

Joe Toscano

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How to take on Big Tech and build better data systems.

Joe Toscano, award-winning designer, published author and international keynote speaker left a consultancy role at Google because he felt the industry was misusing data. Here he talks to Jane Wakefield about his journey.

There was no one 'road to Damascus' moment for Joe Toscano as he considered leaving his comfortable six-figure salaried consultancy role at Google, but increasingly he realised that he had to speak out about what he was seeing.

"What made me leave were the practices I saw within the Valley that I felt were unethical."

More specifically, he was involved in user experience research which he felt was not being conducted in the right way.

"One project I was working on, there were some questions about Google search that they wanted user experience feedback on and the way that they had asked the questions was self-reinforcing. Asking a leading question to get the answer that you want when you're a monopoly just reinforces your monopoly."

And he wasn't happy about how it used data either.

"Google is basically a giant data slush fund. You sign up for one Google product and that data can go throughout the entire eco-system."

He remembers feeling "terrified" about speaking out against the tech giant.

"I was super-scared they'd sue me."

It was 2017 and still relatively early days for whistleblowing. Christopher Wylie and Brittany Kaiser had taken on Facebook over its association with Cambridge Analytica, while Edward Snowden had, a few years earlier, exposed the data practices of the NSA.

"Joe didn't want to be labelled as a

whistleblower partly because his blue collar parents had taught him to always do things "on the straight and narrow".

"I really tried to do that. I went to my boss multiple times and I said these are leading questions that are going to lead to results that realistically should not even be questions in the first place. And more or less every time, I was just told to shut my mouth and continue working. I was basically told 'this is our biggest client, so please don't mess it up'."

Joe decided that the best route was to leave and speak out, but he was worried that he had damaged his own career.

"I sold everything I had, I broke my lease in San Francisco and got into a two door Coupe and I started travelling anywhere that would have me. I spent two and a half months on the road with no home."

Home was in Nebraska and that is where he eventually ended up, back at his parents' house dealing with the mental anxiety of "leaving such a comfortable job and wondering if I'm going to be hireable for the rest of my life".

But just a year later Joe had written a book - Automated Humanity - and taken part in Netflix's Social Dilemma, which exposed on the big screen the issues that had been swirling around in Silicon Valley for more than a decade.

"That was the first time that I felt that I could take a breath because I was like 'okay, it's out and people accept it and they're on our side,'" Joe tells me.

Since leaving Google, Joe has spoken at thousands of events around the globe, from schools to companies wanting to make changes to how they do business.

And he is keen to point out that the problem wasn't just with Google, but rather

with the whole tech industry in Silicon Valley, which from 2010 onwards employed user experience designers, many of whom did not have data science or data ethics backgrounds as Joe did.

"It's not because they're malicious it is because the field was evolving so fast that everyone was trying to fill holes before the ship sank."

In his book, he gives the example of Facebook gathering user feedback on making phone calls via Messenger.

"There were five stars to choose from, where one is poor, two is fair, three good, four very

good and five excellent. That means four out of five of those options are fair or better, so it's a leading question."

"So let's say Zuckerberg has to go to Congress and they ask how people like the Facebook Messenger experience. Legally and honestly Zuckerberg can say at least 80% think it is fair or better. But that's not



And that allowed me to be stronger in my language. When I was presenting and talking about things, I didn't tiptoe around things as much. I felt that I'm safe to talk about these things and I definitely knew my career had not ended."

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necessarily true - it is just because of the way the question was asked.”

He compares Big Tech to the tobacco industry which spent millions of dollars lobbying the US government but ultimately fell into decline because it faced thousands of lawsuits from those whom its products had harmed.

And this, he says “opens the door to competitors such as OpenAI, which burst onto the scene in November last year with its generative AI platform ChatGPT.”

It seemed to take Meta and Google – both who have big ambitions for AI – by surprise.

Google responded by rushing out its Large Language Model, Bard, some say before it was ready.

Joe says that for years the industry was in the shadow of the big tech firms.

“I think most tech entrepreneurs over the last five or 10 years have really felt that Big Tech is the be all and end all and it can never be pushed back on

or fought against.”

Joe’s issues with Silicon Valley weren’t just limited to how Big Tech did business, but with the wider culture of that little pocket of Southern California, a place that he found alien as a Midwestern boy from a state of just three million.

“When you are in Silicon Valley and your car breaks down and the tyre pops, you call a professional. In Nebraska when your computer breaks down you call a professional but most of the people can change your tyre. It’s different ways of thinking about the world, different ways of life. This is what makes the world special.”

““

I don’t think it will be one thing that takes down Big Tech and I don’t think anti-trust is the answer. I do think that the lawsuits that are happening against abuses of data are dragging them down slowly and distracting them from being productive.”

“Growing up I had a very pleasant life, living in a lot of green, a lot of trees – it wasn’t until my early 20s that I realised how far behind our state was.”

That differing mindset meant that when he aced his Maths exams and graduated high school, it was suggested he become a Maths professor.

“If I’d got

that score in California, they would have said go to Stanford or Cal Poly and do rocket science or build computers.”

He opted instead to find balance in his academics by studying humanities, picking up a Psychology degree at the University of Nebraska, later teaching himself to code and moving to Colorado to build his tech career.

When he moved to San Francisco, he immediately felt like an outsider.

“In Nebraska if you walk down the sidewalk and you look someone in the eyes, you say hello even if they are a stranger. Moving to San Francisco, nobody talked to you.”

These days Joe is based in New York, a city he finds far friendlier than San Francisco. And he is back on the tech entrepreneur path - concentrating on building a new platform called DataGrade.

“We have grades for restaurants or movies, but we don’t have it for the internet

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Everyone was on their phone. And I felt everyone was alone together – just like the book says, constantly with people but always alone because nobody is actually connected to anything besides their phone.”

and I want to build that.”

The tool builds profiles of companies and their data practices. It is aimed both at educating the public but it is also a for-profit exercise aimed at data protection officers, privacy lawyers and companies with an interest in good data practices.

“I originally started off trying to make it a non-profit but I realised that if I want to make any kind of significant impact on these companies, I need more money. So I needed to figure out a business model that would allow me to inject a lot of capital fast and earn money to make change.”

For now, and probably for the next decade, he says that his focus will be on building DataGrade.

“Privacy is a huge, huge thing for me.”

And he remains optimistic about how data and privacy will evolve in our ever more digital world.

“The younger generation are far more tech savvy and are taking control of how



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they share their data.”

“When I speak at schools I ask the kids who has a VPN and most of them raise their hands. It’s not because they are tech wizards or trying to protect their data, it’s because they are trying to get around the network at their school.

“And they enter false data into systems because they understand that if they give

fake information the systems don’t know who they are. So that allows them to be online without the companies being able to track them.”

And without real data, big tech will be truly hamstrung. Something that brings a little smile to Joe’s face tells me.



What are your three top tips for business?

- Define metrics that can easily be discussed among team members and educate those who don’t understand—business is better when everyone understands the goal.
- Leverage those metrics to find and invest in efficiencies but don’t forget that investing in the crazy ideas is what got you to where you are.
- Remember performance and impact isn’t always quantifiable.

What is the best advice you have ever received?

You can’t make impact without money. Of course we can all make small, every day impact on others around us without much money but if you really want to change the world you need money and a lot of it. Being from a blue collar family, this piece of advice helped me change the way I think about money. Rather than having shame about asking for money or charging more money for work, as I think a lot of blue collar families raise their children—we’re taught it’s greedy and everyone should learn to just be happy with life with or without money, I began thinking about how much change I could make if I had more. Those six words set me free.

If you weren’t a tech consultant, what would you be?

A chef. In fact, I’m in the process of building my own permaculture farm in Colorado so that some day I can retire making my own food and cooking for people.

Tell me something surprising about you?

I picked up longboarding several years ago because I was traveling the world with very little money as I bootstrapped my work so I bought a longboard because, unlike a bike, I could take it on a plane as carry-on, I saved on Uber + Lyft, and I got exercise all in one addition to my life. I’ve since really come to love the sport and ride on a regular basis throughout NYC.

What’s the piece of tech, other than your phone, that you couldn’t be without?

Bose Headphones. I love music and I’m constantly listening to something.