BOOK REVIEW

Four companies owning the future

The Four: the Hidden DNA of Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google, by Scott Galloway, London, Bantam Press, 2017, 301 pp., $17, ISBN 9780593077894

What is the digital economy going to look like in the future? How much power and influence will information and communication technology companies have over our lives? What will they know about each one of us?

If you are asking yourself these questions, you are still living in the past. This is one of the powerful messages of Scott Galloway’s best-selling book, The Four: the hidden DNA of Amazon, Apple, Facebook and Google. In the first five chapters of this 300-page book, the author explores the identity of the companies mentioned in the title. In a realistic – and sarcastic – analysis of what the new digital economy already looks like, Galloway argues that, in their way to becoming a US$1 trillion company, these ‘Four’ huge agents have conquered enough power to change our lifestyles, make us dependent on them and control strategic shares of consumer market.

Chapters Six to Eight are dedicated to the study of the business environment of the digital economies, including an anthropological analysis of how every business appeals to one of three human organs: the brain, the heart or the genitals. It is in the chapter Nine where the author says that a ‘Fifth horseman’ could show up and add to the Four, or replace one of them – and Galloway tries to guess who, making a list of candidates including Alibaba, Tesla, Uber, Walmart, Microsoft, Airbnb, IBM, and others. Chapter Ten is a business class on how to become a successful professional in such a fast and competitive environment, while in chapter 11 Galloway concludes his remarks.

The Four have, indeed, improved our lives in many ways, especially when it comes to comfort and efficiency. But they did not do it for charity. In the words of Pope Francis, whom the author briefly quotes at least twice, these companies act as if they were guided by an ‘idolatry of money’. They are determined to grow just as much as they can, aiming at the infinite, and working hard to dominate every possible market. They are able to do so either by creating new consumer needs or by eliminating and subjugating their opponents. And, they do it with the consent of most national governments.

They grew so much that their businesses are now starting to compete among themselves. ‘Apple was a machine, Amazon a store, Google a search engine, and Facebook a social network. (…) the four giants have moved inexorably into each other’s turf’ (p. 92). Apple is the most innovative company of our times, Amazon is probably the most reputable, Facebook is the best to work for and Google is the one we trust the most, says Galloway (p. 130).

The Four have strongly influenced public decisions in their favor, thereupon avoiding paying taxes, hiring very few employees – in proportion to their market cap – and finding ways to escape any serious public control. In addition, they do know more about our habits, places, tastes and relationships than we could ever imagine. Probably much more than we would like, too. They cross check our information among their different businesses – between Facebook and Instagram, for example – and thus know which products are best to offer us.

For the author, ‘understanding the Four gives insight into our digital age and a greater capacity to build economic security for you and your family’ (p. 268). Galloway’s attempt is to help us with both tasks, something that he successfully accomplishes. Everyone who somehow relates to the Four would gain a lot from the reading. And even those – fewer
and fewer – people who do not buy on Amazon, do not have an iPhone, who neither ask questions to Google nor have a Facebook profile… they all should know this: Our society relies on these Four companies more than it has ever done with any other in the past.

And yet, the Four are not always giving their share of public contribution to build a better world. Galloway advises Apple, for example, to use its social capital and its good image ‘to found the largest tuition-free university in the world’ (p. 93). Apple, which has built to itself an image of a luxury brand, has a huge network of almost 500 stores in 19 countries. This, says the business professor, guarantees Apple’s survival and it could be a starting point for doing social good. ‘Apple has cash, brand, skills, and market opening to really dent the universe. Or … they could just make a better screen for their next phone’ (p. 95).

The decisions and investments the Four are making will directly affect us, whether we are aware of the process or not. Imagine, for instance, Amazon’s plan to improve the efficiency of their delivery system until no one else can do better than they. The company is also willing to increase the use of robots and drones. ‘Amazon is going underwater with the world’s largest oxygen tank, forcing other retailers to follow it, match its prices, and deal with changed customer delivery expectations’ (p. 39). Competing against Amazon will force other business to change … or die.

The size and power of these companies would allow them to give real and huge contributions to society. And ‘if size matters (it does), Facebook may be the most successful thing in the history of humankind’ (p. 96). It holds 2 billion users in its hands. Facebook is changing the way we relate to others. ‘It’s easy to be skeptical about Facebook, especially with all of the self-promotion, fake news, and groupthink spread on the platform. But it’s also hard to deny it nurtures relationships, even love’ (p. 102).

But then, if Facebook is focused only on guiding us through our next acquisition, it will become a literally violent platform – as it already is in many cases. As Galloway says, if Google supplies how to buy and Amazon when to have a commodity, Facebook tells us what to buy. To tell us that, Facebook must know what do we ‘like’, where do we go, how do we think. As I consume, ‘the algorithm knows what to feed me’. If one starts going conservative or progressive, Facebook will give him/her more of what he/she is looking for, and never the opposite, in order to promote clicks and shares. For this reason, ‘we are exposed to less and less calm and reasonable content’ (p. 118). And, in Galloway’s words, little by little ‘we all step deeper into our bubbles’ (p. 119).

In a similar sense, Google is the company that knows more about us. The relationship we have with Google, says Galloway, is almost religious. It knows our ‘deepest secrets’ (p. 130) and therefore it has become the most influential company among the group of the Four. Google is ‘the god of information’ (p. 138). We blindly trust on the organic results that Google presents as answers to our questions. We tend to treat what we find on Google’s first results as ‘the truth’.

For these and many other reasons expressed in the book, all these companies should not behave as if they were normal businesses. They should not be accountable only to the short-term thinking of their shareholders (p. 144). Their responsibility is extraordinary because they are extraordinary. The Four do not have to worry about surviving, unlike most small and medium companies in the world. If shareholder value is not anymore their main priority, or obsession, what could they actually offer to the world? What should they pursue? The book triggers these relevant questions in our minds.

The limits of Galloway’s text are toward the end of the book. He enters on a list of advice for a successful business career in the digital era. At this point, what makes his arguments strong also betrays him in some aspects. Galloway is a Professor of Marketing at the NYU Stern School of Business. Accordingly, he speaks the language of business world. Even though the book is purposely written in an easy and informal way, including
plenty of slang and crude words, the text is extremely authoritative and the advice he gives can be helpful. Yet, the author’s vision of the world seems to be business-centered and American-centered, as perhaps it might be considered necessary to be a good business professor. He advises on the best ways to survive within the system. Although Galloway uses Pope Francis’ expression ‘idolatry of money’ and economic and social views to criticize the Four, apparently he considers it normal and recommendable that someone work 80 hours a week to be a successful business person, for example. How is this not in contradiction with the criticism of the Four?

To mention more examples of this contradiction: On the one hand, the author says that ‘If you are seeking justice, you won’t find it in the corporate world’ (p. 248). On the other hand, he argues that it is not a good idea to hold grudges against someone who made one’s life miserable in the business world.

In other words, Galloway does question business people’s priorities and big companies’ practices, but, at least in this book, he does not seem to bother much with the economic system itself and its structural failures, which lead people to behave selfishly and which feed hostility. The way they are now, our business practices consistently put profits above people. Nevertheless, an economic system focused on growth and currently dominated by finance cannot be just, indeed. The Four are some quintessential examples of a business universe where big companies inevitably get out of control if no one tries to stop them. Perhaps, in the current digital era this problem will become even worse.

It is not exactly clear what Galloway understands by business responsibility. He argues intelligibly against companies that are too big and retain too much power. The Four, he says, have frequently abused of their position (regarding taxes, privacy, jobs …) ‘because … they can’ (p. 265). Perhaps, in a future edition, the author could elucidate, in his own terms, what a ‘good’ company in the digital era would be. And, although he is not a policymaker, it seems necessary to suggest what governments could do to keep the Four under control. Otherwise, the critique to these actors is just a plea for more virtues among the devious.

Galloway’s book is a popular read and, simultaneously, a relevant contribution to scientific research on Media Studies and Social Sciences. It gathers useful data and analyzes the market in a way that only an insider could do. For the same reason, though, it is limited by some elements of the topic: market cap, revenue, and global presence numbers will change constantly. The Four might keep their position for decades, or might die as fast as they rose. The question is not if but when the scene will change. This book is, therefore, a compelling picture of the present moment. With its help, it is fair enough to ask ourselves how this disturbing present moment will affect our lives and determine the future.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Filipe Domingues
Pontifical Gregorian University, Roma, Italy
filipe.domingues@gmail.com

Received 4 December 2017; accepted 12 January 2018
© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2018.1429222