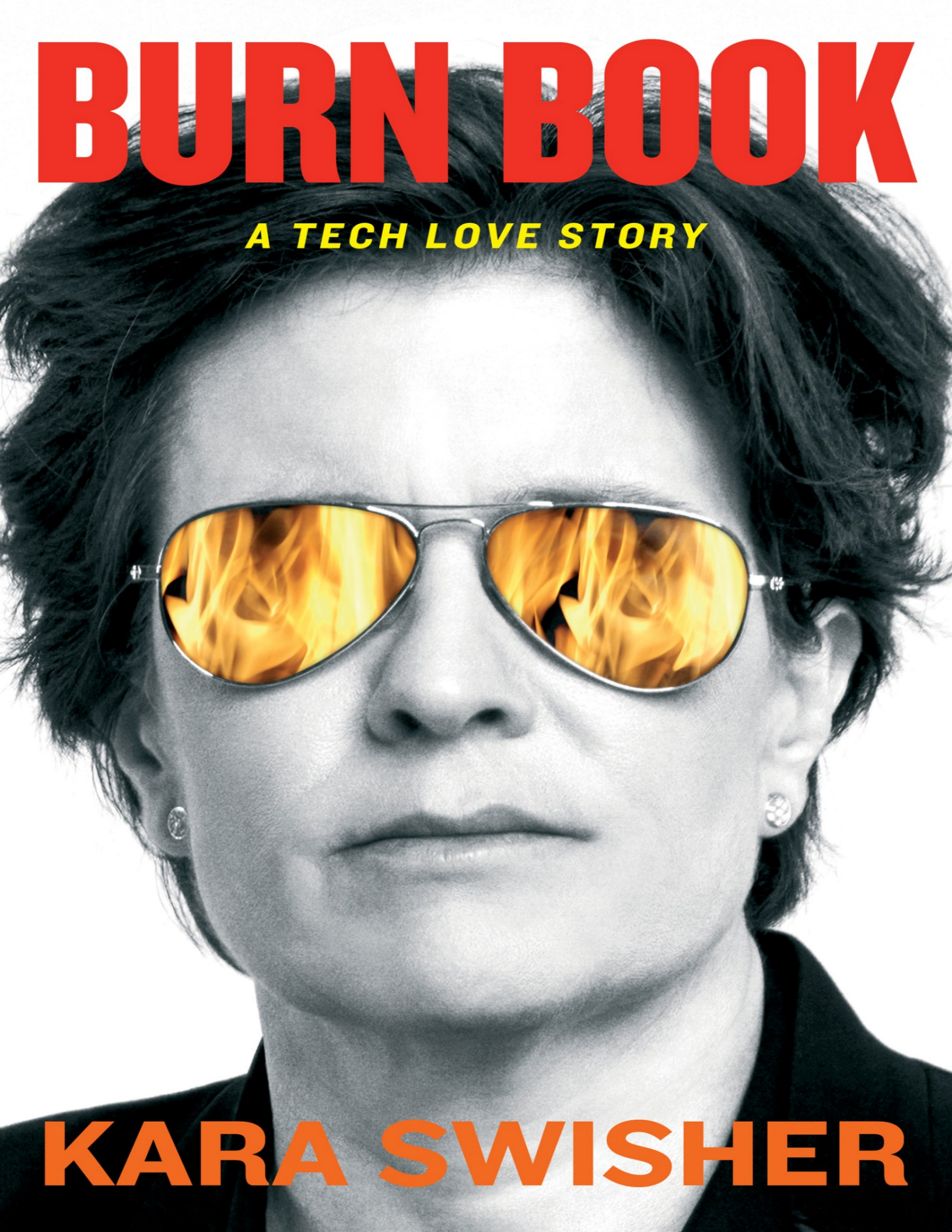# BURN BOOK

A TECH LOVE STORY

KARA SWISHER

Praise for Kara Swisher

"Most people in this town stab you in the back, but [Kara] stabbed me in the front, and I appreciate that."

—John McLaughlin, former host, *The McLaughlin Group*

"She has a coffee before bed every night, after midnight. This seems somehow emblematic to me. (In a good way.)"

—Ben Smith, media writer guy and other *reportrepreneur* besides Kara

"I don't buy into the meme of Kara Swisher the ass-kicker who says what she wants, like she's this honey badger who doesn't give a shit."

—Paul Carr, guy who knows from honey badgers

"A force in the industry."

—Meredith Kopit Levien, CEO, *The New York Times*

"It is a constant joke in the Valley when people write memos for them to say, 'I hope Kara never sees this.'"

—Sheryl Sandberg, former COO, Facebook (before it was called Meta, in order to hide in plain sight)

"She's willing to get into the brawl with me."

—Ari Emanuel, Endeavor CEO and well-known brawler

"There she was with a front-row seat to the mining of great intellectual property—using technology, really—as a means of creating value [and] in effect turned the results of her own reporting on herself."

<div align="right">—Bob Iger, CEO of Disney, two times</div>

"Part of the power of her podcast is there's a sense of somebody who has been here the whole time and is kind of fed up."

<div align="right">—Casey Newton, tech journalist (and former renter of Kara's
guest cottage in San Francisco)</div>

"Kara has become so shrill at this point that only dogs can hear her."

<div align="right">—Elon Musk, Tesla guy, May 2023</div>

"I mentor a lot of people, and almost every single one of them is worried about losing their place if they step out of line. And I'm like, the only way you get higher is if you step out of line. That's the only way. Seriously. Unless you're untalented. And then you should stay in line."

<div align="right">—Kara Swisher, other *reportrepreneur* besides Ben</div>

"I have rarely seen evil in as pure a form as Yoel Roth and Kara Swisher's heart is filled with seething hate. I regard their dislike of me as a compliment."

<div align="right">—Elon Musk (who could use a compliment these days),
September 2023</div>

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BURN BOOK

A TECH LOVE STORY

KARA SWISHER

To Walt Mossberg

You wrote in the first line of your first column on tech: "Personal computers are just too hard to use, and it isn't your fault." Some thirty years later, that remains true, and so is the fact that you have altered the course of my life in ways I can never repay. And it is—thankfully for me—your fault.

Sheeple Who Need Sheeple

They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.

—F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, *THE GREAT GATSBY*

As it turned out, it was capitalism after all.

If I had to pick the moment when it all went off the rails for the tech industry, I'd choose Saturday morning, December 10, 2016, when I was at a farmers market considering some epic Meyer lemons with my oldest son, who liked to cook. It was there in the San Francisco sunshine as the fog burned away up the hill in Noe Valley that I got a tip: The crowned heads of Silicon Valley's most powerful tech companies had been summoned to tromp into Manhattan's Trump Tower and meet the man who had unexpectedly just been elected president and was the antithesis of all they supposedly represented.

"Skulk" was more like it. The only reason I was hearing about the tech summit was because one of tech's top-tier players had *not* been invited due to his "liberal leanings" and "outspoken

opposition" to President-Elect Donald Trump. The outcast called me in a lather.

"Sucking up to that corpulent loser who never met a business he didn't drive straight into a wall, it's shameful," he said. "Can you believe it? Can you *believe* it?"

After decades of covering the nascent Internet industry from its birth, I could believe it. While my actual son filled me with pride, an increasing number of these once fresh-faced wunderkinds I had mostly rooted for now made me feel like a parent whose progeny had turned into, *well*, assholes.

My first call was to one of the potentates who was sometimes testy, often funny, and always accessible. Of everyone I had covered, I could count on Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk to engage with me on a semi-human basis. While Musk would morph later into a troll-king-at-scale on Twitter, which he would rename X, he was among the few tech titans who did not fall back on practiced talking points, even if perhaps he was the one who most should have.

So, what did Musk think of Trump's invitation? The meeting had no stated agenda, which made it clear to me that it had nothing to do with policy and everything to do with a photo op.

"You shouldn't go," I warned him. "Trump's going to screw you."

Musk disagreed. He told me he would attend, adding that he had already joined a business council for the newly elected president, too. When I brought up Trump's constant divisive fearmongering and campaign promises to unravel progress on issues ranging from immigration to gay rights, Musk dismissed the threats.

I can convince him, he assured me. I can influence him, he told me.

Apparently, Musk thought that his very presence would turn the fetid water into fine wine, since he had long considered himself more than just a man, but an icon and, on some days, a god. Good luck with that, I thought to myself as we hung up.

I moved on, calling other C-suiters for comment. The guest list had been compiled by contrarian investor and persistent irritant Peter Thiel, who had made a fortune betting on visionary technologies. Still, his latest vision for the future was his most outlandish: backing Trump. It was certainly a bold bet by Thiel, and it had panned out magnificently.

I didn't even attempt to contact Thiel. The entrepreneur had long since stopped communicating with me, especially after a lengthy video interview in 2007 where we agreed on exactly nothing. After the camera stopped rolling, I pressed Thiel on the need to ensure gays had the same rights to be married and have children as straight people. Both Thiel and I are famously gay, but he argued that gays should not get "special rights," even as I asserted that we had no rights at all. We had exactly nothing in common. And, while we would both go on to get married and have kids (me, twice), it was probably a good instinct on his part to avoid me.

But I talked with other invitees, a few of whom said that Thiel had pressured them to get on board. Others welcomed Thiel's invite and insisted that Trump did not mean the terrible things he had said repeatedly on the stump. Another tried to convince me that meeting Trump "was a public show of truce." Like Musk, many insisted they would bring up substantive issues, except behind closed doors.

"Look, this is obviously a circus," said one person to me. "Everyone in tech just wants to be invisible right now when it comes to this administration but has to participate since we've done it before."

The sticky part was that many of the tech leaders—including Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg, who had been a prominent supporter of Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton —had openly opposed Trump's stances during the campaign. Almost all of them pushed back when Trump called for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" and announced a plan to severely limit immigration. In fact, two of the invitees—Musk and Microsoft's new CEO Satya Nadella—were immigrants themselves. And most had privately derided Trump to me as a buffoon.

This kind of casual hypocrisy became increasingly common over the decades that I covered Silicon Valley's elite. Over that time, I watched founders transform from young, idealistic strivers in a scrappy upstart industry into leaders of some of America's largest and most influential businesses. And while there were exceptions, the richer and more powerful people grew, the more compromised they became—wrapping themselves in expensive cashmere batting until the genuine person fell deep inside a cocoon of comfort and privilege where no unpleasantness intruded.

When people get really rich, they seem to attract legions of enablers who lick them up and down all day. Many of these billionaires had then started to think of this fawning as reality, where suddenly everything that comes out of their mouths is golden. History gets rewritten as hagiography. But if you knew them in the before times and have some prior knowledge of

their original selves, you either become an asset (truth-teller) or a threat (truth-teller) to them.

Still, I hoped even they had some limits and there was a way to view the meeting as an opportunity, an opening to voice one's opinion. I advised the people who called me back to make a strong public joint statement going into the meeting on key values and issues important to tech and its employees.

"Isn't that the point of a democracy?" I urged one CEO. "Let the public know that you're not going to Trump Tower to bend the knee to a king, but to stand up to a bully. You can resist Trump's stances against immigrants, because it is immigrants who built America and immigrants who most definitely built tech. You can defend science, because climate change is a big threat and tech can be a crucial part of fixing it. You can insist we invest in critical technologies that point the way to revolutions in things like health and transportation, and not get bogged down in the politics."

Admittedly, I was monologuing. Even though I started out as a reporter, I had shifted into an analyst and sometimes an advocate. Increasingly, I used my extensive contact list to offer my honest opinion not just to readers, but to these increasingly clownish billionaires.

My advice, of course, was completely ignored. These famed "disrupters" accepted Trump's invitation with no conditions. They gave up their dignity for nothing. Hewlett Packard's Meg Whitman, whom I had tangled with over her opposition to gay marriage when she ran for governor (a stance she later recanted), was the rare exception and was therefore not at the meeting. Despite being a staunch Republican, she had

accurately pegged Trump as "a dishonest demagogue" and shifted her support to Clinton in August before the election.

Investor Chris Sacca, who also was not invited to the meeting, likewise seemed to grasp what was happening, boiling it down beautifully. "It's funny, in every tech deal I've ever done, the photo op comes after you've signed the papers," he told me. "If Trump publicly commits to embrace science, stops threatening censorship of the Internet, rejects fake news, and denounces hate against our diverse employees, only then it would make sense for tech leaders to visit Trump Tower. Short of that, they are being used to legitimize a fascist."

Did Sacca change minds where I had failed? Nope. And on December 14, the people—or, more accurately, "sheeple," as I called them in print—who had helped invent the future slipped in through the back entrance of Trump Tower to enable a fascist. Even though the president-elect had openly attacked Amazon and Apple by name, Jeff Bezos and Tim Cook joined many others to compete in a non-televised episode of *The Apprentice: Nerd Edition*.

What none of these CEOs wanted to admit were the real reasons they flocked to the wolf's gilded den: There was a heap of money at stake, and they wanted to avoid a lot of damage the incoming Trump administration could do to the tech sector. As much as tech execs wanted visas, they also wanted contracts with the new government, especially the military. They wanted profits repatriated back to the U.S. from foreign countries where they had been stashing their lucre. More than anything, they wanted to be shielded from regulation, which they had neatly and completely avoided so far.

Normally, sucking up to power isn't news in the corporate world, but Silicon Valley was supposed to be different. In 2000, Google incorporated the motto "Don't be evil" into its code of conduct. At Tesla, Musk insisted that his dedication to humanity led him to make cool electric cars for the mass market and reduce dependence on fossil fuel. Facebook was supposed to be a tool to create "stronger relationships with those you love, a stronger economy with more opportunities, and a stronger society that reflects all of our values."

All these companies began with a gauzy credo to change the world. And they had indeed done that, but in ways they hadn't imagined at the start, increasingly with troubling consequences from a flood of misinformation to a society becoming isolated and addicted to its gadgets. So had I, so much so that I had taken to joking at the end when I made speeches: "I leave you to your own devices…. I mean that; your phone is the best relationship you all have now, the first thing you pick up in the morning and the last thing you touch at night."

It always got a laugh, but by the time Trump was halfway through his term, it was much less funny and it was dead clear that I had underestimated how compromised the tech companies would become.

"Facebook, as well as Twitter and Google's YouTube and the rest, have become the digital arms dealers of the modern age," I wrote in one of my first columns after I joined the *New York Times* as a columnist in 2018. "They have mutated human communication, so that connecting people has too often become about pitting them against one another and turbocharged that discord to an unprecedented and damaging volume. They have weaponized the First Amendment. They

have weaponized civic discourse. And they have weaponized, most of all, politics."

The tech titans would argue that they were no worse than cable networks like Fox News (true, but a very low bar) and that there was no easily provable causality that they polarized the populace (a nearly impossible thing to measure). Most of all, they often dismissed any weaponization as "unintended consequences."

Maybe so, but it was not an *unimaginable* consequence. French philosopher Paul Virilio has a quote I think about a lot: "When you invent the ship, you also invent the shipwreck; when you invent the plane, you also invent the plane crash; and when you invent electricity, you invent electrocution…. Every technology carries its own negativity, which is invented at the same time as technical progress."

Let me be clear: Hitler didn't need Instagram. Mussolini didn't need to tweet. Murderous autocrats did not need to Snapchat their way to infamy. But just imagine if they'd had those supercharged tools. Well, Trump did, and he won the election, thanks in large part to social media. It wasn't the only reason, but it's easy to see a direct line from FDR mastering radio to JFK mastering TV to DJT mastering social technology. And Trump didn't do it alone. Purveyors of propaganda, both foreign and domestic, saw an opportunity to spread lies and misinformation. Today, malevolent actors continue to game the platforms, and there's still no real solution in sight, because these powerful platforms are doing exactly what they were designed to do.

Back on the twenty-fifth floor of Trump Tower, the tech leaders managed to nix the photo op, but not the video op. In the

four minutes that have been publicly released, we can see a grinning Trump flanked by Vice President–Elect Mike Pence and Thiel, who Trump awkwardly pats on the hand and praises for being "very special."

Reporters were quickly shooed out when the meeting commenced. Afterward, Bezos called it "very productive," and Safra Catz, Oracle's chief executive and a Trump transition team member, flashed a thumbs-up to cameras. Most other attendees slipped out the same way they had snuck in.

I was not surprised that the tech summit attendees didn't release a statement, either collectively or individually. But you know who did? Trump. His team went public with a list of thirteen topics of discussion with no mention of immigration, even though I'd called around and learned that Microsoft's Nadella had asked specifically about H-1B visas, often called the "genius visa." Reportedly, Trump responded with, "Let's fix that. What can I do to make it better?" Instead, his administration made it worse, eventually issuing a proclamation to suspend the entry of H-1B visa holders. Only successful litigation stopped the action.

It was a massive embarrassment for an industry that had promised to be better than anything that had come before it.

In November 2018, I interviewed Musk for my *Recode Decode* podcast. I reminded him that I had called and warned him about Trump before that tech summit.

"I said you shouldn't go, because he was going to screw you, remember?" I said. "We had a whole—"

Musk interrupted me. "Well, you are right," he said.

"I am right, thank you, Elon. I know that," I replied.

I do enjoy being right, but I took no pleasure in it this time. The Trump tech summit was a major turning point for me and how I viewed the industry I'd been covering since the early 1990s. The lack of humanity was overwhelming. My minor in college was in Holocaust studies. I studied propaganda, and I could see Trump was an expert at it. I knew exactly where this was headed. I ended my original column that broke the story with this:

"Welcome to the brave new world, which is neither brave nor new. But it's now the world we live in, in which it's Trump who is the disrupter and tech the disrupted. Yeah, you can say it: *Fuckfuckfuck.*"

Maybe "fuckfuckfuck" wasn't the most professional sentence I've ever written, but I was trying to express my deep disappointment. I love tech, I breathe tech. And I believe in tech. But for tech to fulfill its promise, founders and executives who ran their creations needed to put more safety tools in place. They needed to anticipate consequences more. Or at all. They needed to acknowledge that online rage might extend into the real world in increasingly scary ways.

Instead, far too many of these founders and innovators were careless, an attitude best summarized by the ethos on early Facebook office posters: "Move fast and break things." I know it's a software slogan and it would later change (Facebook CEO and co-founder Mark Zuckerberg jokingly changed it to "Move fast with stable infra," as in infrastructure, in 2014), but I still think it reflects a deep-seated childishness. Children like to break things. I'd have initially preferred "Move fast and change things." Or, even more adult, "Move fast and fix things."

But they decided to start with "break," and such carelessness has led to damage around the globe that, in turn, helped me understand what was happening to our own country. In August of 2016, investigative journalist Maria Ressa gave Facebook alarming data about people in the Philippines who were being targeted for graphic online abuse after criticizing President Duterte's drug war. Facebook did not take down the pages until two years after her report.

So, in 2017, Maria contacted me and asked if I could help convince Facebook of the burgeoning threat. "We're the canary in the coal mine, and it's coming to you," said the woman who would later win the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to shed light on the murderous reality in her country. "Can you help me stop them?"

As it turned out, as much as I tried to sound alarms, I could not stop them.

Each year since has brought bigger and fresher tech messes. Twitter, stupidly renamed X, has mutated into a platform where the richest man in the world offers his retweet support to racist, sexist, and homophobic conspiracies. AI's deep fakes and misinformation open a virtual Pandora's box, with the potential to unleash troubles to plague humankind faster than any actual plague. Chinese-owned TikTok makes parents feel better by employing safety features for teens, while the site could be extending the Communist Party's surveillance state across the globe, according to increasing numbers of government officials I have interviewed around the world.

Over time, I've come to settle on a theory that tech people embrace one of two pop culture visions of the future. First, there's the "Star Wars" view, which pits the forces of good

against the Dark Side. And, as we know, the Dark Side puts up a disturbingly good fight. While the Death Star gets destroyed, heroes die and then it inevitably gets rebuilt. Evil, in fact, does tend to prevail.

Then there's the "Star Trek" view, where a crew works together to travel to distant worlds like an interstellar Benetton commercial, promoting tolerance and convincing villains not to be villains. It often works. I am, no surprise, a Trekkie, and I am not alone. At a 2007 *AllThingsD* conference well-known tech columnist Walt Mossberg and I hosted, Apple legend Steve Jobs appeared onstage and said: "I like *Star Trek*. I want *Star Trek*."

Now Jobs is long dead, and the "Star Wars" version seems to have won. Even if it was never the intention, tech companies became key players in killing our comity and stymieing our politics, our government, our social fabric, and most of all, our minds, by seeding isolation, outrage, and addictive behavior. Innocuous boy-kings who wanted to make the world a better place and ended up cosplaying Darth Vader feels like science fiction. But everything I am about to tell you really happened.

Yeah, I can say it: *Fuckfuckfuck*.