

Beware: Eric Schmidt, Larry Page, David Drummond and the other Silicon Valley's cultists want to turn you into a disruptive deviant

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[Evgeny Morozov](#)

High-tech giants are becoming more like the radical right as they launch populist crusade to block government regulation – and they have the technology to recruit believers

Back in August 2014, Mike Bulajewski, a Seattle-based designer with a penchant for psychoanalysis, published a fascinating essay. In [*The Cult of Sharing*](#), he argued that the best way to understand why so many users feel emotionally attached to such companies as [Uber](#) and [Airbnb](#) – even earning them the feel-good moniker “the sharing economy” – is by treating such communities as cults.

Like all good cults, such firms tap into our inner quest for solidarity and belonging, promising to fill our lives with meaning. By presenting their foes

as enemies of innovation who want to destroy the new and deviant class of entrepreneurs, technology companies play on the perennial theme of persecution. And they stoke fears of conspiracy – involving governments, trade unions and big corporations – out to suppress all disruptive ideas.

That corporations strive to manipulate our aspirations is, of course, not news. Big brands have been dabbling in practices such as “greenwashing”, convincing customers that buying their green products is the way to fight global warming.

But the sharing economy craze, argued Bulajewski, is far more pernicious: while greenwashing simply gives us the erroneous impression that we are saving the world through shopping, “sharewashing” turns us into everyday lobbyists for our favourite startup-cum-church.

Bulajewski’s essay is useful in making sense of some recent efforts by technology companies to mobilise customers to fight government regulation. In fact, we might be witnessing the birth of a new, powerful and highly decentralised approach to lobbying, where citizens merge with the algorithms to neutralise any threat to their cult. By taking advantage of their superb technical knowhow and their unmatched ability to reach and mobilise millions of people in a matter of seconds, technology companies enjoy a definite advantage over the hapless regulators.

Consider last summer’s high-profile public relations battle between [Uber](#) and [Bill de Blasio](#), mayor of New York, when the latter tried to limit the number of cars that Uber could operate in the city. Uber deployed all the

conventional arguments, stating – not without some merit – that the mayor acted on behalf of the taxi industry and that Uber was good for minorities.

But [Uber](#) also added a De Blasio feature to its app – an unmissable “NO CARS – SEE WHY” sign placed on New York’s map. On clicking it, users were told Uber would look like this if De Blasio won. Users were encouraged to email the mayor and the city council with a handy “EMAIL NOW” link. Eventually, De Blasio capitulated.

Facebook has recently deployed a similar tactic. Having run into trouble with the rollout of its

[Free Basics initiative in India](#) – Free Basics is part of its controversial Internet.org efforts to connect the whole world on its own terms – Facebook called on its users to “save Free Basics”. Presumably it was to be saved from its numerous critics, who argue that Free Basics violates net neutrality.

And [Facebook](#) was quick to offer its users a platform for saving it: its users in India saw a message that already contained a complaint – along with their name – that, at the click of a button, would be sent to the Indian government.

Of course, companies have been trying to mobilise their customer base – with the help of think-tanks, journalists and PR firms – for decades. Today, however, Uber and Facebook have the technology to generate immense popular support that would overwhelm any government. Facebook could do much more: by manipulating what news you see in your newsfeed, it can also “curate” your mood and make it more likely that you’ll agree with a particular petition.

With such power to mobilise the masses, it's no wonder that these firms like to portray themselves as spiritual movements. Their religion is innovation and anyone who stands in its way must be either a heretic or have sold out to special, yet undisrupted, interests: mayors are said to be in bed with the taxi and hospitality industries; government regulators with the telecoms industry; European courts with the media industry.

In Silicon Valley's conception of the universe, everything is already rotten and corrupt and the only source of purity is to be found in Californian basements, where the hardworking and hoodie-wearing saints are toiling to accelerate progress.

Ideologically, Silicon Valley is rapidly coming to occupy the space traditionally reserved for the radical populists of the right. In a sense, Silicon Valley is like the cosmopolitan and tech-savvy equivalent of the Tea Party: the startup contingent wants us to believe that, while capitalism works in theory, today's practice is, in fact, very different.

Thus, public institutions have been co-opted by big (or, rather, bigger and older) business and it's now the citizens who have to pay the price – quite literally – through higher transportation and housing fares, restrictions on what they can do with their property and time, and so on. Worse, all those public institutions are a drag on entrepreneurs – the only class worth defending.

Hence Silicon Valley's policy proposals: once we deregulate most industries and let the disrupters in, this will lower the prices, unleash entrepreneurs, and awaken the masses from their sloth and slumber – the products of useless government interventions that took responsibility away from individuals. And the tech firms will push for that policy agenda with the

extremely effective toolkit spanning every single innovation from online petitions to apps.

That such petitions might not matter in the long run is irrelevant: what matters is that they are being signed by the people, giving a populist feel to the overall effort. Old-school lobbyists, generously funded by venture capitalists, will do the rest.

Intriguingly, Silicon Valley's despair about the health of our public institutions is shared by the insurgent populists of the left, at least across Europe. The new political parties that sprang up in the past few years are a best testament to that.

From [Podemos](#) in Spain to Italy's Five Star Movement, they, too, have developed a robust communications machine that lets them mobilise their supporters.

These new parties do not share the deregulatory, highly individualistic agenda of Silicon Valley's right. Nor do they agree with its vision of the state as a mere bystander to the eternal disruption wreaked by technology companies.

Traditional parties, on the other hand, seem to be trapped in a host of prior commitments and missteps; the recent Spanish election is a case in point.

Unable to deviate from the standard neoliberal line of more labour market reforms and more privatisation, they can't offer a counter-programme to that of Silicon Valley, which simply pushes the logic of both privatisation and employment flexibility to their ultimate conclusions. Nor do they have the necessary infrastructure to mobilise their base.

The global fight to watch, then, is between two high-tech populisms – those of the left (represented by the new political parties) and those of the right (represented by Silicon Valley entrepreneurs).

Either way, it's clear that whoever controls the technology for mobilising our attention will eventually set the terms of the political debate – yet another argument for not surrendering it completely to Silicon Valley.

Everything has a history, including Silicon Valley. According to a [new media theorist](#), an influential Valley philosophy might underlie the current [attitudes, values, and beliefs](#):

There is a Silicon Valley religion, and it's one that doesn't particularly care for people — at least not in our present form. Technologists may pretend to be led by a utilitarian, computational logic devoid of superstition, but make no mistake: There is a prophetic belief system embedded in the technologies and business plans coming out of Google, Uber, Facebook, and Amazon, among others.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF, [“THE ANTI-HUMAN RELIGION OF SILICON VALLEY”](#) AT *MEDIUM*

In an excerpt from [his](#) new book, [Team Human](#) (2019), Rushkoff traces the history to a post-Cold War collaboration centered on Silicon Valley, aimed at first at preventing nuclear war, but branching gradually into a pursuit of immortality through digitization and AI:

Self-actualization through technology meant leaving the body behind — but this was okay since, in keeping with the gnostic tradition, the body was the source of human sin and corruption.

The cosmists talked about reassembling human beings, atom by atom, after death, moving one's consciousness into a robot and colonizing space. The cosmists pulled it all together for the fledgling American transhumanists: They believed human beings could not only transcend the limits of our mortal shell but also manifest physically through new machines. With a compellingly optimistic have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too gusto, the cosmists told America's LSD-taking spiritualists that technology could give them a way to beat death...

The idea that lit up the turned-on technoculture was that technology would be our evolutionary partner and successor — that humans are essentially computational, and computers could do computation better. Any ideas that could be construed to support this contention were embraced. **Douglas Rushkoff**, "[The Anti-Human Religion of Silicon Valley](#)," at *Medium*

Such a cult might help explain something: It's amazing how often the big tech companies get caught snooping and manipulating, as discussed in regular news media: [All Ears: Always-On Listening Devices Could Soon Be Everywhere](#) (*Wall Street Journal*, July 18, 2019); [US regulators have met to discuss imposing a record-setting fine against Facebook for some of its privacy violations](#) (*Washington Post*, January 18, 2019); [If You Care About Privacy, Throw Your Amazon Alexa Devices Into the Sea](#) (*Gizmodo*, April 24, 2019); [Amazon Alexa: Illegally recording kids, privacy advocates allege](#) (*Futurism*, May 9, 2019); [Snapchat Employees Abused Data Access to Spy on Users](#) (*Vice*, May 23, 2019); [My Favorite Facebook Conspiracy Might be True](#) (*Medium*, May 19, 2019).

Or else they are ridiculously careless with data ([Google has stored some passwords in plaintext since 2005](#), *Wired*, May 21, 2019) —*if* carelessness

is really what lay behind that. In an age where we are constantly tracked and our data is being sold (yes, even our medical data), that's like accidentally leaving cash lying around.

We surely don't need a cult-like atmosphere to explain why people are tempted by money, status, and power. The puzzling part is their seeming lack of ordinary insight into why others would find their behavior unacceptable. But if they believe the rest of us are doomed and anyway expendable, they would be oblivious to public opinion. They seem so out of touch it is almost funny. Well, it would be, if it weren't so serious.

In this TED talk, Rushkoff recounts a memorable meeting where top tech billionaires share their apocalyptic fears and fantasies:

See also: The idol with feet of silicon: Religions based on artificial intelligence (AI) cannot transcend the limits of computers (Robert J. Marks)

Tales of an invented god The most important characteristic of an AI cult is that its gods (Godbots?) will be created by the AI developers and not the other way around

AI as an emergent religion Science philosopher Mike Keas's new book discusses how AI and ET are merging, to create a religion of futuristmagic
and

Can we cheat death by uploading ourselves as virtual AI entities?

Two pictures appear in the *New York Sun*. The first is of Alix Tichelman, a thirty year old “hooker,” and below that of her victim, 51 year old Timothy Hayes. We see Tichelman posing for a selfie in front of a mirror. She is holding a phone decorated with a Warhol print of Marilyn Monroe. She is wearing a tight corset and her upper body is all cleavage and undecipherable tattoos. One seems to be a frothing dog’s snout and the other a toothy flower.

Hayes, on the other hand, is shown in windswept sunkissed glory on his yacht, “Escape,” the picture of glowing if aging health. Behind him there’s a sweeping glimpse of the bay and the shadowy shoulder of a man. Hayes is relaxed and semi-smiling, grasping a bottle of Corona or some other low key beer. He is paunchy in his classic dad sweater. Known as a wealthy Silicon Valley executive, he could be any man. He could be any bourgeois man. Despite dying of a heroin overdose with a prostitute, he will be eulogized as “A husband, father of five, and Google employee,” while Alix is eternalized as “the call-girl killer” or “the harbor hooker.”

Alix’s morphology goes under the sign of the “suicide girl”: dyed black hair, tattoos, dramatic makeup. A calculated hybrid of slut, goth, punk, manic pixie dream girl — she is a pie chart of late capitalist repressive desublimation. She is professionally uncivilized. And while she is rewarded for her gestural performance of “wildness,” she can never escape sanction or find sanctuary. Another picture has her in a tawdry red room, in mismatched bikini and tattoo sleeves, leaning against a wall to accentuate the snake-like curve of her form. Insofar as the public knows, her scandalous case ends with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) deporting her back to Canada, spatializing her stint as “other” of the month, reestablishing the borders. The story will be “Prostitute injected Google

executive with heroin, finished her wine and left him to die.” What the public doesn’t know is much weirder and worse.

In Alix Tichelman’s lair, the preparations are underway. She has starved herself for three days, enjoying the slow build of hunger. If she were a wolf, her coat would be dry at the roots and spit slick at the tips, her ribs would protrude and hollow, her eyes would be dim, rheumy, and grey, her head would bow to the ground and her once lush and alert tail would sag. She is not yet a wolf though. She is hairless and skinny, a haunt of a person. Amy Winehouse towards the end. Haggard and scratchily full-throated. She has plucked every follicle to make the transformation more spectacular. Her tattoos are fairly bristling with anticipation.

The rec room where the Werewolf Cult of Silicon Valley meet is almost complete. It has a ping pong table and a life-sized Spock pez dispenser. They’ve recently acquired a Robot Coupe J80 Ultra Automatic Juicer With Pulp Ejection (for \$5000, more or less — who needs spare change in the singularity?). On the wall there is a poster where the evolution of man is charted. First, a hunched ape. Then, a lumpy neanderthal. Man straightens out. He obtains a tool, a spear. He becomes the tool, sleek and strong, perfectly upright. And then his form blurs with a stream of numbers. The tool’s intelligence has surpassed man and encompassed him. He is the singularity. But how to broach this next step? For all the Google glasses and iphone upgrades, the Werewolf Cult of Silicon Valley still feel the distance. They are sullen and lonely in their discrete, analog bodies — ravenous for transformation. There’s something missing, a missing link.

It stands to reason, if animal can become human, then human can become pure information. And that analogy of evolution is where Alix comes in. On

a dark web fetish site, they found her, “werewolf girl,” spent months fantasizing, feeding on her animal ferocity and grace. Finally, came the epiphany — this was the final ingredient, the missing link. Animal/human amalgam as gateway to human/machine transcendence. They tinkered night and day to find the formula. A small army of azure screens irradiated in the dawn’s mechanical light.

There is really nothing easier for the Werewolf Cult of Silicon Valley to do than rig a surveillance camera, make it appear that Alix watched Timothy slowly die of the heroin she injected into his arm, step over his body, enjoy her glass of wine, and escape out into the night. The blood ceremony was more complex. First, they had to hide from her sharp sense of smell, which could easily detect the hidden pack of men steaming with anticipation in the hull of the ship. Then, they needed to ensnare her at the precise moment when she entered the helpless throws of transformation from woman to wolf. Then there was the blood to obtain, the Rube-Goldberg-like twists and turns of its processing, and the ascension ritual to perform, all before she came to, starving, bloodthirsty and bewildered by the absence of her prey. The arrangements had been elaborate, time consuming, sending them to nerd heaven. And then the moment was here. She was really on “Escape.” They were all wired up and ready, almost as excited to see her transformation as for their own ascendance.

It begins as a postural change. She catches a glimpse of the full moon and hunches as if in pain at the bright glare of it. She ducks her head. Spiny fur rips through the back of her shirt. Her nose elongates, morphing into a snout. Her jaw drops and a low moan emits from her throat. The claws tear at her fingers and toes and at that moment she cannot bear the pain of it, tucks her head between gristly muscled arms as if cowing before a master.

She crouches and cries before giving way to her own deadly strength, arching her back, bathing gloriously and unashamed in the moonlight. It is right then, a hair's breadth before her full emergence, that they take her. A syringe sucks a tiny droplet of hot blood. Then the light speed distillation and transubstantiation. Water becomes wine. Blood becomes electricity. Men become gods. Alix's blood contains multitudes. They inject her, take her in. And then, the Werewolf Cult of Silicon Valley cease to exist as men. They distribute their particles, grid-like. It's as Tron as they hoped it would be with all the fun campy eighties vibe sucked out. They etherialize. In the annals it will be recorded as a case of male autochthony. But it was Alix's essence that galvanized it all. The mistress was mastered. The artist became muse — a gruelingly familiar story.

When she came to, her fangs screaming for Google Exec flesh, she found herself alone. There was a faint shimmering above and then nothing. The Werewolf Cult of Silicon Valley had left meat space for the great digital beyond. Who knows where they are hacking and haunting now? It was not the time or place to think about that. Starving, blood mad Alix had lost her prey. Not unlike the Alix in the fake footage, she lapped up some wine and leapt off "Escape." There could be no distinction now between innocent and non-innocent blood. There was only iron and heat. She sprinted from the harbor to the highway, smelling an injured animal. Soon her fur was blood drenched and she had the back half of a deer carcass in her teeth, nothing of its outsides still in tact but two slender legs ending in poignantly cloven hooves. And it wasn't enough, it was never enough. The world was infrared with heat.

Later, restored to humanity, she will see flashes of carnage. Was it an unlucky transient? Was it a clueless tech bro? Or something else? One thing

she did not second guess was her guilt. She owned it in the courtroom. One picture shows her looking past a patiently explaining lawyer, straight into the camera. Her black rimmed eyes shine with demonic glee. Her hair hangs with redolent carnality before her hunched form. She doesn't know who, exactly, it is she ate. But there is no doubt she is a predator.

It is possible that she sprinted from the Santa Cruz yacht harbor, up the 17 highway to San Jose. The pickings are easy. She would encounter a homeless encampment with a jaunty sign, "welcome to Googleville." The distraught forms would huddle against a fence, so lifeless they don't even bother to look up or defend themselves. In a night it would be possible to consume an entire illegal RV encampment packed with delectable janitors, baristas, adjunct instructors, waitresses, low level tech workers, preschool teachers, their skinny children, their scraggly dogs.

Or, alternately, she might have burst through and shattered the glass of the Googleplex, rampaging the office's open-floor plan, leaving only a trail of rectangular glasses and Pellegrino behind.

She suspects she took the easier route and dined on the surplus populations of Silicon Valley...

...where the well-heeled can dine on gold-flecked steaks, \$500 tasting menus and \$29 loaves of bread... a new study suggests that 26.8% of the population — almost 720,000 people — qualify as "food insecure" based on risk factors such as missing meals, relying on food banks or food stamps, borrowing money for food, or neglecting bills and rent in order to buy groceries. Nearly a quarter are families with children...a survey of more than 4,000 students found about half have skipped meals due to the cost...a family of four earning \$84,750 or less in Santa Clara County is considered

low-income ...the median price of a family home has reached a new high of \$1,125m, while the supply of homes continues to shrink.... These realities mean food insecurity cuts across lines of race, age and employment status... Martina Rivera, a 52-year-old mental health nurse, explained that her troubles began when her entire building was evicted last year... Mass evictions have swept the area as landlords seek higher-paying tenants... “Because I breastfeed my daughter, I feel like I’m passing that stress and depression on to her,” she said during an interview in Spanish... The firm, in announcing the purchase of the 48-unit Buckingham Apartments, said that its goal was to “rebrand” and “revitalize” the property, raise the rents, and attract “young working professionals” employed at “Google, Facebook, and other Fortune 100 tech companies”... Prior to Trion’s \$15m purchase of the property, rents were 40% below market value, the company said in a press release, noting that it “presented an opportunity ... to maximize rent growth”... “While rents will be increasing at this property, we would, of course, be delighted to have the original residents come back to this building as residents in the renovated units if they would like to”... Numerous studies have shown that, although the region depends on low-wage service workers who support the tech economy, only the ultra-wealthy can afford to live near their jobs. In Silicon Valley, roughly 70,000 low-income workers now commute more than 50 miles to work... “You’re always thinking and worrying. It’s something that is always with me,” ... “We are being forced to move. This is our home.”...Between 2000 and 2013, the number of low-income households in the Bay Area increased by 10%, but the region lost 50% units defined affordable for this population... “It’s a form of gaslighting to have these companies doing so many harmful things telling you how great they are and how much they are helping you. It’s another form of abuse,” ... Veiled by the yellow willows and brush along a

forgotten creek bed in San Jose, hundreds of people jerry-built a treehouse and constructed underground bunkers and ramshackle lean-tos to form one of the nation's largest homeless encampments...In 2013, San Jose and the surrounding Santa Clara County estimated almost 7,600 homeless people, more than in San Francisco. And 75% of them were sleeping outside, on sidewalks, in parks and under freeway embankments — a percentage greater than in any other major U.S. metropolitan area... "You need to work five minimum-wage jobs to afford to live here," ...Three-quarters of the area's 7,567 homeless residents are from Santa Clara County. Most of them live in one of San Jose's 247 tent cities, just miles from the sprawling headquarters of Google and Apple....They've submitted rental applications for more than 20 apartments, he said, but the waiting lists are up to two years long... They ended up here after trying to move from a two-story apartment to a one-floor place to accommodate his wife, who is disabled. But the landlord of the apartment they found turned them away at the last second, and by then, their old apartment had already been rented out... "I'd sleep at the college, they'd bus me here.... Anywhere I went, [police] would harass me," he said. "Once I came here, they stopped harassing me."

The Werewolf Cult of Silicon Valley had no need to literalize their ascendance into the singularity. They had already absented themselves from this human suffering, cordoning themselves off in their privatized buses and social spaces. They were already gone.

Alix's brand of werewolf is borrowed from the great 1981 film *Wolfen*, directed by Michael Wadleigh, whose only other films are avant garde counter-culture documentaries. That film can be read as a treatise on the failed political dreams of the sixties and the rise of deindustrialized wastelands along-side gentrified class war fortresses that was to follow.

In *Cartographies of the Absolute*, Roberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle read this film as a model of cognitive mapping, unveiling “the collapse of radical politics and the emergence of a feral neoliberalism against a backdrop of urban dereliction and redevelopment.” The werewolves are at first compared to anti-colonial Native Americans and radical student leftists. They even go so far as to kill billionaire developers and destroy a model for an upscale apartment complex to be built on the wolves’ rewilded south Bronx hunting grounds. However, these brutal, majestic creatures are denied heroic status. They fight redevelopment because they want to continue preying on the surplus populations that haunt the deindustrialized South Bronx. Finally Toscano and Kinkle compare the wolves to gentrifying artists who form symbiotic relationships with the downtrodden, not as allies, but as predator and prey. No, there was no heroism at the end of the tunnel for Alix, just the insurance of ever-replenishing blood.

I would have preferred to model Alix’s werewolf after the lush feminist werewolf film, *The Company of Wolves*, based on a short story by Angela Carter. In this retelling of the Little Red Riding Hood fairy tale, the sexual implications of Riding hood’s red cape are allowed to unfurl. In a misty fairy land, a young girl learns to trust her sexual power, turns the tables on an aggressive huntsman who stalks her, refuses to either be the passive object of his desire or to deny her own agency. Instead, her transformation into a werewolf is a phantasmal symbol of a woman coming into her own sexuality and voice, emerging from passivity and revelling in her untamed power.

I wish this kind of heroine was available to me, that I could delink my depiction of feminist avenger from the din of suffering that pervades the Silicon Valley and its surrounds. I want to escape the homeless wastelands

for a misty, mythic forest. There, Alix could become a true singularity, overriding the typologies that rise and fall with the bubbles and bursts of the tech economy, including that of the high class prostitute toying with her emotionally damaged tech worker prey. I would like to rewild Alix, make her violence libidinal and pure, to have her run with the wolves, unleash her pure carnality, harness the fantasy of a thousand second-wave feminists howling at the atavistic, elemental, matriarchal, transformational power of the moon. But Alix is pure modernity — predator and prey: both of whom are locked into the Tron-like grid of capitalism's singularity. In the courtroom we see Alix is neither wild nor free. As in the bleak post-war chiaroscuro of film noir, the shadow of bars falls across her face, darkening her defiant glare.

In a moment when crisis and stasis lurk around every corner, it is hard to tell any story, but especially this one. The myth of the werewolf typically references sexual maturation. Her newly awoken hirsute desires are easily translatable to puberty, when carnality stirs and freaks-out a previously innocent child. From there, werewolf myths can go a few different ways. They can be allegories for the primal sin of irrational, destructive, immoral, uncivilized, irresponsible sex. With this interpretation comes a world view that insists on repressing instinct, and thereby nature. Or, the werewolf may be an emblem of spontaneous, liberated, gloriously carnal and embodied sexual empowerment. This is the romantic view of the werewolf, connecting her to nature, obliterating boundaries between human and animal, signifying a desire to return to premodern forms of living.

But here, at the end of the world, where the Werewolf cults of Silicon Valley rampage and party in an etherialized, Walpurgisnacht death dance, sponsored by elite vitamin waters, are either of these narratives available to

Alix? She who has been forced to commodify and rationalize her sex? She who must eat or be eaten? She for whom there is no outside, wilderness, or past that offers escape?

The chiaroscuro prison bars fall across the Silicon Valley as predator and prey howl in auto-tuned harmony, while rewilded marshes, densely populated with the unhoused, reflect in the mirrored glass of tomorrow's sleek neo-feudal death-yachts whose seasteading captains sacrifice the undocumented to a bitcoin sea-monster-god, the rival of she whose name shall never be spoken until the last hacked moonscape turns blood orange and evaporates into the singularity's cruel libertarian nightmare, from which our feral hearts must by force be awakened.