ANTISOCIAL

ANDREW MARANTZ

The American Conversation
and the Hijacking of
Techno-Utopians,
Online Extremists,
Morality, if it is to remain or become morality, must be perpetually examined, cracked, changed, made new . . . Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

James Baldwin, "As Much Truth As One Can Bear"

Under all this dirt
the floor is really very clean.

Lydia Davis, Can't and Won't
Prologue

I landed at the Bob Hope Airport in Burbank, rented a Ford sedan, and asked Google to send me southward on a semiefficient route, scenic but without too much traffic. As I drove, I listened to a nationalist motivational speaker delivering far-right talking points via livestream. I was deprived of the full effect, being unable to see his facial expressions and the comments floating up the left side of my phone's screen, but I figured that the full effect was not worth dying for. "Are you gonna be a passive observer in these extraordinary times, as we fight to save Western civilization, or are you gonna step up?" he asked. "I've decided that I'm stepping up." The 2016 presidential election was approaching, and the institutional gatekeepers in government, business, and media all agreed that the result was inevitable. The nationalist was urging his listeners to question the prevailing narrative, to think the unthinkable, to bend the arc of history. Through my windshield I could see a sliver of the Pacific, picturesque but not all that pacific.

On the Hermosa Beach boardwalk there were longboards and mirrored sunglasses and poke bowls and matcha smoothies. A small film crew from Women.com was shooting a series of woman-on-the-street interviews about sex positivity. On the beach, a crowd had gathered around a drum circle. "Can you feel the Earth's rhythm?" one of the drummers asked, passing around a bucket for donations.

I spotted about a dozen beefy white men, dressed in T-shirts and shorts, milling around near an outdoor bar. In the middle of the scrum was the nationalist motivational speaker. Most people on the boardwalk didn't recognize him, but to his followers, both in person and on the internet, he was something of a hero, or maybe an antihero—an expert at injecting fringe ideas into mainstream discourse. A few months earlier, he had decided, based on no real evidence, that Hillary Clinton was suffering from a grave neurological condition and that the
traditional media was covering it up. He turned this conjecture into a meme, which gathered momentum on Twitter, then leaped to the Drudge Report, then to Fox News, and then into Donald Trump's mouth. The nationalist had told me, “All the people at each step may or may not know my name, but I'm influencing world history whether they know where their ideas are coming from or not.”

He was hosting what he called a free-speech happy hour—a meetup for local masculinists, neomonarchists, nihilist Twitter trolls, and other self-taught culture warriors. About sixty people showed up over the course of the afternoon. Some refused to call themselves alt-right, which had become, in their words, "a toxic brand"; others were happy to own the label. Most were white, most were nationalists, and some were white nationalists—not the old skinhead type but the more polished, just-asking-the-question variety. For years, they’d been able to promote their agenda through social networks like Twitter and Facebook, with almost no restrictions. Now those networks were starting to crack down, banning a few of the most egregious trolls and bigots. "It's straight-up thought policing," one person at the meetup said. "It's 1984."

A pudgy guy with oversized sunglasses sat at a table by himself. On his T-shirt was a drawing of Harambe, a gorilla who’d recently been shot to death at the Cincinnati Zoo. The incident had resulted in real internet outrage, followed by satirical internet outrage, followed by absurdist metacommentaries on the phenomenon of internet outrage. All afternoon, I saw people pointing at the guy’s T-shirt and laughing as they passed by. "Fuck yeah, Harambe," they’d say, or "Dicks out for Harambe." The guy wearing the T-shirt would nod knowingly, as if in solidarity. That was the extent of the interaction.

I sat down next to the guy and asked him to explain the joke. "It's a funny thing people say, or post, or whatever," he said. "It's, like—it's just a thing on the internet." Harambe, of course, was a real animal before he became a meme. Still, I knew what it was like to experience much of life through the mediating effects of a screen. It wasn't hard for me to imagine how anything—a dead gorilla, a gas chamber, a presidential election, a moral principle—could start to seem like just another thing on the internet.

For as long as the United States has been a country, there have been Americans handing out pamphlets declaring taxation unconstitutional, or standing on
soapboxes railing against papist sabotage, or calling C-SPAN to demand that every member of Congress be investigated for treason. (C-SPAN’s screeners, if they were doing their jobs, did not put those callers on air.) The First Amendment protected this minority’s right to speak, and for a long time it seemed as if the majority were not inclined to listen. “There have always been those on the fringes of our society who have sought to escape their own responsibility by finding a simple solution, an appealing slogan, or a convenient scapegoat,” President John F. Kennedy said in 1961. “But in time the basic good sense and stability of the great American consensus has always prevailed.”

In 2004 and 2005, a few young men wrote the computer code that would grow into a vast industry called social media—“social” because people could receive information horizontally, from their friends, rather than waiting for gatekeepers to impart it from on high; “media” because information was information, whether it came from a stilted broadcaster, a kid procrastinating during study hall, or a nationalist on a boardwalk. The social media entrepreneurs called themselves disrupters, but they rarely described in much detail what a postdisruption world would look like. When pressed, their visions tended toward hazy utopianism: they expected to connect people, to bring us all closer together, to make the world a better place.

Their optimism wasn’t entirely misguided, of course. Millions of people—whistleblowers, citizen journalists, women resisting abuse, dissidents under despotic regimes—did use social media to organize, to reveal abuses of power, to advance the aims of justice. And yet, when the same tools were used to sow disinformation or incite hatred, the disrupters usually responded by saying something vague about free speech and then changing the subject.

The disrupters aimed to topple gatekeepers in dozens of industries, including advertising, publishing, political consulting, and journalism. Within a decade, they had succeeded beyond anyone’s expectations. Their social networks had become the most powerful information-spreading instruments in world history. Many traditional media outlets were being dismantled, and no one seemed to have any idea what might replace them. Instead of taking over where the old gatekeepers had left off, the disrupters—the new gatekeepers—refused to acknowledge the expanding scope of their influence and responsibility. They left their gates unguarded, for the most part, trusting passersby not to mess with the padlocks.

Right away, the national vocabulary started to shift, becoming both more
liberated and more unhinged. The silent majority was no longer silent. Long-standing fissures furrowed into deep rifts. The disrupters weren’t solely responsible for all of this, of course. Like every epochal shift, this one had many preconditions. Political movements mattered; economic structures mattered; geography and demography mattered; foreign wars mattered. Still, only a few years into the unprecedented experiment that was social media, it suddenly seemed quaint to recall that there had ever been such a thing as a great American consensus.

This much was shocking but not quite unthinkable. Then, swiftly, came the unthinkable: smart, well-meaning people unable to distinguish simple truth from viral misinformation; a pop-culture punch line ascending to the presidency; neoNazis marching, unmasked, through several American cities. This wasn’t the kind of disruption anyone had envisioned. There had been a serious miscalculation.

We like to assume that the arc of history will bend inexorably toward justice, but this is wishing thinking. Nobody, not even Martin Luther King Jr., believed that social progress was automatic; if he did, he wouldn’t have bothered marching across any bridges. The arc of history bends the way people bend it. In the early years of the twenty-first century, the internet was full of nihilists and masculinists and ironic neo-Nazis and nonironic neo-Nazis, all working to bend the arc of history in some extremely disturbing directions. Social media feeds were algorithmically personalized, which meant that many people didn’t have to see the lurid ugliness online if they didn’t want to. But it was there, more and more of it every minute, whether they chose to look at it or not.

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In 2012, a small group of former Ron Paul supporters started a blog called The Right Stuff. They soon began calling themselves “post-libertarians,” although they weren’t sure what would come next. By 2014, they’d started to self-identify as alt-right. They developed a countercultural tone—arch, antic, floridly offensive—that appealed to a growing cohort of disaffected young men, searching for meaning and addicted to the internet. These young men often referred to The Right Stuff, approvingly, as a key part of a “libertarian-to-far-right pipeline,” a path by which “normies” could advance, through a series of epiphanies, toward “full radicalization.” As with everything the alt-right said, it was hard to tell whether they were joking, half joking, or not joking at all.
The Right Stuff’s founders came up with talking points—narratives, they called them—that their followers then disseminated through various social networks. The memes were tailored to the medium. On Facebook, they posted Photoshopped images, or parody songs, or “countersignal memes”—sardonic line “drawings” designed to spark just enough cognitive dissonance to shock normies out of their complacency.* On Twitter, the alt-right trolled and harassed mainstream journalists, hoping to work the referees of the national discourse while capturing the attention of the wider public.† On Reddit and 4chan and 8chan, where the content moderation was so lax as to be almost nonexistent, the memes were more overtly vile. Many alt-right trolls started calling themselves “fashy,” or “fash-ist.” They referred to all liberals and traditional conservatives as Communists, or “degenerates”; they posted pro-Pinochet propaganda; they baited normies into arguments by insisting that “Hitler did nothing wrong.”

When I first saw luridly ugly memes like this, in 2014 and 2015, I wasn’t sure how seriously to take them. Everyone knows the most basic rule of the internet: Don’t feed the trolls, and don’t take tricksters at their word. The trolls of the alt-right called themselves provocateurs, or shitposters, or edgeglors. And what could be edgier than joking about Hitler? For a little while, I was able to avoid reaching the conclusion that would soon become obvious: maybe they meant what they said.‡

In October 2018, a white terrorist carried three Glock handguns and an AR-15 into a synagogue in Pittsburgh and started shooting. He had been active on a small social network called Gab, a hermetic bubble of toxicity that billed itself as “the home of free speech online.” Two weeks before the shooting, he’d reposted a countersignal meme featuring two stick figures. The first was labeled “Me one year ago” and the second was labeled “Me today.” The first stick figure, in a speech

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*“I’m so brave!” said one stick figure, a normie liberal wearing a nose ring. “Parroting the exact same narrative as universities, government departments, schools, the mainstream media, Hollywood, major political parties, and corporations is sooooo anti-establishment.”

†Twitter had rules against harassment, and Facebook had rules against terrorist recruitment, but the rules were enforced casually and inconsistently. Techno-libertarian utopianism was ascendant in Silicon Valley, and most social media executives were determined to moderate their networks as lightly as possible. Besides, when the executives vowed to remove terrorist recruiters from their networks, they didn’t seem to have white terrorists in mind.

‡"The unindoctrinated should not be able to tell if we are joking or not," the editor of a prominent neo-Nazi site wrote in an internal document that was later leaked to the press. "This is obviously a ploy and I actually do want to gas kids." For legal reasons, he asked his writers to refrain from openly inciting violence; "however, whenever someone does something violent, it should be made light of." The ultimate goal, he wrote, was to "dehumanize the enemy, to the point where people are ready to laugh at their deaths."
bubble, said, "I believe everyone has the right to live how they want and do what makes them happy." The second one said, "We need to overthrow the government, implement a clerical fascist regime, and begin mass executing these Marxist degenerates." The caption above the drawing: "The libertarian-to-far-right pipeline is a real thing."

This is not a book arguing that the fascists have won, or that they will win. This is a book about how the unthinkable becomes thinkable. I don't assume that America is destined to live up to its founding ideals of liberty and equality. Nor do I assume that it is doomed to repeat its founding reality of brutal oppression. I can't know which way the arc will bend. What I can offer is the story of how a few disruptive entrepreneurs, motivated by naiveté and reckless techno-utopianism, built powerful new systems full of unforeseen vulnerabilities, and how a motley cadre of edgelords, motivated by bigotry and bad faith and nihilism, exploited those vulnerabilities to hijack the American conversation.

I spent about three years immersing myself in two worlds: the world of the gate-crashers, such as the nationalist on the boardwalk, and the world of the new gatekeepers of Silicon Valley, who, whether intentionally or not, afforded the gate-crashers their unprecedented power. (At the same time, simply by working as a writer at The New Yorker, I was immersed in a third world: that of the old gatekeepers, who are increasingly at risk of being disrupted into extinction.) I had breakfast at the Trump Soho with a self-proclaimed "internet supervillain," toured a rural Illinois junkyard with a freelance Twitter propagandist, drank in a German beer hall with a not-quite-Nazi. In Washington, D.C., I shadowed a histrionic far-right troll during his first week as a White House press correspondent. In San Francisco, I sat at a conference table while a group of new gatekeepers, having allowed their huge social network to become overrun with hate speech, opened their laptops and tried to rein in the chaos. I also spent hundreds of hours talking to people who were ensnared in the cult of web-savvy white supremacy, and to a few who managed to get out.

At no point did I start to find Nazi propaganda cute or funny. I did not succumb to the misconception that a journalist must present both sides of every story, or that all interview subjects are owed equal sympathy. I am not of the opinion that we owe Nazis anything. I do believe, however, that if we want to under-
stand what is happening to our country, we can't rely on wishful thinking. We have to look at the problem—at how our national vocabulary, and thus our national character, are in the process of being shattered.

"The left won by seizing control of media and academia," a blogger on The Right Stuff, using the pseudonym Meow Blitz, wrote in 2015. "With the Internet, they lost control of the narrative." By "the left," he meant the whole standard range of American culture and politics—everyone who preferred democracy to autocracy, everyone who resisted the alt-right's vision of a white American ethnostate. For decades, Meow Blitz argued, this pluralistic worldview—the mainstream worldview—had gone effectively unchallenged; but now, by promoting their agenda on social media, he and his fellow propagandists could push America in a more fascist-friendly direction. "ISIS became the most powerful terrorist group in the world because of flashy Internet videos," he wrote. "If you're alive in the year 2015 and you don't understand the power of the interwebz you're an idiot."

To the post's intended audience, this was supposed to be invigorating. To me, it was more like a faint whiff of sulfur that may or may not turn out to be a gas leak. The post was called "Right Wing Trolls Can Win." Would the neofascists win? I had a hard time imagining it. Could they win? That was a different question. "The culture war is being fought daily from your smartphone," the post continued. On this one point, at least, I had to agree with Meow Blitz. To change how we talk is to change who we are.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A Filter for Quality

The internet was full of red pills if you knew where to look for them, or even if you didn’t. It wasn’t just gender—it could be race, or GMOs, or the history of the Federal Reserve. You never knew when you might bump into Morpheus. Sometimes, it seemed, you could be minding your own business and Morpheus would find you.

Obama ran for president, and the pundits on cable news often praised his campaign for its sophisticated social-networking tools. But much of what the campaign did with those tools—canvassing, phone-banking, fund-raising—was just the normal business of electoral politics, made more efficient by computers. There was a deeper technological shift happening, but it was still inchoate and hard to describe. In 2008, at a rally in Lakeville, Minnesota, Obama’s opponent, John McCain, took unvetted questions from the audience. “I can’t trust Obama,” one woman said. “I have read about him, and he’s not—he’s not—he’s an Arab.” McCain took the cordless microphone out of the woman’s hand and corrected her while backing away. The moment was recapped on cable news, where it was treated as proof of McCain’s Buckleyan willingness to rebuke the fringes of his party, and on Saturday Night Live, where it was treated as a joke. Few people thought to wonder exactly what the woman had been reading, or which content-distribution algorithm had served it to her.

Obama won the election. “We gather because we have chosen hope over fear; unity of purpose over conflict and discord,” he said in his inaugural address. This seemed true, or at least plausible, to those Americans who were still getting their information from USA Today and the CBS Evening News. But in the backwaters of the internet, the conspiratorial hum continued to grow louder.
Two days after the 2008 election, at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco, there was a tech conference called the Web 2.0 Summit. It featured keynote speeches by several BSBs, including Mark Zuckerberg. "I would expect that, next year, people will share twice as much information as they are this year, and then the year after that they’ll share twice as much," he said. This became known as Zuckerberg’s Law, and it turned out to be basically correct. More and more people were contributing news to, and getting news from, their social feeds; meanwhile, the very definition of "news" was being transformed. A few years earlier, Zuckerberg had said, "A squirrel dying in your front yard may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa." This wasn’t meant to be a public-facing adage like Zuckerberg’s Law. Rather, it was an internal directive to the engineers who would build Facebook’s News Feed algorithm, instructing them to show whatever a particular user was likely to find most relevant—i.e., most clickable—at any given moment.

In the age of social media, anyone could be an influencer. Money, credentials, cleverness, personal connections—all were helpful, of course, but you could make do without them. You didn’t have to know how to code, or even how to write; you didn’t have to show your face or use your name. All you needed was a meme with momentum.*

The conference in San Francisco was called Web 2.0 because its organizers believed that the internet was in the midst of a momentous transition: the shift from the open web to the social web. Web 1.0 was dominated by big institutions, but Web 2.0 would give the power to the people. The paradigmatic Web 2.0 innovation was the social network. If the open web was a vast landscape dotted with isolated viruses, then social networks would be like the advent of air travel, enabling a virus to conquer the world in a day.

Paul Graham, a renowned computer engineer and venture capitalist, wrote a post on his personal blog about what Web 2.0 meant to him. One of the things it meant was online "democracy," in the form of freedom from informational gatekeepers. "Amateurs can surpass professionals, when they have the right kind of

*"The time in history to be alive," Mike Cernovich wrote. "You don’t need permission or the right family to suc-

**"If you want it, take it."
system to channel their efforts,” Graham wrote. The social web, he hoped, would be this kind of system.

In 1998, before the tech bubble burst, Graham sold his first software company to Yahoo for $49 million. After that, he often showed up at tech conferences around the Valley, looking the part of the semiretired Mountain View millionaire (polo shirt, khaki shorts, Birkenstocks). “Like a lot of guys who got rich from technology, I’ve been meaning to give seed money to new start-ups,” he wrote. In 2005, he finally got around to it: he cofounded Y Combinator, a boot camp for aspiring entrepreneurs.

Within a few years, thousands of young coders, some of them still in college, had applied to Y Combinator. The three percent who were accepted moved to the Bay Area, where, for three months, Graham and his team provided mentorship, technical advice, and access to their personal network of rich investors. Graham did all this, he wrote, because “start-ups are on balance a good thing . . . Focus on helping founders, and everything else will follow.” More tangibly, Y Combinator took a 7 percent stake in every company that completed its program, an investment portfolio that would soon be worth tens of billions of dollars.

Graham wasn’t a household name in the rest of the country, but within Silicon Valley he was widely revered—a BSB’s BSB.* Aspiring entrepreneurs read Graham’s blog religiously; they quoted it, from memory, in casual conversation. He wrote essays about Lisp programming and Bayesian filtering, but he also took on more far-ranging subjects: “Why Nerds are Unpopular,” “Why Smart People Have Bad Ideas,” “How to Make Wealth.”

Graham’s essayistic voice exemplified the BSB attitude—blithely dismissive of received wisdom, self-assured to the point of hubris.† He approached most topics with the pragmatic swagger of an engineer. When you’re writing code, or getting a business off the ground, you can solve problems by applying time-tested axioms or you can solve them by flouting convention and reinventing the wheel. All that matters is whether your solution works, or seems to work.

Graham instructed the young entrepreneurs in Y Combinator to take business advice from people who had successful track records in business. Yet he encour

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*The New York Times, over the years, has called him “a well-known inventor and esteemed figure in Silicon Valley,” “the closest thing the start-up world has to a pre-eminent guru,” and “the closest thing the technology community has to either a Bertrand Russell or a P. T. Barnum.”
†From “Keep Your Identity Small”: “I finally realized today why politics and religion yield such uniquely useless discussions.” From “How to Do Philosophy”: “Most philosophers up to the present have been wasting their time
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ached everyone to take his advice on a wide range of topics, far more than it was
possible for one person to be an expert in. What gave him this confidence? The
democratic spirit of the internet. “Anyone can publish an essay on the Web,” Gra-


The text was small blue Verdana on a white background. People posted links to
funny news stories (“Public Schools Begin to Offer Gym Classes Online”), baubles
from the far corners of the web (a grad student blogging his way through Wittgen-
stein’s On Certainty), and midnight dorm-style conjecture (“Why the Probability
That You Are Living in a Matrix Is Quite High”). Ohanian—using his Reddit

In March 2005, Graham gave a talk at Harvard called “How to Start a Start-up.”
In the audience were Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian, two undergrads from the
University of Virginia. It was spring break of their senior year. Huffman, a
computer science major with chipmunk teeth, a thatch of blond hair, and an
alpha-nerd blend of introversion and self-assurance, had been coding since he was
eight years old. His favorite programming language was Lisp, and, as he put it
later, “If you’re a fan of Lisp, you inevitably become a fan of Paul Graham.” They
approached Graham after the lecture, and Huffman asked for his autograph.

A week later, when Graham started accepting applications for the inaugural
class of Y Combinator, he encouraged Huffman and Ohanian to apply. Ohanian—
dark-haired and tall, with a goofy kind of charisma—was not a coder, but he was
a techno-optimist who believed that start-ups could “make the world suck less.”
He and Huffman proposed a company that would let people order food on their
cell phones.

Graham rejected the food-ordering idea, but he liked Huffman and Ohanian,
so he accepted them on the condition that they think of something else. What
to do was establish a simple link aggregator—a site for sorting and surfacing
the best stuff on the web. Anyone could post a link to anything. Next to each link
would be two voting buttons, an up arrow and a down arrow. That was pretty
much it. The site was called Reddit. They referred to it, aspirationally, as “the front
page of the internet.”
handle, nothing—posted a news story called “Researchers Map the Sexual Network of an Entire High School.” Huffman—using his handle, spez—posted “The 86 Rules of Boozing,” from Modern Drunkard Magazine. Both links were big hits on Reddit, which wasn’t a surprise. The cofounders understood the site’s vibe implicitly, because the vibe was being formed, in real time, around their personalities.

Reddit’s sorting algorithm was purely democratic, which is to say anarchic. The links with the most “upvotes” rose to the top of the page. There was no economic incentive for people to click or share; Huffman and Ohanian hoped that other basic human motives, such as curiosity and vanity, would be enough of a draw. They turned out to be right.

Every time a link was upvoted, the user who’d submitted it would get one “karma” point added to his or her profile; a downvote would take a point away. Business consultants would soon start referring to such online design tactics as “gamification”—but Huffman, coding Reddit alone in his bedroom, was proceeding less by strategy than by instinct, trying to build the kind of site that someone like him would find irresistible. The site’s frequent users—redditors—started visiting multiple times a day, or multiple times an hour, or multiple times a minute. They mocked the site’s built-in enticements, referring to the karma system as “meaningless internet points.” This was basically true. Still, there was no evidence that those who noticed the futility of the game were any less likely to play it.

Six months after Reddit went live, Huffman added a new function: comments. Now, in addition to links, users could type their thoughts, and other users could thread their thoughts below those thoughts, enabling a post to turn into a discussion. Each comment, like each link, could be upvoted or downvoted. This system allowed the cream to rise to the top. It also allowed redditors to gang up on people or ideas they disliked, downvoting them into oblivion. If the latter was an abuse of the system, then it was a form of abuse that existed from the start. On the day Reddit launched, Ohanian posted the site’s first link. Huffman, sitting at his computer a few feet away, immediately downvoted it. He didn’t have any particular objection to the link Ohanian had posted; he hadn’t even clicked on it yet. He was just being a jerk. “I consider myself a troll at heart,” he said later. “We now think of trolls as these racist, vile creatures, and obviously I don’t consider myself that. But making people bristle, being a little outrageous in order to add some spice to life— I get that. I’ve done that. That was kind of how I grew up on the internet.”
Redditors went by pseudonyms, so it wasn’t always possible to know exactly who was saying what. Still, many of the site’s early adopters, if not most, seemed to be sharp-tongued, contrarian young men like Huffman and Ohanian, interested in video games, computer programming, and crass, recursive humor. The Reddit community developed a bent for irreverence and an antipathy to pious groupthink. Reason was preferable to emotion. Irony was prized above ingenuousness. The site’s design, its tone, its meaningless internet points—all served to make it a petri dish for inside jokes and pet theories and hermetic, self-reinforcing worldviews.

In the early days, Reddit had few official policies about what should or shouldn’t be posted. Huffman and Ohanian were too busy keeping the site from crashing. Besides, even if they’d had the time to write down rules, they would have been loath to restrict the free flow of information. “Like most programmers at the time, we were pretty libertarian,” Huffman said later. “Not in the political, Ayn Rand sense—more in the ‘Fuck you, don’t tell me what to think,’ outlaw-hacker sense.”

In late 2005, Paul Graham posted his essay about Web 2.0. “Another place democracy seems to win is in deciding what counts as news,” he wrote. “I never look at any news site now except Reddit. I know if something major happens, or someone writes a particularly interesting article, it will show up there. Why bother checking the front page of any specific paper or magazine?” Sites like Reddit functioned as “a filter for quality,” he added. The gatekeepers had only been getting in the way. The news could be improved the way everything else could be improved: “emp, disintermediate, democratize, give the power to the people.

In 2017, the Supreme Court heard a case about a North Carolina law that prevented registered sex offenders from using social media. Did the law violate the First Amendment? Before answering that question, the Court had to consider another question: what is social media? In sixty minutes of oral argument, Facebook was compared to a park, a playground, an airport terminal, a polling booth, and a town square. Justice Sotomayor asked a question about high schoolers looking for what on LinkedIn. Justice Alito tried to compare Google+ to BettyCrocker.com. Everybody uses Twitter,” Justice Kagan said. “This has become a crucially important channel of political communication.”
Of all possible metaphors, it might be best to compare founding a social network to hosting a party. It starts out small, with just the hosts and a few of their friends. Then word gets out, and strangers start to show up. People take cues from the environment. Mimosas in a sun-dappled atrium suggest one kind of mood; grain alcohol in a moldy basement suggests another. Sometimes, a pattern emerges on its own: Pinterest, a photo-sharing site founded by three men, happened to catch on among women. In other cases, the pattern seems more premeditated—more like a result of implicit gatekeeping. If you're fourteen, TikTok's user interface is intuitive; if you're twenty-two, it's intriguing; if you're forty-five, it's impenetrable. This encourages older people to self-deport.

Suppose you throw a party. Early on, you're busy greeting people, fetching drinks, making sure the sound system works. Everyone seems to be having a good time. You could stand outside the front door with a flashlight, interviewing each potential guest, but instead you decide to leave the gates open. You don't think about what might go wrong. On the whole, people are basically trustworthy. Why would someone want to ruin the party?

Inevitably, things go wrong. You play an obscene song. Someone complains. You play an unobjectionable song. Everyone stops dancing. One person sneaks into the bathroom for a cigarette, and you decide to look the other way—you sort of like the idea of hosting a raucous party, the kind with a trace of illicit smoke in the air. But then people start smoking in the hallway, and on the dance floor, and someone has an asthma attack. Sleazy men start making aggressive passes at women; word gets around, and many women decide to leave. Someone spreads a rumor that the bartender is poisoning the drinks. Another person makes a racist joke, and several people laugh; before you can confront them, they scatter into the crowd.

What can you do? You don't want to let things get out of hand. You consider pausing the music, turning on all the lights, maybe identifying a few of the troublemakers and dragging them out by the collar. That would set an example, but it could also spoil the mood, and the party might never recover.

By far the easiest solution, and the only one that will set you up to be perfectly consistent in the future, is to do nothing, or almost nothing. You can't spend all your time policing everyone. Instead, you establish a clear, simple policy: as long as none of your guests do anything violent or illegal, they can say whatever they want. After all, you believe in free speech.
In 2005, Reddit was a sparsely attended party: a few sharp-tongued young men in dank, cavernous warehouse. At the time, Facebook was only available to college students, and in order to join it you had to provide your real name, your birthday, and a valid school email address—the equivalent of being carded at the door. To use Reddit, all you needed was a username that hadn’t been claimed yet. You could start as many accounts as you wanted, all without providing a profile photo or a name. This encouraged creativity, and also mischief.

A few months in, Huffman built the warehouse’s first internal walls. People were posting links to vulgar and violent content—which was fine, except that Huffman wanted users to have some idea of what they were about to click on before they clicked on it. He labeled some content NSFW—not safe for work—and quarantined it from everything else. That was the end of pure democracy.

The NSFW content was shunted into a new room: reddit.com/r/NSFW. The separation of content proved useful, so Huffman made more rooms, called subreddits, each devoted to a specific topic: r/Programming; r/Science; r/FreeCulture, for techno-libertarians. He made a subreddit called r/Politics, not to amplify political news but to sequester it. “I don’t like thinking about politics all the time,” he said later; links to news stories were getting too popular, clogging up his feed. “So I sent OK, nerds, talk about politics all you want, but go do it over here.” Yet the walls between rooms were always permeable. If a political link or a programming link got upvoted enough times, the algorithm would crosspost it to Reddit’s main page.

Huffman and Ohanian believed in free speech, but they also believed in limits. “We always banned people,” Huffman said later. “We just didn’t talk about it very much.” Reddit was so small that Huffman could do most of the banning himself, on an ad hoc basis, using his common sense. “It wasn’t well thought out or even articulated, really. It was, ‘That guy has the N-word in his username? Fuck that.’ Delete account.” Bans were carried out inconsistently, because there was no set of consistent principles underlying them.

In 2006, Huffman and Ohanian sold Reddit to Condé Nast, an old-media conglomerate that owned more than twenty magazines, including Wired, Vanity Fair, GQ, and The New Yorker. The sale made them twenty-two-year-old millionaires, but they didn’t fit in at a big corporation, and three years later they left.
Huffman spent a few months backpacking in Costa Rica, played a lot of Call of Duty, and then cofounded a travel-search company. Ohanian became an angel investor and a techno-optimist at large, sometimes referred to in the press as “the Mayor of the Internet.” In their absence, the warehouse party that was Reddit grew bigger and wilder, and ominous cliques started to gather in the corners.
Epilogue

It has become a tradition for big tech companies to release elaborate, self-referential jokes every April Fools’ Day. The point is to generate some free publicity, to make the company seem quirky and relatable; but it can also have the opposite effect, especially when the premise of the joke is Silicon Valley’s unprecedented power. A few years ago, Twitter announced that it would start charging for vowels. More recently, Amazon revealed voice-recognition software that could take commands from pets, and Google shared a mock-up of its new data-storage center on Mars. The companies hadn’t actually commissioned any of these projects, but they probably could, one day, if they wanted to. Get it?

In 2017, instead of a parody announcement, Reddit unveiled a genuine social experiment. It was called r/Place, and it was a blank square, a thousand pixels by a thousand pixels. In the beginning, all million pixels were white. Once it started, any Reddit user could change a single pixel, anywhere on the grid, to one of sixteen colors. The only restriction was speed: the algorithm allowed each redditor to alter just one pixel every five minutes. “That way, no one person can take over—it’s too slow,” Josh Wardle, the Reddit product manager in charge of r/Place, explained. “In order to do anything at scale, they’re gonna have to cooperate.”

The experiment had been live for about twenty minutes when I found Wardle in the common area, huddled over his laptop, frantically refreshing dozens of tabs. So far, the square was mostly blank, with a few stray dots blinking in and out of existence. But redditors were making plans and, in true Reddit fashion, clinging to those plans with cultish intensity. A new subreddit, r/TheBlueCorner, was conspiring to turn the whole square blue; r/RedCorner was vowing to make it red; already, they were on a war footing. Other groups planned elaborate messages, fractal patterns, and references to various memes. A broad coalition—leftists, Trump supporters, patriotic libertarians, prepolitical teenagers—decided to draw
an American flag in the center of the square. They congregated at r/AmericanFlagInPlace, where they hashed out the exact dimensions of the stars and stripes, and shared strategies for repelling potential invaders. Meanwhile, a group of nihilists at r/TheBlackVoid prepared to blot out whatever the other groups created. Some people just want to watch the world burn.

Wardle went to great lengths to show me that Place was a pure democracy—the algorithm was designed so that, once it went live, all he could do was watch, along with everyone else. Now, toggling compulsively from tab to tab, he seemed nervous. “The idea was ‘Let’s put up a very simple microcosm of the internet and just see what happens,’” he said. “Reddit itself is not the most complex idea. It’s sort of a blank canvas. The community takes that and does all sorts of creative things with it.”

“And some terrible things,” I said.

“I’m pretty confident,” he said. He paused. “I’d be lying if I said I was a hundred percent confident.” Already, one of the top comments on Place read, “I give this an hour until swastikas.” One of Wardle’s colleagues told me, “That was what kept Josh up at night. Before this went live, he was literally calculating, ‘OK, it takes a minimum of seventeen pixels to make a swastika—what if we open this up to the world, and the headline the next day is ’Reddit: A Place to Draw Swastikas on the Internet’?”

The upper-left corner turned a choppy, flickering purple as the “Blue Empire” and the “Red Empire” battled for dominance. A graffiti artist, or artists, wrote “9/11 was an inside job”; a few minutes later, the “was” turned into “wasn’t,” and the “an” became “anime.” Elsewhere, “Dick butt” became “Dick butter,” then “Dick buffet”; “Kill me” became “Kill men,” then the words disappeared entirely. And then the swastikas arrived—just a few of them, but enough to make Wardle raise the hood of his sweatshirt, retreat into an empty conference room, and shut the door, looking pallid.

In his office, Huffman met with Chris Slowe, Reddit’s first employee, who is now the chief technical officer.

“How is Place going?” Huffman asked.

“Pretty much as expected,” Slowe said. “A lot of memes, some Pokémon, and a barrage of dicks.”

“If there’s ever a Reddit musical, that wouldn’t be a bad title,” Huffman said.

“I have faith in our people,” Slowe replied.
told both camps: the scene doesn’t imply that We Are Good or that We Are Bad. All I knew was that, on this particular day, on this particular part of the internet, the hordes had joined together to beat back the darkness. Even better, they’d done it on their own, without the guidance of gatekeepers, relying only on the wisdom of the crowd.

Then I got a direct message on Twitter. “For r/place, Reddit employees had mass white-out tools where they could quickly and easily remove swastikas,” the message read. “Those swastikas weren’t all replaced by other users.” The message came from a Twitter account with a female avatar photo, but the person behind it wouldn’t tell me her name. She claimed to be a former Reddit employee. “Heard about the white-out tools from an engineer who still works at Reddit,” she continued. “They’re probably feeding you quite a bit of propaganda tbh.”

I tried to report out the rumor, asking a few former employees who’d recently left the company.

“Totally sounds like something they would do,” one former employee said.

“Why leave it to chance?”

“Doesn’t sound like them,” another former employee said. “I think they’re too old-school techno-libertarian to try playing tricks like that.”

I messaged the woman on Twitter, asking for more information, or for proof of her identity.

She didn’t respond.

A few weeks later, I tried again: “Maybe we could talk on the phone?”

No response.

A few weeks after that: “So was this just a troll?”

I never heard from her again.