Book review: 'More Awesome Than Money: Four Boys and Their Heroic Quest to Save Your Privacy From Facebook'

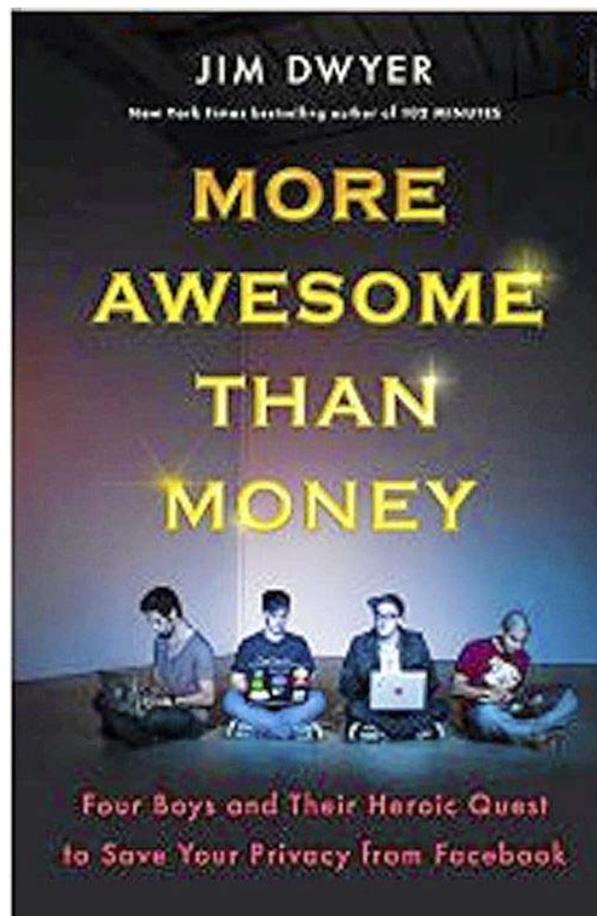**By Glenn C. Altschuler | Posted: Sunday, November 2, 2014 12:00 am**

"Facebook holds and controls more data about the daily lives and social interactions of half a billion people than 20th century totalitarian governments ever managed to collect about the people they surveilled," Eben Moglen, a professor of law at Columbia University and a leading advocate of the free software movement in the United States, pointed out in 2010.

As alarmed as Moglen, four NYU undergraduates — Max, Rafi, Dan and Ilya — decided to design a distributed, decentralized social network they called "Diaspora" that would preserve privacy by allowing users to control the information they shared about themselves. In "More Awesome Than Money," New York Times reporter Jim Dwyer draws on extensive access with the quartet to tell their story — and to remind us how difficult it is to conduct a successful revolution against "the settled digital order" that can now "monetize the soul."

The vast majority of startups fail, of course, and "More Awesome Than Money" documents, perhaps in too much detail, the failed pitches and missed opportunities of the Diaspora guys. They were "shareholders in that history," Dwyer writes, due to inattention, indifference, naiveté, "and a failure to have the slightest idea of what they were supposed to do as board members."

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By Jim Dwyer, Viking, $27.95

Some of their ideas, like Ilya's Epic Parties app and fees to establish "spontaneous hacker spaces, according to Dwyer, had "elements of genius and Ponzi at the same time." And Ilya's notion (crafted after he read a study that workers in illegal narcotics organizations earned very little money and had few romantic liaisons) that internet billboards, with messages like "Drug Dealers On Average Make Less Than The Minimum Wage" and "They Live With Their Mommas," could reduce drug trafficking by making it embarrassing to be a dealer, was, well, pretty goofy.

Dwyer insists, however, that their youthfulness and idealism "was also their treasure." After two years

Diaspora was "more than mere vaporware." Without any real marketing, 600,000 people used the site.

To date, Diaspora has been a failure. In August 2012, Jason Robinson, a devoted follower and donor, announced that after years of dismissing critics of Diaspora for "not seeing the big picture," he had become "a doom talker."

"Currently, my faith in this whole project is crumbling faster than ice in the polar region." By 2013, the three surviving founders of Diaspora were no longer involved with it on a daily basis.

But it is not yet dead. Diaspora is now part of the Free Software Support Network, which Moglen describes as a condominium for nonprofit organizations. Diaspora operates as a subsidiary of FSSN, which takes care of bookkeeping and taxes. It has not penetrated popular culture or become a staple of world commerce, Dwyer acknowledges; it is not "a verb and a noun, like Facebook."

Nonetheless, Diaspora has 55,000 lines of code and hundreds of contributors, 77 of them still writing code. Most important, Dwyer hopes that the idea can still provide a glimmer of hope in a world in which privacy remains an endangered species.