Alexis Ohanian (left) and Steve Huffman founded the social-media website Reddit in 2005.

INTERNET

# The rancorous rise of Reddit

**Timo Hannay** extols a history of the website's evolution in our tumultuous era.

According to Internet-analytics company Alexa.com, the websites with most traffic from the United States are Google, YouTube, Facebook and Amazon (which owns Alexa). The rest of the top ten is composed of other familiar names —Yahoo!, Twitter, Wikipedia, Instagram and LinkedIn. But one entry might surprise. Not only is it listed at an impressive number five, but it beats all the others hands down in terms of time spent by each user. Welcome to Reddit.
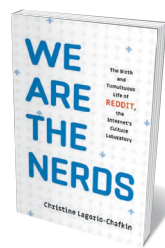
*We Are the Nerds* by journalist Christine Lagorio-Chafkin traces Reddit's emergence in 2005, and its evolution as a website, company and social phenomenon. Ostensibly, it's the story of co-founders Steve Huffman (the technical brains) and Alexis Ohanian (the showman). But it is really three tales in one.

The first story is that of a scrappy start-up destined for web domination. Superficially, this resembles the legend of Apple founder Steve Jobs: foundation, separation, return and redemption. Reddit's sale to New York-based magazine publisher Condé Nast in 2006, just over a year after launch, bestowed wealth and credibility on its young founders, but it was a cultural mismatch. Huffman and Ohanian lost heart; by 2010, both had left, their friendship strained. Feted replacements such as

investor Ellen Pao never quite embodied the Reddit spirit. Crises followed, from staff rebellions to a spate of revenge porn between users. Neatly for the narrative arc, a 2015 rapprochement led to Huffman and Ohanian's surprise return — and the revitalization of their wayward creation.

The second story concerns the early-twenty-first-century technology industry. Here, Reddit is a node in a network of technologists, entrepreneurs and iconoclasts seeking to reshape the world. The reader feels like Forrest Gump, stumbling from one remarkable event or person to the next.

Science publishing makes an appearance, albeit a tragic one. Hired at the start of Reddit's journey, programmer Aaron Swartz quickly became more taken with campaigning than coding. Incensed by publishers' paywalls, he covertly downloaded millions of academic articles, and was caught. The ensuing legal



**We Are the Nerds: The Birth and Tumultuous Life of Reddit, the Internet's Culture Laboratory**
CHRISTINE LAGORIO-CHAFKIN
*Hachette (2018)*

battle ended in 2013, when this principled, sensitive young man killed himself, aged 26.

As this second narrative unfolds, readers might lose track of the vast array of walk-on parts. But for anyone familiar with the names, it's a who's who of nerd aristocracy, from Paul Graham, co-founder of Y Combinator in Mountain View, California (the start-up incubator that begat Reddit) to Chris Anderson, former editor-in-chief of technology magazine *Wired*. It is also a reminder of how few people comprise the circles of influence in the parochial but powerful world of the web.

The third story traces the rise of social media from the perspective of one of its most important players. If Facebook lets users cultivate online personas and Twitter enables them to broadcast random thoughts to the world, Reddit was built to foster discussion. Whatever one thinks about the social costs and benefits of such services, they are no longer mere geeky distractions. They are central to the perceptions of billions, and have become cultural and political battlegrounds.

In August 2012, it all seemed positively wholesome. At the University of Virginia in Charlottesville (where Huffman and Ohanian met), then-US president Barack Obama took part in an Ask Me Anything or AMA, a Reddit staple in which anyone from A-listers to the

terminally obscure (I've done two) answers questions. Obama was a natural, typing his own answers and signing off with a Reddit catchphrase: "NOT BAD!". The crowd went wild. Four years later, it was all very different.

Reddit, as *We Are the Nerds* shows, was always a venue for the edgy and degenerate, fostered in part by its anonymity. But by 2016, some of this was going mainstream. The forum (or 'subreddit') r/The_Donald had become an important cheerleader for a divisive US presidential campaign. The volunteer moderators kept just inside the rules. It became a prolific disseminator of misleading memes — with consequences that everyone now knows but no one yet fully comprehends. If Obama was the presidential incarnation of change-the-world techno-optimism, Trump now personified a revenge of the trolls.

In August 2017, white supremacists and opposition demonstrators went head-to-head in Charlottesville. Huffman was furious, and the incident triggered a clampdown on certain far-right groups across Reddit. This was a major milestone on the journey from the site's freewheeling origins to a dawning realization that online communities, like societies, need rules. An obvious question is why unaccountable individuals such as Huffman (or Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, or Twitter's Jack Dorsey) should be the ones setting them.
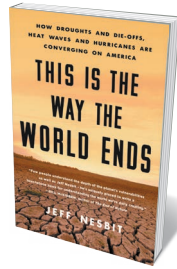
The story of social media is ironic. The most powerful decentralizing technologies in history — the Internet and the web — have led to the greatest concentrations of power. Friction-free information and the death of distance have not ushered in a new Enlightenment, but enabled every crackpot belief and bile-drenched enmity to gain adherents. Technologists, anxious to avoid any 'single point of failure' in their systems (the reason everything from disk drives to data centres is duplicated) have built single points of failure for society. A well-aimed post or algorithmic tweak can mislead, enrage and divide on a national or global scale. At its all-too-common worst, this is not so much social software as social malware.

The main story of the book ends on a high. Huffman is the boss of a major website valued at well over US$1 billion. Ohanian, Reddit's first promoter and now its executive chair, is a celebrity (and married to tennis phenomenon Serena Williams). To paraphrase Jobs, both have helped to put a dent in the Universe.

But this is no happily-ever-after fairy tale. *We Are the Nerds* describes how Reddit began. The real story is how the site and its ilk will change the world. On that, we're still in Act One — and the story is being written by us all, one thoughtful blogpost or belligerent tweet at a time. ∎

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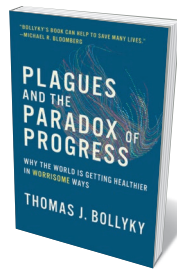*e-mail: timo@hannay.net*

# Books in brief

### This Is the Way the World Ends
*Jeff Nesbit* THOMAS DUNNE *(2018)*
Environmental expert Jeff Nesbit delivers a scientifically rich overview of how the impacts of climate change are affecting natural resources in the here and now. He reveals how oceanic and atmospheric shifts are triggering losses in species from pollinating insects to phytoplankton, fatal heatwaves are becoming regional norms and water stress could spark new waves of mass migration. Nesbit's blueprint for surviving these systemic issues — centring on efficient resource use, innovation and infrastructure — is arguably sketchy, but overall this is a cogent analysis of a creeping crisis.

### Plagues and the Paradox of Progress
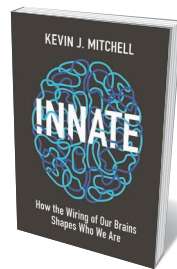*Thomas J. Bollyky* MIT PRESS *(2018)*
From polio to tuberculosis, infectious diseases are no longer the leading cause of death in any region. Yet this triumph is paradoxical, argues Thomas Bollyky in this rich, incisive study. Bollyky, director of the Global Health Program at US think tank the Council on Foreign Relations, shows that in too many lower-income countries, any gains in public health are counterbalanced by poor health-care systems, illiberal governance, low employment, rampant urbanization and booming populations. A thoughtful reminder of the social, economic and political complexities inherent in sustainable public health.

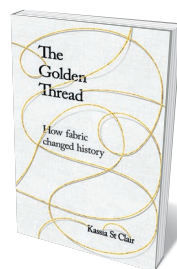### Wally Funk's Race for Space
*Sue Nelson* WESTBOURNE *(2018)*
In 1961, as NASA made superstars of astronauts such as John Glenn, their medical supervisor, William Randolph Lovelace II, was secretly training 13 female flying aces for space. The 'Mercury 13' programme was axed, but the ambitions of trainee Wally Funk never died. In this compelling portrait, space journalist Sue Nelson reveals how Funk (now nearly 80) became the first female US aviation-safety inspector, has hobnobbed with luminaries such as Italian astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti, and is in training for the first Virgin Galactic flight. As Nelson notes: "What a life she has had while fighting to right a wrong."

### Innate
*Kevin J. Mitchell* PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS *(2018)*
The nexus of neuroscience and genetics can be murky. Not so in neuroscientist Kevin Mitchell's study on human diversity, which probes with clarity and balance how variation in our genetic program causes variation in outcome. Mitchell reveals that environmental effects tend to amplify, not counteract, innate differences. He uses that framework to examine psychological domains such as perception, conditions including schizophrenia, and the dubious ethical and social implications of 'designer babies' and other trends. A powerful antidote to genetic determinism.

### The Golden Thread: How Fabric Changed History
*Kassia St Clair* JOHN MURRAY *(2018)*
Fabrics are knitted into human history, from the Silk Road to the mechanical looms of the Industrial Revolution. Here, design writer Kassia St Clair explores the connection in 13 beautifully wrought stories. We visit a cave in Georgia's Caucasus Mountains where dyed fibres more than 30,000 years old have been discovered; goggle at the starched intricacy of sixteenth-century lace ruffs; flinch over astronauts' nappies and the sodden sleeping bags of early polar expeditions; and savour the idea of materials spun from spiders' webs. A joyful commingling of text and textiles. **Barbara Kiser**