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Legendary Tech Entrepreneurs: Who Made the Biggest Impact on Society?

By: Ben W. Heineman Jr.

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Who is the most influential tech innovator of all time? Here is the case for each of the top six contenders.



I need the help of knowledgeable technophiles -- including Alexis Madrigal -- to answer two questions I have been raising in dinner table conversations since the death of Steve Jobs. The first: Of the great innovators/entrepreneurs of the computer/Internet age, who has had the greatest impact on society in the last 30 years -- Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Sergei Brin/Larry Page, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos or "other?" This is a descriptive

question -- who has changed society the most - regardless of one's personal views about Microsoft, Apple, Facebook, Google or Amazon, and the change each has wrought.

A second, different question is which of these great innovators/entrepreneurs has made the greatest contribution to society. This is a question about the values of the person answering: in his/her view, which of the legends has done the most to make society a better place.

Both the "impact" and "contribution" questions, as we discuss them around the dinner table, are open-ended. The people answering can define what those key concepts mean in any way they see fit -- indeed, one aspect of the interesting conversation is defining "impact" and "contribution."

The problem with the conversation around the table is that most of my friends and associates are lay people who use all or most of the products and who have, like everyone else, read newspaper and magazine articles about the great tech entrepreneurs. But we are not experts on the history and nature of technology. We are not really competent to give informed opinions, although that hardly stopped us from having strongly held views.

Most of us knew a little at the 30,000 foot level.

Bill Gates understood that computing could be a high-volume, low-margin business and, with Intel, understood that software was more valuable than hardware. He and Microsoft blew the computing world apart with the dominant Windows operating system to lead the way in making personal computers available to the multitudes.

Steve Jobs has multiple legacies: merging design and technology; changing multiple markets with innovation (animated film, desk top computers, music, cellular phone, tablets); a business model that put the customer before share price.

Sergei Brin and Larry Page realized the enormous potential of the internet by creating in Google the best search engine that put vast knowledge at the fingertips of hundreds of millions; by building service, productivity and enterprise innovations on that search engine such as Gmail; and by developing the pioneering marketing and advertising model for the Internet.

Mark Zuckerberg created by far the most successful social network in Facebook -

- and has been adding multiple functions to a platform that now reaches more than 800 million "active" users across the globe, realizing the enormous power of the Internet to interconnect people.

Jeff Bezos had by far the most successful vision of direct online retailing (with Amazon sales rising from \$2.8 billion in 2000 to \$34.2 billion in 2010), moving far beyond books so that almost any item is available on the Amazon site, while developing the suite of Kindles to display content sold via Amazon (and elsewhere) and using Amazon's huge computing capacity to offer cloud services for those who don't want to spend vast amounts of capital buying their own computers.

Of course, each of the entrepreneurs have been "great" in their own ways.

But, it occurred to me that it would be fascinating to hear the views of other non-experts -- and hopefully the views of real experts -- on this comparative question of who had "the greatest impact" and who made "the greatest contribution."

Perhaps Alexis---and readers of *The Atlantic* -- can enlighten my dinner table friends, and the rest of the nation, on these fundamental questions about the transformative technologies of the past three decades. "Other" may also be offered in addition to the five I have mentioned.

Let me get the conversation started by offering my views in brief (with the expectation that many will vehemently disagree). I would answer that first Microsoft -- for "democratizing" the personal computer through its widely adopted operating system (at the time) -- and then Google -- for "democratizing" knowledge through the best search engine and its subsequent mining of all sorts of data -- have both had the most impact and made the greatest contribution.

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