

Greater Good Gathering

Speaker
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The Greater Good Gathering held on February 6–7, 2019 explored the future of public policy and how best to advance the greater good in the 21st century in light of technological innovation, economic disruption, ideological polarization, and governance challenges. Event co-sponsors included Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia Law School, Union Theological Seminary, The Academy of Political Science, and Public Works LLC/Brain Storm Consulting.

IT IS A PLEASURE TO BE a guest with you. As Eric mentioned, I am the author of a book called *Future Politics*. The challenge that I want to bring to today's meeting is to recognize that what Franklin Foer very eloquently and correctly described as a public health problem is actually really the start of something much deeper and much bigger. It is a change in human civilization that could be as profound for us as the difference between the civilization that had the invention of writing and the civilizations that preceded it that did not.

There is a story that Henry Ford used to tell. When he asked people what they wanted in terms of their transit, they would tell him that they wanted faster horses, as he was in the process of moving the automobile to the mass market. I find it worrying, sometimes, to think that in our political thinking, our “faster horses” thinking, we tend to imagine the future in terms of today. As a sort of a faster, sleeker, all chrome-like version of what we have now, whereas we actually need something entirely different.

In chasing down that suspicion in my book, I wanted to focus on the four most important, fundamental words and concepts that we use to speak about politics: power, freedom, democracy, and justice. I looked at each of those. I thought of what they meant in the past, what they mean today, and what they might mean in the future—in a world transformed by digital technology. I mean by increasingly capable systems. Systems that in the past were considered unimaginable. Moreover, increasingly integrated technology, the idea that rather than interfacing with tech through the keyboard, mouse, and screen, we have glass slabs that we hold in our hands—and the future of tech will surround us in our objects, appliances, and utilities. The idea of an increasingly quantified society. We generate more data in two hours than we did from the dawn of time until 2003. I look at those trends together and I see what we could be going through is something much bigger than a public health crisis, or even a public policy crisis, but rather a fundamental change in the way we live.

Just cycling through those concepts very quickly, I am trying to summarize years of work in 10 minutes, no doubt unsuccessfully. I think digital technology will change what the word “power” means in our time. If you take a basic definition of “power” as “getting people to do things they would not otherwise do”, then technology, actually, can be used as a form of power over us in three different ways.

One is by writing rules the rest of us have to follow. When you think about driving a self-driving car, and it refuses to go over the speed limit or park illegally just for a moment, you are subject to the rules someone else has written. The rules may be laws. They reflect laws, but they may be a different kind of law embedded in code, and that has been recognized as a feature of cyberspace for some time.

The second way technology can be a form of power, is because of the data that it gathers about us. The more that you know about somebody, the easier it is to influence and even manipulate them. Data is the basis for almost all online advertising, and increasingly on physical advertising, too. Of course, having data gathered on us has a disciplinary function as well, because we behave differently when we know that we are being watched, or rather, my prediction is that in the future we will behave differently because we know we are being watched.

Right now, you are more likely to be caught out by technology—like the guy who went to prison for the murder of his wife. His defense failed because he said that she was tied down during a home invasion and killed. However, the FitBit she was wearing told a very different story. She had in fact been running around the house, and her heart rate was consistent with someone who was fleeing. That was part of the evidentiary basis on which he was eventually convicted. I think once we come around to the fact that an increasing amount of our lives are documented and stored, it would be strange if it did not change human behavior in some way.

Of course, the third way that technology is a form of power is that it controls our perception of the world. All of us rely on third parties to present us with new information about the universe beyond our own immediate perception. Increasingly, we turn to technologies—whether it is our news, which we get through algorithmic means, whether it is our search, and even how we communicate with each other.

The technologies that control the way we communicate with each other are important, as well. We take it for granted in the west, but the equivalent of WhatsApp in China, if you send a message saying, “Amnesty International,” that message will never arrive, and neither of us would know. I look at those three factors—to write rules that the rest of us have to follow (the self-driving car example), the ability to gather enormous amounts of data about us, and the ability to control our perception of the world. I see this as a new and strange form of power. One which does not correspond to many people’s typical perceptions of power, as it relates to parliaments, legislatures, congresses and the like, and which now largely resides in the private sector.

Now, I ask what this means for freedom. I talk in my book, about the idea of privatization of freedom—key things like freedom of speech, important speech like political speech. Increasingly, we rely on private sector, third parties, to uphold our rights to free speech, by allowing us to communicate in the manner that they do on their online platforms.

I would also say there is a question about how much freedom there is going to be in the future, caused by different technology. 78 percent of British people confessed that they have done one of the following things: paid someone cash-in-hand knowing that tax would not be paid on that money; dodged a bus fare by jumping on a bus and jumping off again without paying the fee; illegally streamed something online; or taken more than their fair share at a restaurant soda dispenser. These are all crimes. I sometimes call them “mini-crimes”, but they are actually just crimes and 78 percent of us here in the UK say that we have done them. The reason for that is not because we are scoundrels, but there is a hint of liberty that we take for granted. We are allowed to get away with small things some of the time, as long as we do not abuse the privilege system, which is why perhaps all of us had driven over the speed limit last evening, even just for a moment. However, in the future, I ask whether those kinds of mini-freedoms will still exist.

You do not dodge a bus fare if your smart wallet automatically deducts the money when you get on the bus. You do not pay cash-in-hand if the cash is not on you. You cannot take more than your fair share at the soda dispenser if it is regulated by face-recognition technology. It would be naive to suppose that public and private sector bodies will not make use of the technologies that are available to them.

To borrow a phrase from Larry Lessig, we live in a society now where there are a lot of doors marked “do not enter”, and we can walk through them and be punished later. We are

moving into a world, I suggest, where there are many more locked doors where you cannot break the rules at all, because the rules are coded into the technologies around you. I think you get quite a profound change in human civilization.

We will move on to democracy in the end, but the third factor that I looked at in the book is justice. I look at two types of justice. One is justice in distribution and the other is justice in recognition. In the past, political theorists and economists assumed or took for granted that stuff was distributed around to society by the market and redistributed by the state. However increasingly we rely on systems and algorithms to distribute things of importance to us.

For instance, your access to credit, to a mortgage, to a loan for a small business, or to health insurance might be algorithmically determined, and are increasingly so. Your access to a job is the same. 72 percent of resumes are never read by human eyes anymore. Obviously, who writes the code that operates in these systems that parse through applicants' CVs, and determines who gets to the next round and who does not, plays a very important role in distributing one of the most valuable things a society has to offer—a job.

In terms of recognition, we all talk a lot about identity politics these days, for obvious reasons. But, in a world that is suffused with technology, it will not just be anomalous cases causing problems when we have voice-recognition systems that do not hear the voices of women, because they have only been trained on male voices. Or face-recognition systems which cannot see people of color because they have only been trained on white faces. Or, like in 2017, an automated passport system in New Zealand rejected the application of a man of Asian extraction on the basis that in the photo he submitted his eyes were closed, or so the machine told them. In the future, it will not just be humans who can offend and upset us. It will be digital systems, too. I think that is an interesting change in human civilization, and one we need to pay more attention to.

Finally, democracy—I have no doubt that you have already in your conference gone through of the ways democracy has been transformed by technology. Obviously, it transformed the relationship between the party and the individual. Almost all of the organizing takes place online. It has transformed the relationship between the individual and the states—e-petitions, online consultations. It has transformed the relationship between systems and other systems, allowing human feedback forms and political organization online—like the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. In many ways, that stuff is all lost causes. It has also changed the way that we deliberate.

Franklin has eloquently talked already about how technology can polarize and fragment our discourse. Looking even further to the future, the three big challenges that I see to the way we understand democracy are as follows. One is the challenge of direct democracy. For thousands of years, we have taken for granted that the only real functional form of democracy, in a large polity, is parliamentary or representative democracy. In the future, I do not think that will be the case. I think it will be within our capacity, if we wanted to, for each of us to swipe left or to swipe right on a policy on any given day, or five times a day. If you did not want to bother with that, you delegate your vote, as in a system of liquid democracy. So, let us say on matters of healthcare, my vote can go to that consortium of doctors and nurses. There are already stirrings in populist nationalist movements around the world, with people calling, as a matter of political philosophy, for more and more decisions to be taken on a direct-democracy basis—like the Brexit referendum in the UK. That is a debate that is going to intersect with technology. The tech is going to make it, in my mind, possible.

The second big challenge is what I call “data democracy.” In a world where there apparently will be three million books worth of data for every human being on the planet in a relatively short order, it is surprising, at least in theory, to think the system of government which best represents the people is one based on a tick in a box every three or four years. I think there will

be growing calls, as a matter of philosophy and morality, not just as a matter of good public policy, for the big data that have been so enjoyed by private-sector firms to be used in the public sector, too, as a matter of democratic legitimacy. To generate policies that actually represent the people.

Finally, there is the challenge of AI democracy. We already have systems that can beat us in every game we have ever devised. They can diagnose skin and lung cancers better than most experts can. They can lip-read and mimic human speech, and synchronize human speech better than we can. There are already many things we never thought possible. It is not crazy to ask which aspects of public policy, in the future, might be better done by digital systems, rather than by human beings. Again, a question that philosophers never had to deal with before. It is like the “faster horses” question. It is not like the question of king, priests, democracy, oligarchy or plutarchy. This is a new, potentially better form of government, or a potentially worse and more dangerous form, too.

Stepping back, when I think about the future of politics, I try to think not just about the immediate public policy problems that are thrown out today. We need to understand, I think, that our generation is living through a period of colossal change in human civilization—how we organize ourselves as human beings. Every time in the past, when we have gone through a big change in the way that we organize and disseminate information as a species, there have always been political upheavals that follow. A very simple example: The very first human empires spreading out over this large amount of terrain, followed in relatively short order after the invention of writing. It was not until we had that very powerful way of communicating information—that data could be kept in a permanent form and transported in that form—that we were able to manage a large polity over a large distance.

In the last century, the 20th century, the big political question was what should be done about the market? What should be done by the state, and what should be left to the market and civil society? That was the question that divided right from left, and it divided the eastern hemisphere from the western hemisphere.

I believe that our generation will have to tackle another question as well, perhaps even a more important one. To what extent should our lives be governed by powerful digital systems, whether publicly or privately held, and on what terms? Until we start wrestling with that—not just as a public policy, or even a legal or regulatory level, but at a deep, philosophical, and moral level—we are not going to be in a position to make sound laws. We are not going to be in a position to make sure that we live out this century in as prosperous and free way as we would like to. Many thanks.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

JAMIE SUSSKIND is an author, speaker, and practicing barrister. A past Fellow of Harvard University’s Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society, he studied history and politics at Magdalen College, Oxford, graduating first in his year before turning to the law. Jamie is passionate about technology (from AI to Blockchain, Robotics, and Virtual Reality) and politics. He is the author of *Future Politics: Living Together in a World Transformed by Tech* (Oxford University Press, 2018), an Evening Standard Book of the Year, a Prospect Book of the Year, and a Guardian Book of the Day. He writes and speaks about the future of power, freedom, justice, and democracy.