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Should
You
Believe
Wikipedia?

Online Communities
and the Construction of
Knowledge

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being awful is not only allowable but rewarded, then yes, people behave awfully not only in that group but in other places where they participate. Getting rid of that group reversed it. So, we have the power to change things that make a difference.

You already said that a for-profit company cannot do the right thing for individuals or communities, but I would like to hear your thoughts on a matter. Some people argue that giants like Google, Facebook, and Twitter should not be private companies. In other words, when an entity like Google has this much power to influence every aspect of our lives including the way we think and behave, it should not be a private or for-profit company anymore just because of its scale. Do you agree with that? I think you do.

I helped a little bit on the committee that wrote the 2018 revision of the ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct, which was the first revision in 25 years to the code. One of its ethical imperatives asks these giants to recognize when a piece of software has be-

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come so fundamental to society that it has a special responsibility to us all. That isn't the exact wording, but it doesn't say that infrastructure should be made public and nationalized. It says that the people who control it have to recognize that they have a special responsibility. I don't think that we should necessarily prohibit those companies from continuing to operate as companies. I do think there are some cases where antitrust law has an important role to play. That's the whole principle of antitrust: that a company can't control too much. And I do think we need a marketplace. So, there need to be alternatives. When there are no alternatives, antitrust law could help remedy that.

Moreover, I think we need publicly funded information infrastructure not to replace the commercial but to complement it so that people have a choice to go to the public infrastructure or the private. We have an incredible highway system in the United States, and it's all funded with tax dollars. If we relied on each local municipality to maintain its own roads, we would not have that highway structure. It benefits every-

body except the climate, but that's another conversation. Someone made a public decision to fund this infrastructure. I personally think they should have put some of that money into railroads instead of highways.

But in any case, I think we need public information infrastructure. Just like if you let each local district make its own highway, you would have terrible highways, it's the same thing with information infrastructure. What could be more important than how we come to understand our world and what is true? For the same reasons that the government has funded transportation infrastructure, I think it needs to fund information infrastructure.

You said that these giants should recognize that they have a special responsibility just because of the impact they have. Some might interpret that we are putting too much trust in the benevolence and good intentions of those people. That trust, they believe, is misplaced.

I think regulation plays an incredibly important role. We don't yet know how to regulate technology. I talk in

my book about the fact that making a rational regulation of people's privacy in phone calls took 120 years in the United States. So, the law is always slow, and our ability to regulate always lags behind the invention of new technologies.

In the context of everything we talked about, how do you see what is known as hacktivism of groups like Anonymous, which are trying to impede and make trouble to advance their political cause?

I am a work-within-the-system sort of person. I believe in working with our system of elections, laws, and peaceful protest to be a catalyst for change. I know that some people disagree and prefer other methods, but personally, I prefer working within the system.

You have traced the evolution of the Internet over a few decades. If you had the power to reverse one of the key moments that made a negative huge impact, what moment would you single out?

I don't know. That's a hard one.

Don't you miss the world before the Internet?

I don't miss the world before the Internet. I do not miss having no answers to my questions and needing to go to the library to find out anything. I do think that we don't yet understand how to use this technology in a wise fashion. We'll look back on some of our practices today and laugh. What we're doing now is ridiculous, and I'm optimistic that we'll get better at it with time. We'll make wiser decisions about how to use technology to enrich our lives and not overwhelm them.

That was interesting because in my opinion, maybe 99% of the nostalgic feelings that people harbor come from the fact that they have forgotten how the past actually was. They are just trying to hold on to a fictitious image of the past.

Yeah, absolutely. Just to give you an example, smartphones are the most wonderful tool for a parent. If I asked some questions of my parents, they would say, "I don't know" or "Well, we can go to the library". But when my little children asked me the same questions, I usually

say, "Let's look it up together." What a wonderful world it is now. There are so many things about this that are very positive.
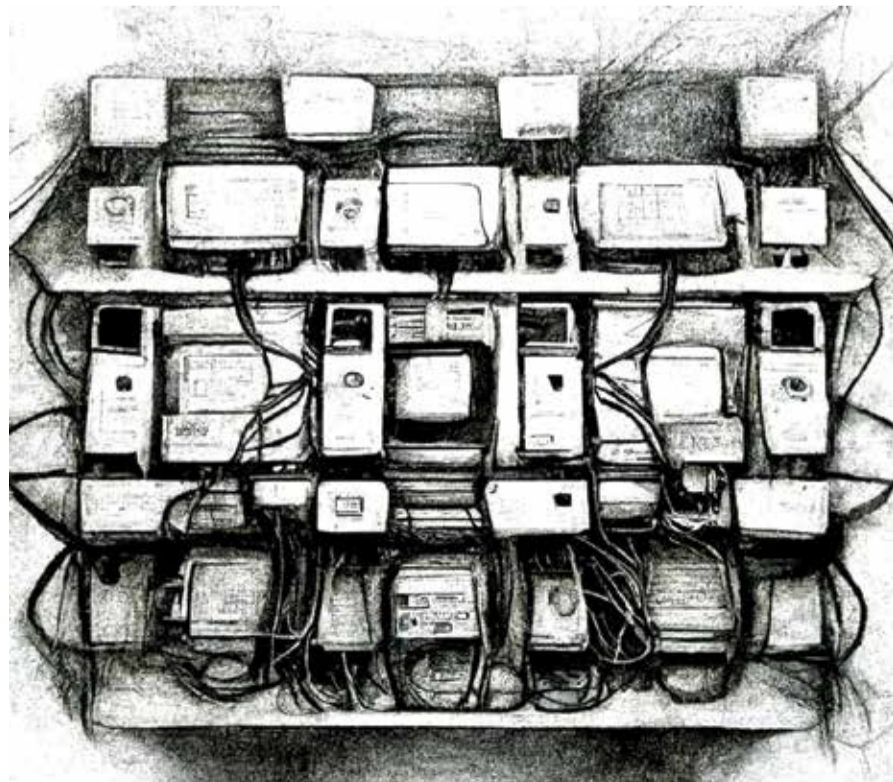
The example I usually use to counter this feeling of nostalgia about the world without the Internet is Google Maps. I don't know how the situation is in your city, but the situation in Tehran, at least, is crazy. In the old times, if you wanted to go from location A to location B, you had to ask 20 People in the street, "Should I go right or left? Where is that bridge? Where is that stop?" But right now, Google Maps tells you with very good accuracy how you should go from point A to point B. So, nostalgic people have forgotten about all the troubles they had to go through.

Yeah, absolutely. I don't think Atlanta is as confusing as Tehran, but it's not easy. We always laugh that there are two major streets that intersect twice. How do you know to which intersection of major road A and major road B you should go?!

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posting on these awful groups and then, did an interrupted time series (ITS) experiment to see whether the speech of those specific people was more toxic or less toxic after the banning of these awful subs. And the answer is less toxic. So, banning r/fatpeoplehate caused the people who had been posting there to be nicer on the rest of Reddit.

When the social norms of a group of people say that

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