CA4 – Current Literature Essay

Write a short article-style essay, of 750 words or less, summarising the main arguments in Rana Foroohar's book *Don't Be Evil: The Case Against Big Tech*, and giving your response to Foroohar's arguments.

In her book ‘Don’t be Evil: The Case Against Big Tech’, Rana Foorahar argues that a small number of technology companies have grown to become dangerously positioned within society. That is: they have monopolised significant areas of the economy; they are in a similar state to pre-financial crisis big banks; and they have betrayed the innocent principles they were founded upon. All of this, according to Foorahar, has happened in the name of capitalism, as a result of a desire for more wealth and greater power. Foorahar’s eagerness to critique Big Tech is refreshing, and whilst some of her arguments are very convincing, others are less so.

Throughout the book, Foorahar argues that Big Tech companies resemble monopolies, and that they frequently abuse the power they wield. For example, Google is the dominant search engine for the web, and has vast amounts of spare cash to block competition by acquiring start-ups and filing lawsuits. Also, the amount of data they gather gives them two huge advantages: they can commoditise and sell the data; and use it to enhance their products. These factors deter competition, resulting in huge monopolies. Foorahar argues that as this sort of thing becomes more widespread, growth in society is stifled. She even takes it a step further, arguing that Big Tech has become so monopolistic that we are essentially living in a surveillance state somewhat resembling China. Foorahar argues convincingly about the dangers of monopolistic power, a point that is also made by Shoshana Zuboff in ‘The Age of Surveillance Capitalism’. However, to argue that citizens of Western societies are subject to levels of surveillance like in China is a step too far. Big Tech companies may know a lot about us, but they are not the government.

Another argument put forth by Foorahar is that Big Tech is in a similar position to the global banks pre-financial crisis. In 2008 many banks were seen as huge, complex organisations, which were so engrained in the economy that the consequences of them failing would be disastrous. Foorahar argues that Big Tech companies have similarly engrained themselves in society. According to Foorahar, Big Tech companies have been funnelling huge amounts of cash into offshore corporate bonds, and the consequences of a sell-off are certainly hard to fathom. As well as being too-big-to-fail, Foorahar argues that Big Tech is growing ever more complex. With growth, companies struggle to maintain a clear vision and culture, and responsibility is diluted. If you’ve ever worked for a large corporation, visualising this requires little imagination. Although the comparison between Big Tech and banks thus far makes sense, it’s difficult to go any further because of the difference in products and services they provide. Most often, consuming technology is a choice, however it would be nonsensical to not have a bank account.

The book title subliminally gives away one of the main points of the book; that Big Tech companies have betrayed their founding principles. For many years, “Don’t be evil” was a phrase used in Google’s corporate philosophy, and Google’s original intention of creating a better search engine for the web certainly wasn’t evil. Foorahar argues that the original, innocent intentions of Big Tech are long gone, and these companies have turned into money hungry capitalist machines. This point is interesting, because it certainly makes sense on the surface. However, it also seems inevitable that a company which encounters so much success and grows to such a size will focus on profits. Anyway, don’t most start-ups begin with a positive and flirty catchphrase, telling us how they aim to make the world a better place?

The role of Big Tech in society is a controversial subject, and Foorahar ties it all together nicely in her book. She convincingly argues that Big Tech companies are dangerously monopolistic and criticises the amount of influence they have. By comparing Big Tech to pre-financial crisis banks, she paints a picture of the monolithic, incumbent firms that she wants the reader to see. However, accusing Big Tech companies of betraying their founding principles seems to me a rather pointless point to make several decades after they were founded. Overall, the book rounds up current ideas about Big Tech very well, and is a good read for those without much knowledge of the issues surrounding Big Tech. However, it is slightly lacking in original material, and contains few answers to the problem of how dangerously posed Big Tech is within society.