Unelected Digital Sovereigns? A Review of *The Tech Coup*

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Marietje Schaake's *The Tech Coup* is a well-informed and urgent call to action about the unchecked power of big tech companies and the existential threat they pose to democracy. As international policy director at Stanford University Cyber Policy Center and international policy fellow at Stanford's Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence, Schaake serves on the UN Secretary General's High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence, is a Special Advisor to European Commission President Margrethe Vestager. Also a member of President Macron's Tech Thinkers Group, Schaake is well-positioned to critique the way Silicon Valley has infiltrated nearly every aspect of modern life, far beyond innovation and commerce. She argues that companies like Google, Meta, X, and Amazon have accumulated influence beyond what governments ever anticipated, often with little oversight or accountability. These tech giants are no longer just businesses; they have become global power players that shape economies, social norms, and even political systems. Unlike traditional monopolies of the past, which dominated specific industries, today's tech behemoths cut across multiple sectors, influencing everything from how we communicate to how elections are won and lost.

One of the book's most emphatic points is how tech corporations have, in many ways, become more powerful than the governments meant to regulate them. Their vast resources allow them to lobby aggressively against any attempts at meaningful oversight. Schaake describes how these companies operate with near-sovereign authority, setting their own rules, evading regulation, and influencing policymakers to protect their interests. She explains how these corporations determine the flow of information, shaping what we see, read, and believe. Algorithms dictate what news stories trend, what voices are amplified, and which perspectives are buried. In doing so, they subtly—or sometimes overtly—shape public discourse and, by extension, the political landscape.

Schaake is especially critical of how these companies frame themselves as champions of free speech and innovation while actively undermining democratic institutions. She highlights the hypocrisy of Silicon Valley leaders who claim to be empowering individuals while simultaneously profiting from surveillance capitalism, misinformation, and algorithmic manipulation. A major challenge, she argues, is that governments—especially in the U.S.—have been slow to respond, either due to political paralysis or outright complicity. "For too long, too much trust has been placed in tech companies without making sure that their technology operates within the parameters of the rule of law and

supports democratic outcomes." Many policymakers lack the technical expertise to understand the extent of the problem, while others are simply too close to the industry to be impartial. Campaign donations and lobbying efforts ensure that meaningful reform rarely gets off the ground. She points to the European Union as one of the few global actors taking real steps toward regulation, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Digital Services Act. However, these efforts are still fragmented and often face pushback from American companies determined to maintain their dominance.

Schaake also discusses how tech executives and venture capitalists have formed alliances with populist and libertarian political figures who prioritize deregulation. In their worldview, government intervention is always the enemy—even when it's necessary to protect democracy. The result is a system where Silicon Valley is not just disrupting industries but also undermining democratic governance itself.

Beyond their impact on democratic governments, Schaake also highlights the ways in which tech companies enable and even strengthen autocratic regimes. She argues that while Silicon Valley presents itself as a beacon of freedom and progress, its business practices have frequently aligned with authoritarian interests. Whether through selling surveillance technology, enabling censorship, or providing data access to oppressive regimes, tech giants have repeatedly compromised democratic values in pursuit of profit. She drives home her point and humanizes this argument with

her opening story about a man who escaped from Iran after surveillance technology exposed him and other protesters from their hideouts and led to their arrest. As she says, "those who praised the democratizing possibilities of technology and social media platforms failed to appreciate that repressive authoritarian regimes could be tech-savvy too." Platforms that promise to connect the world and foster open dialogue often become instruments of control, allowing authoritarian leaders to monitor dissent, spread propaganda, and manipulate their populations with unprecedented efficiency.

Despite the bleak picture Schaake paints, she avoids leaving the reader without hope. She argues that democratic institutions can still reassert control if there is the political will to do so. Her proposed solutions include stronger antitrust enforcement to break up monopolies, stricter data privacy laws to protect consumers, and global cooperation to ensure tech companies cannot evade regulation by shifting operations across borders. She emphasizes that governments should treat digital tech companies as they do pharmaceutical companies—requiring strict criteria, thorough vetting, and operating within checks and balances—rather than pushing untested experiments on the public. She also highlights the importance of public awareness and activism, urging citizens to demand better policies and greater accountability from their governments.

Not a rejection of technology *per se, The Tech Coup* calls for a more thoughtful and democratic approach to regulating it. "This is not a book against technology but in favor

of democracy." Coming from someone who has been on the front lines of tech policy debates, this view is promising. Schaake has firsthand experience negotiating with tech companies, drafting legislation, and pushing for reforms in the European Parliament. Her expertise shines through and makes her arguments all the more credible.

For those who believe in the promise of democracy, *The Tech Coup* is both a wake-up call and a roadmap. Schaake reminds us that democracy is not something we can take for granted—it must be actively defended. And in a world where a handful of tech executives hold an outsized amount of power, that fight has never been more urgent. Because everyone has a stake in democracy and technology, she makes the effort to shape the book as a lively narrative with accessible language, relatable examples, and compelling case studies. The book is a must-read for policymakers, technologists, and citizens alike.