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Will Big Sister Be Watching?

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Digital omniscience meets “the crooked timber of humanity.”

The swinish behavior currently exemplified by Harvey Weinstein is, sorry to say, a constant in history. Indeed, it would be easy to cast the disgraced producer in a lurid film about any one of countless potentates—kings, feudal lords, warrior chieftains, sultans, bishops—who with impunity commanded the sexual services of wives, concubines, slaves, and other subjugated persons. To produce such a film, all it would take would be a quick raid on a studio costume department and the discarding of a certain hotel bathrobe. The star already knows the script.

And so do the rest of us—which is odd, since our society purportedly respects the dignity of every human being. Weinstein confined his swinishness to aspiring actresses, but others throughout history have preyed on both sexes, not to mention children. Today’s potentates—media celebrities, politicians, corporate executives, sports icons, religious leaders, educators, professionals—no longer claim in law what the French nobility once referred to as *droit de cuissage* (roughly translated as “right of the thighs”). But they certainly claim it in practice.

Their ranks a trifle thinned, the media are now taking credit for having exposed a previously unknown problem. Some are calling for an army of empowered women and enlightened men to lead us all into a bright future where the male of the species will cease not only to harass, assault, and rape, but also to act on lustful impulses. No one knows how, exactly, this bright future will be realized. But this is America, where every human problem has a technological fix. So let us appeal to the Titans of Silicon Valley. What advice would they give?

First of all, they would advise using their own highly profitable social media to name-and-shame offenders. This advice has already been followed. Right after

the Weinstein story broke in October, indignant Facebook posts by Ben Affleck and other Hollywood icons attracted tens of thousands of likes, comments, and shares. On Twitter, the hashtag #MeToo is a viral rival to #Gropin-in-Chief. And, as usual, the digital wave is being whipped into a tsunami by broadcast outlets hoping to regain the hefty profit margins reached by last year's blockbuster reality show, *Celebrity Candidate*, starring Donald Trump.

Unfortunately, this naming-and-shaming is unlikely to make much of a dent in behavior that, while ugly, is deeply ingrained in human nature. But rather than despair, let us appeal once again to the Titans. After all, their embrace of innovative disruption shows an impressive disregard for human nature. Perhaps they have been working on some amazing new digital tools that, if deployed correctly, could halt sexual misconduct in its tracks.

As it happens, this is exactly what the Titans have been doing. Every December, *Forbes* chooses a "Businessperson of the Year," and the choice for 2017 is Jen-Hsun ("Jensen") Huang, a U.S. citizen born in Taiwan, who is cofounder and CEO of the semiconductor and software company Nvidia. According to *Forbes*, Nvidia isn't a household name because "it doesn't make a chat app or a search service... meant to appeal to the average smartphone-toting consumer." Instead, Nvidia is a world leader in "developing artificial intelligence systems that can take advantage of the more than one billion video cameras in cities to help manage everything from traffic congestion to parking."

The key to these systems is "deep learning," a term that refers not to serious human thought and reflection but to massive data-processing algorithms that can detect, analyze, and classify billions of distinct visual and auditory patterns. In short, deep learning allows a state-of-the-art surveillance camera to do much more than simply watch us walk down the street. Connected online to a phalanx of super-computers, it can also identify us, eavesdrop on our conversations, and sift through our entire digital footprint, all for the purpose of figuring out where we are headed—and why.

The reader can figure out where *this* is headed. If every luxury hotel, swanky restaurant, executive suite, and yacht frequented by Weinstein and his ilk were equipped with deep-learning technology, which, in addition to recognizing faces and voices, can see in the dark, pinpoint ambient sounds, read documents in multiple languages, and crunch terabytes of information on every individual in its crosshairs, then a lot of women might be spared a lot of pawing, flashing, and slobbering. In other words, if Big Sister were watching, the world would be a better place.

Or would it?

A recent report from the British research firm IHS-Markit states that, "thanks to deep learning, the futuristic type results popularized in films and TV which influences end users' expectations for VCA is significantly closer than ever before." And the report waxes bullish on the industry's long-term prospects: "China is the largest video surveillance market in the world [...] With the numerous large installations of surveillance cameras and massive amounts of video data, the end users in China are eagerly seeking ways to interpret the large amounts of data they collect."

This prediction would be chilling even if the prose did not sound like Google Translate. It is chilling because, although this world-transforming technology was born in Silicon Valley, it has matured in China. As the *Economist* wrote one year ago:

The idea is to harness digitally stored information to chivvy everyone into behaving more honestly. . . . That sounds fair enough. But the government also talks about this as a tool of "social management": i.e., controlling individuals' behavior

In the West, too, the puffs of data that people leave behind them as they go about their lives are being vacuumed up by companies such as Google and Facebook. Those with access to these data will know more about people than people know about themselves. But you can be

fairly sure that the West will have rules—especially where the state is involved. In China, by contrast, the monitoring could result in a digital dystopia. Officials talk of creating a system that by 2020 will “allow the trustworthy to roam everywhere under heaven while making it hard for the discredited to take a single step.”

American society has a long history of moral self-regulation, as opposed to conceding that power to the government. But lately three things have changed. First, America’s moral self-regulation has, like the rest of our politics and culture, become polarized, with blue-state righteousness locked in bitter combat with red-state righteousness. Second, this combat is eroding America’s capacity for moral self-regulation. And third, our technological elites are partnering with the world’s most advanced police state to think up new ways to suppress the liberties on which our nation was founded.

In sum, America has much in common with China these days. Both fear the erosion of social trust and the proliferation of moral and financial corruption. Both have been heavily investing in technological solutions to the daunting task of keeping their citizens safe. In China, the latest stage of this investment is the building of entire “safe cities,” in which each and every citizen can be continually tracked and monitored as part of a vast “social credit system” that rewards and punishes behaviors—and thoughts—deemed correct or incorrect by the authorities.

The two countries are also very different. The Chinese Communist Party justifies building its digital dictatorship with constant allusions to crime and immoral behavior, but under President Xi makes no secret of its deeper intent to fine-tune the system so that it can crush every spark of political dissent. No American leader would admit to a similar intent. But as the leaden prose of IHS-Markit makes clear, the incentives to move in that direction are pretty powerful:

The global market for safe city solutions was estimated to be over \$14 billion in 2016. This is projected to be worth more than \$20 billion by 2021. Big data analytics, increased sensor connectivity through IoT [Internet of Things], and the ability to pool and share resources and ubiquitous access through the cloud will all emerge as key themes into 2017 with agencies and governments wanting to ensure that they are maximizing the use and business case to continue to ensure the success of their safe city deployment and ultimately the safety of their citizens and emergency service front line personnel.

Substitute “control” for “safety” in that final line, and you have the prospect facing us. The worst horrors of the 20th century were committed by totalitarian state actors seeking to straighten out, once and for all, what Kant called “the crooked timber of humanity”—either by exterminating or enslaving certain kinds of people or by eliminating through means of extreme prejudice certain social classes. We should be careful what we wish for.

Published on: December 11, 2017



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