“What you'll see,” predicts Cohen, “is an equilibrium of those two sides.” Malloy adds that “then, you’d expect to see less predictability. The subtle and interesting part of this,” he says, is that the equilibrium remains undefined. “You see both sides playing,” presenting a dynamic relationship in which either side could conceivably take the upper hand. Papers like “Lazy Prices” might prompt more informed investment decisions, but as firms respond, the target will continue to move. —JOHN A. GRIFFIN

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URBAN TUNNEL VISION

Cities Too Smart for Their Own Good?

Wouldn’t everyone want a hometown that’s a “smart city”? The answer seems obvious: who, after all, wants to live in a stupid city? And indeed, the technologies touted by smart-city advocates can seem utopian: self-driving cars, pothole-reporting apps, and sensors to detect the public’s every need—all connected by free public WiFi!

But for Ben Green, this utopian view is precisely the problem. Informed by his experience designing technology for the cities of New Haven, Memphis, and Boston, Green—now a doctoral candidate in applied math at Harvard’s Paulson School of Engineering and Applied Sciences and an affiliate of the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society—believes the technologies sold to policymakers and the public as tools of a brighter, optimized ur-

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When political decisions are hidden inside technology design, citizens can’t shape the future of their own city.

Green brims with cautionary tales, from Sidewalk Labs (a subsidiary of Google’s parent company, Alphabet), using its control of New York City’s free public WiFi hotspots to slurp up detailed personal data, to predictive policing algorithms that exacerbate biases in cities from Oakland to Chicago by sending officers to patrol poor and minority neighborhoods—and arrest the local residents for minor crimes.

Green thinks it’s possible to escape these “smart” mistakes without discarding technical innovation entirely, pointing to cities that considered the social implications of their data and technology as they were developing it—and were better for it. Johnson County, Kansas, for instance, used crime statistics and other data not to direct police patrols but to expand social services for citizens at risk of falling through the cracks, before they entered the criminal justice system. “It’s not that cities should have no people who care about technology,” he said, “but they shouldn’t have their entire sense of innovation and progress based around technology.”

He hopes his book will be a wake-up call both to practitioners already in the field and to residents pushing for better cities. He says cities should not compete to be “smarter” than their peers if all that means is having newer and more powerful technology. Instead, he challenges them to take off the “tech goggles” and build the cities people want to live in. ~BENNET MCINTOSH