



Tech jobs performed on large corporate campuses like Apple's should be decentralized, argues Khanna.

BOOKS *et al.*

## SCIENCE AND SOCIETY

# The digital citizen

Two new books advocate for technological agency

By Michael Neblo<sup>1,2</sup> and Avery White<sup>2</sup>

Many people initially regarded the radical ideas espoused by Charles Darwin about evolution and Henry Ford about automation technology as threats to what was understood to be, respectively, humankind's proper place in the world and dignified work. By adjusting our ideas and practices, however, we have (mostly) been able to reconcile ourselves to the upheavals wrought by the evolutionary worldview and the economics of industrial automation. Two new books, Ro Khanna's *Dignity in a Digital Age* and Jamie Susskind's *The Digital Republic*, aim to help today's society adapt to the social, economic, and political upheavals underway as a result of rapid changes in digital technology.

Khanna—a US congressman whose district includes Silicon Valley—synthesizes a remarkable range of philosophy, economics, tech knowledge, and savvy politics in his plan to reduce economic inequality (part I) and partisan polarization (part II), while preserving people's ability to establish and maintain roots in the communities of their choice. He argues that people in regions without access

to high-paying tech jobs often face a real (but ultimately unnecessary) choice between abandoning their communities and foregoing the work and wealth afforded by the tech industry. The indignity of that choice, and the resulting economic inequality, drive much of the recent increase in political polarization, he maintains. This process is further catalyzed by the often insidious effects that social media itself has had on our political discourse. He proposes instead a policy to decentralize the tech industry geographically and an "Internet Bill of Rights" incentivizing industry to promote healthy public discourse. Khanna's vision sometimes gets lost in the litany of proposals he puts forward, but the insight it offers is potentially profound.

*Dignity* plays a different role for Susskind, who titles his opening chapter "The Indignant Spirit." He grounds his thesis in the "republican" tradition of political philosophy, which emphasizes avoiding subjection to the arbitrary power of others. Citizens become indignant when they are subject to governmental or private power, he argues, and should feel the same when big tech similarly encroaches on their freedom.

Although it comes with a "parsimony" caveat, Susskind's "digital republicanism" inverts traditional concerns about state power. The primary threat to be contained, in his view, emanates from private industry, and democratically guided state action is necessary to curtail it.

The private power held by the technology sector is all the more insidious because it often operates covertly, argues Susskind. Coding practices can produce relations of domination, for example, even when coders act in good faith. Even potential coercion, he maintains, is a serious problem—it is not enough to rely on the goodwill of individuals in the tech sector or on market discipline. We must build institutions that afford democratic citizens a robust say in the forces that affect them.

Susskind's thesis is thus more general than Khanna's, and his policy proposals are applicable beyond the United States. His book includes an entire chapter defending an internationalist component of his approach. But reading these two books together further enhances the value of each. While Khanna links our private lives as workers and our public lives as citizens, he offers more detailed policy proposals related to the former. Susskind's proposals, meanwhile, tend to emphasize changes that might be put in place on the public side. The two books provide a full picture of what it would mean to govern technology well.

It is also worthwhile to consider more radical notions of digital spaces. In his recent book, *Reality+*, for example, philosopher David Chalmers argues that virtual entities are no less real for being digital. If we accept this as true, we should regard such spaces as new venues in which to live a good life, rather than as distractions from the "real" world.

Khanna rightly values an individual's ability to establish and maintain roots in a particular place. His strictly physical interpretation of "place," however, undervalues the ways virtual spaces enable experiments in living that keep liberal democracies robust and vibrant. Similarly, Susskind rightly emphasizes the need to avoid technological domination, but, at times, his position de-emphasizes positive human agency—the power to experiment with different ways of living. Efforts to govern the tech industry should also promote technology's power to enable previously undiscovered ways to live lives of dignity. ■



**Dignity in a Digital Age**

Ro Khanna

Simon & Schuster, 2022. 368 pp.



**The Digital Republic**

Jamie Susskind

Pegasus, 2022. 304 pp.

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