

# Opinion: Silicon Valley keeps us stuck in the political past

By Joe Mathews

As long as Silicon Valley and its futuristic technologies dominate our politics, we're doomed to stay stuck in the past.

The big story of the poisonous 2016 elections was how new digital media tools ended up crowding out two big topics from our conversation: the present and the future.



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This phenomenon went beyond the controversy about “fake news” on Facebook; the problem wasn't just quality—but excessive quantity. California and the entire country were deluged by digital tidal waves of data and information from months, years and decades ago.

Many of these were dredged-up video clips or photos or records of the candidates and their families and associates. There were endless emails from old hacks and investigations, followed by all the historical echoes, endlessly debated and rehashed, which kept us refighting the Cold War, J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, the Clinton impeachment, 1980s New York real estate and 17 waves of feminism. Donald Trump and his acolytes

kept offering bogus ideas that refuse to go away—that President Obama wasn't born here, that vaccines cause autism, that immigrants add to crime in the United States.

Because these waves never stop, those who have some interest in the truth are left to explain—over and over—easily verifiable truths and old history. All this record-correcting leaves no time or bandwidth for conversations about the present (What to do about the wars that have been wound down but aren't over? How to take advantage of rising employment and wages to invest in infrastructure and reckon with national debt?), much less the future (How is this aging country going to make itself healthier, better educated, and more economically competitive?).

With all the past crowding out any conversation about today or tomorrow, the stakes of the election were never made clear—especially about how the result might affect our role in the world.

All of this is bad—but the really bad news is that, in four years, we're likely to look back at 2016 as the good old days.

Smart people in Silicon Valley say the digital media world is growing so fast (with more people around the world going online every day), that future ill-conceived regurgitations from the past could be even more destructive to our democracy. New immersive technologies—augmented reality, virtual reality—will allow us to invent out of whole cloth whatever past serves our purposes, and make it impossible for our brains to separate fact from fiction. Anyone with a modicum of knowhow will be able to create digital experiences of candidates saying or doing things they never said or did.

This is a public health problem, as surely as an epidemic of opioid overdoses. The more political noise, the less political understanding. The more data, the less coherence. The digital age is not just the “post-fact” era; more dangerously, as

Politico recently warned, it's the "post-narrative" age of democracy. If you can't follow the story, it's because there isn't one.

There is not nearly enough thinking about how to save democracy from media. Much commentary offers the false hope that the deluge of the digital past is somehow self-correcting, that the media culture has finally hit bottom and will reform itself. The free speech folks say you can fix pernicious and inaccurate speech with more speech—but more speech actually makes the problem worse.

The more serious, but less common conversation, involves giving people more tools to stop the flow. Should we allow people to litigate and recover damages more easily for sins visited upon them on the web? Do we want to regulate social media platforms more extensively?

I find the most intriguing approaches economic. Is it possible to create financial consequences for constant past-sharing and tweets and Facebook posts that pollute our civic culture?

Sam Lessin, a former Facebook vice president writing at The Information, suggested a tax on political coverage. If CNN, for example, wants to spend 50 percent of its time on election coverage, it should give 50 percent of its revenue to the government. "That would basically say that you can't profit off the public discourse at all," wrote Lessin. "We the people own it."

Or we could create incentives for companies to change their designs to reduce the pollution around elections. Could our smartphones be designed to keep us from constantly picking them up? Could social media sites be reshaped to slow people down, and require them consider or verify posts before hitting send? One suggestion: certifications for companies that agree to certain standards that encourage more limited, healthier media usage.

Somehow, and soon, we need new ideas that raise the costs of deluging us with the past—if the present and the future are ever again to have a fighting chance.

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