Book Reviews

is easy, the engineer in me is quick to add that the work of designing and developing technology is also difficult, just as science is.

As a computer teacher, I have been invited on a few occasions to speak to parents at schools about navigating a world of digital devices. The truth is, I have only limited practical guidance to offer, and as a parent I have had struggles with this in my own family as well. However, if I should be asked again to speak to parents on this topic, I will heartily recommend this book. Besides parents, this book is suitable for anyone who is seeking ways to "put technology in its place" in their own lives.

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DISRUPTED: My Misadventure in the Start-Up Bubble by Dan Lyons. New York: Hachette Books, 2016. 259 pages. Hardcover; $27.00. ISBN: 9780316306089.

What do you do if you are a 52-year-old journalist who has been laid off because *Newsweek* is reducing its workforce? If you are Dan Lyons, you find out that there are few non-entry-level jobs in journalism and you end up in a tech start-up.

Disrupted chronicles Lyons's uncomfortable journey through this transition. In the book, he describes his shifting emotions as he navigates the transition and turns his journalistic training toward observing the company (and industry) he has joined.

He finds a job at HubSpot, a start-up that is selling marketing software, primarily to small and mid-sized businesses. The company offers ways to get potential customers to contact the business, as opposed to cold contacts or unsolicited advertising.

HubSpot hires him as a high profile journalist/blogger, but once he arrives, the executives who hired him never actually meet with him. He is placed under a manager who is quite young and who has little experience in industry. In fact, the average age of employees is 26—half his age. The company hires many white, middle class workers straight out of college at low wages but with a promise of a fun place to work and a mission to make the world a better place. Lyons characterizes the culture of HubSpot, and many similar companies as (quoting former Zillow employee Rachel Kremer) "the culture of a frat house" (p. 55): free beer and candy, parties and costumes at work, and lots of effort to generate enthusiasm for the company. Lyons likens it to "a cult based around marketing" (p. 48).

It quickly becomes clear that there is a huge cultural divide. Lyons is old and feels ignored by his coworkers. His lack of fit in other ways exacerbates the age difference. He describes himself as a reporter: "Reporters are trained to hate corporate jargon and to eliminate it, not to engage in it. We're expected to be cynical and skeptical, not to be cheerleaders" (p. 56). It does not take long for his cynical, snarky personality to confuse and then alienate him from pretty much everyone else at the company. (Readers who are not comfortable with periodic profanity may find parts of the book disconcerting.)

The book follows his series of misadventures, eventually leading him to leave the company for something more suitable. In the process, he highlights a number of issues that he regards as serious problems in both the company and the tech start-up world. He also has unflattering comments about his managers and coworkers (all but the two company founders are given pseudonyms—such as Cranium, Wingman, Trotsky, and Spinner).

The reader will need to decide whether some of the author's difficulties are self-inflicted or if his coworkers are vindictive and hyper-sensitive. Of greater importance are issues such as the following (he does not limit these issues to HubSpot, but that is the source of his observations):

AGEISM: He takes exception on both moral and business grounds to the dramatic scarcity of workers over forty. Lyons gets into trouble by criticizing, via social media, the following public statement by one of the founders: "In the tech world, gray hair and experience are really overrated. We're trying to build a culture specifically to attract and retain Gen Y'ers" (p. 146).

A LACK OF DIVERSITY: Besides one of the two founders, there are almost no employees who are not white. There are many women, but few of them in executive or board positions (p. 153).

SILICON VALLEY <THE TECH WORLD>: This is "a world where older employees are not wanted, where people get tossed aside when they turn forty. It's a world where employers discriminate on the basis of race and gender, where founders sometimes turn out to be sociopathic monsters, where poorly trained (or completely untrained) managers abuse employees and fire people with impunity, and where workers have little recourse and no job security" (p. 115).

THE START-UP BUSINESS MODEL: Some of Lyon's harshest criticism targets the business model of tech start-ups. HubSpot and many of its peer companies have never made a profit. This does not matter as long as they

keep growing revenue. Once HubSpot has an IPO, the founders and venture capitalist investors will make a lot of money. Even before the IPO, these people at the top are making millions (their personal profits are greater than the hundreds of millions that the company is losing). The company may never make a profit. If there is another tech bubble burst, the mom-and-pop investors in the company and the young employees will lose. Many of those at the top will have already cashed in (pp. 115–17).

> This is the New Work, but really it is just a new twist on an old story, the one about labor being exploited by capital. The difference is that this time the exploitation is done with a smiley face. Everything about this new workplace, from the crazy décor to the change-the-world rhetoric to the hero's journey mythology and the perks that are not really perks—all of these things exist for one reason, which is to drive down the cost of labor so that investors can maximize the return. (p. 121)

HUBSPOT: Lyons makes several pointed criticisms specifically about HubSpot (pp. 42, 97, 103, 113). The founders responded to some of these criticisms in a statement made after the book was published.

After Lyons left ("graduated" in HubSpot speak) and he was close to completing this book, there were news reports about the HubSpot board firing Cranium and Trotsky, and censuring one of the founders. The FBI opened an investigation, but Lyons was unable at that time to find out any clear details, except that the firings related to illegal activities relating to "a book" about the company. One of the company's self-proclaimed core values is transparency. The firing incident highlighted the selective implementation of that value. Lyons eventually obtained a redacted copy of the FBI report. It appears that some bosses resorted to hacking and extortion in a failed attempt to obtain a pre-release copy of the book.

After publication of this book, the two founders of HubSpot held a press conference to discuss the issues raised by Lyons in the book, mostly skirting the issues. One can find transcripts on the Internet.

The epilogue raises one other issue. Many companies, such as HubSpot, have our data even if we have never given it to them. In the case of HubSpot, they store the data generated by the companies who are HubSpot's customers. What is to stop them from mining that second-hand data? (p. 255).

> There's an adage in Silicon Valley that people who use online services are not the customers. We're the product. As far as companies in Silicon Valley are concerned, we exist solely to be packaged up and sold to advertisers. (p. 257)

One motivation for the behaviors Lyons finds objectionable has been a part of the human psyche since the Fall in the Garden of Eden. The Apostle Paul has this to say:

> But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. (1 Tim. 6:9–10, NRSV)

The majority of readers of this review are neither venture capitalists nor tech start-up founders. We may appear to be exempt from all the problems described in the book. A deeper look shows there may be more overlap than we wish to admit. Early in the book Lyons writes:

> *Drinking the Kool-Aid* is a phrase everyone in Silicon Valley uses to describe the process by which ordinary people get sucked into an organization and converted into true believers … Believing that your company is not just about making money, that there is a meaning and a purpose to what you do, that your company has a mission, and that you want to be part of that mission—that is a big prerequisite for working at one of these places. (p. 51)

Those of us who work in academia also tend to think that we are engaged in work that is life- and world-changing (presumably we are). It is important that we periodically measure how well we are accomplishing those goals. Does our work really change lives and make the world a better place, or are we just earning a paycheck? Do we treat our students disrespectfully? Do we look down our noses at staff and other non-academics? Are we in perpetual war with administration? Or, do we truly seek to love and serve all whom we encounter?

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IRRESISTIBLE: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked by Adam Alter. New York: Penguin Press, 2017. 354 pages. Hardcover; $27.00. ISBN: 9781594206641.

For over twenty years, I have been exploring rat models of excessive behaviors—animal parallels to what in humans are now called behavioral addictions. At the same time, I have acquired a number of technological devices—computers (desktop and laptop), iPods, iPads, and smartphones (both BlackBerry and iPhone)—but I have not developed much of a technological presence. I use my computers for work and my mobile devices for email, texting family, and keeping my schedule (I do have one app—a local