efficient process for triggering and flowing technical information to customers is critical for enterprise sales:

Audit how technical information flows to customers during various stages of the sales cycle. This begins with a potential customer's first contact with your brand, and extends to the lifetime technical success of the customer—i.e., communicating changes to products, discovered limitations and best practices, etc. Where is information missing, undocumented, inaccurate, difficult to find, or not reaching users and decision makers?

What are the most frequent problems caused by poor technical communication? Tracking support issues and common implementation errors are a great place to start. What knowledge gaps can we identify in our customer and prospect base and what are the root causes?

Sales teams invariably find themselves fielding questions beyond their technical depth. When technical issues must be escalated, particularly in the pre-sales process, is there a clear path and ownership for resolution?

What opportunities are you providing for people inside the customer company to get trained on the product? RTFM is a meme because people don't. When you're trying to sell products, this becomes YOUR problem. JIT documentation is often too late. Knowledge transfer means more than good docs.

Not having an efficient flow and feedback loop for technical information results in lost deals, failed implementations, and frustrated and misinformed customers.

2. Engineers talk to customers.

Inevitably, there are organic conditions that force engineering teams to make transformative contact with enterprise customers — such as production outages, bottoms-up deals, and big-ticket evaluation cycles. However, the culture often rejects and dis-incentivizes such contact as a normal occurrence. The mythology that engineers lack the social abilities to communicate with customers or cannot be trusted with them is not only inaccurate, but provides a cover for much deeper cultural dysfunction. Connecting startup engineering teams with enterprise technologists builds empathy for customer pain points, understanding of the implementation environment, and opportunities for high-value product changes. Some suggestions:

Have a rotating schedule for involving engineers and product managers in early, mid- and late-stage sales calls. This schedule does not have to significantly disrupt building time—a few meetings a month can significantly increase understanding of the problem space.

Try rotating engineers through support cycles for 1-2 weeks at a time. While this can be disruptive to engineering work, the gains in empathy, understanding and knowledge sharing with customers and support staff tends to make it worth it.

Create ambient customer awareness by publishing customer notes , insights and data to the entire company—make it a cultural expectation that everyone reads and absorbs this knowledge and participates in the conversation it sparks.

3. They recognize the importance of professional services.

Our industry has been transformed with the rise of as-a-Service, the low-touch sales model, and the consumerization of the enterprise. However, these changes can be overgeneralized from a delivery model, software design or aspect of the full value chain

into a cultural value that reviles high-touch, human-to-human value exchange. Outside of building a revenue stream, professional services:

- helps build the trust and personal relationships that are required for large sales deals to go through
- ensures that customers can extract the full value from the software because they are trained on how to use it and have had professional help in setting it up
- can help customers navigate periods that are extremely risky and critical for current and future sales, such as going into production, an important migration, a capacity build-out, or introducing the technology to a new team

4. They build community with customer companies.

Community-building is instrumental in the success of many software companies as they build open source adoption and momentum in the early adopter segment of the user base. Many companies, especially those with open source or low-end products that supplement the enterprise business, can struggle to build the same type of community within enterprises—even though community there is equally critical for building trust, reputation and adoption. Here are some approaches:

Do hackathons, tech talks and meetups at customer sites.

Invite and promote open source contributions from large customers.

Create opportunities through conferences, dinners and meetings for groups at customer companies to meet and build relationships with your employees.

Don't fall into the trap of nurturing one champion within a large company, only to be in a tough position when that champion is

promoted, leaves the company, or onto other projects. Make sure to build a community of champions with multiple individuals at a customer company for a more resilient business.

5. They understand, and are honest about, the technical aspects and limitations of their product.

Many enterprise software startups struggle with (unintentionally) misleading potential customers about their product. This can turn into cancelled contracts, burnt bridges, dissatisfied users, and draining support burdens. Building a company that is able to communicate often nuanced technical limitations and tradeoffs (see: the NoSQL market) is critical for a healthy enterprise business:

Sometimes, sales people don't understand basic limitations of the product, fail to understand the severity and delicacy of technical subtleties, and accidentally mislead prospects. This can be minimized by cultivating a technically literate business team.

Having a technical partner that is closely involved in the sales cycle ensures honesty and accuracy in customer communications and generally reduces the duration of the sales cycle when selling high-tech products.

Marketing should be required to get sign-off from the technical team on assets, messaging and collateral to prevent disseminating inaccurate information.

Actively discuss and seek to document limitations of your product. Limitations will be discovered and change as you grow—a commitment to being open about them with customers is the critical factor.

Rebuilding

Enterprise sales is both extremely difficult and extremely lucrative for startup technology companies. Unfortunately, many of our shared values and cultural norms jeopardize our ability to sell successfully to these customers. Building a company that succeeds in enterprise sales often means rebuilding part of the culture. Eventually and cumulatively, active development of the competencies discussed in this post can help transform a culture hostile or toxic to enterprise sales.

Building Technical Literacy in Business Teams

Companies that build tools, infrastructure, and other products used by engineers and developers are often dampened by business teams that lack technical literacy in their market. Departments that build and maintain the core product often represent the vast majority of technical competency in a company. Marketing, sales, product management, business development and strategy teams often cannot even describe (much less navigate, intelligently discuss, market or sell) the technical assets of the company.

This post is about what technical literacy means and concrete strategies for building it, based on my experiences working at various high tech companies, conversations with friends and colleagues, and formal schooling in technical programs. I believe this conversation is as relevant to tech PR firms as it is to software creators, and as important for entry-level marketing employees as executives.

Technical Literacy

Technical literacy is a spectrum of knowledge, language and critical thinking skills. It can act as a force multiplier on the efficacy of individual employees as well as entire business units.

Business teams high on this spectrum tend to exhibit competencies such as:

- Team members can accurately describe the software's architecture, interfaces, operations and benefits/limitations to developers and engineers
- Team members can identify and describe technical differences

between similar and competing technologies

- Team members can identify and communicate implementation and usage trends in the customer base and market
- Team members can install, run and demo the software on their laptops, in public cloud environments and on other infrastructure
- Team members can use the software's interfaces, interact with it using APIs, client libraries and the command line, and/or build small-scale, limited applications using the tools/software
- Team members have read, understood and can discuss and contribute to the product documentation
- Team members have read, understood and can discuss academic literature relevant to the design and theory of the software
- Team members know how to find quickly find answers to technical questions posed by users of the software or quickly activate a resolution path to issues

Benefits and Liabilities

For many products, none of the above skills require an engineering degree or programming background and can be both taught and cultivated. Teams which lack these skills subject the company to liabilities which include marketing inaccurate and misleading information, and developing deep distrust between engineering and business teams. In contrast, teams which possess these skills will do the following:

- Identify and execute on partnerships with the most technical value to users
- Win technical sales deals at a higher rate and with a shorter sales cycle
- Serve as a community evangelism arm for the company
- Create accurate, highly relevant content that directly contributes to engineers and developers selecting and being successful with the software
- Help shape product direction by filtering relevant user research, feedback and market data to the engineering team
- Identify and harness key technical forces shaping the company,

products and market

Strategies for Building Technically Literate Business Teams

Building and expanding technical knowledge within business teams requires a cultural commitment. Too many companies are negligent and fatalistic when it comes to the technical competency of their business team, building internal bubbles of artificially maintained ignorance and creating unintelligible barriers between products and external users. Here are actionable strategies to nurture a company culture that creates and grows technical literacy.

Forbid use of phrases like “Well I’m not that technical but...” or “I’m not an engineer, but...”

We use these phrases to absolve ourselves of responsibility for gaining technical literacy and excuse those who lack it from learning. Make a culture where excuses aren’t a valid response to questions and dialogue, or a reason to avoid learning opportunities.

Create transparency and access to technical units.

Invite business teams to sit in on engineering meetings. Have internal technical chat rooms where non-developers are welcome to be present, participate and ask questions. Share engineering status updates with the entire company. Hold technical training on new releases which are accessible to all groups. Increasing communication between technical and business teams tends to increase the shared knowledge of the company, produce better collaboration, and lead to better processes for interaction. End silos and share knowledge.

Do not shame learners.

Inside companies, technical ability is a classification used to distribute wealth, create in/out groups, and prevent minorities and underrepresented populations from being valued and included.

Create a culture where making fun of someone for asking beginner

questions isn't acceptable, where "she's not that technical" isn't a way to devalue someone, and where everyone feels responsible for educating each other.

Create an immersive technical environment.

Provide an immersive experience where it is possible for business teams to pick up on the language, concepts, designs, tools and structure of the technical team. Growing technical literacy can be similar to new language acquisition. If technical discourse and education isn't an omnipresent facet of the environment, business teams will stagnate and efforts to permanently elevate technical literacy across the company will fail. Share technical content on internal social networks. Discuss tech news on calls and in water cooler conversations.

Make technical training an integral part of new employee on-boarding across ALL units.

Give new employees assigned/recommended technical reading and access to videos, documentation and training. Discuss the material and provide employees with a forum to ask questions. Hold 1x1 sessions with new employees and engineers, developers and other members of the technical staff.

Provide access to educational materials for a core set of technical abilities.

First, have an opinion of what skills are most relevant to your business. In general, the following skills can be gained in 3-6 months and significantly increase technical literacy and access to many products: build simple HTML/CSS pages, query RESTful public APIs, master common commands on a CLI, spin up instances on EC2, commit code to Github, set up SQLite, build a simple MVC application. Provide access to resources like PeepCode, ebooks, tutorials and other material to help employees self-learn these foundational skill sets.

Create a continuing education curriculum.

For all fields, all workers, and all lines of work, knowledge is a

spectrum. You can strive to define and achieve a base level of technical literacy across your entire company, but also to continually elevate that literacy. Effective strategies can include sending business teams to technical events and industry conferences, holding learning sessions on new topics on a regular basis, regularly distributing new research and material to the team, and having hands-on technical workshops to learn new features and aspects of the product. Less important than the exact facets of the plan is that there is an overarching strategy that continually pushes the business team forward in relevant fields of understanding.

And most importantly: set different expectations.

Business teams don't lack some inherent skill to gain technical ability. They didn't miss some critical knowledge acquisition period that has now passed. They aren't actively resisting knowing more about the products and technologies around them.

The system that says marketers, sales people, business development and product workers can't or shouldn't be technical and therefore have less value is an industry-wide myth that serves to maintain the status quo. It is a mechanism used to oppress women, create wealth gaps, shame people from the "wrong" backgrounds, maintain white male geek elitism and prevent underrepresented groups from gaining options in technical fields.

There is an artificial barrier in the tech industry designed to separate the business people from the technical people. *This* is what you must tear down for cohesive and productive teams, because the *belief* that business people cannot achieve technical literacy becomes an expectation. To change the belief you must change the expectations. Once the culture EXPECTS business teams to have technical literacy and VALUES that literacy, the behavior changes.

HR Antipatterns at Startups

In the ceremonious dismissal of formal organizational structure -- which many startups claim as their defining cultural value -- HR at startups has long been categorically broken.

HR is often effectively absent from tech companies even as they balloon into hundreds of employees, banished perfunctorily by Silicon Valley's ruling class of white man-children who were handed millions of dollars far before showing the faintest sign of managerial skill.

Sometimes HR is running as a thin, cosmetic shadow of a bureaucracy, even as departments dedicated to lavish employee perks are fully furnished with staff, bank accounts and executive support. And where HR does exist, its presence is too often defined by egregious negligence, summary incompetence or outright corruption, used alternately as a foil, weapon, and clean-up crew by a floundering, bullying management.

Indeed, HR which does not fulfill its legal duties to anti-discrimination and employment law, its business responsibilities to shareholders, and its ethical duties to employees is part-and-parcel of tech's system of privilege... a system in which straight, white men must be assured access to wealth and power while other groups must be exploited, discriminated against and denied opportunity at every step of the corporate ladder.

In examining HR within startups, we find a series of antipatterns in their creation and implementation. Maybe these come from ignorance more than malice, but they nonetheless result in negative outcomes for the business and its employees ranging from mild to severe and even criminal consequences. While the endemic brokenness of HR is inseparable from the larger brokenness of tech

culture and management itself, these anti-patterns perhaps offer a starting point for intervention and reform of human resources in tech.

Antipattern: HR is led by an employee with no HR experience whatsoever.

It is incredibly common for HR departments at startups to be created by promoting early operational employees with absolutely no background, experience or training in HR to the role. The ill-fated recipients of these “promotions” are often business generalists who have filled a variety of roles in the initial build out of the company, assuming the roles and responsibilities of HR either formally or as a “natural” extension of their existing operational role as the company scales.

The rationale here is that these employees possess deep understanding of the culture and the company infrastructure and processes because of their early start-date, and that they have (at least one hopes) demonstrated their ability to effectively learn and perform a multitude of roles that fall on the nebulous and poorly understood “business” side of the house. In an industry where non-technical roles are often devalued, viewed as interchangeable, and thought to be relatively straightforward to pick up, it is easily concluded that an early operations employee will just be able to “get the hang of” HR, and all will be fine.

Of course, this typically ends in unmitigated disaster. First, having had no experience or formal training in HR, the newly-appointed HR lead lacks the requisite training, background, professional support system and body of experience to effectively perform the job. Having novice, pseudo-HR professionals with NO training or experience in sexual harassment, discrimination and employment law is obviously dangerous not only to the company but to marginalized employees who are not offered a competent human relations arm in which to seek recourse.

Not to mention the many other roles and responsibilities of HR

workers for whom the hapless individual thus appointed will be woefully unprepared.

Ultimately, the unfortunate result of this antipattern is that the HR department cannot be relied upon to protect either the interests of employees OR the company - they simply lack the tools, knowledge and experience to do so.

Antipattern: HR is TOO close with early employees and executives at the company.

It's not uncommon to see HR professionals in startups become extremely close with early employees and executives at the company.

This is especially common when the individual performing HR for the company was merely "promoted" to HR from a different role in the early stages of company development. While some increased familiarity with the executive team and employees with more seniority is natural, when this familiarity extends from a professionally appropriate camaraderie into inappropriate bias and favoritism, problems arise. In many cases, displays of excessive camaraderie and closeness between HR and certain employees lead to circumstances where other employees don't feel safe and comfortable going to HR. For example, what happens when a new employee has an issue with a more senior employee that the HR professional is clearly "buddy buddy" with?

New employees will naturally feel they have no chance of gaining an objective hearing.

In more extreme cases, it's not unheard of to see HR positions played by immediate family members or close, personal friends of an executive, which can severely compromise the ability of HR to act without bias or to nurture an environment where reporting feels safe. In these cases there is very little chance of employees feeling able to approach HR about a multitude of problems that may be seen as criticizing the leadership in general, or a particular individ-

ual. What if you are assaulted by an executive and HR is literally that executive's aunt, childhood friend or college buddy?

Nepotism - the most formalized promotion structure in Silicon Valley - is hostile to employees in a particularly direct and coercive way in this case. Especially in the excessively de-professionalized environments of many startups where the IMPLICIT dynamics of unequal camaraderie, intimacy, and friendship are a more reliable indicator of power than an org chart, HR's ability to be unbiased, create a safe environment, and effectively carry out their duties must be carefully monitored and managed.

Antipattern: HR's primary charter is "maintaining the culture":

"Culture" is on the lips of every self-impressed, ego-bound man-child and his cabinet of college buddy executives as his company begins to grow. He begins to feel poetic and nostalgic about the early days, fancying himself as the architect of an innovative and revolutionary approach to managing companies, even if in fact the "good old days" were shaped far more by nepotism, entitlement, privilege and undeserved funding than by some unprecedented insight into company operations.

In this period of nostalgia and self-congratulation, one often can observe numerous efforts launched to "maintain the culture" as new employees enter, operations scale and some undefined fear of "losing the culture" emerges amongst the "old timers." It's not uncommon for HR to be tasked with this role, or for HR operations to be suddenly subsumed under, replaced by or neglected for recently-invented roles like "Culture Officers" or "Employee Happiness" teams.

Sadly, the culture that is set out as the revered object of "maintenance" efforts is an artifact quickly losing relevance to the growing organization, and a romanticization and formalization of it can calcify the ultimate growth and prosperity of the organization.

When critical roles like HR are bound to a reactionary mission based around romanticization of the past, rather than a progressive charter of growing and adapting the culture, the company can rapidly become dysfunctional, hostile to new employees, and unable to adapt to the needs of a growing organization.

Antipattern: HR doesn't have a comprehensive diversity strategy.

In a tech industry that suffers on an epic scale from homogeneity, white and male privilege, and rampant discrimination, it is imperative that HR be knowledgeable and active in workplace diversity efforts. In order to be effective in building diversity within the company, HR needs to be familiar with issues facing underrepresented groups in tech, tools and strategies for recruiting and retaining diverse candidates, and the many ways discrimination and bias manifests in the industry. Too often, HR professionals are entirely out of touch with current diversity best-practices, are not incentivized to take an active role in building diversity, and/or take too narrow of an approach to diversity in the workplace.

When HR is aligned with industry and company-wide efforts to promote diversity as well as aware of the systemic inequalities that impact marginalized candidates and employees, they are much more equipped to help the company and its employees grow. With a comprehensive awareness of diversity issues and their importance, a toolkit of strategies and approaches, and compassion for marginalized groups, HR can better contextualize and identify systemic problems in the workplace like hiring discrimination, implement effective programs to ensure management practices that foster diversity, and intervene successfully in misogynistic, racist, homophobic, transphobic and other abusive behavior in the workplace. They are more able to implement appropriate policies that can help all employees to feel safe and welcome, assist managers in building effective diverse teams, and assist the company in building diversity as a fundamental value.

Sounds nice, right? Except most HR departments do not give a single fuck about any of those things.

Antipattern: HR approaches workplace dysfunctions as isolated problems.

While incidents and problems are often reported to HR in a one-off or seemingly random fashion, we know that these complaints often tie into deeper and more systemic problems. For example, we know from community conversation, the “whisper network” and even studies about repeat offenders that harassers and abusers operating within companies are often SERIAL abusers who will repeatedly target and victimize people or groups within the company.

From managers who consistently fail to foster productivity and growth in their teams to individuals who sexually harass multiple employees over time, it is rarely ever “just that once.” Considering that many targets of workplace harassment or abuse, hostile work environments, or even plain bad management are unlikely to report due to intimidation, fear and stigma, a low number or volume of reports cannot be considered a reliable indicator of the scope of the problem.

HR should not assume that reports are necessarily isolated incidents, and they should be equipped with the insight and support to be able to (safely and responsibly) investigate problems in the workplace which are more likely to be systemic than isolated.

Unfortunately, we often hear that even when MULTIPLE people within a workplace report systemic problems (such as a manager who harasses subordinates), that these reports are often not connected or acted on. In these scenarios, serial abusers quickly learn that their abuse will be protected and sheltered by HR, and over time they may even escalate damaging behavior in absence of any consequences or repercussions for their actions.

HR needs to both be AWARE of the often serial nature of abuse

within startups and equipped by management within the company to act on those issues.

Antipattern: HR is defensive, not proactive.

HR in startups is often oriented to react primarily defensively and reactively to developing workplace issues or opportunities. For example, its role in sexual harassment begins at the time of reporting, its role in addressing systemic discrimination comes when a lawsuit occurs or when there's bad press, or its intervention in culture starts only when serious problems have emerged in the foundation of the company.

The most effective HR is not HR that intervenes only when grievous harm has occurred. Proactive HR can contribute substantially to the development of culture and processes within which problems are identified and addressed earlier, or even where they don't emerge at all. In this way, HR's role should be not dissimilar to that of a stellar engineering team: architecting systems that avoid massive security breaches, outages and bugs, rather than systems with fundamental dysfunctions that resign the team to emergency clean-up when mission-critical services break down.

There are a number of ways that HR professionals can be PROACTIVE in their workplaces:

- Make resources and training available to managers, executives and other people in positions of power within the company
- Nurture trusting relationships with employees from the early stages
- Monitor key metrics such as diversity data, employee satisfaction, attrition rate across teams and managers, and other critical indicators for early intervention and improvement
- Install mentoring and training programs to help new managers be successful and existing managers grow their skills sets and improve in weak areas
- Promote training for the entire company on diversity and work-

- place abuse, harassment and discrimination
- Install and promote employee programs that contribute to health, happiness and retention, such as ongoing career development, leadership and conflict resolution training, etc.

Of course, in order to work in a proactive way, HR needs to have the very same executive backing, access to resources, cultural support, and influence over policy and programs that they often lack in startup environments.

Root problems

Despite being varied in their origin and ultimate impact on companies, each of these patterns shares an underlying root problem: HR is not taken seriously by startup management and its employees.

Many of the problems listed above are a consequence of the devaluing of human resources within the industry. This devaluation is toxic.

Contributing significantly to this, of course, is the fact HR is often gendered as “female” or “women’s work” in a male-dominated industry, branded “non-technical” in an industry that privileges only programming.

The devaluation also stems from the underlying belief that HR is NOT a specialized function requiring domain knowledge and experience, but rather a “supplemental” part or outgrowth of other jobs. That HR serves merely to save the company from extreme situations or intervene when employee relations have broken down in a catastrophic way. That HR is a matter of filling in a checkbox, rather than worthy of the same care and nurturing as the technical areas of the business. That HR is just another “soft skill” largely irrelevant to the founding and building of technology. That “anyone can do it” and that the roles and responsibilities typically taken on by HR - and the problems it addresses - will magically be taken care of by the startup’s “meritocratic” culture.

HR is viewed as, at best, a necessary evil, a tedious bureaucratic duty. At worst, it is treated as the enemy, a symbol of the corporate world that startups so desperately eschew even as they fall into the same patterns of dysfunction and abuse of power.

Yet in eschewing the development of effective, balanced and integrated human relations, startups subject their business and their employees to endemic abuse, deep management dysfunction, employee dissatisfaction, potential lawsuits, calcification of the culture and other entirely avoidable problems.

HR ultimately cannot be relied upon to advocate for employee interests when they come into conflict with those of the company, nor can we expect it to serve as a panacea for structural dysfunctions in startups. It cannot replace or substitute for the political organization of tech workers, for unionization, or for broader and sorely-needed culture change across the industry. However, it can and should have the support and resources to enact its own specific functions within the startup environment.

And in order for us to get better HR at our startups, not only startup founders and management but startup WORKERS need to advocate for better HR. While perks like laundry, in-office gym facilities and yoga classes, haircuts, and elaborate cafeterias, fancy offsites, and beer on tap are showered on many startup workers, these same employees do not have access to trained, professional, effective HR - a “perk” vastly more important. But until startup employees themselves - and especially those in privileged and dominant groups - start DEMANDING appropriate HR representation from our startups, we will see no progress.

Management

Values Towards Ethical and Radical Management

These are beliefs, attitudes, aspirations, and values for managers - for building teams that are safe, healthy, productive and resilient; for building management that is humane, ethical and anti-oppression.

Role and Responsibilities

“Manager” is not an honorific, it is my job description.

My first and only priority is to make my team successful.

The honesty, safety, productivity and dignity of my team is more important than my personal comfort.

I am an equal member and part of my team. I am not the smartest, the most competent, or the most knowledgeable person on my team. I do not feel the need to be the smartest, the most competent or the most knowledgeable person on my team.

It is not my job to come up with the best ideas and strategies for my team. It *is* my job to facilitate my team developing the best ideas and strategies together.

It is not my job to decide what my team needs to be successful. It *is* my job to facilitate my team deciding what they need to be successful, together, and creating those conditions, together.

Anti-Oppression

I will build a diverse team.

I recognize that management is a site in which the endemic inequality and oppression in my industry is reproduced, and I am dedicated to understanding and working to end that inequality and oppression.

I will ensure that the people on my team are being paid at least market rate. I will continually check and correct pay inequity on my team.

I work to understand sexism, racism, cissexism, homophobia, heteronormativity, ableism, classism and other forms of oppression, both individually and intersectionally, and how they affect my industry and workplace.

I interrogate my own privilege and how privilege is functioning in my workplace and industry *every fucking day*.

Power

I understand that the economic, personal and political power I have over my team impacts every interaction we have.

I understand how microaggressions work in the performance of power and how they affect people and systems, and I constantly strive to eliminate microaggressions on my team.

I will not yell at anyone on my team for any reason, ever. I will not physically intimidate anyone on my team for any reason, ever. I will not engage in any acts of verbal, physical or sexual violence against anyone on my team, nor allow that violence to happen anywhere within it.

I am an avid student of power dynamics and I work to tear down negative power dynamics in my team and company.

Teams and Team Building

Team building exercises do not build teams. Doing good work together in ethical and humane ways is the only relevant team building exercise.

Bonding activities and behaviors that exclude any member of the team are not bonding, they are alienation.

I am not above the performance of any administrative or other duties on my team, and nor is any other member of my team.

I understand the concept of in and out groups and how they are created. I can interpret in and out groups in my workplace and I work to bridge them.

A multiplicity of experiences exist within teams. Some people on my team may be having very good experiences and others may be having very bad experiences. Just because some people on my team are having good experiences does not mean that the bad experiences of other team members are somehow less real or valid.

Honesty

I do not dominate the conversation on my team and I do not feel the need to dominate the conversation on my team. I will not interrupt or speak over the people on my team.

I will pay attention to how much each person on my team speaks or is allowed to speak, and will work to make sure that each person has the time, space, safety and respect they need to speak openly.

I want people on my team to tell the truth.

I will believe the self-reports of employees about their experiences.

I will not punish anyone on my team for speaking their truth and
I will not allow anyone on my team to be punished for speaking
their truth.

I will speak my own truth.

I help my team to develop non-violent communication and productive approaches to conflict. I will face conflict and help my team to express and resolve conflict.

Development

I will work with each individual on my team to learn their personal goals for career development. I will devote myself to helping them achieve those goals.

If I, my team, or my company can not facilitate the career development of any individual employee for any reason, I will be honest and upfront about it.

I will work to address, remediate and ultimately minimize the collateral damage of my mistakes, which will be many.

I will help the managers around me become better managers. If my company does not have a good system for promoting and educating managers, I will use my influence to help develop that.

Recourse

I accept that I might not be the right person to manage my team, now or at some point in the future. I understand that it is possible,

now or in the future, that the best thing I can do for my team is to not manage them.

I will make sure that safe mechanisms are in place for my team to provide feedback to me and the larger management structure about my performance.

I will ensure that my team has access to, and a relationship with, other managers at my company and official HR representatives.

I will make sure that individuals on my team are educated about their rights in the workplace and how they can address and escalate issues, both to me directly and through channels that don't require my awareness or participation.

Culture

I understand that culture is mainly comprised of the things no one will say.

Culture is about power dynamics, unspoken priorities and beliefs, mythologies, conflicts, enforcement of social norms, creation of in/out groups and distribution of wealth and control inside companies.

Dignity, security, work-life balance, achievement, autonomy and growth are the only perks that matter.

No methodology is a panacea. Every methodology is problematic. No methodology is a substitute for effective management. All methodology applied uncritically will fail.

I will work to expose, interrogate and improve the *actual* culture of my team, workplace and industry.

The only basis for a healthy culture is a shared stance of critical consciousness.

Managing Against the Machine

This essay is about how managers can use their power for positive transformation of the workplace and tech industry.

The tech industry is in moral crisis. We live in a dystopian, panoptic geek revenge fantasy infested by absurd beliefs in meritocracy, full of entrenched inequalities, focused on white upper-class problems, inherently hostile to minorities, rife with blatant sexism and racism and generally incapable of reaching anyone beyond early adopter audiences of people just like us.

The state of management in our industry is also dire.

Our managers are usually people who have been promoted up from individual contributor roles within growing companies. They are thrust into positions of great power and influence despite having almost no experience, almost no training, almost no critical consciousness, almost no understanding of the problem space. And because most technology companies and startups either don't care or don't know how to mentor managers, even people with tons of experience are horrible managers, trailed by decades of inflicted damage on the teams and companies that have enabled them.

“Barely functional” is the default state of managers in our industry, defined by a dangerous miasma of privilege, incompetence, ego-mania, pressure and fear.

And managers play a large role in company culture, generally with disastrous results.

Despite this, the disproportionate access that managers have to power and resources makes management a fertile site for transformative action and social consciousness within the tech industry.

As our community faces the growing realization that things are horribly, horribly wrong, managers have an enormous opportunity to participate in transforming the industry for good. Here are five ways that managers can use their positions of power to make an impact.

Ensure people on your team are being paid equitably.

Regularly analyze the salaries of people on your team to ensure equitable pay and correct for wage inequities associated with gender, race, sexual orientation and other factors. Get started:

Compare each person's salary to market rates for their position, role and experience level. HR can help you determine accurate market rates, or you can compile it yourself using a combination of published data, anecdotal information from the community, and established pay ranges for roles. Do this at least every six months.

Compare average salary of white men on your team to the average salary of people from marginalized or underrepresented groups. Then, do something about the gaps within your org.

Pay equality begins in the negotiation process. Members of other minority groups in tech often ask for, and are offered less, money than white men. This is a known phenomenon. It is your moral and ethical responsibility to understand this pattern and correct, rather than exploit it, during the hiring process.

Base your offers on equitable pay even if you were asked for less

money during the negotiation process.

If your people are making less than market rate (disproportionately, marginalized/oppressed people in tech), making less than the dominant class (i.e. white men), or being offered less because of entrenched inequalities in the negotiation process, you are in a powerful position to change the status quo as a manager.

Advocate for better management training and mentorship.

There are lots of amazing educators and resources in the world to help managers in your company be more aware, more effective, more competent. Managers are often in the best position to help develop these programs, and socially conscious managers can make sure these programs integrate diversity, social justice, critical consciousness, and management anti-patterns as core areas of inquiry. The act of carving out space to consider the unique challenges and problems of management itself can help transform startups early in their management practice.

Demonstrate positive power in the workplace.

Destructive power punishes, microaggresses, demeans, humiliates, stereotypes, divides, frightens and neglects. It is also used to police and oppress members of marginalized groups.

Positive power inspires, unites, empowers, and promotes autonomy, personal growth and humane teamwork. Think critically about the ways your power as a manager is constructed and performed—start by thinking about microaggressions, how you build agreement and handle critique and dissent, and the real emotional consequences of your actions as a manager on the people around you. Critical consciousness about the negative impacts we have on our team—and the humility and thoughtfulness it takes to confront it—are absolutely transformative practices in our approach to the craft.

Direct company resources to social justice causes.

Managers have a lot of influence over the events a company sponsors, the causes it promotes, the people it funds, the projects it invests in. How can you use that influence to help promote transformative social projects within the technology industry? There are a number of hacker schools, child and teen education programs, progressive events and organizations that advocate for oppressed people in technology and bring social consciousness to our industry. How can you use some of your team's time and money to support these ventures? Participation in them will make your workplace more friendly to diverse workers, help with recruiting, bring new viewpoints and perspectives into your workplace, and cultivate critical thinking in your team.

Hire diverse teams.

Managers are often given a great deal of power and influence over who gets hired onto their team. They are often the chief interviewer, primary negotiator, final approver, head recruiter, and director of the budget. As such, they can play a transformative role in recruiting, hiring and retaining diverse candidates. Ultimately, this benefits your business because diverse teams are more innovative and outperform homogeneous teams. And you'll be helping to rebuild the system at the same time. Some practical strategies:

Analyze your hiring pipeline. Are members of marginalized and underrepresented populations present in the pipeline? If so, are they making into your company and if not, why? Use your powers of root cause analysis.

Look at the existing makeup of your team. What categories of diversity are missing? Don't just look at gender. How can you get your team invested and excited about building a more diverse group?

Increase the number of diverse candidates you're speaking with by actively participating in communities that support diversity in tech, promoting your job positions within those communities (if appropriate), and proactively recruiting talent outside of homogeneous communities.

As a manager, you occupy a position of power, influence and access to resources. How can you use that position to change and to transform your team, the community, and ultimately the industry?

More than just changing external systems, engaging in social justice and developing critical consciousness changes you as a manager—changes your own, personal practice of management. It makes you more effective, more powerful, more able to help your team learn, grow and succeed. Through engagement with diverse communities, gaining understanding of microaggressions and other negative power practices, and building an environment where good management is actively nurtured, we gain the empathy and skillset to be truly great managers.

Microaggression and Management

This post looks at microaggressions managers use against their team members to reinforce destructive power dynamics, justify inequality in the workplace, submerge conflict, construct false superiority/entitlement and maintain control over employees.

Microaggressions are the “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities” (Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. Sue, Derald Wing; Capodilupo, Christina M.; Torino, Gina C.; Bucceri, Jennifer M.; Holder, Aisha M. B.; Nadal, Kevin L.; Esquilin, Marta) that help perform and maintain power dynamics, inequalities and stereotypes. Microaggressions often humiliate, surveil, insult, police and silence their targets.

Much of the pivotal early work on microaggression focused on its role in racism, and has been applied to other systems and their interrelations. These microaggressions have sexist, racist, and classist impact—it is useful to understand their common role across intersecting systems. I am purposefully adopting a broad definition “microaggression,” which has been examined in varying degrees of focus and granularity.

Here are five categories of microaggression in management and examples of how they play out.

Body Language and Touching

Managers often use body language and touching to construct power over employees. Here are some examples:

Managers will often initiate touch with their employees in aggressive or patronizing ways, such as patting forearms, hands,

shoulders or thighs and touching/massaging the necks and backs of employees. Often, managers are able to initiate touching their employees but employees will almost never initiate touching a manager because it would violate the implied power structure.

Managers will slouch excessively and flagrantly in meetings with their “subordinates”. This and other performances of over-familiarity and exaggerated casualness send the message that managers do not need to display the politeness/ attention gestures reserved for equals.

Relatedly, hyper-masculine, sexualized posturing is a core part of mainstream performance of masculinity and power. How this relates to the way men in positions of power sometimes posture is an uncomfortable topic, but bears examination. Have you ever been in a meeting with men in position of power who sit with their legs wide apart, slouching, drawing attention to their crotch area and using it as a gestural center of their body? This is especially aggressive towards women, and is designed to assert masculine, hyper-sexual power while creating discomfort that cannot be spoken about openly—a form of silencing.

Unequal Visibility and Accountability

Commonly, there is a huge inequality in the accountability that employees have to managers vs. the accountability managers have to employees. There is a similar gulf in the relative degree of visibility that transacts between the parties. These gaps in visibility and accountability create an uneven ground for interaction—constructing a context that is simultaneously parental, patronizing, surveilling and discomforting. Some examples:

Employees will often have to document and share in explicit detail everything they are working on in a way that is easily accessible to their manager (status reports, project management trackers, etc.), while the manager neither documents nor shares their action items. All activities an employee does in the workplace may be subject to explicit or implicit/assumed monitoring by the manager, while all

activities done by a manager may be nearly opaque to their employees.

Managers may define employee's roles, responsibilities and action items in explicit or even excessive detail without negotiating with their team members on what THEIR role, responsibilities and action items as a manager are. Thus there is no way for teams to evaluate or discuss if a manager is meeting the contract with the team.

“Managing by walking around” is a generally unexamined practice that has the distinct flavor of surveillance culture. “Walking around” may be intrusive and surveilling of employees when it is a one-sided activity performed only by those in power. When managers are assumed to have inarguable and immediate access to the personal space of their employees at any moment, a culture of invasiveness and micro-management can flourish.

Derailing and Gaslighting

In a system of management where the manager must maintain disproportionate power, things like dissent, disagreement, and conflict present crisis. Many managers will address dissenting employees by derailing and gaslighting them in order to discredit criticism or critical examination. Here are common strategies:

The dissenter is characterized as “difficult to work with”, “aggressive”, “insubordinate,” “not a team player” or “not a culture fit”. Often, specific examples of such behavior are either explicitly not provided or extraordinarily weak. The result creates self-doubt in the dissenter while destroying their credibility in the eyes of the broader team and management.

The dissenter is made to feel that there is criticism from other members of the team or company, but that criticism is provided in an inactionable or vague way that is impossible to critique or examine. This leads employees to feel paranoid, surveilled, and insecure.

Any disagreement or critique is transformed into a symptom of pathology on the part of the dissenter. Managers may imply that the individual is unstable, emotionally disturbed, or has a mental disorder. Commonly, this includes overtly stating or implying that the dissenter is “too emotional”, “crazy”, should “take some time off”, “has an anger problem,” is “hostile”, is “overly aggressive”, “takes things too seriously/personally” or “has a problem with authority”.

It is particularly notable that these tactics are very commonly used against women by male managers, as dissent by women not only threatens the manager’s authority and position but also normative gender roles.

Performances of Excessive Confidence

In one form of workplace microaggression, managers engage in performances of over-confidence, arrogance and false omniscience. These microaggressions eliminate discussion, ignore or even claim good ideas from other members of the team, and leave no space for dissent, discovery or collaboration. In a system where they are supposed to be more knowledgeable, more competent and more capable of choosing the best course of action, managers experience strong motivation to embody the mythology. Here are some ways this plays out:

Asserting opinions as inarguable fact. This eliminates the emotional and intellectual possibility needed for healthy discussion. It constructs the manager as more intelligent, more experienced, more competent—even unassailable:

Often, managers will speak with a complete lack of hedging words and behaviors; use a louder and more forcible tone than other teammates and state conclusions without revealing the train of logic behind it, with the expectation that the conclusion be accepted as self-evidently correct.

Making extremely fast judgment calls about strategy and cours-

es of action. Managers may very quickly render a decision when faced with a situation or opportunity, demonstrating they can process information at a faster rate and have a much greater degree of foresight/intellect/instinct than their peers. While destructive to team dynamics, this can also lead to poor decision-making.

Preferential Treatment as a Reward and Division System

A great deal of stress is inflicted on targeted employees when managers exhibit preferential treatment. Managers may use the provision or denial of affection and praise to divide a team, punish dissenters and reward people who fit team norms and support the manager's power. Here's some examples:

If a given employee dissents from the manager's opinions, operating mode, or is openly critical/questioning of how the team is functioning, managers may treat that person differently in public settings as a way to both punish and warn against such behavior. A manager may ignore the employee during team meetings, transparently avoid contact, discuss the conflict with other team members behind the individual's back, or exclude the individual from team activities, projects and discussions. Isolation and public punishment can serve to regulate not only the individual's behavior, but that of the broader team, who seeks naturally to avoid such consequences.

Especially prominent in teams where there is a male manager and a mix of women and male employees, a male manager may engage in public hetero-normative male bonding and displays of affection with the male members of the team. This includes activities such as fist-bumping, chest-bumping and play-punching or mock-fighting. This creates a display of closeness and preference between male managers and male employees that very explicitly discludes women and others who aren't "masculo-normative". In contrast to the previous discussion of dominance-based touching, this is exclusion-based touching.

This is not an exhaustive account of microaggressions by managers against employees.

It is critical to emphasize that microaggressions are disproportionately and sometimes exclusively used against employees who are not white, male, straight and masculine.

In order to break the self-perpetuating cycle of microaggression in the workplace, we need to re-imagine and re-implement the concept of management. Management should be a job description that pertains to a particular type of work done on a team related to facilitating the team and enabling it to be as successful as possible.

Management should NOT be an honorific, based in an unequal power dynamic, and associated with superiority, entitlement and hypermasculinity. When managers locate their value and contribution to the company in the latter system, microaggression against the very team they are supposed to be part of becomes the default mode.

If you are a manager, parts of this post will probably hit a little too close to home. Please remember these behavioral patterns are an integral part of the way we are taught to manage. It is unrealistic to expect revolution overnight. However, it is realistic to continually interrogate and critique the ways we define and enact management.

I hope you will.

Managing Junior Startup Employees

When we talk about junior employees, we might be talking about a fresh grad entering the workplace, someone in their 20s beginning their first or second job in tech, or someone later in their career switching to a new industry or type of work. Junior workers can be attractive to startups and tech companies as they offer lower-cost labor, fill critical execution positions in the org, and bring a diversity of perspectives and backgrounds that may not be present in the rest of the workforce.

Managers often struggle to effectively manage junior employees as they require more mentorship, active learning, and hands-on leadership than more experienced employees. By definition, they lack much of the business, cultural and technical context held by more seasoned employees. The power and knowledge gap between management and the junior employee is even more pronounced, which means that junior employees can find themselves being disproportionately (and even unintentionally) manipulated, exploited and subjected to negative power dynamics. Establishing healthy communication and teamwork across these divides is difficult but essential. There's also significant challenges in building a healthy learning and growth environment, especially in startups and growing technology companies where explicit mentorship and growth has not been a cultural value.

In this post, we look at three axes needed for junior employees to be successful in startups and tech companies—fairness, trust and equality; employee growth; and feedback.

On Fairness, Trust and Equality

Market Rate, Goddammit.

People in the early stages of their tech careers often don't know how much they are supposed to be making for their role, experience level and educational background. For many managers, taking advantage of this naiveté to pay under-market salaries means more room in the budget and extracting more value for less cost. Unfortunately for you, mutual trust and respect lays the foundation for a healthy relationship with your team. You may get a good deal out of an employee for awhile, but eventually they WILL discover that people in their same position, with equal experience and equal responsibilities, are getting paid more than them and that was just fine with you.

This is a particularly essential practice when hiring marginalized persons in tech. The wage gap starts in these early roles.

Stop Lying About Equity.

If I had a house for everytime the CEO of a tech company told me there was a house in this shit for me... Look, it's easy to manipulate junior employees with promises of insta-riches, and unfortunately such manipulation happens all the time. Just stop, don't tip-toe around how many outstanding shares there are and buy the kid a fucking book about startup equity. Be a good person, not a manipulative asshole. They'll thank you for it down the road.

Share the Paperwork

When first hiring inexperienced employees, many managers immediately begin passing off a lot of their most annoying housekeeping work and administrative tasks. Presumably, this frees up the manager's time to attend to More Important Things and also fits into our narrative around "paying one's dues". Unfortunately, many early startup employees get hired under the pretense of doing more strategic and meaningful work.

On the other hand, it is amazingly powerful when managers show they are a part of the team and are secure and willing to contribute to the administrative work generated by the team. When they show that their power and influence doesn't come from forcing the people around them to do the shit work. When they, too, will take notes, schedule meetings, order lunches. It inspires more loyalty, more respect, more bonded teams, more effective teams, more egalitarian teams.

A manager who uses their power to evenly and effectively tackle the administrative functions of a team is much more effective than one who uses delegation of trivial tasks to instill power dynamics and get out of annoying tasks. Junior employees will not be as effective if they are the sole carriers of this work—and making it so does them and your team a disservice.

On Employee Growth

Take Them With You.

Some managers get hung up and protective about their “important manager things.” Often, they don't understand that their value comes from the way they help their team succeed, not their access to high level meetings, their status in the org chart, or their prerogative to nab all the high-profile projects, get maximum exec-face-time, develop the most important strategies, and make unilateral decisions. The best mentor I ever had brought me to ALL the “important, senior meetings” instead of leaving me behind, even though I was super junior. I went to key meetings with important prospects, spent a ton of time with major customers, helped develop product plans, spoke in press and analyst briefings, and participated in strategy summits and partnership negotiations. At first, I was pretty useless. But I picked up technical and industry knowledge, product management skills, sales and marketing techniques, and key leadership skills at a very accelerated rate.

Being there, immersed in the environment can help accelerate a junior employee's value curve exponentially.

Provide Learning Opportunities Outside the Workplace.

Sure, junior people can learn a lot from inside the workplace. But there's also a ton they can learn outside it. Attending conferences, meetups, classes, training, and other “extra-curriculars” can be an awesome way for junior people to get market context, get experience evangelizing the company, learn new technical and communications skills, gain confidence and bring that back into the workplace. Some strategies to encourage and support these initiatives:

- Provide a sensible budget for continuing education events on a quarterly or yearly basis
- Work to identify some technical or other skills that would help the junior team member provide more value in the workplace and then build a plan to help acquire those skills
- Encourage employees to give lightning talks, product demos, or engage in other speaking opportunities. You get awesome evangelism and they build their experience.

Give Them Responsibility for Things a Bit Outside of Their... and Your... Comfort Zone

Sometimes we learn the most in life by taking responsibility for things that are a bit outside of our comfort zone, beyond our existing experience level. That's also how we can help our team members grow to provide more and more value to the company and take us to the next level in team development. Sometimes it's easy to take our eye off of team member development in the day to day of executing on existing tasks—this is definitely something I've done as a manager in the past. Here are some ways to make sure you can keep pushing the growth of early startup employees:

- Make a point in every 1:1 to spend five minutes talking about what an employee might want to do or try, or what projects there are that they could take a bigger role in
- Every month, discuss ways to optimize existing work to free up capacity for more strategic growth

- Give opportunities for your junior team members to “shadow” you on initiatives that might be over their skill level so they can pick up learning from you or other, more senior members of the team

On Feedback

Experiment With Feedback Strategies to Find Ones that Work

Oftentimes, managers simply impose their concept of how feedback should be given and taken on a junior employee who doesn't have the skills or experience to work productively together developing a feedback system that works for everyone. Before just jumping to a system you designed solo, work with them to figure out what their expectations are, what they want to get out of feedback, and their ideas about the best way to set it up. This is a more equitable and fair way of working together on growth and can prevent a lot of hurt feelings, misunderstandings, and missed opportunities to work through the inevitable mistakes, failures and missteps along the way.

Let Them Give Feedback Too

Too often, managers look at feedback as a one-way street, especially when it comes to junior employees that are viewed as too inexperienced to provide useful feedback. But, not only can a junior employee's perspective provide unique and valuable insight, but learning how to give feedback—not just take it—is also an important skill to develop. Whether it's on your performance on a manager or on work produced by the team, give your junior employees the opportunity to share their ideas, feelings and concerns as well. This leads to more participatory and equal teams as well as healthier feedback loops.

Managers that can positively implement these strategies will have healthier teams inclusive and nurturing of junior workers, who in return will contribute more value to the business.

Management Reform in The Valley

The management complex that dominates tech companies breaks teams in a million ways, all brutal, all fascinating, each poorly understood and barely documented.

Every day, individual contributors become managers without any experience, education, reflection or critical consciousness about team dynamics, productivity, power, culture, violence or oppression. The dominant management path is grossly negligent—within it, management is the reward for personal achievement, not leadership; it is a bribe for early employees when money and stock will no longer do; it is a flimsy stand-in for a more considered career path for individual contributors; it repels the humanitarian ethos which is its antidote.

Practically speaking, this promotion strategy is secured by an overall management structure in which employees lack true recourse, insight into team dynamics, or access to remediation strategies. The asymmetry of power in the relationship between manager and employee is made toxic by a symmetrical lack of education and critical consciousness. On neither side of the equation do we find the knowledge, experience or access to intervene in the structure. Management thus becomes site of much exploitation, dysfunction and destruction of value... the very issues endemic to our industry.

Alongside these facts we find a Silicon Valley desperate to “innovate” and “disrupt” traditional management. A cocktail of bitter irony and much hilarity as Silicon Valley tackles The Problem of Management with its typical fumbling bravado. Yet instead of true management reform in tech, we find:

A workforce expecting more autonomy while it willingly abandons responsibility for its food, entertainment, transportation, social life,

and emotional and spiritual well-being to workplaces that ever-more resemble company towns.

A faux-rebellious, adolescent demand for flat companies that still can't shed the founder mythology, nor the cult of personality, nor, you know, hierarchy.

Startups that trade managers for team leads, visionaries, leaders, project heads, coaches, guides. These are still fucking managers. A rose by any other name is still fucking up your team.

Techniques for more enlightened teamwork unthinkingly borrowed from manual and machine labor optimization strategies in industries notorious for creating and supporting systemic wealth gaps.

A shared dedication to the false ideal of meritocracy, built on top of a damning system of racist and sexist oppression.

Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.

The potential evils of management are vast. The practice of management represents a pooling of power that has an intense and deeply personal effect on “subordinate” employees. Generally, the practice of management is based on profound asymmetry of power and information between employee and manager. The direct influence of managers on the economic security of the people they manage inherently shapes all interactions and provides the basis for a fully exploitable and asymmetric power relationship.

The greatest irony of management is that the very moment at which management begins to fail its teams is the moment that this allocation of power is most dangerous. What is the recourse for broken teams under the profound asymmetry of this relationship?

A trap that only tightens as your struggle.

Silicon Valley's attempts to “disrupt” management are at best

superficial, at worst deeply destructive (i.e. discarding formal management entirely, letting implicit, totally unexamined power dynamics take over instead). No true management reform is possible without:

1. Critical consciousness about the cultural, psychological, emotional, racist, sexist, and power dynamics of management—critical consciousness very few employees, much less managers, have... or even have access to.
2. Engagement and critique of the economically enforced power structures that underpin the relationship between manager and employee.
3. An articulate strategy for remediating breakdowns in teams and management—a management reform which does not anticipate the menagerie of catastrophic dysfunctions that teams experience regularly is no reform at all.

No surprise that most current attempts at management reform in the Valley lack all three.

Misogyny

Lean Against: Building an Alternative to Lean In Within Tech

It all started here. Sandberg's ascent to power. The re-imagining of her professional and personal life as an emblem of feminist achievement. Her story, the foundation of a new media empire.

"Lean In" ideology cannot be interpreted without historical insight into mainstream feminism - a lens which reveals a mere re-branding of decades-old, elitist, white, upper class "faux feminism." But it also cannot be interpreted without considering the political landscape of the tech industry, from which Sandberg has emerged into world-wide fame and wildly disproportionate fortune.

Tech. An industry notorious for its largely homogeneous workforce, ruled by rampant sexism and racism, built on an invisible "under class" of tech workers offered no claim to the privileges of that title. It is an industry where 56% of women will leave over time, over twice the rate of men; where representation of women is actually declining, and where women are regularly abused, harassed, sexually assaulted and even raped in professional contexts. Meanwhile, Silicon Valley offers no moral framework besides one of elitist and narcissistic "liberalism," pumping out one new social application after another.

Lean In perfectly reflects the propaganda of the ruling class within technology towards the advancement of people it systemically oppresses: The expectation that marginalized groups take responsibility for their oppression and seek individual achievement as a remedy to it; conform to the sexist and racist ideals of the industry to succeed; focus on personal advancement over systemic change; devote their lives to working for a system that refuses to treat them

equally... wrapped in the rhetoric of a false meritocracy, this is the agenda of straight white men in technology, and it is not a feminist one.

In turn, Lean In - as a book and as an ideology - is embraced by that same ruling class which shaped it. It is now being used to inculcate a new generation of women through Lean In circles, held proximally to prestigious computer science programs graduating many of tech's next class. Sandberg's brand of "feminism" has been embraced warmly by organizations dedicated to women in tech, including, (to the author's grave disappointment), the Anita Borg Institute. And perhaps as payment for her loyalty, Sandberg herself has become one of two or three women deemed worthy of keynote appearances at tech's most prestigious events.

Lean In as A Prescription

Lean In is more than a book, a TED talk. In many ways, it represents a framework and a prescription for addressing systemic inequalities in the corporate world - one that is ultimately doomed to fail, that has been deliberately designed to fail.

bell hooks' essay Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In provides critical insight on its failings. Lean In declines to provide either a structural analysis that accurately reflects the systemic oppression, sexism, racism, cissexism and homophobia that oppress underrepresented and marginalized groups in tech; or a remedial approach that results in the destruction of those systems.

Notably, Sandberg's career vessel is a company whose very product and economy is built on the extension of patriarchal gaze. Facebook is perhaps the most lucrative exercise in gendered surveillance in history, creating an unprecedented virtualization of the male gaze, as Kate Losse has written about in Model View Culture. Mirroring the template of Sandberg's own career, Lean In seeks only to marginally expand the types of people who can benefit from wildly disproportionate wealth and control of international companies. It is but a slight departure from the current norms - of

privileged, white, straight, able-bodied cis men willing to shit on the rest of the world - to also envelop privileged, white, straight, able-bodied cis women willing to shit on the rest of world... and perhaps particularly, willing to shit on other women.

This pursuit of a fractional, exceptional “success” wrapped up in book deals and media appearances has loaned a new vigor to the anti-intellectual dullery of mainstream feminism, which has spent the past few years producing vapid HBO shows about self-involved white girls and fighting intersectionality on social media. Sandberg’s book, her TED talk, her quaint Circles are steadily transformed into a Lean In Industrial Complex with the tacit approval of Facebook itself - lurking, as it does. Watching.

And Lean In as a movement continues to undermine all womens’ progress for the sake of some women: hiring unpaid interns, focusing on schools of extraordinary privilege, participating in projects that co-opt the work of women of color, and promoting Congresswomen with incredibly problematic voting histories.

Doomed to Fail

To many in the technology industry, Lean In was immediately familiar - it has always been a part of Silicon Valley’s philosophy, even if only now distilled into a book, a palatable and international media campaign. Like most of the tech industry’s dearly held positions on marginalized and underrepresented groups, it is designed to fail as a working strategy for structural changes to entrenched inequalities:

The movement’s target audience and central focus is privileged white, cis women, excluding the many, many other groups that are marginalized and underrepresented in tech. By focusing on only this group and, in fact, often co-opting, appropriating, marginalizing, and seeking to destroy the movement of other groups, the Lean In “solution” acts to prevent the only thing that could in fact rupture the system: broad-based, intersectional action and solidarity.

Success is defined as the disproportionate achievement of the individual, through attaining money and power as the primary means of “transformative” engagement with patriarchal systems. This reinforces the importance of the largely doomed capitalist “rat race” and siphons energy into individual dominance rather than into collective action.

Lean In puts the onus onto marginalized groups to achieve and become successful in white, straight, male-dominated systems, specifically coercing women and other marginalized groups to participate in those systems rather than work to dismantle them.

It ignores sexism, racism, gendered and racial violence and other structural oppressions, thus erasing those oppressions and creating an ahistorical, anti-intellectual construction of the problem.

As hooks states, “...we all need to remember that visionary feminist goal which is not of a women running the world as is, but a women doing our part to change the world so that freedom and justice, the opportunity to have optimal well-being, can be equally shared by everyone...”

Against Lean In: Alternate Strategies Against Oppression Within Technology

In 2014, the existing mainstream tech establishment is on a massive campaign to steal, negate and benefit from the activism of diverse communities in tech. This year will be a critical year, one in which Lean In ideology seizes the opportunity of economic progress in tech - the rising bubble - to forward an agenda of greed, capitalism, personal achievement and disproportionate wealth.

It's not just Lean In and Facebook: the mainstream tech industry is on a full-fledged attempt to co-opt, minimize, sanitize and absorb the increased visibility and radical organization around diversity in tech. Already in 2014, we have seen VCs like Paul Graham and Dave McClure and glorified conference organizers like Jason

Calacanis all independently claiming to be - and being heralded as - champions of diversity in tech. Graham wants accolades for LESS THAN PROPORTIONAL investment in women in tech. Campaigns like that of McClure's 500 Startups offer relatively small sums of money to organizations where women have a mere 10% ownership in a business, and paint the imperialistic expansion of VC into other countries as investment in diverse communities.

But alternative frameworks, strategies and approaches against oppression - not just binary gender oppression but the myriad, intersecting systems that prevent a truly diverse technology industry and community - already exist. Already in use by activists, feminists, anti-racists, radical and independent organizations, critics and technologists, these tactics offer a practice of resistance, change, activism in tech:

Refuse to Sanitize The Problem Statement

Lean In ideology commits massive erasure in its sanitization of, and refusal to acknowledge, patriarchal systems as the primary obstacle to women's achievement in the corporate world. In discussing the advancement of women in tech, it is loathe to so much as mention sexism, racism, homophobia, cissexism and gendered violence. Like many corporate-sponsored diversity initiatives in tech, it imagines a false and magical world in which there are no underlying motivations for the systematic exclusion of minorities in tech, no white supremacist patriarchy; merely a world where women haven't been confident enough to succeed.

To make true progress, our efforts must refuse to construct a harmless straw-men of endemic discrimination: we must name and address rampant physical and sexual violence and harassment in tech, institutionalized racism, systemic barriers to achievement, overt and implicit bias, and the people and systems who benefit from them.

Locate Responsibility in the White Male Patriarchal Establishment

Rather than locating responsibility for addressing systemic problems in marginalized communities, we must hold the straight white male establishment responsible. The straight white male establishment is responsible for maintaining its dominance and propagation at every stage of the career lifestyle - from preferencing white men in the hiring system, to funding white men to start companies, to creating environments of harassment, misogyny, racism and violence that drive diverse individuals from the industry.

Marginalized communities in tech **MUST NOT** carry the burden for individual success when it is granted so freely to the ruling class. To do otherwise promotes a dangerous exceptionalism that ultimately cannot remedy the system.

Encourage New Conceptions of Leaderships

Tech is an industry whose white male dominance, and its attendant overconfidence, risk-taking, arrogance and entitlement has resulted in multiple, widespread economic crises within the industry, a profound failure to address significant social problems with technology, and a “power-law”-driven mentality that benefits the 1% while destroying the 99%.

The tech industry’s destruction of local communities through gentrification, separatism and abuse of eviction law are of note on their own; they are also representative of an overall attitude of the devouring entitlement and imperialism that permeates tech. Instead of encouraging women to model this behavior to succeed in corporations, what new formations of leadership can we develop? What forms of leadership, success and ambition can we develop as marginalized groups in technology that are anti-patriarchy, instead of being formed in its image?

Build Solidarity Across Groups

Promoting privileged, cis white women is “safe” to the system. This group, already aligned with white supremacy, can be relied upon to not seek solidarity with other groups. It is a group that has repeatedly shown itself willing to make certain tradeoffs relative to their own advancement: actively harming the advancement of other groups in exchange for marginal increased access to patriarchy’s wealth and power.

To achieve broad, transformative change within tech, we need to build solidarity across marginalized groups. While it is absolutely critical to create identity-focused groups where people who share a certain identity or position in the political system can be safe, create systems and technology relevant to themselves, and organize for their goals, it is also in the political interests of diverse groups within tech to partner with each other against the status quo. Together, we can marshal more resources, access, knowledge, influence. Of course, this requires facing and dismantling the systems that keep us apart - an essential form of work in itself.

Support Independent Small Tech and Small Businesses Outside of the Existing Corporate Structure

We cannot just hold up success within multinational corporations as the main nexus of change. White male-dominated, patriarchal organizations are known to thoroughly corrupt equality movements and co-opt the success of marginalized groups in ways that threaten the progress of others. Sandberg herself can be interpreted through this lens, used both by a white, male-dominated company and by a white, male-dominated mainstream media to promote an uncritical, ineffective and bigoted form of “feminism” for mass consumption. For this reason, we must seek structures and definitions of success that can occur outside of these mainstream organizations, not just within them - and as a community, find ways to support alternate structures.

Relatedly, corporate-sponsored feminism in tech, and diversity efforts, have a long history of erasing the work of independent organizations that do the most critical and dangerous work in this space; funneling money back into the broken system rather than the many independent organizations struggling for funding; and creating a non-critical, non-dangerous conception of what feminism and diversity truly means.

For this reason, in 2014 it is particularly important that we center, fund, and support independent organization and activism that is not motivated by PR, branding and a sanitized version of activism in tech.

Leaning Out, And Leaning Against

The ultimate message of Lean In ideology is transparent in the name itself: Stay in the machine. Work for the machine. Appease the machine.

While we may be coerced via various systems to remain in tech, those who are able, and choose, to leave tech - or work against its fundamental systems - should not be treated as moral failures of the Lean In ideology. We should not be asking ourselves to re-commit to the very systems eroding our lives, esteem, activism, humanity, safety and fulfillment. People who are choosing to leave dominant paths - to start their own businesses, join non-profits, pursue life-work where they feel safer and more fulfilled, reform their relationship and participation in tech, and work against its harmful structures - are not only well within their rights to self-determination... they also offer a vision of radical departure, of reclamations of technology, and new approaches to life and to work that provide more hope than Lean Out... in leaning against.

The Gendering of Technology Work

When women do it, it's community management.

When men do it, it's technical evangelism.

With women it is nurturing and mothering; with men it is a glorious mission, rooted in the unassailable masculinity of technical ability. He is a traveler, a hustler, a business-man, an opener of markets. She is serving the beer, doing the social work.

Making sure everyone is taken care of.

When women do it, it's marketing. When men do it, it's growth hacking. The masculine re-branding of marketing work as a technical skill—"hacking", the implication of a more analytical or mathematical focus—is disingenuous, ahistorical. Marketing has always involved analytical and mathematical skills, and in technology, it has always required technical literacy and competency.

Yet the emergence of the "growth hacker" is deeply indicative of a industry desperate to maintain gender inequalities even as women make significant inroads into some of its career paths.

When women do it, it's marketing. It is always marketing. But men get a million sub-variants of marketing that they can lead—business development, partnerships, strategy, revenue, funnel.

When women do it, it's administration. A matter of paperwork and service, following orders, carrying out the business' hum and tedium. It's accounting, bookkeeping. When men do it, it's operations—the invention and optimization of business processes, the very design of the company.

When men organize conferences they become community heroes and icons, publicly lauded (or lauding themselves) for their personal sacrifice, dedication to the cause, exalted position as a king among geeks.

Women conference organizers are invisible.

In the gender politics of Silicon Valley, technical ability is the very currency of masculinity. To maintain the hegemony of men in the industry, all advancement of women in any sector must be emasculated, its technical aspects erased, its gender-normative functions emphasized: the soft skills, the nurturing and mothering functions.

The work of men, however similar in task, role and function, must be engendered separate, elevated, more technical, more strategic and analytical.

Sadly, while women equal and sometimes even outnumber men in areas like marketing, the head of the department is almost always a white man.

The refusal of the industry to allow its highest positions to go to women even in practices where they equal or outnumber men is deeply concerning and a matter of much urgency for feminists and activists in the field.

Misogyny and the Marketing Chick

We have lots of characters in tech. We use these characters to tell each other and ourselves stories about what technology is, what tech culture is, what innovation is, what our industry is. Lots of these characters are about geek revenge, about the continued dominance of the white man, about the ownership of technology and the money that comes with it by the privileged class.

Here are some of our favorite characters: The heroic founder. The mad scientist. The prodigal investor. The tinkerer. The hacker. The nerd boy genius. The ideas man. The product guy.

We love these characters. We change the real stories of real people to fit these shapes. We write about them in our tech news. Our VCs invest in them, our journalists propagate them. We export them to pop culture as consumable plastic sound bites. We try to figure out how to reinvent ourselves to look, to feel, to act like them, to make money like them, to win like them.

But we have a character that we hate.

She's the marketing chick.

She's not in tech, she's "around" it. She doesn't understand engineering. She's not a programmer. She probably got her job because she's pretty. Or how did she get that job, *she's not even pretty*. She probably got her job from sleeping with that guy. She probably does social media. She's helping out with the conference. She's doing the launch. She's setting up the meetings. She's writing mass emails. She's composing tweets.

She's just here to serve the beer and order lunch.

Fuck, we hate her. We hate her so much. We want her out of our industry so bad.

What is to be done about her? We need to make sure the marketing chick can't infiltrate our industry, make sure we don't accidentally aid and abet her rise. So we're going to assume all women in our industry are like her unless they can prove to us they're not a marketing chick. Now even women hate the marketing chick because they have to prove everyday, in every meeting, in every conversation, that they aren't that.

Until she can prove that she's not, we're not going to look at her in meetings. We're not going to talk to her at the booth or at the meetup (but we might feel her up). We're going to call her the marketing chick *to her fucking face*. We're going to treat her like shit. We're going to make sure she knows we don't want her here, even as we need her to run our business; that we don't value her, even as her work is paramount to our success.

Except this character, the marketing chick, does not exist. We invented her.

We invented her because technology is a male-dominated industry that distributes wealth and power to white men and is designed to make sure that wealth and power continues to flow to white men. We're making sure that women don't become programmers and engineers... and we're doing such a good job at it that there's been a 79% drop between 2000 and 2008 in the number of incoming undergraduate women interested in computer science.

But women are still leaking in to our valley of white milk and green honey. They are taking tech marketing careers that here in Silicon Valley can offer six-figure salaries, economic independence, upward mobility. Jobs that can offer a great deal to the next generation of women - mothers, allies, role models who have built their careers and futures in tech.

Marketing chick *works* because it allows us to harness hundreds of years of denigrating necessary social work by relegating that work to women. The marketing chick has all those soft skills that patriarchy has taught us are undesirable, less useful, less expensive, less valuable, women's work.

These beliefs about social work and its worth, and which gender it belongs to, lets us ignore the very real value that women in "marketing" provide our industry. LMAO if you think you are going to build a viable technology company without people who are doing "marketing" - talking to your customers and users, establishing partners and channels, communicating with the market, coming up with product specifications, conducting user and beta testing, planning international expansion, pricing and selling software, writing product information and documentation, designing interfaces, doing marketing and sales operations, building culture and processes, handling finance and business strategy.

If you think a company can be built on engineering alone you're either a fool or have never worked at a real company or on a real team.

Ironically, but not surprisingly, men who do these jobs are almost never denigrated and insulted the way women who do these jobs are. In fact, most high-level marketing positions in tech are still occupied by white men. Funny how that works.

Marketing chick feeds on the ongoing capital/labor struggle of programmers who are watching investors get rich off of them while many of their jobs are shipped overseas and tech giants collude to fix their salaries. Programmers are also in a long, bitter and probably losing battle to align decision-making with their labor - while we trumpet the self-realized programmer, an Ayn-Randish figure who is coming up with products AND building them AND shipping them AND marketing them AND selling them, the reality is that oftentimes programmers aren't involved in decisions about what to build, while other business units are - especially market-

ing. The tension between labor/capital, between decision-makers/workers, generates a rich antagonism that is really about white men fighting each other for money and power but is easily diverted into hatred for the “invading other”, be it overseas labor or women in the workplace.

Further, marketing chick gives us an outlet for all of the misogynist behaviors and attitudes cultivated by the rest of our social upbringing. It’s no error that marketing chick draws unapologetically on the same cultural mechanisms that make *fake geek girl* work. The marketing chick, like the fake geek girl, is a succubus that poses as something she isn’t in order to gain the social and economic capital created and owned by men, to trick them into sleeping with her, to steal from them, to subjugate them, to benefit from them. Often the marketing chick is also the subject of vile and sometimes violent commentary on her appearance and its relation to her stature and professional achievements. She is often sexually harassed and even assaulted in her workplace, by her coworkers.

By creating a caricature of reviled femininity out of the women in our industry, we create a way to use slut-shaming, objectification and other tools of misogyny as weapons against our colleagues.

But the thing to most hate and fear about marketing chick is how it turns women against each other. We’ve created this fictionalized, trumped-up phantom enemy that allows us to blame *other women* for why we treat women in this industry so bad. We manufacture a paranoia and revulsion towards a fictionalized “*bad other*” that allows us to default to treating women like shit, that makes women struggle everyday to prove they aren’t *like that*. It manufactures suspicion and resentment by women towards other women.

That’s what makes me so sad about it, anyways.

Different Internets: How Online Sexism and Misogyny Impact Women in Tech

The Internet is not a monolith.

Yet even in the tech industry, ostensibly better positioned than any other to provide a nuanced mapping of the social, economic, political, aesthetic topology of the Internet—an industry where the internet is viewed simultaneously as our greatest communal triumph and our judge, jury, market, empire, home, soul; both of us and by us and yet outside of us—we are quick to appeal to a uniform conception.

We see it as almost a type of naturally-occurring, self-replenishing resource. It provides the basis for our economy, but also, simultaneously, a location and a source of identity—“We’re from the Internet.” It possesses changing states, even emotions: “the Internet is angry today.” And on days when cascading failure conditions ripple out from the true monoliths, looming clusters of data centers in Virginia, New York, the Bay, protected by armored guards and backed by corporate interests: “The Internet is broken.”

It is characteristic of the way we will readily absolve ourselves responsibility for the technologies we create, the systems and economies around them. We cannot bring ourselves to view the things we’ve made for what they are: in the case of social media, gigantic surveillance machines first aimed at women and then stolen by the government to use against the people; in the case of the new utopian, California-liberalism economy we hoped for and sometimes

promised, a wealth gap of increasingly horrifying severity; in the case of “innovation”, just more products powered by advertising; in the case of “meritocracy”, a system that dutifully forces out the few oppressed and marginalized people that the preceding systems of exclusion and privilege have failed to weed out.

And ultimately the Internet—a complex system of social, political and economic regions, of access and elitism, communication and suppression, opportunity and manipulation, information and advertising—which we provide the infrastructure and structure for, and most days are happy to take credit for... yes, we can reduce it easily enough if it suits us. As if it were a confounding mystery which even its creators had no hope of changing, moderating or explaining—*the Internet*.

Yet even we in technology have our own parts of the internet, a surface space that we gather in commune in large numbers, small enough to be nearly knowable.

GitHub, Hacker News, Twitter, IRC, r/programming, Slashdot, even Instagram and Foursquare: the online hubs where groups of tech people cluster and network with other tech people.

Our hives.

Here we create, share and comment on news, opinions, best practices, trends. We present our work, and compliment or critique the work of others. These tools are necessary to the social, intellectual and economic capital and commerce of our industry: open source code repositories are “the new resume” for technical contributors; social upvoting sites regularly drives tens of thousands of page views to individuals and companies; micro-blogging services help to organize and amplify the affect, the anxieties and day-to-day opinion wave of our community.

They can make or break careers.

On photo sharing and location services sites, we record and create artifacts of where we go and what we do... more often than not, lately, the travels, spoils, and delights of an emerging bubble.

We can all agree that the places where a community connects, gathers, communicates and congresses—real or virtual—are critical to that community and to the individuals within it.

And yet: There is reason to believe that women in tech actually have LESS representation in the internet communities relevant to their careers than they do in the tech workforce itself. For example, in community practice, social coding sites like Github are more than simple storage and version control for code. They provide a data source for analysis of trends in the community. They produce a system of social validation and currency, with the concept of popular projects, following, and commenting built-in. They provide a new type of resume, contributing to the hireability and desirability of technical candidates in the job market, and ultimately to that job market's inequalities. They have tools for discoverability, for making professional connections with individuals and companies, for building authority in the industry and community.

Yet study after study shows that women are vastly underrepresented among free and open source contributors, even compared to their representation in proprietary software. Thus, women are even LESS represented on the open source code repository tools now so pivotal to our community than they are in the software industry overall.

What about social sharing and upvoting sites that drive massive amounts of traffic, recognition and exposure to technologists, projects, startups and communities in our field?

Hacker News has 44% of its users in the 18-24 age bracket and is 77% male (Slashdot is 87% male, StackOverflow is 76%). Hacker News further has a well-documented history of hostility and abuse towards women, and posts that speak specifically to the experienc-

es of women in tech have a tendency to be “disappeared” off (good job, Paulg). Meanwhile, sites like Reddit, while having technology channels like r/programming, are well-known to support misogynistic clusters that attack women en masse during high-visibility incidents of sexism.

What about IRC? Users with feminine nicknames receive 25 times the number of malicious messages as users with masculine nicknames. There are also several high-profile incidents of harassment on IRC documented on the Geek Feminism wiki. Many women report using ambiguous or masculine nicks on IRC in order to avoid this type of harassment- which means that if women are present in IRC channels focused on technical subjects, people inside the room may assume they are just another “one of the bros”—a form of invisibility that happens around women in online spaces when they obscure their gender identity to protect themselves from gendered perceptions, harassment, abuse and even violence.

Oh, and Twitter. Twitter is integral to the formation and congress of the tech industry. It has propelled many technologists to a new kind of social fame, helps ideas and projects go viral, and is an important part of having a “presence” or “personal brand” in tech’s professional community. Here again, we find inequalities that may shape women’s visibility, representation and experience on the service. Men have 15% more followers than women, and are almost twice as likely to follow another man than a woman, and data suggests that men get retweeted more than women—a lot more.

Further outside of mediums specifically devoted to tech or dominated by technologists, tech workers also use more general-purpose social tools, where their network often clusters around other tech workers, even if not exclusively. Here are some things to keep in mind around how women may use tools like Instagram and Four-square—tools their male colleagues use to share their lives, experiences, and make new connections—differently:

Because of the frequency of gendered attacks, violence, and

stalking of women—by strangers, men they know in their personal lives, and men they know professionally—many women don't feel safe or comfortable using tools that share their location or presence at events. For example, I have stopped using Foursquare completely, turned off all location-based services on the other services I use, and almost never share where I'm at (including industry-events where I could use social tools to help make industry connections) in order to protect my physical safety.

Sexist critique of women's appearance online is frequent, frightening, derailing and humiliating. Many women in the industry may avoid sharing their photos online, or participating in types of virtual media where their likeness is used—which could range from everything from photo sharing sites to video casts to recordings of their presentations. I know that fear of the comments I get about my looks online—everything from comments about how hot or ugly I am, to specific facial features, to how I look when I'm angry, to my hair and clothes—significantly impacts my behavior on the internet. At one point the comments I got everytime I changed my Twitter avatar made me so nervous I would get anxiety attacks about it.

Indeed, the internet is not a monolith.

Considering these factors, we see that women are actually LESS represented in the online tech community than in the tech workforce, and that their ability to access and benefit from the professional network represented by these spaces is severely restricted.

In fact, of much interest to activists, feminists, and social justice workers in the field are the ways women's representations and experiences in the online, professional sphere of the tech industry affect their careers and retention rate over time, as moderated by sexist and misogynist abuse and bullying, threats to their emotional and physical safety from gendered violence, and overall representation in online spaces.

Seethe and Grin: My Life Going to Tech Events

This post is not about the overt verbal harassment, physical assault, abuse and rape that happens to women at technology events all the time. That is a post for later.

These are just the subtle things.

I am a woman who works in technology and I used to go to technology events.

As one does. There are many of them. San Francisco, 2013, something that in time we will come to know as a bubble year, before a crash will come, again, to wring out the pomp and circumstance and the worst of the hubris.

Water from a stone.

Every kind of event. The more money there is, the more events there are.

For awhile it was my job to fly around giving demos of developer tools at such events, hackathons and meetups all over the country, attending dozens in the span of a few months, many I had organized myself. Later, I would go to more conferences than I care to count, sponsored by companies I worked at, or to give talks, to make deals with partners, to talk to old customers and find new ones. Conferences and summits on anything and everything: APIs. Distributed systems. Monitoring. Gaming. Operations. Big data. Startups. Hadoop. Cloud. Telephony. Open standards. Open source.

But now I don't go to that shit. If I am giving a talk, I will show up to give my talk, and then I will leave. If I need to go to support a friend or see them talk, I will show up for that, and then I will leave.

The thing that stands out most viscerally to my memory is the way they always look at me.

Up and down, up and down, with that familiar combination of lechery and curiosity.

At the many tech events where “few” women is more like “almost no” women, I am more a walking exhibit than an attendee. I try to find a place in the room where I can watch them all, so no one is behind me or can sneak up on me, can look at me or make gestures at me without me seeing, or can look at my computer, trying to figure out who I am and what I do.

My “otherness”, my difference, is both palpable and deeply uncomfortable. I cannot blend in or go unnoticed. It's a strange feeling for someone who is used to being unassuming and mostly invisible in the safety of the broader world, tiny and fast-moving.

Some will ignore me entirely. Some I will catch staring at me, or trailing behind me as I go from room to room, my silent and terrifying companions, perhaps projecting onto me their hopes for a manic pixie dream girl to call their own, perhaps working up the courage to talk to me.

They never do.

They just... watch.

And follow.

Some will come up to me, over-enthusiastic to the point of confrontation: “Who are you? What do you do? Do you work in mar-

keting? Are you here with someone?" I will tilt my shoulders away, I will curve my back towards the floor, I will shrink into my own body. They will lean in closer.

I am always much smaller than they are.

At some point, always, I will be walking around and men will ask me where the food is being served, if they can get seconds, where they can get coffee, what time the break is, where the bathrooms are, where they can get a free t-shirt. "I don't work here," I always say.

I am wearing my speaker badge, I am wearing my sponsor badge, I am wearing my conference badge. It's right there, dangling in front of my body, it's fucking huge, it's bigger than my breasts, which they somehow never seem to miss.

"Oh, so sorry," they say.

At first, early in my career, I try very hard to participate and to talk to the other people at the event. Over time, I speak less and less and instead smile and nod, smile and nod, more and more.

In a group, the talking itself feels less like a collaborative discourse and more like a competition, men fighting each other to dominate the writhing unruly beast of the conversation with ever-higher volume, ever-longer periods un-interrupted, ever-more violent gesturing.

This only gets worse with the addition of alcohol, which is always plentiful. Of course, as time goes on I find it increasingly difficult to quibble: I would prefer to be drunk for this also.

The goal, it seems, is to prove that you know more than anyone else in the group. This is not my default intellectual posture, nor a defensible one as I have only been working several years.

The reward for winning the conversation seems uncertain except that everyone thinks you're an asshole but can at least admit you are not ignorant about whatever obscure aspect of computing is on the table at the moment.

Even one on one, I cannot share in nor benefit from the same sense of comfort and camaraderie that the men seem to have with each other, often immediately.

It is hard to quantify or even qualify what that diminished comfort—the unfamiliarity, the anxiety, the distance—that men in technology feel towards the women they work with does to our careers. I believe it to be both incalculable and devastating. It is difficult to share in the masculine bonding that secures their trust, the light-hearted exchange of sexist slurs and sexual innuendo, the immediate sense of knowing and security and shared context that comes from being around people like you.

I smile and nod and no one ever notices that I am not talking.

If I am attending an event with a man things are both better and worse.

If I am attending with a man, other men will not even bother to gather what must seem on the surface to be a tacit approval and silent interest in their conversation.

Instead they pretend I am not there at all.

Perhaps they think I am his secretary, his wife, his prop, his property.

After all, what is the use of talking to a woman another man already possesses, or has even tainted with companionship.

I used to go to events for companies I worked for, to give demos or talks or work the booths, little brightly-colored tents where I will

be demeaned, overlooked, disrespected and objectified for up to six hours at a time.

The men come by the dozens, poorly dressed, grinning, sometimes stinking, palms open for a bit of free candy, a brochure, an oogle.

They ask where my boss is, they ask to talk to someone who actually works there. They want to speak to someone more technical. I haven't even introduced myself. They slide right past me, suddenly agile in their hulking masculine bodies, aimed for a male colleague and a fist bump. On the way out, they'll turn to me and ask for a t-shirt.

Here. Here's your fucking t-shirt you fucking misogynist pig.

Smile and nod turns to grin and seethe.

Once a man came to my booth and asked to speak to the most technical person there. We discussed distributed database architectures for twenty minutes, and after twenty minutes he leaned his face so close to me I could smell his breath, and he said,

"I am just blown away that someone that looks like you knows so much about these things."

I want to fucking scream but I can't because this pays the bills right?

"We don't get paid enough," I will laugh with my female colleagues later as I drink enough to forget the fake compliments, the sweaty hands and the way they looked at my body like I was just another part of the booth, with all the passing interest they show in the interactive displays and free stickers. Shiny. Free. Touchable.

I drink to forget that I had to smile the whole time.

Bills. Wine and bills.

Oftentimes, in the past few years, men at events will know me from the internet. And now, even though I have many less followers than most influential men in our industry, my writing gets as many or more page views than their writing, so many people know who I am, even if they pretend not to.

Later, though, once they've pretended not to for the entire event, which may last days, they will tweet at me. "Saw you at the conference."

Maybe they want everyone to see that they saw me there?

Myself, I too only tweet about things after I have left.

But that's because it doesn't feel safe for me if people know where I am.

Some will tell me they're surprised at how nice I am in person and they seem disappointed.

I laugh and hope to my bones I will never see them again.

They seem to have expected a performance, just for them.

Sometimes they ask me what I think about some incident, some event, some flare-up or other, and I will pretend like I really, really want to have a deep, personal heart-to-heart conversation with them about my feminist politics.

A few beers in, they will try to bait me with comments on my looks, on feminism, on women. Sometimes I catch myself saying bad things that I don't believe and that are wrong just to deflect the discomfort and the attention.

Seethe and grin. Seethe and grin.

Make sure not to stay too long or drink too much. Make sure someone you trust always knows where you are.

It may look the same to you on the outside but I always spend too much time on the inside thinking about how I look at events.

Or really anytime I am around people who work in tech, which is all the time and I can never escape because everywhere I go there are dudebros talking about crushing code and I wish I lived on a farm instead of in this fucking morally bankrupt city.

I don't want to be thought of as cute, pretty, hot or sexy. I often stick with baggy hoodies and sweatpants that make it hard to tell what shape my body is. Over time, this leads to a weird disconnect with it.

Something I need to hide from the world.

I struggle with makeup. I like to wear makeup but in the A/B test of my life, men will take me more seriously and listen to me more if I don't wear it.

At the same time, it is hard to go to these things all the time looking your worst: hair up, unbrushed, no makeup, baggy clothes, tennis shoes.

When I'm giving talks, deciding how to look is most challenging.

One must take care to neither appear too attractive nor too unattractive. When presenting, I tend to wear glasses and wear my hair in a bun so at least in my mind my face stands out less.

My eyesight is bad enough that wearing glasses impairs my vision which makes it more difficult to present, but seems worth it to put something between my face and the men watching me perform.

When I speak, like everyone else, I worry about if I will sound smart, if people will like the talk, if they will laugh at the jokes I put in. But more than that I worry about what men will think and say about how I look, because I've heard what they say about the other women.

It can seem like the only thing worse than when they think you're ugly is when they think you're pretty.

I often wonder how I would look and dress if I didn't have to worry about what the men in my industry thought about it.

These are some of the reasons I don't go anymore. They are only some and there are others that are much worse.

I know deeply, and by now instinctively, that a technology event dominated by straight white men is not a place where I am safe.

It is not a place where I will be allowed to speak, where I will have dignity. I will not be treated with respect. I will be a stereotype instead of a person.

I will be a shadow of myself, slinking around and hiding, trying not to get fucked with.

I am a white, cis woman, who is able-bodied, who everyone will assume to be straight and vanilla, maybe even married.

I cannot even stomach what it must be like for women at these events without such privileges.

Of course, it's more the just the persistent subtle sexism, the insidious misogyny, the blanket dismissals and objectification.

Mixed in with the fear, the anxiety, and the humiliation, is a profound boredom.

That boredom of being surrounded by men who all look and talk and act the same. Watching them on stage, all bravado and confidence and bullshit and salesmanship. All fist-bumping and shoulder-slapping and self-congratulation and clinking beers. Them knowing everything there is to know in the world about startups and computers and companies and the lives and thoughts of other men just like them.

I just can't bring myself to give a fuck about these men or the things they have to say anymore.

Fuck You I Got Mine: Women in Tech for the Patriarchy

TRIGGER WARNING: Discussion of rape, sexual and physical assault.

We know some things about women in tech. The brogrammer culture, with its flamboyant, self-congratulatory misogyny and pretend meritocracy. Its parodic, perpetual adolescence. Its lingo, its fashion, its vices. And yet very little of its true nature is revealed by a hype machine pumping out tabloid spread after tabloid spread in a late and questionably intentioned outrage.

Behind the stark heteronormativity is the predictable streak of rape culture, dangerously paired, as it often is, with a bland homoeroticism. Brogramming presents a bizarre, nightmarish hybrid: a re-imagined geek-as-boy-king that co-opts the jock stereotype in all its brazen physicality, with all its attendant vanilla, American, locker-room male bonding. In brogramming we see a white male hive mind which has tired of its own sexless, fumbling nerd stereotype—itself a cover-up, a type of plausible deniability for a long history of rampant sexual objectification, harassment and assault of women by “nerds.” The brogrammer movement trades a hidden culture of lecherous misogyny for an overt one in an effort to restore a masculinity lost to caricature.

And then there is Lean In, the new brand of white, extreme upper-class tech feminism championed by Sheryl Sandberg and epitomized by Marissa Mayer. It is a self-interested feminism of white privilege, bereft of historical context, bereft of critical thought. It is a feminism removed utterly from the challenges of average women workers in tech, a feminism deliberately pacified for the devouring palate of the status quo.

It is, at last, a feminism the patriarchy can get behind.

“Women’s inspiration,” but inspiration for a lifetime of work given freely to the white male machine, with no certain reward other than soothing the phantom guilt of abandoning a workplace that never gave a fuck about women anyway.

Yes, this is what we know about women in tech, fashioned by a sycophant media and corrupt network of “thought leadership” into memes, scandals and link-bait. The true activists of these issues, much-erased and oft-maligned in the underground, mostly get rape and death threats, harassment, persistent threats to their careers and to their safety. Now, their profiteers enjoy bylines and public accolades. Through outright plagiarism by male “allies” in the limelight of a farcical journalism, the most pressing feminist issues of our time are milked for pageviews by men who are both the only ones the mainstream will listen to and the only ones it will credit. In the reality-distortion field of ever-richer rich white women, they become inspirational posters instead of a movement.

But there is also another conflict—one that is about women undermining feminist discourse and organization within the tech industry in order to preserve their own privilege.

We call this “Fuck You, I Got Mine.” It is made up, primarily, of women with decent tech jobs, with white, cis privilege, who actively and passively work to discredit feminist voices, deny systemic sexism in the industry, confuse the community about empirical gaps in privilege and opportunity, co-sign on the sexist and racist speech acts of influential white men, promote non-threatening conceptions of women in tech, and scapegoat other women for the endemic misogyny in our field.

By aligning with the white male interest, such women stand, ostensibly, to gain the trust and support of white men in power, advance their careers, receive positive recognition, present a non-threatening personal image and shield themselves from the ever-present

threat of feminist backlash.

It is difficult to talk about how women support the patriarchy in technology. The predominant feminist impulse is to build stronger community with the women who do work in tech.

Openly debating “Fuck You I Got Mine,” which is extensively discussed in private spaces, tends to devolve rapidly in public discourse. Little so excites the anti-feminist movement as the opportunity to paint feminism counter to the beliefs, desires and benefit of the mainstream woman—an easier claim in light of feminist critique of the ways women collude in the oppression of other women. Attempts to discuss the trend of anti-feminist acts by women give an excuse, however flimsy, for women and men in the industry to unite in portraying the feminist community as an angry, irrational mob, decrying its “crazy politics” and creating unsubstantiated, damaging representations of its agenda.

Still, the human shield for entrenched misogyny must be challenged and ultimately dismantled.

The Cost of Admission

“I just prefer to work with men. Most of my friends have always been guys, anyway.”

“The women I’ve worked with have been way worse than men.”

Women in tech have, or so they may believe, much to gain in being perceived as “one of the bros.” Much of the critical networking, decision-making and team bonding important to career growth occurs in male-dominated spaces, cemented by heteronormative male bonding. Gaining access to these spaces—or simply achieving the level of comfort and camaraderie that white men in the industry share as the foundation for their work relationships—may, or may seem to, open up career opportunities. Being “one of the bros”

is only possible by presenting a non-threatening persona that is aligned with male privilege and emulates the bonding techniques of straight, masculine men... and often its attendant misogyny (such as participating in casual denigration of women in the workplace).

As part of presenting in a non-threatening manner, attempting to fit it, or reinforcing internalized cultural stereotypes, women will often blame other women for their bad experiences in the workplace, portraying women in positions of power as selfish, domineering, untrustworthy, bitchy, abusive and/or incompetent. This behavior feeds off internalized misogyny, which often pits women against each other as a distraction technique, and sexist perceptions of women in leadership roles that are shared by women and men.

In the end, you have an environment where women are working against each other, for the patriarchy: co-signing on sexist portrayals of women leaders, submerging gender conflict and exploitation in order to gain favor and access to opportunities, and perhaps competing for real or perceived positions provided by tokenism.

Derailment, Gaslighting and Tone Policing

Tone policing is one element of well-documented derailment and role-enforcing strategies in which feminist discourse is pathologized and marginalized as irrational, violent, angry and unreliable. Most feminist discourse in the tech industry is met with a veritable firehose of such strategies ranging from garden variety “you catch more honey with flies!” to blatant and unsubstantiated character assassination of prominent feminists.

Unfortunately, women play a particular dangerous and critical role in discrediting and gaslighting other women and their experiences and speech acts, allowing the industry to persist in a state of denial and providing a highly credible means of deflection from the issues at hand. Women in the community can often be seen berating other women for their “anger”, “negativity,” or “vitriol”, criticizing femi-

nist discourse for alienating men, discouraging or minimizing open discussion of the ugliest issues in the community (such as rape and assault), or painting civil debate as feminist bullying. In tone policing other women, many women are co-signed and supported by influential white men (just check out Dave Winer's championing of white women defending and indulging his egregious ignorance and obvious, unrepentant sexism)—perhaps hinting at the hidden system of reward offered up to women willing to carry out patriarchy's bread and butter regulation. In these roles, women themselves act as the first line of defense against feminist dialogue in the industry.

Assault, Harassment and Abuse

Women are regularly harassed, abused, assaulted, molested, stalked and threatened by men in the technology industry. Many of these incidents are never spoken about publicly. The consequences women face for speaking out about these events are often severe and irreversible.

It saddens me that physical and sexual assault, and other forms of gendered violence are so common, and provide such a mesh of shared context for so many women. The acts of providing aid and comfort to our friends, lovers, sisters, family, colleagues and co-workers who have been hurt by men is one I believe every woman knows. This is why it is particularly alarming to see women in tech engage in apologist behavior when one of us shares our experiences of abuse.

Here are some of the horrible things women in tech say and do in response to reports of assault and harassment aimed at other women. I've left out links and names of specific incidents because I am more interested in creating awareness than shaming perpetrators, but many of these will sound familiar if you have followed incidents of harassment, abuse and assault in the open source, Ruby, Python and other communities over the past year:

- Publish material assassinating the character of the target, effectively victim-blaming, co-signing on abuse, and participating in the ritual of publicly punishing women who speak out
- Construct the assaulter as an object of pity rather than danger; express equal and/or more concern for the attacker; offer direct support for the assaulter; and other acts that minimize the abuse, the responsibility for it, and the severity of the impact
- Portray assault against women as a minor and rare disruption rather than a common, well-documented and catastrophic endemic
- Cast assault as an interpersonal issue, submerging the systemic forces at work and participating in a subtle form of victim-blaming
- Question the reliability and truth of the account or report (sometimes in non-obvious ways), a way of discrediting and gas-lighting targets rather than supporting them

Defending, normalizing, minimizing and erasing misogynistic attacks of all forms on women is one of the primary ways that patriarchy is enforced through violence and fear. It's heartbreaking to watch women participating in it.

Denial

Underneath blog posts and essays speaking out about sexism and misogyny in the tech industry, you can almost always find a certain variety of commentary from women who work in it. About how they don't experience sexism in tech, even how being a woman within it is a *career advantage* as it is easier to stand out and get help (sexist paternalism, white privilege and misogynistic objectification is never mentioned, of course). About how all the other women in tech talking about sexism is making it harder because it *makes the men uncomfortable*. About how the sexism in tech is overblown, how anyone can succeed in tech if they just work hard enough, how the meritocracy ensures equality.

And then, every once in awhile a woman writes a blog post about

how sexism in tech is a lie, or minimizing it, or vilifying the feminists, and she enjoys a brief moment of fame in the bro-bubble of internet traffic.

The thing about women who deny sexism in tech, though, is this:

Technology is an objectively homogeneous and sexist industry where the participation and advancement of women is not only stalled but empirically receding, where very few women are in positions of power, where there are regular, public incidents of sexism and assault, where arguments of gender essentialism are common, where most conference speakers are men, and where women are leaving the industry at over double the rate of men.

If you deny sexism in tech, you're either ignorant or a fucking liar.

Neither is acceptable.

And then there's the women who never say anything at all about it, ever. Some of them are white women sitting in six-figure jobs with their good health insurance, surrounded by white men. They will probably never be managers or executives, victims of what is less a glass ceiling than a glass jell-O in which the ambitions and advancement of women exist in a suspended animation.

Of everything else mentioned in this post, I have the most empathy for this. I understand the silence. It is career-limiting to speak out. It can be scary, and it is dangerous. Many of you are well-justified in staying away from a discussion and a political, moral and ethical stance that may threaten your economic security, career advancement, health and safety. Ultimately, I prefer silence to the blatant denial.

Still, I can only imagine the power of more woman in the industry, particularly the most privileged ones, saying SOMETHING or doing SOMETHING besides just occupying the space. Imagine that.

Maybe you can do a little more than you are now. If so, I hope you will.

But if not, I understand too. You are doing a lot, just by being here in all this fucking bullshit.

Conclusion

In order to correctly discuss the ways women in technology align with the patriarchy, we must acknowledge two co-existing facts.

Women resort to many strategies to protect and defend themselves from the patriarchy and to achieve security, opportunity, upward mobility and a fulfilling life within its constraints. This is one way that the patriarchy secures the collusion of the people it oppresses, and it is necessary to its continuance. While it may not be useful at this juncture to weigh the moral and ethical implications of this behavior in certain groups, it is negligent to ignore it.

The tech industry, just as it is shaped by sexism, is shaped by white supremacy and a system of racism and privilege that provides white women access to career opportunities, career security and career growth not shared by women of color. The white privilege that benefits many white women in tech plays a huge role in allowing them to occupy a position denying gender oppression, supporting the patriarchy, and undermining feminist activism. It is no coincidence that the majority of women engaging in the behavior mentioned in this post are white women. We must not erase the truth and consequences of intersectional oppression and racism in constructing and moderating this behavior.

Ultimately, the way women themselves participate in, defend and promote the sexism and entrenched gender inequality in the tech industry is the cause of much sadness, anger and despair—especially among the women who are dedicating much of their time, lives and money to speaking out, raising awareness, building community with women, promoting women, helping them succeed. Making things better both for women in tech today and the women

who will follow us.

And yeah, it is hard to talk about.

But ultimately, the level of damage done by the “fuck you I got mine” attitude of many women in our industry—the active sabotaging, erasure, derailment and discrediting of women and feminist organization in order to advance their careers a tiny notch, get blog traffic, get co-signed by the male establishment, and ensure their ultimate comfort—is incalculable.

And so we talk we must.

Geek Stereotypes: Misogyny, Mental Illness and Company Dysfunction in Tech

Geek culture, while not our unique domain, pervades the technology community.

From it, we get the stereotype of male geeks as socially inept, fumbling and awkward—challenged by companionship and romance alike, by tact and conversation, by the norms and expectations of broader civil society.

This social deficiency, it is posited by pop culture, is the inevitable result of an extraordinary or unique intelligence, and the expected cost of mediating the world through computers, gadgets, games, technologies and other machines and fantasies.

This stereotype is also a cover-up and a red herring for deep dysfunctions in our community.

The belief that male geeks are incapable of romantic interaction with women that isn't fumbling, awkward, transparent, and ultimately doomed—the cheap laughs of blockbuster movies—covers up endemic sexual harassment, abuse and assault by male technologists against women in the field.

It also simultaneously forgives, mitigates and erases the rampant and entrenched misogyny at male-dominated technology events, which have long employed “booth babes”, adult entertainment and casual objectification as marketing and bonding strategies.

Tellingly, this stereotype is one of the only lenses through which we as a community engage with mental illness and disability—particularly social anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder, sometimes even depression. You can also frequently find a subtle (or even overt) appeal to Autism somewhere in the apologia that occurs around the invocation of the male geek stereotype to explain or justify damaging behavior.

Importantly, these appeals do not represent any actual engagement with mental illness and disability—something that is sorely needed in the technology and startup industry, where many of us suffer in shame and silence with undiagnosed or untreated conditions, where mental illness and disability is incredibly stigmatized, and where very little community support is available.

Rather, it represents a dangerous armchair psychology—expressing no actual knowledge of, nor empathy towards, mental illness and disability, just co-opting the ill-informed and stigmatizing representations of mass media to avoid actual engagement with behaviors and trends in the community.

Within the workplace, the geek stereotype is frequently invoked, implicitly or explicitly, to keep engineers away, or justify their absence from, customer engagement, participation in business decisions, and cross-functional teamwork.

This appeal is used by engineers to protect their own time and focus, and by other departments to protect their political turf and sense of importance in companies that value engineering above other competencies—a profound and often devastating dysfunction.

In companies where the technical staff is the most privileged group, the geek stereotype is omnipresent in the paternalism of perk culture, where all needs and desires—including a built-in and corporate-endorsed *social life* —are catered to by groups of underrepresented and marginalized people in tech.

The manner in which our community uncritically co-opts, performs, and reproduces the stereotype of male geeks as inevitably, as acceptably socially inept, is a major challenge to social justice in the field.

We need to move towards a culture that actively deconstructs the use and performance of stereotypes, rather than using them as a way to elude responsibility for our behavior as individuals and as a community.

What Can Men Do?

I get asked this a lot.

Sometimes it is less a question than a veiled accusation or criticism. More often, it is revealing of the guilt, insecurity and helplessness men in our industry tend to feel around discussions of the systemic sexism they are the primary beneficiaries of.

So here you go. Here is what you can do so you can stop asking me to do your job for you.

Please remember two things.

Men need to work with each other on sexism. It is not okay to lean on the class of people you oppress to solve your system or your discomfort with it.

Men need to work within their own communities on sexism. It's typical of male arrogance in tech to go gallivanting into other people's communities trying to solve their problems, but there's enough problem right here to go around. Get to work.

Money

White men in technology have access to an enormous amount of wealth and cash. White men in tech can make six figures for being a mediocre Rails programmer any day of the week. They also control more flow of money inside companies, can raise money more easily, and accumulate more non-salary compensation than women.

Give your money to people who know what the fuck they are doing. Seriously. While you are reading feminist lit for the first time, give your money to people who are actually educated on sexism, diversity and feminism, people who are working in tech everyday to make things better.

Get company funds diverted to the cause. Men have a lot of ability to influence company spend, and advocating for social justice causes is likely to result in their career advancement, while women advocating for the same can expect often serious career consequences. Get your company to sponsor feminist organizations, conferences, hackerspaces, development academies and more. This will help more diverse candidates flow into your pipeline and help your company's reputation among underrepresented people in tech.

Education

Men in technology need to work with each other on getting more educated in feminism, intersectionality and the way sexism plays out in the industry. Stop relying on women to teach you material that is readily available on the open internet.

Start a feminist bookclub for men. Seriously. I would love to see men in our industry getting together to read and discuss feminist books, literature and research. Start with some bell hooks *Feminism is for Everybody* because it will change your life, and go from there.

Educate other men. Call other men on their sexist, microaggressing, misogynist bullshit. I know you see it and hear it all the time at tech events, on the internet, in your meetings and beers after work. *Speak the fuck up*. It's sad that often the only people speaking up about the way men in our industry treat women are the people who suffer from it.

Get better management training in your company. Male-dominated management is one of the primary sites where inequality is reproduced in the tech industry. At the same time, very few managers have any training or educating whatsoever on diversity, sexism, racism and explicit and implicit bias. Men are in a great position to demand better and more comprehensive management training that addresses these issues.

Support Women

Use your platform. The writing and work of men in tech gets much more attention, audience and respect than the writing and work of women. Use your platform and your authority to direct attention to the work women are doing in your industry and community.

Be an agent of good in the workplace. Get educated on the ways women get treated in the workplace. Read up on microaggressions, pay attention to how men around you constantly talk over the women you work with. Understand how women are consistently underpromoted, underpaid and underrespected at work, and how women leaders are villainized just for doing their job. Then work with other men in your workplace to flag and eradicate this behavior.

Hiring

Get women hired. Make your workplace give a fuck about hiring diverse teams. You are in a wonderful position to advocate and agitate for more diversity in your workplace. Draw attention to your company's demographics internally, bring in speakers on building team diversity, start a committee dedicated to auditing and improving the hiring process. Oh and make sure this doesn't just end up in a position where you just hire a few white women and call it a day.

Not good enough.

If you are a manager: **YOU HAVE THE DIRECT POWER TO HIRE A DIVERSE TEAM.** If you are not a manager but your team is hiring and growing, let your manager and your teammates know that you care about diversity, and help recruit diverse candidates.

Community Events

Men have an extraordinary amount of power and over-representation at technology events. They are also critical to changing the representation and experience of women at these events.

Don't speak at events or on panels where women speakers aren't represented. Be up-front, verbal and clear with conference organizers. Work with them to find and promote women speakers in your field.

Get your company to only sponsor events with a code of conduct. These policies help to build events where women and other under-represented groups are safe and welcome.

Encourage diversity at conferences you go to. Let conference organizers and the community know that you want to attend diverse conferences. Use Twitter, email, comments, whatever. When conference organizers know that their attendees want to see more diversity, they are more likely to take steps to improve.

How Much Do You Get Paid?

Inside Silicon Valley's paternalistic work culture, companies are designed to feel like families, perks of all forms spring "magically" from a deliberately concealed service class, and there is a perpetual, conspiratorial sense that we're all going to get rich.

Or at least, the people who are smart enough, work hard enough, long enough—they are all going to get rich. The meritocracy, after all, must be fed.

Within this economic system, functioning on the surface as a widely shared mythology, any specific, shared realization and acknowledgment of the unequal compensation earned by marginalized groups in tech represents a significant threat.

I say "specific" because it is generally understood that women get paid less than men; that white women get paid more than black men and women and hispanic men and women (oh you didn't know that last part?). However, recognizing this macrocosm functioning intimately, in the immediate, personal, local context—in our friend groups, in our teams, in our companies, and in our communities—remains massively taboo in the industry. It is also the context where people are most likely to truly recognize the system AND have agency to intervene in it.

People in tech—both members of the privileged groups and members of the marginalized groups—need to start talking about fucking money. And not in the sense of how much this company or that company sold for, but in the sense of *how much fucking money are you making* and why is that more or less than the people around you?

Towards a Broader Understanding of Compensation in Tech

In part because of the mainstream focus on “cents on the dollar” comparing of marginalized people to the dominant class in terms of base salary, we are likely to adopt a similarly narrow conception of compensation in tech.

However, salary only tells one part of the compensation picture. For people within tech, a study of local / community inequalities must include:

FUCKING EQUITY. How much equity do marginalized groups in your company have relative to their total population in the company and the industry? How does this affect their long-term financial status? While white men are squeezing billions of dollars out of their startup equity, why are members of other groups being left behind? What are the long-term, systemic financial consequences when marginalized groups get left out of one of the primary wealth mechanisms of their own industry?

Bonuses. Lots of people in tech, in addition to base salaries, get percentage bonuses at regular points throughout the year, and spot bonuses at other times, that can significantly affect an overall compensation package—ESPECIALLY for people in management and executive positions. What about signing bonuses?

Company perks. Who is able to take advantage of company perks that occur outside of working hours—such as dinners, company housing, corporate transportation, and other perks that can significantly reduce overall living cost? Who ISN'T able to take advantage of these perks because they are caretakers, because they don't have access, or because they don't feel safe or comfortable in those spaces?

Between Friends

There are many reasons we don't talk about compensation. For one, it is hard to land on the right side. Either one is making more than the other, and thus may feel guilty or be perceived as bragging; or one is making less, and thus may feel inferior, embarrassed, taken advantage of. There is always a vague sense of unease: can we get in trouble for sharing our own salary information, or hearing that of others? In the morass of legal paper you have to sign when taking a job in the Valley, it can be hard to know. Regardless, appearing to others as being a troublemaker, instigator, or cause of bad morale in the ranks can carry risk to your employment.'

(Please note that talking about compensation is federally protected under section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act.)

Because of the taboo and potential discomfort that open discussions of salary invoke, compensation information is generally only shared within homogeneous groups—white men in similar roles at similar companies, for example.

Unfortunately, while this is an utterly non-challenging way of examining how compensation functions, it also means we look at compensation through the lens of “like-like” comparisons- i.e., comparing salary between like people occupying the same positions.

This isn't sufficient for seeing the entire economic system at play in the workforce. For one, women's roles in tech are often gendered and undervalued/under-compensated compared to men's roles. Women are often not provided the mentorship, training and benefit-of-the-doubt that men benefit from to try out new positions and roles. Women are less likely to be promoted to manager and executive positions, with only 3-5% of senior management positions in tech occupied by women.

This is not to say that “like-like” inequalities DO NOT happen because ohhhhhh they do. (I once discovered I was making at least \$25,000 below market rate for my position)—but just that it is not complete, and that it erases many of the broader issues relevant to the economics of oppression in tech—including the long-term economic stability of minorities, access to a personal economic base that permits one to take big career risks, ability to start companies, ability/inability to access the most lucrative job positions, etc.

What Can Happen When We Talk About Compensation In Our Communities

For members of marginalized groups, having unequal compensation be visible in the community means that we can better advocate for our own fair compensation, armed with better data and context.

Open sharing of compensation information provides a basis for better community organization and advocacy—more than just individuals advocating for their own individual finances, but groups advocating for more equitable compensation at a team, company, even industry level.

For members of privileged groups who are allies to oppressed people, illuminating how economic disparity is functioning in their own teams and communities gives them a site of intervention, a place to use their power and influence to enact positive change.

Helping to shift the control of economic information from the existing patriarchal structure and into the province of workers removes a major source of power (via information asymmetry) from the structure.

Openly discussing compensation works to dismantle the politeness politics around “gentlemen don’t discuss money” that only benefits the gentlemen—and works to move the practice of discussing economic systems into community consciousness.

Note: As with many things in tech, talking about compensation openly can be more risky for people in marginalized groups than those in privileged groups. You should always think about the potential risks and consequences of discussing comp in your specific situation. It's also important to note that people in privileged positions can provide people in marginalized groups with important compensation information without requiring the same in return; and that talking within marginalized groups about comp may be safer than talking across power structures. For examples, there's a great post discussing some of the issues around openness re: compensation in the workplace from *Red Light Voices* called "How to rebrand feminism and get women fired in the process."

Ultimately, talking about compensation is taboo precisely because it means that we might actually realize what is going on right in front of us—not as abstract social constructs, but as a realized fact in our everyday environments. Compensation inequity continues to function in large part because of the deliberate silence and taboo around it.

Talking about compensation together, in our communities, with people within our economic, social, gender and racial groups, and with people outside of them, represents a small act of radical organization. It rejects the self-interested taboos of the ruling class within technology, dismantles the information asymmetry that helps it run, and gives us the data and community consciousness we need to make change happen.

How Much Do You Get Paid? Part II

The previous article is on the importance of people in tech talking about compensation inequality locally—within their teams, companies, roles and communities—as a small act of rebellion against the existing power structures in the industry.

Yet discussing compensation can be fraught with peril for members of marginalized groups who can be threatened, intimidated, bullied, punished and fired for advocating for pay transparency and equality.

Many members of the tech community report being asked to sign agreements stating that they will not share salary information, even though sharing salary information is federally protected and in California, where many tech employees work, employers are forbidden from firing or otherwise discriminating against any employee for sharing information, like salary, about their working conditions.

The implicit and explicit legal threats around discussing compensation can also disproportionately affect people from marginalized groups, who may not have access to the knowledge base, legal counsel and community support to effectively defend against such threats.

It's important that members of marginalized groups aren't further punished for pursuing openness around compensation information and fighting for pay inequality; and that responsibility for such doesn't fall solely to them. So, here are some thoughts on specific ways that we can open up community conversation about pay inequality in tech in light of these concerns.

Please keep in mind that none of these strategies are without risk—indeed, no strategy that challenges the existing power structure is

without risk. Still, they are important to consider and discuss if we are to seriously pursue openness and reform around compensation in the industry. Any strategies implemented in practice should be thought through critically and thoroughly.

You can learn a lot, with a higher degree of safety, by confidentially sharing salary information with people like you, that you trust in your community. Many marginalized groups in technology have communication channels to safely share important information relevant to their group, such as information on abusers, harassers and other dangerous or harmful persons in the broader community. But because of the politeness politics and taboos around discussing comp, we don't always use these same channels to talk \$\$\$.

Still, talking to other women in tech is where I've historically gotten most salary data that wasn't otherwise accessible to me, and the anecdotal data that such communities can collect and disseminate is both large and invaluable. This information can help you make better decisions about asking for raises, interviewing and negotiation, switching companies, moving into different roles and other things that can benefit you financially.

It's important to get compensation information not only from within your company, but from the broader industry. I've found that sharing compensation information with people who don't share my employer has really helped me to contextualize my compensation, and ultimately advocate more effectively for market rate compensation for myself and the people I have managed and advised. In some cases, gaining compensation information from people outside of your immediate company may be safer and more practical for both you and them, and in some cases, more useful as well.

Help create awareness around worker's rights in your community. Many people in tech don't know about section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act, and in California, section 232.5 of

the California Labor Code, which protect worker's rights to share information about their working conditions—including salary—without retaliation from employers.

People in positions of privilege should be open to sharing their compensation information, if it is desired, without requiring mutual disclosure from people in marginalized groups. Oftentimes, data about their relative compensation compared to members of privileged groups is not accessible to people in marginalized groups.

Talking about compensation does not just imply the context of 1:1 conversations. How can larger groups help facilitate these discussions—by negotiating safe, even anonymous disclosures within groups, or simply by discussing the silence and taboo around compensation in order to start facilitating group coordination?

Within companies, groups that bring together diverse individuals can organize to promote organizational practices that lead to more openness around compensation, such as anonymized publishing of compensation across role and across privileged and marginalized groups (gender, race, age, etc.). This may be safer in larger companies where anonymized data is unlikely to result in any particular individuals being personally identified and/or targeted as a result of this disclosure.

Managers inside of companies are in a significant position of power to change the norms around compensation. Managers can work with other managers to discuss and implement policies that contribute to pay equality, such as regular reviews and correction of unequal compensation across diverse groups in the company. This is just one way that managers can use their power and privilege to advocate for positive transformation in the workplace.

People in positions of privilege within the industry can use their platforms and influence to draw attention to compensation inequity. I'd love to hear more people discussing the role of

equity in compensation inequality, the roles of privilege in affecting the long-term financial conditions of tech workers, and paths to better organization of workers to advocate for equal pay.

Unionization is an incredibly taboo topic in tech—perhaps even more so than discussion of compensation itself. The tech community’s narcissistic focus on individualism, devotion to large corporate entities, uncritical love of capitalism, and lack of social consciousness all contribute to an environment where formal workers’ organization is generally considered out of the question.

However, data conclusively shows that the interests of marginalized workers in tech are not in line with the ruling corporate interests... which makes formal worker’s organization increasingly appealing.

Analyzing Diversity in Your Workplace

While much of this last section has focused primarily or specifically on women in tech, a reflection of the author's lived experiences and early subject matter, *it is essential to note that this focus is insufficient for true transformation of the industry.*

Many tech companies are showing increasing engagement with diversity in their workplaces. Unfortunately, this interest tends to focus too narrowly, particularly in new companies and startups, on a single metric: % of women vs. % of men.

While neglecting fundamental intersectional issues, this metric also neglects a more nuanced and accurate analysis of diversity and employee experiences in the workplace. In order to both build diverse companies and ensure equality of experiences and opportunity within them, we must attain a broader view.

Please note that it is NOT a tactical guide. In this post, we look at some different axes, perspectives and analytical techniques with the goal of gaining a broader and more useful mental framework for quantifying and qualifying diversity in the workplace. It is important to consider the ethics and implications of how diversity information is self-reported, collected and/or used and published in your workplace—detailed treatment of that is outside the scope of the piece, but should not be neglected in practice. For example, individuals self-identify across gender, sexuality, and racial/ethnic categories in many ways, and you cannot and should not rely on your own assessment of others' identity. At the same time, requesting and sharing this information can be problematic and even hazardous or dangerous and is not to be collected, analyzed or shared without serious, critical consideration.

Population and Representation

Some important considerations for an intersectional view of your company. Much of this data can be contextualized by information from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Department of Labor and the many organizations devoted to underrepresented groups in tech. It is important to contextualize workplace demographics both with industry demographics, where available, and data from the general population.

- Ethnic and racial diversity
- Ethnic and racial diversity within gender groups—i.e., do you have diversity among men in your organization but have mainly or solely hired white women?
- Age—is your startup mostly comprised of people in their mid-twenties and early thirties? How does age break down across gender groups?
- Gender—Gender isn't just about the monolithic binaries of “man” and “woman.” It's about a range of presentations within a broad spectrum that includes traditional representations of masculinity and femininity, androgyny, and combinations, variations and departures thereof. It's about gender identity, about cis and trans identities and experiences. It's about the complex intersection of perception, presentation, experience, and identity that goes into gender.
- Sexuality—An intersectional view of the workplace must include a look at populations, identities, presentations and experiences of gay, lesbian, pansexual and bisexual individuals, as well as individuals with other sexual identities.
- What about the population, identities and experiences of people in your workplace with disabilities, mental illnesses, and/or short and long-term health challenges?

Attrition and Advancement

A view that only considers population metrics neglects much of the lived experiences of employees within the workplace.

Please consider:

- Average length of employment of white men vs. average length of employment of persons from marginalized and underrepresented groups
- Relative rates that people from marginalized groups get fired, laid off or quit compared to people from dominant groups
- Representation in various tiers of management—what is the diversity breakdown in the top tiers (C-suite) vs middle-managers vs individual contributors
- Representation in service groups—What is the representation across positions such as personal assistant, employee wellness, internal administration, etc. that are more focused than other roles on internal welfare and enablement?
- Representation across departments—do you have a marketing team of all women but an engineering team of all men?

Other things to look at in this category: average time to promotion, average time in single positions without promotion, % that attain a management position over time.

Pay and Compensation

Pay and compensation is a complex issue—simply examining the base pay across various groups is insufficient. Consider:

- Starting salaries of white men vs. starting salaries of persons from marginalized groups—we know that starting salary differences across similar roles and qualification levels contributes significantly to endemic wealth gaps over time.
- Average time between raises for white men vs. persons in marginalized and underrepresented groups; differences in relative size and proportion of raises
- Overall average salaries across groups at various tiers (management, middle-management, individual contributor, etc.)
- Breakdown in equity granted to white men vs equity granted to persons from marginalized groups; breakdown in additional

stock grants over time

- How spot bonuses, percentage bonuses, and other extra-salary comp is awarded across groups and at various hierarchical tiers

Employee Welfare and HR

- What percentage of HR complaints are generated by persons in marginalized and underrepresented groups relative to their overall population in the company?
- What *kinds* of HR issues and complaints are brought forward by persons across diverse groups?
- What are the differences in use of vacation and leave across groups? For example, do white men in the company take less overall vacation and leave than other groups, creating a dominant culture where taking less leave is rewarded and ultimately disadvantaging groups that need to use vacation time for family support and other issues?
- How much company and team-building centers around after-work activities, masculinity-centric competitive extracurriculars, alcohol consumption, and other bonding sites that might alienate or exclude? *Who* participates and enjoys these activities?
- What perks are provided in the workplace and who can and does take advantage of those perks? I.e., what type of people attend conferences and speak on behalf of the company; what perks are only available outside of working hours; what perks are designed to keep people in the office and who uses them, etc.
- Remote employees: How are diverse groups represented in the remote employee pool?

Socialization, Administration and Coordination

Oftentimes, members of marginalized groups end up assuming more of the coordination costs of the company -- which they are not formally responsible for, nor compensated for. This work, oftentimes emotional and administrative work, is incredibly important to company operations, but it needs to be negotiated, compensated for, acknowledged and respected.

Some common things to look for that marginalized people are often expected to do without appropriate credit, negotiation and compensation:

- Who schedules the meetings at your company? Takes notes for them? Follows up on them?
- Who coordinates social gatherings such as birthday celebrations, company parties, holiday events, happy hours, etc.?
- How is that work assigned and rotated in the employee base?
- Who gets asked to order lunches, clean up, take notes, schedule meetings and perform other administrative tasks within your company?
- Who performs the emotional and social work within your company and how is that valued? i.e., new employee onboarding and socialization, conflict resolution, facilitating social relationships, etc.?

This is not an exhaustive or even comprehensive list of the axes that must be examined when assessing the diversity of your workplace and the experiences of under-represented and marginalized groups within it.

However, it should get you thinking more broadly and critically about diversity inside your company and teams so you are more equipped to intervene in them.