


The Infection Called Douchebaggery

“All These Rich People Can’t Stop Themselves”: The Luxe Quarantine Lives of Silicon Valley’s Elite

Travis Kalanick is throwing (outdoor) parties, private-jet owners are hopping from safe zone to safe zone, and dinner party hosts are administering 15-minute COVID-19 rapid tests—all business as usual. “Coronavirus is a poor person’s virus,” says one source.

By [Nick Bilton](#)

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Photo Illustration by Vanity Fair; Photos from Getty
Images.

“Are you going to **Travis Kalanick’s** party this weekend?” read a text that popped up on my phone a couple of weeks ago. “Umm, no!” I replied. First, I wasn’t invited. (Kalanick is [not a big fan](#) of mine, or most other people who have written about him.) But more importantly, this message landed in my inbox smack in the middle of a spike in COVID-19 cases in Los Angeles, where

Kalanick now lives. (Kalanick held the party outside, according to two people with knowledge of the soiree, and it was a smaller gathering than pre-COVID parties he is [known for](#).)

Kalanick isn't the only one throwing parties during the worst pandemic in 100 years. I've heard about parties from Palm Springs to Palo Alto, business meetings on the slopes in Colorado after a mountain-biking sesh, electric surfing in Hawaii, and billionaires traveling the world on their private jets, hopping from state to state, country to country, intentionally following the lowest COVID rates of the previous week. "All these rich people can't stop themselves," one person who is close to a number of wealthy tech CEOs and venture capitalists told me. "They just can't stop themselves from throwing parties and going on their jets and socializing as if everything was normal."

In many respects, to them, things are better than normal. Those on the top billionaire lists have only grown richer over the past five months, as tech has [soared](#) on the S&P and NASDAQ, helping push the markets back to their pre-COVID numbers, and adding double-digit billions to some tech CEOs' personal net worths in a single day. Look no further than Apple or Amazon as a prime example. While [16.3 million](#) Americans are unemployed, Apple is now nearing a \$2 trillion market cap and Amazon just posted record [profits of \\$5.2 billion](#) in the last quarter—double last year's goal.

So what are these elite tech founders doing with their wealth? Mostly living life as they did before coronavirus. I've spoken to numerous people who've described countless billionaires hitting the road, flying around the country to wherever case numbers are lowest. One investor worth several billion who has several

homes told a friend—who then parlayed the information to me in tones of shock and awe and more than a tinge of jealousy—that he was in Miami when the numbers were lowest at the start of the pandemic; hopped over to Los Angeles when Florida got a bit dicey; and now that California is a hotbed, is in New York enjoying the season’s outdoor dining. Another billionaire in Los Angeles has been hosting lavish dinner parties (no social media allowed) where an on-site nurse administers 15-minute coronavirus tests outside as guests drink cocktails, and allows them in to dine once their test comes back negative. And yet another investor told me about some of his colleagues who chipped in for a massive \$50,000-a-month compound in Palm Springs that’s being used as a group party house. (I’ve heard about similar setups in Los Angeles and Silicon Valley.)

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For those who don’t want to be in America (and let’s be frank, who really wants to be in America right now?), there’s an easy solution. A [report last week](#) found that the superrich are paying as much as \$2.6 million for international citizenships, then zipping out to said country on their private jets. Not everyone owns their own jet, or “P.J.,” as they’re called. As a result, jet [rentals](#) are skyrocketing. A spokeswoman for NetJets, a private-jet rental company, told me that inquiries for flights shot up from the previous year, and have only continued to grow as the pandemic has stretched on. In April, for example, calls to NetJets was up 60% for the year prior, as of June, it was 195%, the spokeswoman said.

By Gabriel Sherman

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Even if you're stranded at home, there are plenty of new toys to help pass the time. While most of us have tried to pick up an outdoor hobby or two to stay sane, tech workers have been buying up digital versions of the same things. The hot new trend in the oceans around Silicon Valley is the [Lift eFoil](#) surfboard, which the company describes as a mix between "surfing, flying, and deep-powder snowboarding." These contraptions cost \$12,000 apiece and allow for more than an hour of ride time at 25 mph on a two-hour charge. We all got a glimpse of one of these boards last month, when **Mark Zuckerberg** was [photographed](#) riding one in Hawaii with a face covered in zinc. For those who prefer biking, the options are apparently endless, and in some cases equal the cost of a down payment on a new house. Most of the tech elite in Silicon Valley have chosen a more economical route, scooping up the trendy [MATE bike](#), a \$2,000 fold-up electric bike founded on Indiegogo. (I've heard of tech founders going on group "MATE rides" in Silicon Valley, like a gang of hipster Hells Angels; MATE is also *the* bike of choice for Burning Man given how well it handles rough terrain.) Sales of RVs, like the \$200,000 Winnebago Revel, are [skyrocketing](#).

But the area in which the rich have perhaps most distinguished themselves from the other 99 percent is their kids' education. One California government official told me that some public school teachers are being enticed away to teach a single child in more affluent areas, like Beverly Hills and Palo Alto—a scenario this person called "fucked up," and one that's proving to be a real

problem for school systems. Others who can't afford a single teacher are creating pods. As a doctor recently told me, "Coronavirus is a poor person's virus. We're seeing it spread in poor neighborhoods, to poor families who have to go to work and live in close proximity to each other, and poor kids are the ones who will not get a proper education."

Meanwhile, the gap between the haves and the have-nots in Silicon Valley has only grown. The coronavirus pandemic has proven to be more fruitful for tech than almost any other single event in history. Surfer-guy Zuckerberg is now the [fourth-richest](#) person on the planet, worth \$100 billion. **Jeff Bezos** has reached another vertiginous high; he's now worth [around \\$190 billion](#), depending on the time of day, and he set a record last month when his net worth jumped by \$13 billion in single day. **Elon Musk**, who has spent half the pandemic schilling conspiracy theories about COVID-19 or attacking **Gavin Newsom** for shuttering businesses, has seen his net worth skyrocket; last month it reached \$70 billion, helped along by a [\\$6.1 billion](#) bump in a single day, edging him past **Warren Buffett** on the list of the world's richest people. When he passed the benchmark, Musk [told](#) *Forbes*, "I really couldn't care less."