UC SANTA BARBARA

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A Rude Awakening

A one-time mentor to Mark Zuckerberg and an early investor in Facebook, Roger McNamee in 2006 advised “Zuck,” as the social media behemoth’s CEO is known to friends, not to sell the company for $1 billion, and later recommended that he hire Sheryl Sandberg.

Then the bloom fell off the rose. Ultimately, McNamee said, he “could no longer sit quietly watching the head of one of the world’s most powerful companies fail to address the damage it was doing, and that failure’s catastrophic results.”

In “Zucked: Waking Up to the Facebook Catastrophe” (Penguin Press, February 2019), McNamee delivers an enthralling personal narrative and a fascinating explication of the forces that, he argues, have conspired to put our democracy and our public health in danger. Built around the story of Facebook and its leadership, the book tells a larger tale of a business sector unmoored from normal constraints, and at “the worst possible time.”

McNamee, co-founder of Elevation Partners, a longtime Silicon Valley investor, and technical advisor, for four seasons, on HBO’s “Silicon Valley” series, will discuss his book and the questions it raises during a visit to UC Santa Barbara Wednesday, May 1. He will give a free public lecture at 7 p.m. in the campus’s Lotte Lehmann Concert Hall.

“When I wrote my book, I wrote it as a lifelong, or at least a career-long, tech optimist who had come to see the dark side and felt it was important to call

attention to it and get a conversation started," McNamee said in an interview. "To me what's really powerful is that all problems create a business opportunity. For the students at UC Santa Barbara the opportunity is to create solutions to the problems created by Google, Facebook and the other internet platforms. This also is an opportunity to contribute intellectually to the discussion of what should the values of a business be and how exactly should societies behave when corporations lose their way and threaten the broad population."

Prior to his public lecture, McNamee will meet with a small group of students and faculty members for a conversation and Q&A session to examine issues addressed in his book, broader concerns about social media and the tech sector and, perhaps, talk potential solutions.

"There's still a lot we need to be asking about Facebook's effects on people — how strong or how potent or how real they are, and what kind of evidence there is," said Joe Walther, Mark and Susan Bertelsen Presidential Chair in Technology and Society at UC Santa Barbara and co-organizer of McNamee's visit. "We want to learn more about how people do or don't anticipate negative technology effects and how to select among various corporate, social and institutional models for confronting them. What happens if big changes are made to Facebook and in the regulatory environment for all social media? And human value questions, such as who should get to decide how each of us voluntarily uses media?

"Roger McNamee has produced a fascinating record that weaves together important developments from a number of different sectors — technological development, corporations, law, psychology and politics," added Walther, also director of the campus's Center for Information Technology & Society (CITS). "That's a great fit for UCSB's interdisciplinary tendencies, and the CITS's mission to explore questions that are too big for any discipline to solve on its own. It dovetails well with our research on fake news and online hate, the influence of algorithms on perception and action, the potential of AI and machine learning to solve problems in human systems, the economics of decision-making and a number of other issues."

The danger to public health, McNamee said, stems from what he describes as the "deeply flawed business model of platforms like Google, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter and Reddit, where they've essentially gained enormous value and power by amplifying emotional signals without having any safeguards."

In fact, McNamee writes in his book, these companies have surveilled our actions online and monetized users' personal data and, in the process, fostered hate speech, conspiracy theories and disinformation, and enabled interference in elections. The first step toward mitigating these damages, he concludes, is to cultivate public pressure to do so.

"Where have I given permission in my credit card transactions for the credit card companies to sell my data? I can't figure that out," McNamee said. "Why is it legal for Google to scan our emails and documents for behavioral info? What are the legitimate uses of data? These are really important questions. The way I see it, the challenge we face is not about right versus left; it's about right versus wrong. And everyone has an opportunity to contribute to the answer."

"I will try to engage in a conversation with students and other members of the UCSB community about the issues as I see them, the issues as they see them and see if we can't collectively come up with some approaches for addressing the problems," he continued. "If I can be helpful to the students to think about things like this, that's my goal. To help kids be part of the solution, because it has to be this generation."

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.