CHAPTER 2

FRANKENSTEIN MEETS THE
FAANG FIVE

FIGURES OF MONSTROUS TECHNOLOGY
IN DIGITAL MEDIA DISCOURSE

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In business parlance, the “FAANG group” is shorthand for Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, and Google: the group of US-based, multinational corporations whose digital services and technologies command a considerable share of both the world economy and the attention of internet users. Over the past few years, the products and actions of these FAANG firms—for instance, social media platforms (like Facebook) and artificial intelligence or AI (one of Google’s main research and development foci)—have prompted Frankenstein-inspired headlines and commentary in journalism, the blogosphere, and other domains of popular culture.

These popular representations of FAANG firms and products as machines or other kinds of entities run amok furnish further evidence for, and grounds for building on, the argument advanced in my recent book, The Medium Is the Monster: Canadian Adaptations of Frankenstein and the Discourse of Technology. That study’s twofold argument holds, first, that Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein effectively reinvented the meaning of the word “technology” for modern English and, second, that the media theory of Marshall McLuhan cemented and popularized this Frankensteinian sense of technology as human-made monstrosity, especially with reference to media technologies.

This chapter first reprises that argument and then, to illustrate and elaborate that argument, turns to some popular representations of FAANG technologies and activities and discusses the particular ways in which Frankenstein shapes and shadows these representations. Frankenstein, together with certain significant adaptations of it, has shaped and reflected the modern meaning of the word
“technology” itself, such that today we can hardly speak of technology without inevitably also conjuring *Frankenstein.*

To document the modernization of the meaning of the word “technology” as a discursive effect of Mary Shelley’s novel, let us examine the discourse of technology in that author’s day and then focus on *Frankenstein.* I retrace the early nineteenth-century redefinition of the word (from describing the study of any art to describing industrial systems) and argue that Shelley’s characterization of the Creature, according to five prevailing tropes, in turn conditions the modern meaning of “technology,” as some period uses of the word suggest. *Frankenstein* does not explicitly use the word “technology” (just as it does not name its antagonist), but through the Creature’s characterization, the novel became a literary “threshold of epistemologization,” a textual battery that charged the episteme of Romantic science and culture to generate the modern discourse of technology.

In the discursive history of technology and in the literature on the relationship between *Frankenstein* and technology, we find two premises that my argument challenges. First, accounts of the provenance of technology—like that of the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*—suggest that it was in the late nineteenth century that the word attained its modern redefinition to mean, in general, tools and machines, and techniques and systems for their use, or combinations thereof. But a close reading of *Frankenstein* suggests that this modern meaning emerged much earlier in the nineteenth century—hence the second premise I question: that while *Frankenstein* is widely read as “the first and most enduring symbol of modern technology,” its relationship to the discourse of technology is constructed retrospectively, as though this definitively modern discourse emerged later and could be retroactively applied to *Frankenstein.* If technology has popularized a certain interpretation of *Frankenstein,* it is because *Frankenstein* itself conditioned the modern redefinition of technology.

Prior to that period, the word “technology” had a relatively rare and specialized meaning and use in English, to refer to the study of any art or craft: “a discourse or treatise on the arts,” as the *OED* offers for this antiquated definition. (And in early-modern English, “the arts” was a phrase with a more expansive meaning than it has now.) Since the early nineteenth century, the word “technology” has instead come to refer to mainly industrial machines, their operating techniques, and the systems they belong to: “machinery, equipment, . . . the mechanical arts and applied sciences,” as the *OED* offers for the word’s modern meaning. The *OED,* like many “keywords” essays about technology (by Raymond Williams, Andrew Ross, and Scott McQueire, among others), dates the emergence of the word’s “machinery” meaning to the mid- to late nineteenth century.
But I suggest that *Frankenstein* effected that modern redefinition. If, as Laura Kranzler writes, “the problematics of technological development and application are initially codified in [Mary] Shelley’s work,” this idea is worth taking at its word—and worth reading for the historical evidence between its lines. A close reading of *Frankenstein* shows how “technology” began circulating in its modern sense as a kind of “Frankenpheme.” “Frankenpheme” is Timothy Morton’s term for an “element of culture that [is] derived from *Frankenstein*, but [is] less than a work of art in completion or scale”—that is, a Frankenpheme is not so much an adaptation as a specific kind of allusion or meme. In Mary Shelley’s novel, we find a series of tropes that show how its language, together with its plot of uncontrolled research and monstrous result, conditions the modern discourse of technology. These tropes are utility, supplementarity, contagion, shock, and revolution.

**Utility**

The rhetoric of utility permeates the text. Both Victor Frankenstein and his interlocutor Walton sometimes sound like a parody of Jeremy Bentham. *Frankenstein* engages with Bentham and his philosophy of Utilitarianism in its exploitation of the then-dubious reputation of medical doctors, who traded with grave robbers to obtain cadavers at a time when Bentham worked to legitimize dissection—with legislation and, ultimately, with the donation of his own body for scientific display to promote the “further uses of the dead to the living.” Like Bentham, Victor pursues his research with utilitarian idealism, buoyed by “visions of extensive usefulness” (I:1.9–10). But the story renders these visions ultimately ironic. Walton, for his part, first foreshadows Victor’s “visions of usefulness” by imagining “the inestimable benefit which [he] shall confer on all mankind” (I:Letter I.4), and finally echoes Victor’s failure, as he abandons his own “hopes of utility and glory” (III:VII.180).

**Supplementarity**

As the preceding passages show, Shelley applies something like Bentham’s “greatest happiness principle” to the trope of utility. Walton and Victor both envision the “extension” of the “utility” of their projects for all humankind. And the modern discourse of technology is nothing if not a discourse of uncanny difference from the ontological category of the human. This simultaneous opposition and intimacy between technology and humanity also informs Marshall McLuhan’s famous definition of technologies as “extensions of man,” extensions that sometimes act as prosthetics—and other times as replacements. “What really makes the novel . . . disturbing,” writes Morton, “is not the creature’s difference from, but his similarity to human beings.” Frankenstein’s Creature—both human and “superhuman” (II:1.79), dead and alive—becomes a prototypical figure of tech-
nology, posing a dangerous supplement to humanity, as technology poses a dangerous supplement to capitalism: as the extension and replacement of human labor and agency.

Contagion

Frankenstein’s images of contagion relate to its images of revolution (on which more will be said momentarily), unsurprisingly, given England’s apprehension in the period over the potentially Channel-crossing infectiousness of revolutionary philosophy and foment. The passage in which Victor ponders what might come of the bride he builds for his Creature furnishes a primal scene for the modern discourse of technology: “a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror” (III:III.139). Victor’s envisioned “race of devils” prefigures the way in which many technologies are represented today, from fossil fuels to the internet to nuclear energy and of course biological weaponry; in Susan J. Wolfson’s chapter in this volume, she elaborates further on Frankenstein’s cultural role as a “cautionary tale” that shadows modern science’s “dark dreams.”

Shock

Frankenstein dramatizes the electrifying sense of shock that has been significant both for subsequent adaptations and for modernizing the meaning and connotations of technology. While Victor’s reference to “the spark of being” (I:IV.41) that animated his creation is famously ambiguous, the science of galvanism is an equally famous context for the novel, and electricity is mentioned in other scenes that inform both the method and affect of the Creature’s construction. An early, foreshadowing anecdote from Victor’s childhood describes “the shock” of lightning that “utterly destroyed” an oak tree and frames Victor’s account of learning about “that power”—electricity and galvanism—which precipitates his own intellectual revolution, the “overthrow” of Agrippa and the alchemists (I:1.24). Shock is also a superb contronym—it means both an extremity of feeling and its nullification—and figures in McLuhan’s theory of technology as a force that, in creating new environments, also shocks or numbs subjects who are accustomed to old environments.

Revolution

The instability and danger of the Creature figure the trope of revolution as another modern discursive condition for technology. As has been widely researched, the conflict between Victor and the Creature stages a drama of revolution that responds to both the French Revolution and the Luddite revolts. These images
of revolution speak to the spirit of Mary Shelley’s age. But they also encode the motion of drastic and disruptive social change that has become integral to representations of technology: from Marx’s “faith in the revolutionary potential of technology” to McLuhan’s theory of technology as revolutionary change,\textsuperscript{13} in which new media replace or consume old media and electric media produce social upheaval on a global scale.

The connected tropes of utility, supplementarity, revolution, contagion, and shock converge significantly in the repeated claim, made first by the dying Victor and then by his Creature, that the latter is an “instrument of future mischief,”\textsuperscript{16} anticipating the popular sense of technology as an instrument of “future shock” (as in the title of Alvin Toffler’s popular 1970 book). While Frankenstein leaves technology, like its antagonist, unnamed, it supplies a primal scene for redefining technology—not after midcentury but as early as the 1820s.

Three representative articulations of the modern discourse of technology, in the 1820s and 1830s, point to its Frankensteinian conditioning, as evoked and evinced in the writings of the aspiring auto-icon Bentham, the Harvard professor Jacob Bigelow, and the steam-power advocate Thomas Love Peacock. Bentham’s 1827 Rationale of Judicial Evidence refers to “questions in technology” in a way that can be read to use the word in either its premodern or its emerging modern sense, especially in the way Bentham distinguishes the term from “science,” as the terms are now conventionally distinguished in current English.\textsuperscript{17} Then, in 1831, the year Mary Shelley’s revised Frankenstein was published, so was Bigelow’s book Elements of Technology, which—in suggestively Frankensteinian language—explicitly “undertakes” a “revival” of the word “technology” to “embody” the industrial and practical arts collectively.\textsuperscript{18} Lastly, Peacock, an acquaintance of the Shelleys and Bentham, in two of his novels uses the word in ways that articulate modernity and menace, bridging the premodern and modern senses of “technology.” Crotchet Castle, for instance, refers to political economy as “a hyper-barbarous technology,”\textsuperscript{19} evoking both the older sense of the word as a knowledge system and its newer, Frankensteinian sense: as a kind of violence.

If Mary Shelley’s novel shapes the modern meaning of “technology” in its distinctive characterization of a manufactured monster according to the aforementioned tropes, then McLuhan’s writings consistently bring the figure of that monster to bear on his characterizations of technology and media.\textsuperscript{20} The title of McLuhan’s first book, The Mechanical Bride, allude to the bride of Frankenstein; the book’s title essay explicitly cites “Frankenstein fantasies” of “the horror of a synthetic robot running amok” to explain the alienating effects of commercialism and automation in a cultural landscape dominated by imagery of “sex, technology, and death.”\textsuperscript{21} And McLuhan’s landmark study, Understanding
Media, opens with an ominous vision of that quintessentially Frankensteinnian technology, artificial intelligence: "Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness."22

McLuhan strove throughout his career to understand media by adopting a neutral stance of critical detachment. But this detached stance proved both controversial and contradictory: controversial, in that his refrain from value judgments led to the widespread misreading of him as an antitexto-fetishist; and contradictory, in that his own writings—in tone and imagery—consistently reveal his deep hostility to technological change. McLuhan amplifies the tropes of utility, supplement, revolution, shock, and contagion with which Frankenstein modernized the meaning of "technology," and his use of the word as a Frankenpheme both undergirds his deterministic premise concerning technology and undermines his declared suspension of judgment. For McLuhan, new technologies produce pain, confusion, and despair,23 to which individuals and societies respond by going into a kind of shock or "autoamputation": "With the arrival of electric technology, man extended, or set outside himself, a live model of the central nervous system itself, ... a development that suggests a desperate and suicidal autoamputation."24 McLuhan consistently describes technology in terms of invasion,25 disease,26 disaster,27 and conflict on a global scale: "every new technology," he said grimly in 1968, "necessitates a new war."28 All five technological tropes that we find in Frankenstein thus inform and shape McLuhan's model of global technological change, a model figured in Frankensteinnian imagery that clearly conveys his hostility to such change.

An uncommonly clear public expression of McLuhan's Frankenpheme of technology—and a rare public confession of his hostility to it—was printed in a 1969 issue of Playboy. Pressed by the interviewer to clarify his opinion about "new technology" as a "revolutionizing agent," McLuhan replied frankly, "I view such upheavals with total personal dislike and dissatisfaction.... I derive no joy from observing the traumatic effects of media on man, although I do obtain satisfaction from grasping their modes of operation.... It's vital to adopt a posture of arrogant superiority; instead of scurrying into a corner and wailing about what media are doing to us, one should charge straight ahead and kick them in the electrodes. They respond beautifully to such treatment and soon become servants rather than masters."29 In his Playboy comments, McLuhan figures technology as a rebellious, male artificial intelligence, whose inherently rebellious tendency should be violently preempted; technology is a menace that needs to be subordinated—mastered—to be useful. This figure vividly condenses and dramatizes many of the tropes with which Mary Shelley characterizes the Creature.

As a maverick public intellectual embraced by the 1960s counterculture and Madison Avenue alike, McLuhan popularized a Frankensteinnian sense of technology that Shelley's Frankenstein had prototyped. It is telling that both their work has been adapted together in more recent popular and scholarly texts
concerning technology, some of the best known and most influential of which include William Gibson’s 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, David Cronenberg’s 1983 film *Videodrome*, and Friedrich Kittler’s monograph *Gramophone Film Typewriter* (first published in 1986 and translated into English in 1999). If *Frankenstein* shaped the modern meaning of “technology” as manufactured monstrosity, then McLuhan’s Frankenpheme of technology and subsequent adaptations of both these writers’ works have globally popularized this meaning. Since the publication of *Frankenstein*, the word “technology” has become valorized as a policy and business imperative, but it has also become popularly evoked as a Frankensteinian image of manufactured monstrosity, a discursive instrument of future mischief.

Several contemporary phenomena exemplify this ambivalent evocation of technology. Glaring examples include two human-made projects of modernity that have run amok and now threaten existential ecological catastrophe: nuclear weaponry and fossil-fuel-based industry and infrastructure. Less obvious but no less globally (albeit differently) implicated (if differently so) examples include digital communications, especially social media, and the corporations that have innovated them and popularized their use: the so-called FAANG companies. In the remainder of this chapter, I consider three examples in particular: the controversy over Facebook’s and Twitter’s impact on US political governance; Apple’s 2016 advertisement “Frankie’s Holiday”; and Amazon’s acquisition and redistribution of the TV series *The Expanse*.

Since the nomination of Donald Trump to the US Republican Party leadership and his subsequent election as US president, numerous commentators have likened Trump to *Frankenstein’s Creature* (as Wolfsen also notes in her chapter in this book). Former US senator Harry Reid called Trump the Republican Party’s Frankenstein monster on several occasions. The TV celebrity pundit Bill Maher applied this analogy to Trump as early as 2015, and the *Washington Post* has repeatedly applied it too. In the run-up to the November 2016 US presidential election, former president Barack Obama did not explicitly make such a comparison, but he did describe the emergence of Trump as a viable candidate in terms that explain why the *Frankenstein* allusion has become so prevalent in this context: “The problem is not that all Republicans think the way this guy does. The problem is, is that they’ve been riding this tiger for a long time. . . . So the point is, if your only agenda is either negative—negative is a euphemism, crazy—based on lies, based on hoaxes, this is the nominee you get. You make him possible.”

The *Frankenstein* allusions continued during Trump’s time in office. An article in the *Atlantic*, speculating on the possible destruction of the position of the president, describes Trump as “a *Frankenstein’s monster of past presidents’ worst attributes.*” And it was during Trump’s presidential term that the *Frankenstein* analogy took on a specifically technological character, amid the controversy that
emerged over the unexpectedly significant role that social media played in influencing the outcome of the 2016 US presidential election.

A 2018 Fast Company article about Twitter details the problems and pitfalls facing that firm, particularly in connection with the Trump administration. Identifying “issues that have long bedeviled Twitter,” like “abuse, the weaponizing of anonymity, bot wars, and slow-motion decision making by the people running a real-time platform,” the journalists write that “these problems have only intensified since Donald Trump became president and chose Twitter as his primary mouthpiece.” The article quotes several Twitter employees who make the Frankenstein connection between their platform and the Trump administration. One source does so with reference to one of Frankenstein’s own intertextual sources, the classical myth of Pandora: “Safety got away from Twitter,” says a former vice president at the company. “It was Pandora’s box. Once it’s opened, how do you put it all back in again?” Another Twitter employee makes the comparison somewhat more explicitly, here in terms of the monstrous: “On November 8, employees were shocked as the election returns poured in, and the morning after Trump’s victory, Twitter’s headquarters were a ghost town. Employees had finally begun to take stock of the role their platform had played not only in Trump’s rise but in the polarization and radicalization of discourse. ‘We all had this “holy shit” moment,’ says a product team leader at the time, adding that everyone was asking the same question: ‘Did we create this monster?’”

More openly still does Kevin Roose, in a 2017 article for the New York Times’ Technology section, liken social media to Frankenstein in connection with the 2016 presidential election. His article, titled “Facebook’s Frankenstein Moment,” features a still frame from the creation scene in Hammer Films’ 1957 Curse of Frankenstein and frames its account of Facebook’s “series of scandals” as an adaptation of Frankenstein’s core plot of a manufactured monster that turns on its maker and runs amok: “If I were a Facebook executive, I might feel a Frankensteinian sense of unease these days. The company has been hit with a series of scandals that have bruised its image, enraged its critics and opened up the possibility that in its quest for global dominance, Facebook may have created something it can’t fully control.”

Roose’s article emphasizes the Frankensteinian sense of technology not only because of the section of the paper it appears in but also in its language: “Facebook was simply not built to handle problems of this magnitude. It’s a technology company . . . in the business of building apps and selling advertising, not determining what constitutes hate speech.” One of Roose’s sources, the author Antonio García Martínez, underscores this sense, referring to Facebook as an unpredictable “machine” and explaining that Facebook’s corporate leaders “still see themselves as a technology middleman.” And the article closes by putting Facebook’s technological implications in a global context that resonates grimly
on several levels: “The company can’t dodge responsibility for the world it has helped to build. In the future, blaming the monster won’t be enough.”

Another of the FAANG firms, Apple, released a television advertisement in late 2016 that further cements the modern sense of “technology” as manufactured monstrosity—while also implicitly critiquing the cultural and political culture that helped Trump win the US presidency earlier that same autumn. “Frankie’s Holiday,” directed by Lance Acord, stars Brad Garrett as the Creature, who in this story leaves his cozy cottage home in the mountains to try caroling in the nearby village square. Based on Boris Karloff’s iconic portrayal in James Whale’s 1931 film Frankenstein, this Creature also has neck bolts, but he replaces them with festive Christmas lights. His caroling effort draws a crowd of onlookers, who seem hostile until a little girl fixes one of his neck-bolt lights and starts singing along with him, whereafter the crowd joins in. The ad’s key dramatic device—the Creature’s substitution of holiday lightbulbs for bolts—emphasizes the creature’s figuration of technology, specifically electric technology, with its aforementioned evocations of shock, an affect performed in the ad spot by the mostly silent, still crowd of onlookers.

Additionally, the advertisement’s pointed focus on Frankenstein’s theme of character’s social construction led several commentators to read it as an allusive response to a presidential victory resulting from the exploitation of atavistic fear and hatred. “The company’s ad is intended to deliver a message of unity at a time when the U.S. and the world are experiencing disunity,” wrote Don Reisinger in Fortune magazine. “Frankie’s Holiday” thus anticipates and dramatically encapsulates the close coordination of technological and sociocultural concerns in journalistic and popular cultural representations of both US politics and FAANG economics.

In the context of FAANG economics especially, Amazon’s recent acquisition, redistribution, and continuance of production of the science fiction TV series The Expanse presents a richly complex digital example of the Frankenpheme of technology. Based on James S. A. Corey’s best-selling series of science fiction novels, The Expanse posits an interplanetary postcolonial society, set several centuries in the future, in which humankind has colonized the solar system and reorganized into three main territorial groups: Earthers, Martians, and “Belters,” the latter being the largely working-class citizens of the asteroid belt. The series’s plot in the first three seasons mainly concerns a “first contact” type of encounter with extraterrestrial technology, which—by underregulated, corporate-sector R&D—becomes weaponized, galvanizing an interplanetary arms race and, thus, in fine Frankensteiian fashion, poses an existential threat to the whole solar system. Echoing McLuhan’s aforementioned claim about technology and war, a Martian ambassador rhetorically asks his Earth counterpart an eminently Frankensteiian question: “Why is all new technology first viewed as a weapon?” The series openly acknowledges its debt to Frankenstein in a scene where two
protagonists engage in a little literary criticism, as one removes the stitches from the other’s head injury:

AMOS: I don’t want you looking like Frankenstein when Mei sees you.
PRAX: Frankenstein was the name of the doctor. The monster didn’t have a name.
AMOS: God damn—that’s right.\textsuperscript{47}

Other Frankensteinian details include the spectral return of a police detective who haunts the protagonist, Jim Holden, as a kind of “simulation”\textsuperscript{48} “Millar’s ghost was an artifact of the alien technology that had created the gates and a dead man.”\textsuperscript{49} The show and its source novels thus develop a distinctly Gothic tone that is unusual for the space opera genre. And much like Frankenstein, too, \textit{The Expanse} holds complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities. The show is intrinsically hopeful for today’s zeitgeist insofar as it posits any future for human-kind whatsoever; the cruelty facing this optimism, though, lies in the series’s projection of human civilization’s interplanetary expansion at a time when human civilization is bracing instead for contraction, if not destruction (intimations of today’s climate crisis appear during the title sequence, which shows brief scenes of rising ocean levels, and in exterior shots like those showing a “Yukon archipelago”); indeed, at the time of this writing, societies worldwide are actively contracting (via border lockdowns, business closures, and distancing measures) in order to mitigate the spread and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, the structural staples that build and sustain \textit{The Expanse}’s hopeful future include fantastical technologies (e.g., rockets and engines that turn interplanetary travels into round trips, not one-way missions), but they also include real-world systems and institutions—not only corporate business, which is consistently characterized as sociopathic in characters such as Dresden and Murry, but also, more intriguingly, its opposite: organized labor, which is often depicted positively and thus adds further subtle but significant Frankensteinian dimension to the show.

An important institution in \textit{The Expanse} is the Outer Planetary Alliance, or OPA: a networked collective operating in the Belt and farther-flung gas giant moons, the OPA “had begun its life more like a labor union than a nation,” Corey writes;\textsuperscript{50} as the series progresses, the OPA becomes a major political power in its own right. Several protagonists are current or former OPA members, and the series’s plots often take shape around the kinds of radical democratic practices with which unions organize themselves and which they espouse and spread to other domains of social life: consensus-based decision-making, trust in expertise, bargaining, the nurturance of skilled labor, deescalation tactics, critical reflection, and transparent communication, including the speaking of truth to power.

In \textit{The Expanse}’s settings, characters, and plots, it thus features some of the most refreshingly positive representations of organized labor—not just in science
fiction but on television generally. Union offices, representatives, and principles permeate the everyday life of *The Expanse’s* fictional world. "Bargaining is how civilizations are built," says Ashford, captain of a Belt flagship. Far from simplistic, however, these representations become significantly complicated by conflicting perceptions and depictions of the OPA. OPA leader Fred Johnson asserts at one point that "the OPA is only interested in human rights and jobs for all Belters." Some characters support the OPA for furthering workers’ interests, while others think the OPA has sold out in bidding for political legitimacy, and still others see the OPA as a terrorist network. The resulting ambivalence over the OPA (visualized in the organization’s logo, with the A rendered like the graffito for “Anarchy”) thus furnishes additional Frankensteinian texture to the series’s premise and plot, since this ambivalent detail reanimates—albeit with a critical, pointedly progressive edge—the long-standing identification of the working class with Frankenstein’s composite, alienated Creature. As my colleague in labor studies Bob Barnetson and I argue elsewhere, *Frankenstein’s Creature* has furnished elites with a gruesome figure for caricaturing the working class—as collective, interchangeable, and quasi-mechanical—and science fiction has long adapted this specific caricature to characterize monstrous antagonists: “Shelley’s politically resonant ’hideous progeny’ thus founded the trope of the collective antagonist, seen throughout SF, from the Martians of H. G. Wells’ 1897 *War of the Worlds* to the Borg of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–94) and the Cylons of *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–09).”

I have detailed these Frankensteinian elements of *The Expanse’s* narrative—its Frankensteinian plot of corporate hubris and catastrophic backfire, its premise in generally valorized working-class and union culture—in order to illustrate the irony arising between the series’s content and its ownership. Amazon Prime Video’s acquisition and redistribution of the series answered a fan-led campaign to #SaveTheExpanse, which had been canceled by SyFy. The fact that Amazon has acquired such a subversively prolabor series as *The Expanse* seems both richly ironic and yet totally typical of capitalist postmodernity. Amazon’s CEO, Jeff Bezos, is currently the world’s richest man, and his company has gained widespread notoriety for its extensive exploitation of workers, in tandem with its advances in automation and artificial intelligence (AI).

Despite this dramatic change of ownership, the show’s fourth and fifth seasons have stayed true to form while deepening and nuancing its sympathetic representations of labor by expanding on related contexts of higher education and anticolonialism. By the time this chapter appears, the sixth and final season will have aired, and the screen adaptation of the sixth novel, *Babylon’s Ashes*, under Amazon’s watch (i.e., its pervasive use of AI in surveilling and serving Prime audiences), is of particular interest, since this novel especially integrates union institutions and activities (not strikes) into its plot.
Further contradiction between ownership and content arises for the whole series, books and shows alike, insofar as *The Expanse*’s plots often hinge on the openness of access to critical knowledge and information. The protagonist, Jim Holden, embodies an ethos strongly reminiscent of Open Access and “information-wants-to-be-free” hackerdom: “Give the people the information they need. Trust them to do the right thing.”58 This ethos sometimes works and sometimes backfires, and it contrasts starkly to the proprietary distribution and accessibility of *Expanse* texts: the shows are only available to Amazon Prime viewers, and the novellas by Corey that accompany the print novels are only available as Amazon Kindle e-books. Given Amazon’s category-killing global stature, demonstrably exploitative labor practices, and—last but far from least—its use of AI in monitoring and stimulating Prime Video usage, the company’s adoption, production, and distribution of such a labor-friendly franchise as *The Expanse* represents a site of fascinating, Frankensteinian ironies and contradictions that are symptomatic of late global capitalism in general and FAANG business specifically.

As the latest innovation in automation, AI has become a frequent target of Frankenstein allusions and memes.59 And AI has become integral to how all the FAANG firms do business, with results from the ridiculous (like when “Twitter taught Microsoft’s AI chatbot to be a racist”)66 to the existentially terrifying, which brings us back to the forty-fifth US president and the demonstrated power of digital media to wreak geopolitical havoc unanticipated by their designers, to exacerbate disinformation campaigns—and thereby to inflame the global climate crisis by emboldening denialists of climate science, from said president to his format-rights counterparts in Canada, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. The elite protectors and beneficiaries of what John Bacher incisively terms “petrotyranny”—“the deadly trinity of oil, war and dictatorship [that] presents the greatest challenge to humanity at the start of the new millennium”61—have entrenched a world-system of fossil-fuel-based corporate capital that now threatens Frankensteinian destruction on a horrific, planetary scale. Digital communication technologies and social media in particular thus join the ranks of technological developments—nuclear power, greenhouse gas emissions, terminator crop seeds—that all share the dubious distinction of drawing unfavorable comparisons to a human-made monster that was first imagined as an assemblage of human and animal parts that had been dead but are made to live again, only to be shunned by society and seek vengeance on it. Nevertheless, for all the Frankensteinian, technological chaos that digital media have visited, however inadvertently, on today’s political and social life, as well as life per se—overcoming this ominous “Frankenstein barrier”62 that shadows the present’s possible futures can still involve time-tested, low-tech strategies like those of yesterday’s Luddites or today’s unions and activists. Get out the vote. Eschew air travel. Plant trees. If human hands can make a monster, they can unmake one too.
NOTES


2. The section of this chapter that analyzes Mary Shelley’s characterization of the Creature and period usage of the word “technology” adapts a portion of chapter 2 in *The Medium Is the Monster*; see pages 64–74 in that volume.


8. Jeremy Bentham, quoted in Morton, 86.


13. See chapter 1 in this volume.


16. See both 371.182 and 371.186.


20. This and the subsequent five paragraphs summarize key highlights from the close reading of McLuhan’s oeuvre elaborated in chapter 4 in McCutcheon, *Medium Is the Monster*, 85–101.


27. McLuhan, 302.
30. Morton, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, 56.
31. McCulleon, Medium Is the Monster, 176.
39. Carr and McCracken.
40. Carr and McCracken.
42. Roose.
50. Corey, Abaddon’s Gate, 183.


58.  Corey, Abaddon’s Gate, 521.


