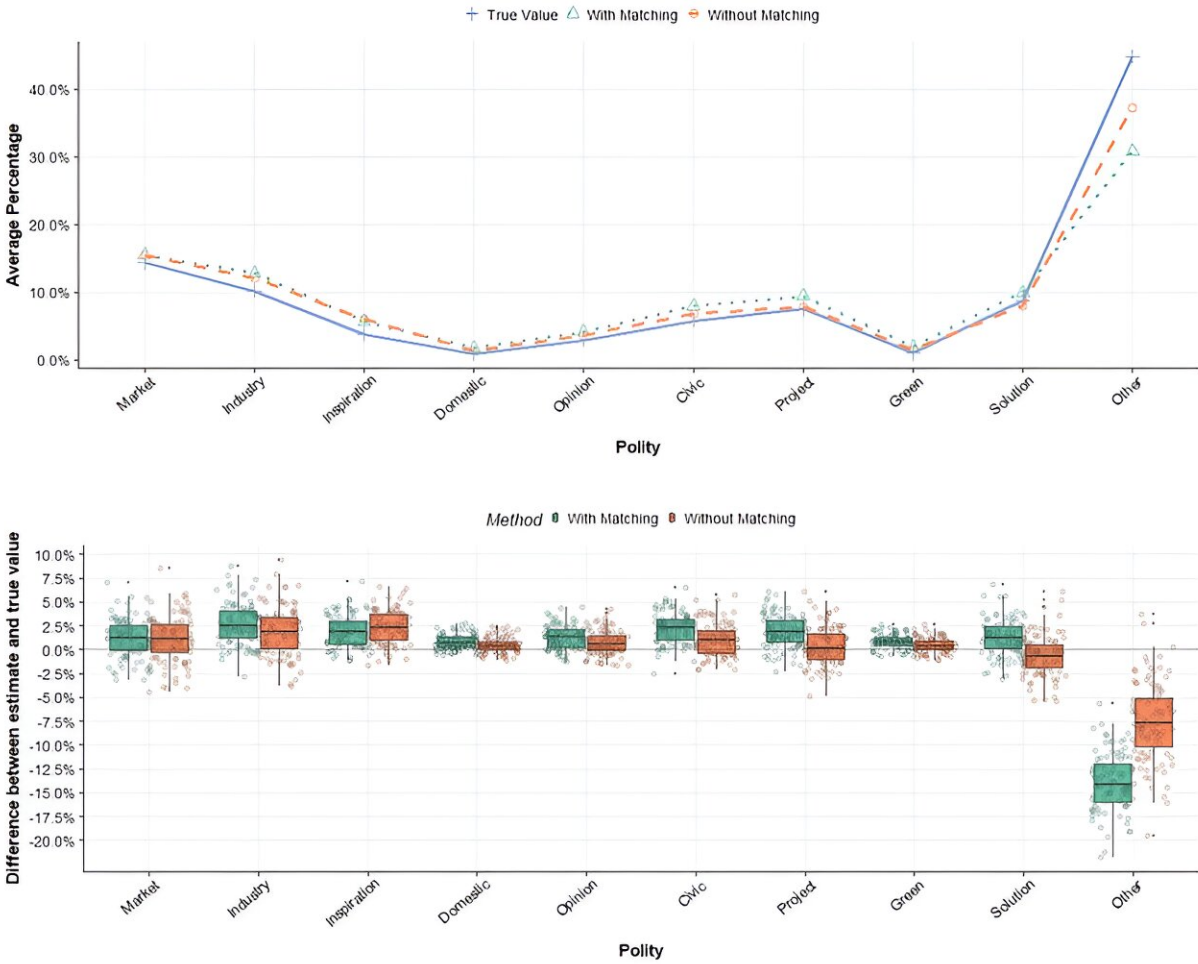


Improving the world á la Silicon Valley: An analysis of solutionist ethic and the spirit of digital capitalism

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Estimated and true category proportions (individual dots refer to the results of different runs). Credit: *Theory, Culture & Society* (2023). DOI:

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How strongly are the ideas of Mark Zuckerberg or Elon Musk influencing today's digital economy? An economic sociologist at the University of Basel has analyzed speeches, book contributions and articles from Silicon Valley, demonstrating the emergence of a new spirit of digital capitalism.

What justification is there for earning a lot of money? Nineteenth-century Calvinists interpreted [economic prosperity](#) as a sign that one was counted among God's chosen. This manner of thinking, centered in Geneva, influenced liberal capitalism.

Today's justifications for economic activity sound different. They focus on themes of flexibility or efficiency. In particular digital capitalists claim that they improve the world. Their credo: for every societal problem, from [climate change](#) to inequity, there is a technical solution that also offers the opportunity to make plenty of profit. This approach is known as solutionism.

Economic sociologist Oliver Nachtwey of the University of Basel, Switzerland, together with his colleague Timo Seidl from the University of Vienna, Austria, wanted to find out how influential this idea is today. For their study, they drew on a variety of texts from Silicon Valley, the global center for high technology on the US West Coast. Their results appear in the journal *Theory, Culture & Society*.

From the West Coast to the East Coast

With the help of a machine-learning algorithm, the researchers examined the speeches and book contributions of people like Facebook founder

Mark Zuckerberg and Tesla CEO Elon Musk—i.e., the West Coast tech elites. They also looked at articles from *Wired*, the magazine popular among tech developers and programmers. The third source Nachtwey and Seidl examined was articles from the East Coast magazine *Harvard Business Review*, which tends to be read more by US managers rather than Silicon Valley types.

Nachtwey explains the choice of textual sources in this way: "We assumed that tech entrepreneurs like Zuckerberg would use solutionist arguments. But we wanted to know whether the ideology extends beyond the exclusive circle of Silicon Valley elites."

For the study, multiple people first classified independently selected text excerpts with a focus on the justifications listed in the various paragraphs for economic activity: world improvement, flexibility, efficiency, etc. Next, an algorithm calculated the proportion of the various justifications in more than 1.7 million excerpts.

Solutionism is rampant

For the tech elites on the US West Coast, solutionism was indeed revealed as the most significant entrepreneurial point of reference. The idea has also become increasingly prevalent in *Wired*, which represents the more or less the mindsets wider tech milieu in the Silicon Valley. The *Harvard Business Review*, on the other hand, contained only fleeting traces of the ideology.

Do-gooder fever has evidently not yet reached all corners of the US economy. With increasing digitalization, though, it will continue to spread to other areas and regions of [economic activity](#), according to Nachtwey.

He sums up the study as follows, "We were the first to demonstrate on a

broad basis of data that a new strain of thought is arising in today's digital capitalism that provides a central justification for entrepreneurial activity. And this strain is highly influenced by solutionism."

Not real do-gooders

Nachtwey considers this new capitalist spirit problematic because it undervalues democratic processes. The big "man of action" Musk, for example, has no appreciation for worker protections or democratic regulation. The result is that Tesla factories in Germany have far more occupational accidents than comparable Audi factories.

Nachtwey also criticizes Meta, formerly known as Facebook: it claims to bring the world together, but allows fake news to proliferate.

"Solutionism doesn't combat real problems at all; it's just an empty ideological shell," he concludes. Nachtwey understands his study as a critique of the American tech giants' self-portrayals, "which we should regard with a great deal of skepticism."

More information: Oliver Nachtwey et al, The Solutionist Ethic and the Spirit of Digital Capitalism, *Theory, Culture & Society* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/02632764231196829](https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764231196829)

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