

“With great power”: Some advice for the technology industry

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Every day, I’m proud to help the technology industry and its ecosystem come together, succeed, and change the world. But Spiderman’s Uncle Ben and Winston Churchill had it right: *with great power comes great responsibility*. We in tech now have great power. To use it well -- and not have it stripped away from us-- we need to focus on the enlightened long-term interests of our industry and the people we serve. That starts with understanding our role and responsibility, and engaging with those we affect.

We have plenty of historical examples of industries which failed to do this. Most of us can recall companies that obfuscated or denied their impact on health or the environment, even as that evidence grew to the contrary. Most of us have seen companies blame customers for negative impacts of their products -- even as those companies invested immense resources in promoting dependence or even physical addiction.

We in tech can do better. And we can draw on our own cultural roots to do so.

Most people I know in technology joined the business not only to build wealth -- or because we love to compete (though we certainly do) -- but also to make a difference in the world. Most of us have been attracted by tech’s foundations in logic, science, and meritocracy: a device or app works well if it’s been designed and built well, not because somebody powerful and important *says* it does. We need to apply the same principles to our societal impacts.

As an example, let’s consider one issue that’s gotten an awful lot of publicity lately: *screen time, which is time spent using a device such as a smartphone, tablet, computer, television, or games console*. This has gotten an awful lot of publicity lately. Perhaps most notably, Dr. Jean Twenge has published findings correlating the rapid growth of smartphones and social media with abrupt deterioration in the rising generation’s attention spans, mental health, and ability to form intimate connections.

While some may find Twenge’s results questionable, worrisome evidence links excessive screen time to obesity and sleep disturbance. Furthermore, as the American Academy of Pediatrics notes, heavy parental use of mobile devices tends to reduce the interactions with children that create emotional connection, improve child health outcomes, and promote development of language, cognition, social skills, and self-regulation of emotion.

Despite naysayers, Twenge could well turn out to be at least partly right about her claims. As a parent, I for one am still limiting my 7 and 10 year old daughters' screen time disproportionately, compared to their friends. My girls are close to disowning me -- but I personally doubt I'll regret my strict stand in the years to come.

As for us in the tech industry, what do we do with the admittedly imperfect knowledge we have about screen time? To begin with, we ought to help promote objective research in the field, and resist the temptation to reflexively minimize it. Then, perhaps, we ought to consider how such findings affect the way we invest in (and build) our products and services.

Some of us might conceivably adjust business models found to be overly dependent on generating dopamine hits. Finally, when a preponderance of evidence does arise, we shouldn’t use the excuse of imperfect knowledge to avoid action -- any more than we would in planning other business strategies and investments.

Screen time is, of course, just one example. But it points to a wider lesson that applies in areas ranging from privacy to fake news, genetic testing to machine learning. Some disruptions are improvements. But some aren’t. And disrupters share responsibility for trying to tell the difference.

