"**Don't Be Evil**
The Case Against Big Tech"

by Rana Foroohar, 2019
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I looked forward to the release of this book in late 2019. It promised to address similar ground to Shoshana Zuboff's, "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism"; but being written by a journalist, I hoped it might be more accessible and, as billed in the launch documentation, offer solutions to the evil implied by the title. At the risk of playing my cards too early – the book is more accessible than Zuboff's, but it offers little in terms of specific solutions to the problems she describes.

Rana Foroohar begins the story with an unexpected credit card bill for over $900 in charges from Apple's App. store – charges incurred by her 10 year old son making in-app purchases while playing an online soccer game. This was the wake-up call that led to "Don't be Evil".

"Don't Be Evil" is only half the size of its illustrious forerunner. While it covers similar ground to "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism", it is not a compressed version of Prof Zuboff's book. Ms Foroohar spends more time challenging the Big Tech companies' economic practices: particularly their handling of corporate tax. I am sympathetic to the Ms Foroohar's moral arguments – but I think that primary complaint is misdirected. Governments establish the national fiscal regimes in which businesses operate. They have been appallingly slow to react to the fundamental changes that have risen from the first days of the Internet in the late 1990s – taxation and regulatory environments still have not caught up. Governments of all shades have failed to protect their citizens from the rise of surveillance capitalism. In fact, they have in many ways facilitated that rise through low- or no-touch regulatory regimes. Today we are seeing an encouraging shift of mood reflected in the rise of B Corporations and the demands of investors to understand the greater social purpose behind businesses beyond a relentless pursuit of profit. Louder though these calls have become – they remain relatively faint within the cacophony of populist beliefs which these tech platforms are helping to amplify.

"Much of what we resent about Big Tech should not be a surprise to anyone, least of all to its founders. The perils were all implicit in the technology we find entrancing. When Google advised its employees not to be evil, it did so because it knew full well that evil was more than a powerful temptation. Evil was baked into the business plan."

Ms Foroohar makes significant use of her experience in the start-up scene in the late 1990s to offer insight into the seemingly chaotic development of companies like Google into the behemoths they are today. She is very critical of the poor human ethics within these organisations. She seizes on Sundar Pichai's leaked internal email, responding to a New York Times article from October 25, 2018, "How Google Protected Andy Rubin, the 'Father of Android'". Pichai is reported to have written, *"In the last two years, 48 people have been terminated for sexual harassment, including 13 who were senior managers and above. None of these individuals have received and exit package."* Foroohar points out

that the culture of these businesses seems to tolerate egregious behaviour by their top executives until they are forced into action by public outrage. They seem to lack a reliable moral compass of their own.

The wandering moral compasses of Big Tech executives attract further criticism over their failure to deal with hate speech, political ads originated by unfriendly state actors and with fake news. When summoned by lawmakers to explain why they had permitted such content on their platforms; the executives insisted on sending in their chief counsels rather their CEOs. Section 230 of the US Communications Decency Act (CDA) 1996 provides their core defence – *"No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider."* Big Tech is immune from liability, it would seem for the content it serves up to its billions of users – at least in the USA.

Ms Foroohar's economic criticism isn't limited to Big Tech's handling of corporate tax. The combination of low interest rates and government incentives has created an environment which favours corporate debt over equity [again not directly the fault of Big Tech companies]. This has fuelled the culture of stock options (means of offering incentives to executives which provide powerful motivation to drive stock prices up at all costs). The author draws comparisons with the dot-com boom and bust of the early years of this century and asks if we are at risk of repeating the experience. The relentless hunt for Unicorns (privately held start-up companies valued at over $1 billion) is contributing to market instability, *"Some of the new crop of hyped-up companies may eventually turn into Cheshire cats, disappearing and leaving behind only the grins of those who got out before the bubble burst."*

Big Tech is not the paragon of innovation it so stridently claims to be. While building incredible financial muscle, Big Tech has copied ideas wherever it could get away with it, and when it could not help itself the tech companies have simply tried to acquire the companies who possess the Intellectual Property (IP) they think they need. Google, Facebook and Apple are reported to have acquired 288 companies between them in the last 10 years.

In the late 2000's B.J. Fogg was developing his eponymous Behavior Model. In written form it states: B(ehaviour) = M(otivation), A(bility) and a P(rompt). This built on the work of B.F. Skinner (who also gets a great deal of attention from Prof Zuboff, in the Age of Surveillance Capitalism'). One of B.J. Fogg's students was Nir Eyal, who ultimately published the 'Hook Model' (please see my review of his book "Hooked") This model formalised exactly how *"through consecutive Hook cycles, successful products reach their ultimate goal of unprompted user engagement, bringing users back repeatedly, without depending on costly advertising or aggressive messaging."* This model underpins nearly all addictive design in smartphone applications. It is stunningly simple and demonstrably effective.

Ms Foroohar had interviewed B.J. Fogg, and in slightly coy terms, she suggests that he *"was more interested and able to discuss the bright side of innovation than to figure out ways to deal with the dark."* Dr Fogg's class at Stanford provided a fertile ground for aspiring social media developers to test their applications on the Facebook platform. This is the route that Alekdsandr Kogan took in developing his survey app that led to the massive leaking of personal data from Facebook and led to the rise of Cambridge Analytica. Like Nir Eyal, B.J. Fogg puts his hopes in human nature to use the tools he has developed wisely. *"I hope anyone looking to design persuasive technologies will review the work we have done on ethics and focus their research and efforts on positive change and helping people succeed and feel successful at doing what they already want to do."*

"Do No Evil" looks briefly at the impact of Big Tech on young people's development. Much of the information offered on this topic tends to be anecdotal. This is a shame because there are some decent academic studies which would

have bolstered her arguments. She highlights the tendency of Big Tech executives to try to keep their children away from the digital world for as long as possible and quotes Nellie Bowles NYT article (October 26, 2018), 'A Dark Consensus about Screens and Kids Begins to Emerge', "*I am convinced that the devil lives in our phones".*

The book moves through the issues of the network effect and the impact of neoliberal politics on the growth of Google, Facebook etc.. The author describes the rapid growth of these businesses, driven by capturing our every search, website visit and social media post; then moving with us into the physical world – where we go, what we buy, who we know and so on. They created a massively profitable business model, where consumers are free raw material to be processed as the Tech Giants see fit. The surveillance capitalists are as close to being omniscient as any human created organisation has ever been.

Foroohar explores the gig economy. She offers a succinct, if well-trodden summary of the key problems and benefits of the model. She rightly worries about the risk of exploitation for those at the 'service end' of the gig economy and the unequal pressure that can be exerted by those operating the digital platforms these workers rely on. The asymmetry of power and information in these models is clear.

"Don't be Evil" picks up the challenge raised in Lina Khan's 2017 Anti-trust paper. In it, Dr Khan challenges the decades old US view of what constitutes monopoly power; which is based entirely on the short-term impact on pricing. Khan uses Amazon as her case-study: "*First, the economics of platform markets create incentives for a company to pursue growth over profits, a strategy that investors have rewarded. Under these conditions, predatory pricing becomes highly rational — even as existing doctrine treats it as irrational and therefore implausible. Second, because online platforms serve as critical intermediaries, integrating across business lines positions these platforms to control the essential infrastructure on which their rivals depend. This dual role also enables a platform to exploit information collected on companies using its services to undermine them as competitors.*"

Predictably the proactive position that regulators in Europe have been taken is celebrated – while the intransigent adherence in the US to patterns dating from the late 1970s receives strong and well-argued criticism. This provides the springboard for a discussion about the value of data: our data. Here, Ms Foroohar's position is very clear; "*Silicon Valley's economic and political power should be curbed, lest we fail a very costly stress test of democracy.*"

"Don't be Evil" presents a pattern of behaviour and conduct of the Big Tech businesses today and the Big Financial Institutions in the run up to the 2008 Financial Crash. The author also sees a failure in the politicians and regulators understanding of the situation – which is leading to a worrying level of carelessness in the corridors of power. She sees hope in the growing concern in Washington, about the rising power of the Tech Titans.

"Don't Be Evil" offers a damning summary of the big-spending Big Tech lobbyists in Washington, with their active placement of their alumni in key government roles, and the systematic investment in key academic institutions. As a result, they maintain significant influence over the continuing debates on the power of Big Tech. Much of the public debate around monopoly, privacy, cybersecurity etc. is largely being orchestrated by the companies round which the debate is centred.

The 2016 US Presidential Election is seen as a landmark in the relentless rise of Big Tech. Facebook and Google were both closely involved across the campaigns which is hardly surprising given the $1.4bn spent in political advertising in the run up to the campaign. The story of Cambridge Analytica, the Ted Cruz and Donald Trump campaign is well

known. The term 'Filter Bubble' was first describer by Eli Pariser in circa 2010. It describes how search engines and social media providers use algorithms to create an attractive world for its users, constructed from the familiar; a world in which we can learn nothing new. Filter bubbles amount to invisible, autonomous propaganda indoctrinating us with our own ideas. The rise of populism and the distortion of the political processes in the UK Brexit Referendum and US Presidential Election to name two are blamed in part on the effect of 'filter bubbles'.

In the USA, Europe and China we have divergent values, regulatory frameworks and investment priorities. As the digital revolution gathers pace – especially with the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), we see a rise in technology-centred nationalism. The USA continues to embrace a low-touch, broadly neo-liberal agenda where regulation is generally seen as an inhibitor and where Big Tech is calling the shots. Europe is more cautious; concerned about the loss of privacy and the rise of Big Tech. It has led the way with the GDPR legislation – it isn't perfect, but it provides a fairly potent tool to fight against todays excesses. China on the other hand is investing and developing technology to enable its vision of a collective society; one that conforms to the State's values and priorities. It is deploying advanced technology to power its Social Credit system as a means of increasing citizen compliance. We are in a global technology arms race – which is making the job of containing Big Tech in the democratic world even harder.

Conclusion

Rana Foroohar celebrates the 'guerrilla movement that is growing in resistance to the business models and behaviour of Big Tech, along with the gently growing concerns of many governments and regulators. Big Tech is still …. too big and it isn't clear how best to stop the harms and turn them towards helping humanity. She suggests that perhaps we need a body that seeks to protect our mental well-being in the same way that the Federal Drug Agency (FDA) exists to protect our bodies. She believes that society needs to 'wake' and believe we have the power to change; to regain control from the new generation of 'robber barons' who dominate our lives today. She then ends to book reflecting on the changes she is making in her own life to try to take back control and ensure that there would be no more surprise credit card charges.

It was inevitable that "Don't Be Evil" would be compared with "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism". "Don't be Evil" arguably is half the size and arguably covers a broader footprint of issues. Its brevity and storytelling are great strengths. Ms Foroohar's experience in the dot-com era gives her insight into the psyche of the Big Tech executives. Neither book offers many practical solutions to the damage being done by Big Tech. In my opinion, Professor Zuboff does a better job of analysing the core malaise and dissecting the elements that gave rise to and sustain Surveillance Capitalism. I share many of Ms Foroohar's concerns about the economic behaviour of Big Tech companies – though perhaps her ire would sometimes be better directed at politicians and regulators who have created the environment which has made all this possible. Rana Foroohar has provided a simpler, more accessible challenge to the conduct of Big Tech and for that she should be thanked.

Jonathan Ebsworth