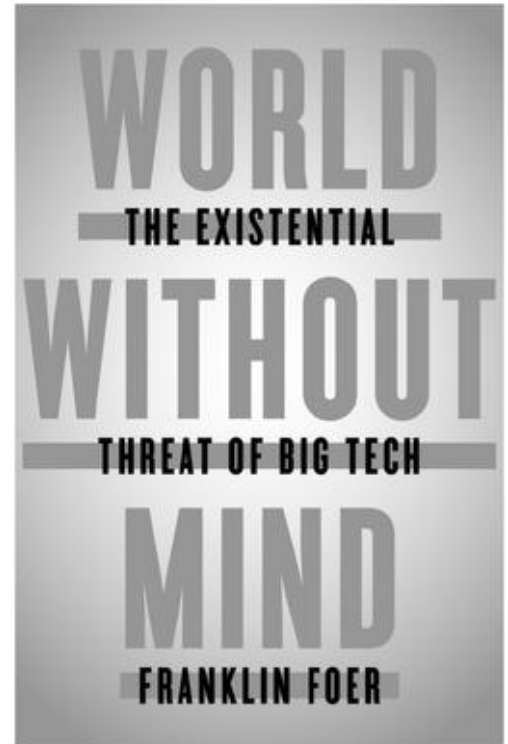


Franklin Foer's 'World Without Mind' argues that Silicon Valley will lead us to our doom



Franklin Foer's new book is "World Without Mind". (Evy Mages, Penguin Press)



By **Steven Zeitchik**

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To many Americans, large technology firms embody much of what's good about the modern world. Google holds the key to new depths of knowledge. Amazon is the white-knight savior of impulse shopping. Facebook builds the connective tissue to old friends and colleagues.

Franklin Foer has a different perspective. In his new book, "World Without Mind," the veteran journalist lays out a more ominous view of where Big Tech would like to take us

— in many ways, already *has* taken us.

Investigating the practices of these digital gatekeepers, he has crafted an anti-Silicon Valley manifesto that while occasionally slipping into alarmism and get-off-my-lawn-ism makes a cogently scary case against the influence of U.S. tech firms (but not, crucially, technology itself). Silicon Valley, he argues, may say it wants to improve the world. But its true endgame is the advancement of an ideological agenda. And it's a terrifying one.

By introducing addictive new features, the book says, these companies have made us hopelessly dependent. Once hooked, consumers are robbed of choice, milked for profit, deprived of privacy and made the subjects of stealth social engineering experiments. “We are,” Foer writes, “the screws and rivets in their grand design.”

Those sound like some grandiose claims. Foer supports them — to a point.

The author previously wrote another globalist study through a particular lens, the entertaining and insightful sports social history “How Soccer Explains the World.” He also served as editor of a revamped (until it wasn’t) New Republic.

It was that latter experience that fuels this book — and, clearly, Foer’s pessimism. The prestigious New Republic was bought in 2012 by Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes, who hired Foer in a fit of shared rosy thinking about long-form journalism. But Hughes would a few years later come to embrace Silicon Valley’s principles of efficiency and data, a pivot that ultimately drove out Foer and many longtime writers. That opened up the author’s eyes.

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These firms have a program: to make the world less private, less individual, less creative, less human.

Foer lays out in elaborate detail how the data-driven science of web traffic can hold good journalism hostage, as he says it did at TNR and continues to do elsewhere. He also goes company by company, digital behemoth by digital behemoth, presenting the motivations, methods and mind-sets he says present a threat to individuality.

In some of the more surprising and futuristic sections, he argues that Google's expansions have less to do with new businesses than with a sweeping artificial intelligence-driven ideology meant to reduce human autonomy. (Anyone who has ever found their brains unable to process directions without the help of Google Maps has begun to get a small taste of what will be, in Foer's estimation, a much larger meal.)

Or take Amazon, he says, which has subjugated book publishing to its rule by controlling many parts of the distribution chain. The book argues that the company has consolidated so much power that even upstanding journalists, worried about their own books, become afraid to criticize it. (Monopolies form the core of the threat, according to the author, with each of these tech giants dividing up control of different aspects of modern life like a chef carving a roasted chicken.)

The author saves some of his most provocative rhetoric for Facebook. Calling its M.O. a “paternalistic nudging,” he describes a company that treat humans as a giant data set, noting how Facebook employees can run “experiments” on the service's tens of millions of users. The Mark Zuckerberg-led firm, he says, furnishes the illusion of free will and individual identity. But what really compels it is the achievement of certain social outcomes. By manipulating the news feeds of its massive user base, Facebook seeks to do everything from getting preferred political candidates elected (by subtly motivating the Americans who would vote for them) to controlling collective emotions (by adding or removing positive adjectives in feeds). The point is not demonstrated conclusively, but Foer offers a number of smoking guns.

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Big Tech has imposed its will on the resident population with neither our input nor our permission.

Foer could hardly be called a Luddite: He admits purchasing and owning myriad digital devices over the years and readily acknowledges the improvements they've afforded. But such conveniences mask a dirtier agenda, he argues.

“[It’s] chilling to hear [co-founder [Larry Page](#)] contemplate how Google will someday employ more than one million people,” Foer writes as he describes the company’s effort to blend humans with machines and dilute the human will. “That’s not just a boast about

dominating an industry where he faces no true rivals, it's a boast about something far vaster, a statement of Google's intent to impose its values and theological convictions on the world."

Or, as Foer says of all the companies' efforts to decode people like a string of data: "They have built their empires by pulverizing privacy; they will further ensconce themselves by pushing boundaries, by taking even more invasive steps that build toward an even more complete portrait of us."

In its march to Wall Street and pop-cultural dominance, Big Tech has certainly had its prophets of doom — the you-are-not-a-gadget-ism of Jaron Lanier, to take one example. But it has rarely had one like Foer, as much journalist and historian as social critic, who dived into the world a researcher and emerged a partisan. Foer draws on numerous historical tech innovations, from Descartes' automatons to Western Union's cozy relationship with the Associated Press, to offer the early templates for modern Big Tech practices.

The narrative also traces the roots of technological innovation in Northern California — particularly 1960s prophet Stewart Brand, who long before Steve Jobs was planting the hippie seeds from which all this has sprung. It is here, he asserts, that countercultural ideals of improvement would begin morphing into the egoism that *these* were the people who should best decide how to enact them.

Foer also has a knack for finding the aptly revealing quote from a Silicon Valley executive; this is a book interested in petard-hoisting.

"World Without Mind" becomes a little too preoccupied with journalism and creativity, particularly in its latter sections. The effect of certain technology on media can be profound and frightening. But it is hardly the sum of the changes the digital world has wrought. Little time is spent on Wikipedia or crowdfunding, for example, enhancements that would seem to bring less downside. Or coming innovations such as self-driving cars and virtual reality, whose full effects remain unmeasurable but certainly offer their share of upside. [Apple](#) gets scant coverage too. Taken in total, it can make Foer seem like a pessimistic cherry-picker.

Some may also find his unifying theories a little too grand. A Google creating a human-challenging AI and an Amazon shipping books at a discount may not be united in conspiracy; their respective consequences may also not be equally significant.

But he mostly and persistently, with the zealotry of the companies he derides, builds a strong philosophical case. Like an occupying power dividing up territory, he asserts, Big Tech has imposed its will on the resident population with neither our input nor our permission. These firms have a program: to make the world less private, less individual, less creative, less human.

Are these companies merely the latest wave of capitalist enterprises, slightly drunk on power, yet not fundamentally that different from many of their nontech counterparts? Or is the combination of vast wealth, ambition, know-how and ideological certitude an insidious force — capable, with our love and permission, of bending us to their will?

Foer makes his position clear. Readers may be less certain, but they're certainly left with a lot to fear.

[“World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech”](#)

Franklin Foer

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