

RALPH NADER RADIO HOUR EP 374 TRANSCRIPT

Steve Skrovan: Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. My name is Steve, along with my co-host David Feldman. Hello David.

David Feldman: Hello, Steve.

Steve Skrovan: And the man of the hour, Ralph Nader, hello Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Hello, this is gonna be a real treat listeners.

Steve Skrovan: It is and Amazon is what we're going to be talking about, for part of the show for the first part of the show. And it's the largest corporation the world has ever known. It's valued at over \$1 trillion. Amazon is hardly the first American corporation to expand, monopolize and eat up everything in its path, but it may be the most diversified. Our first guest today is a journalist, who in the grand muckraking tradition of Upton Sinclair, is popping the bubble wrap that swaddles this mega Corporation. His name is Alec MacGillis, and his book is called *Fulfillment*. In it he explores what happens when Amazon moves into your neighborhood, and when their definition of fulfillment becomes more important than the fulfillment of the communities where they set up shop. He profiles Americans whose lives have been upended by Amazon's monster expansion. And he'll be joining us to discuss the social, political, and environmental aspects that follow in this Godzilla's wake. Our second guests will be our friend, Dr. Michael Carome, from Public Citizen's Health Research Group. We'll be asking him some of our burning questions about the newer COVID-19 variants and how the current crop of COVID vaccines stack up against them. Then we contacted Flyers Rights to answer a particular listener question, about your options when trying to avoid flying in the 737 Max. As always, we will check in with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber, who will fill us in on the latest news in the corporate crime in the suites. But first, let's rake some muck, David?

David Feldman: Alec MacGillis covers politics and government for *ProPublica*. He is the author of *The Cynic*, a 2014 biography of Senator Mitch McConnell, and his latest book is *Fulfillment: Winning and Losing in One-Click America*, which you can buy at your local bookstore. Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Alec MacGillis.

Alec MacGillis: Well, thank you for having me. It's really good to be here.

Ralph Nader: Welcome, Alec. I met Alec when he was up in Connecticut, as a young reporter with great promise, grew up in Pittsfield. And later he wrote a very powerful article on the 737 Max, Boeing crash and the grieving but organized families for *the New Yorker*. Alec, I want to tell our listeners, this is more than just a book on Amazon. It could have been titled a book on Amazon's America. So, you do focus on Amazon in some distinct detail, of course, which also show the kind of America that Amazon fit into, exploited, and is significantly transforming, not only into wider inequities, and displacement of Main Street USA, but also dividing geographical areas even further where areas like Seattle, the San Francisco Bay Area, Boston, Austin, Texas, Washington, DC are booming, often at the expense of their extractive impact of smaller towns and cities. I want to start with Jeff Bezos himself. He is a fellow Princetonian. He majored in

chemical engineering, went to work for Wall Street, started studying the emerging internet and said, you know, someone's going to make a lot of money from this internet, and I want that someone to be me. So, he gets into a car and he drives all the way to Seattle and sets up shop selling books at a discount, figuring that that's the way he could edge in to becoming a multi-vendor conglomerate. Now tell us a little bit about Bezos. Warren Buffett called him the smartest businessman in America. It's quite an encomium coming from Mr. Buffett, who has achieved a number of breakthroughs himself. And there's no doubt that there's a genius behind this man. But there's also a childish aspect to him. And before I ask you to sort of give us a thumbnail profile, what motivates this man to never think that the word enough has any meaning? In your book, on page 315, you have this aspect of his personality, "On the topic of energy consumption, Jeff Bezos was quite blasé. It was why we needed to go to the moon. "We will run out of energy on earth." He would say a few weeks later, "This is just arithmetic. It's going to happen." Well, of course, he has an extra-terrestrial business along with Elon Musk. But it's totally childish to make a comment like that when certainly the sun is not gonna leave the earth and wind is not gonna leave the earth. Give us your appraisal of this man whom you couldn't interview for your book.

Alec MacGillis: Yeah. I couldn't interview him And I would have of course been glad to. But since the book itself was not really about Amazon, per se, I was not too concerned about the inability to speak with him. But one thing I think is at his core is, and this may be true of some other of our Titans, you know, industrial Titans, Tech Titans over the years, but think is especially strong with him, which is, he has a real fear of stasis; he has a fear of slowing down and of allowing a company/his company to settle into any kind of sort of steady state or sort of equilibrium. It's a little bit of the philosophy of the shark, you know, that you've got to keep moving and moving fast and growing. And if you're not growing, growing fast that that you're going to sort of wilt and atrophy and fall apart. That's where this constant will to get bigger, to dominate, to move into other industries, other sectors comes from. It was in his recent letter, his investor letter, there was one line that caught my eye. He said something like, you know, we're getting a lot of flack these days on various fronts, but we're not going to allow ourselves to settle into the status quo equilibrium around us. And it was a very striking kind of phrase, you know, that we're going to keep striving; we're going to keep trying to dominate.

Ralph Nader: He has this other phrase too "Day one."

Alec MacGillis: Yes, it's always day one at Amazon, this notion that every single day is you're a startup; every single day you're always growing; you're always launching; it's never just another day. It's always day one. That's one of the core notions there. And the moon, his obsession with space travel, which goes all the way back to his childhood, is also an important facet of him and it speaks to, in some sense to a kind of that quote you read, you know about, well, of course, we're going to have to go up there; of course, we're going to have to leave this earth behind. There's something a little bit...he's untethered from the mundanities that the rest of us--this sort of world the rest of us live in. He sees himself as separate from that. The other amazing quote, that's an incredibly stunning quote in the book, was when he was asked why he did not give more money, you know why he was so abstemious in his philanthropic giving. And just a couple

years ago, he said, “Well, I just I really don't see what difference I can make with my billions, other than trying to find us a new home up in space, and that that's really the most I can do for humanity.” It was such a striking and telling line that with all these vast needs all around us the very kind of human basic needs, that he couldn't really be troubled with them. The final thing I was saying in this regard is a remarkable answer I got from Nick Hanauer, who was one of the first investors in Amazon [who] became very wealthy because of this early investment in Amazon and helped bring Amazon to Seattle, his hometown. And he has now turned quite critical of the company. And when I asked him why Amazon wasn't considering putting its second headquarters, in a part of the country that could really use it in a city like St. Louis or Baltimore [or] Cleveland that could really use that kind of boost [because] in one fell swoop, the company could just do a lot to sort of rebalance the landscape of opportunity and prosperity in the country. In fact, they ended up choosing not a single one of those sorts of cities. And even their top 20 finalists for that headquarters included no Detroit, no Cleveland, no St. Louis. And I asked Nick Hanauer why is that? Why not even like consider those cities as options and he laughed at me. He laughed in my face essentially and said, “You do not understand Jeff Bezos at all, do you? You have to realize this is a matter of thinking of this question that way is simply not how he does things. He's not thinking about what's best for the country [or] what's best for our society. That simply does not enter into the calculus at all for him. It is all, the question is all about what is best for the company and the company's future growth. That is it.”

Ralph Nader: Would you characterize his trait as avaricious that he's really counting billions? Indicate to our listeners how much he has made in this period of COVID-19 pandemic.

Alec MacGillis: His fortune grew by about \$60 billion in the past year. So basically, from March, the start of lockdowns last year to this past March grew by just under \$60 billion.

Ralph Nader: That's 60.

Alec MacGillis: Yeah, 60 billion, just astonishing in a single year. And he you know, one hesitates to use some of you know, kind of our biblical phrases of--but one reader who wrote me responded very strongly to the book with the phrase that they use--they just kept talking about the “extreme greed” represented in the book and just how upsetting they found it and that to them, that was the main trait, the main kind of theme sort of documented throughout the book. One of the more upsetting moments of the book for me, and reporting it was being at a banquet of huge banquet that was held for Bezos in Washington, DC in the fall of 2018, as the company was deciding where to put the second headquarters. And he was hosted at this at this banquet, a meeting of The Economic Club of Washington, which is sort of a VIP power movers kind of gathering in DC. And it's led by--these dinners are led by David Rubenstein, who is the co-founder of the Carlyle private equity firm, [the] huge, powerful private equity firm based in Washington that made its money initially off of the military industrial complex. And Rubenstein now is a big philanthropist himself and he leads these talks with notable guests. And he was up there on stage with Bezos with hundreds of people in the audience, just all the all the VIPs, the editor of *the Washington Post*, which Bezos owns and all sorts of muckety-mucks in DC, including many elected officials and federal officials, and they spent a good 5,6, 7 minutes of the

talk up there on stage, just joking about how wealthy they both were, and joking about the fact that Bezos had just surpassed, I guess it was Bill Gates to become the richest man in the world and how did he like being the richest man in the world compared to the second richest man in the world, and yada yada, yada [and] was all being played for great, great laughs. And it was quite a moment of our new Gilded Age to watch that.

Ralph Nader: I thought that was one of the most telling parts of your book. Listeners should know that Alec is reporting on things he witnessed directly; he went all over. This is not a book, you know, full of citations of reports on Amazon or court decisions on Amazon. But you went into a level of detail that astounded me and I want to ask you this. [chuckle] I've never quite seen anything like this. You're talking about a fella named Keith Taylor. And among his other interests, he wanted to create a physical memorial for the Bethlehem Steel Sparrows Point complex in Baltimore in the heyday of steel workers. They were unionized; they had relatively high wages, benefits, pensions, job security, and they were manufacturing something real—steel. So, he's going around collecting artifacts from various dumpsters, and on page 311, you say, “He put on some gloves, and clambered into the dumpster from which he began heaving the trash into a second dumpster that was serendipitously only 10 feet away. Out went big coils of plastic drainage tubing, a DirecTv dish, Fireball [whiskey] bottles, Hennessy bottles, an oil can, a hardhat. By days end he's reached the lower strata that he was after. There were a few thousand of the bricks, more than enough for his project.” “How'd you get that detail?”

Alec MacGillis: I got the detail because I was in the dumpster with him. It was one of those moments where you think, “Well, how did this happen?” “How in the world did I end up on a freezing cold day standing inside a large dumpster for hours on this peninsula outside Baltimore?” I had reached out to... I knew I was going to be doing a big chapter on the sort of the heart. The spiritual heart of the book really is that chapter on the transformation of what was the largest steel mill in the world in the late 1950s, with 30,000 employees, huge company town directly adjacent to the mill. And that has all been completely wiped off the face of this Peninsula, the Sparrows Point peninsula outside Baltimore. And it's now been replaced by a logistics business park with a whole bunch of warehouses, including now two Amazon warehouses. And I was doing all sorts of research on Sparrows Point, spent a lot of time at the library, going to old news clippings, read all these books. And I came across this fellow Keith Taylor, who used to work at the mill, and had now founded something called the Sparrows Point [North Point] Historical Society, which is basically a one-man effort to reclaim and save some of the heritage of this extraordinary steel mill that had been such a core part of the identity of Baltimore and in the lives of so many workers. And I reached out to him and he said, “Oh, just so happens I'm going to be there today looking for some bricks.” And they were bricks from the demolished headquarters building of the steel mill that was the building from the 30s or 40s that had been the administrative headquarters and had been demolished along with everything else. And he knew that there were bricks in this dumpster. Fortunately, regular trash had been put on top of the bricks. So, we spent hours in the freezing cold--it was December of 2018--going through the dumpster and just trying to get down to those bricks.

Ralph Nader: Well, that certainly is your modus operandi. You want to see it, feel it, challenge it, observe it, analyze it, and that's what makes this book so readable, listeners. Before we get into the real nitty gritty of Amazon power over workers, over consumers -- our listeners are waiting for that -- let me ask you a couple of quick questions. How did Amazon react to your book, just quickly?

Alec MacGillis: It was radio silence for the first month. And then finally, there was a letter from Jay Carney, who is their head PR guy, government relations guy, who of course, used to be--your listeners recognize his name from the Obama White House. He was Obama's spokesman [as] press secretary for a while before that he worked for Biden in the White House. And actually, before that was a journalist and he's now Amazon's chief Poohbah. And he sent a letter to *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, attacking a favorable review that the book had gotten and by association attacking the book.

Ralph Nader: Well, one thing to be you were very fair to Amazon because you often gave their response to the criticism by people who you interviewed or you observed, especially for example, the congressional hearing in the House. I didn't see much about the board of directors. I checked, the board of directors; there are about 10, including the notorious Jamie Gorelick, the heavyweight lobbyist that got huge money from a very brief stint with Fannie Mae. And my best guess is that Bezos has made them each at least worth \$30 million, just from stock options, each one.

Alec MacGillis: Wow!

Ralph Nader: So, they're pretty passive board, obviously; they're not going to give them much trouble. And for a company whose stock valuation is almost \$2 trillion now, there isn't a very sizable and representative board. So, he has complete control. He has about 11% of the stock, which is only half of the percent that Zuckerberg has of Facebook, but he's much richer than Zuckerberg. And the other thing I didn't see much of was you're interviewing truck drivers. We're talking with Alec MacGillis the author of the book *Fulfillment: Winning and Losing in One-Click America*, which has gotten rave reviews. And he's gotten a lot of interviews in the last few weeks since the book came out. And on the cover of the book is this flat plane with a four-lane highway, and one of the 18-wheeler trucks, presumably an Amazon truck. Is there a reason other than time that you didn't focus on either one of those?

Alec MacGillis: So as for the board of directors, I really made a decision, you know, at the outset that this book was not going to be you know, really about Amazon itself. And there have been some good books written on the company, including Brad Stone's, *The Everything Store*. Brad is actually coming out with another updated book on the company in just a month or so. The whole book really, for me started as a book not about Amazon at all, but about regional disparities in America, and that that's what I set out to write about. And then I secondarily came to Amazon as a good frame through which to tell the story of those disparities. So, I mentioned Jamie Gorelick in the chapter about Amazon's takeover of Washington, DC because she's a key figure in that context. But as far as trying to get to the board of directors or trying to get to

various executives, it was not a priority to me in my reporting. As far as the truck drivers go, I do have a fairly key truck driver figure in my chapter on sort of rural decline and rural isolation, the chapter that's based in Southeast Ohio, where I met a man who used to work at the local boot making factory. And then when he lost his job at the local bootmaker factory when it shut down, he ended up becoming a truck driver in the Columbus area commuting an hour each way to be a truck driver in Columbus and making deliveries. He often made deliveries of goods to the Amazon warehouses and basically essentially goods coming from manufacturers or coming from wholesalers to Amazon warehouses where they would then be packed and go out with delivery guys. I did not end up featuring any Amazon you know any of Amazon's own delivery drivers, who of course usually don't work for the company; they are their contractors. Technically they all wear the Amazon garb and drive Amazon trucks. I did not you know feature one of them partly because of the extraordinary pressure that Amazon puts on its current employees not to speak to the press. You have to sign a nondisclosure agreement when you go to work at Amazon, which is something I found, when I myself applied for a job there. And then also the fact that I was careful not to...I didn't want the book to be matter of just finding x person and y person, just to sort of fit a schematic kind of structure. I wanted there to be some serendipity. And so, in a way, I started my reporting in certain places, places that I was most interested in, and then decided to sort of focus on certain people as I came across them in those places. But I didn't go out in a way to say, okay, I've got to find a this type and a that type and a that type.

Ralph Nader: Okay, fair enough. I spotted Amazon rising long time ago. And I was really amazed at how many signals Amazon gave to its competitors and opponents that were ignored. For example, it was quite clear what Amazon's strategy was going to be right off in the mid-1990s. And the elbow room they got was they avoided paying sales tax on books, and that could be 6, 7, 8%; you cover that in your book. So, I called the National Federation of Independent Business [NFIB] [that's supposed] to represent small business. And they were either clueless, or in the pockets of the Chamber of Commerce, that never goes after any business. And they weren't alert to how small bookstores and other stores selling books, were being severely disadvantaged by a 7 to 8% privilege that Amazon was acquiring for itself. The same with bookstores. Bookstores started shrugging off even the big bookstores started shrugging off Amazon as a threat. They didn't heed the growing signs. Citizen groups ignored Amazon's rise, even as stores started getting pinched and getting closed on Main Street. It's really quite extraordinary. Congress, of course, is very late to the game. And they had trouble even educating themselves about the kind of questions to ask Amazon reps at congressional hearings. I'm laying this predicate for the following question. It's quite clear, and you're not really didactic and moralistic; that's why the book is so readable, Alec. But how would you imagine an America without Amazon? What if you were empowered by the federal and state governments to sort of reorder the place of something like Amazon? What would you do to diminish Amazon's baleful influence on America, on workers, on consumer complicity with various maneuvers, which we're going to talk about in a minute?

Alec MacGillis: Well, I think it's pretty straightforward, I think you would end up considering some of the tougher antitrust approaches that are now being, very belatedly being considered in Washington. And I do think that there's some real prospect of action on that front. There are

signs that the Biden administration is going to be taking this more seriously than the very lax Obama regime did, in that we really are about to have a big debate on this score, not unlike what happened almost exactly 100 years ago, with an earlier generation of monopolies. You know, I talked a lot about this with Amazon itself with their press people over many months where their basic line to me was, look, we know this is not ideal; we know that the warehouse work is pretty grueling. We know that these are not the greatest jobs and all that; we know that our dominance is somewhat unseemly. But if it weren't us, it would be someone else. And that's their basic line. It's a fairly, sort of dispiriting kind as PR lines go. It's fairly bleak. It's essentially, you know, there are these bigger things that have happened in the economy--globalization, technology, e-commerce, all that. And there was always going to be some giant feeling that—

Ralph Nader: And you know, there's a grain of truth in that. And that is, if you take the anti-trust proposals by people like the new Federal Trade Commissioner, Lina Khan, you mentioned in your book, it's basically focusing on the platform, the unfair competition. When they put businesses on the platform, they get data that they use against the businesses; they compete with the same products directly with their cloistered consumer constituency. And, you know, in other words, look, if it is an Amazon, it's five Amazons broken up. I mean, what difference does it make in terms of the kind of qualitative devastation that you outline in your book. That's why I would like you in the future, Alec, if you could, to imagine a different future, not just of a changed or diminished Amazon, but of a changed way of production, marketing, transporting and controlling the consumer constituency that is so incarcerated now in a credit card economy, that they've even lost control over their own money and can be penalized at will. So, let's get to some really nitty-gritty questions. Do you buy from Amazon?

Alec MacGillis: Very, very seldom. I do not have a prime account, and I buy from them only if there's some obscure use book I can't find elsewhere.

Ralph Nader: That's a good response from my point of view. And you point out that Amazon Prime is now part of the life of maybe 100 million people in this country. This is unprecedented market penetration. Once you buy into Amazon Prime, you stop looking at alternatives to Amazon products, because the advantages are so great; they lock you in. And some of my best friends, to use a cliché, have been trapped by Amazon Prime. And they don't even look elsewhere. I want to read a short letter by my nephew, who has developed a way to look elsewhere. He wrote a letter to *the New York Times* recently, in response to *New York Times* columnist, Farhad Manjoo's column, which was titled: "The Force That Can Help Amazon's workers? Amazon's Shoppers." And Farhad didn't have very many specifics on how consumers can discipline Amazon, other than complaining to the government, etc. So, Tarek decided to share his own experience. And here's a short letter, "I make no effort to boycott Amazon. I've just opened my eyes to the many occasions when the company has wasted my time an unpardonable sin in my book. Repeatedly, Amazon has led me down the garden path to a dead end, or lousy purchase. Cheap prices left me too lazy to return faulty, poorly described or substandard merchandise, yet it adds up to considerable waste. So, I've moved most of my business to other vendors, which raises the point that Manjoo missed. "Mom and Pop" plus "Software" will beat Amazon. Once buying data are known, its warehouses won't be able to

compete with last-mile distributed products. But absent restraint, the company will choke this kind of innovation. A few years ago, faced with Amazon's requirement that I add more items to some pen refills, in order to trigger shipping, I walked to my local stationery store and bought them. What would once have been utterly mundane, is still a pleasant memory." What's your reaction to that as an approach to avoid Amazon?

Alec MacGillis: Oh, absolutely. I do believe that we all have agency in this regard. Yes, there are these larger forces acting on us. Yes, there's all sorts of you know, technological forces driving our lives. But we do still have agency; we absolutely can at least moderate this extraordinary reliance on a single company. I mean, what happened this past year was just astonishing. The degree of alacrity with which we even further embraced the company in the kind of one-click life with, you know, for many for many of us, if there had been at some point some compunction about going fully Amazon, that was out the window now, because we felt like we had the kind of permission and approval and even encouragement of the public health authorities to kind of take that approach. It was no longer wasn't just that you could order Amazon without guilt, you could actually now do it with some feeling of virtue. And as we now move out of this this terrible year, I think it's very important that we sort of re-engage with the physical world around us with our local economies. One of the strongest voices against Amazon has been Stacy Mitchell [that] I'm sure you know, [with] the Institute for Local Self-Reliance [ILSR], which has been for years now sort of fighting on behalf of locally rooted economies and small-scale economies. And she's such a strong voice of advocacy against the sort of one-click life. ~~of just it'll say that~~ There is now one of the few hopeful science, you know, emerging of late has been the prospect of a real competitive threat to Amazon in the form of this this company, Shopify, and to be careful about being some kind of corporate booster here because they're a big company in their own right. But it's been very interesting to watch what's been happening with this company, based in Canada is now essentially just what you mentioned, what Tarek mentioned, offering small businesses, merchants, the technical technological means to set up their own e-commerce sites [and] make them very, very smooth, running and seamless without them having to sell through Amazon. Amazon's big, huge moneymaker these last few years has been getting all sorts of third-party sellers as they call them to sell on the site. More than half the goods on the site now are from these third-party merchants who feel like they have no choice but to sell on Amazon because that's where all of us go to buy everything. And they end up paying these enormous fees and commissions to sell on the site. It's enormously lucrative for Amazon. So, if there's now a realistic, smooth running option for companies to simply sell on their own, that could make a difference.

Ralph Nader: But you know, the important point you made is that maybe not using this phrase, but when consumers say, "Hey, look, it's a good deal, Amazon, they're reliable, they're efficient, I buy standard products, I don't often have to return them." They're not considering other costs that are imposed on them, because by Amazon concentrating commerce in fewer and fewer regions of the country, sucking the economic life out of Main Street, USA, what's the consequence for those consumers in those small communities? Well, there's less property tax being paid, because these stores are boarded up. And these companies are going out of business, which means there's less money for the schools, which means their schools suffer, or the

property tax has to go up on those very Amazon consumers. The second thing is, a lot of Amazon consumers are becoming Amazon workers. We know how union busting they are. We know how they treat their warehouse workers. And you give very, very good examples of that in your book. I mean, the bathroom breaks and the kind of constant hectoring, the constant surveillance of every move of these workers, the turnover, Amazon says, “Well, we now pay them 15 bucks an hour.” Well, that was a late entry into a PR move. And of course, there are a lot of workers you point out, don't get \$15 an hour because they're gig type workers. And then of course, there's the loss of the union fight in Bessemer, Alabama, which doesn't augur well for other union efforts around the country. Now, these would be called by economists external diseconomies, of the private corporation known as Amazon. So, what are your observations on this massive consumer complicity here? I know people who will order a hammer from Amazon, which means it's got to be coming from a warehouse, put in a truck or put in a postal truck and sent to the person who orders it. And six blocks away, there's a local hardware store, just barely hanging on, who knows all the different homes and families and what their hardware needs are, and sells that same hammer. Give us a scenario of the consumer complicity here.

Alec MacGillis: The consumer is absolutely complicit. And I try hard in the book to not be too explicit or scolding about this. But in a sense, the entire book is really an appeal to the consumer to show them all those externalities, to show them all the costs that lie behind their one-click seeming convenience. Tim Wu has been so eloquent on this score of the, “convenience of the Amazon purchase.” He's, you know, a very sharp sort of legal mind on anti-trust, who's now actually in the Biden White House, which is a promising sign. And he, you know, he wrote an op-ed a couple years ago called the “Tyranny of Convenience”, in *the [New York] Times* where he just pointed out this shouldn't be hard to for people to grasp. But I think it often is that we think about the choice of the Amazon purchase being more convenient than say having to go 10 blocks or a few miles to that hardware store to get the hammer there. What that overlooks, of course, is the fact that when that hardware store goes out of business, because we've stopped patronizing them, then a few years from now, the choice will be between getting a hammer on Amazon or going to a hardware store 20 miles away or 10 miles away. So, it will then yes, that will then be even more “convenient” to buy on Amazon because all the other options fall away and wither away. And that is really what we're now facing. So, I really do see the book as directed at that consumer. And let's be clear here; it's directed, especially at the consumer, in blue cities and towns, who the Amazon is universal. But its strongest demographic for a while now has been one middle upper-middle class, highly educated, blue residents. And that demographic has become even stronger for them this past year, because it was that demographic that went even more extremely into this kind of hunker down one-click daily existence.

Ralph Nader: And you know, that small hardware store owner pays property tax to the local schools, I might add. Now in your book, you have a premonition of something rising, and you give a startling fact. And that is, although Amazon is hiring a lot of workers, of course, you know, these are workers who have lost their jobs often from businesses who were displaced by Amazon. It's not like they're adding major net workers; they're now the second biggest employer after Walmart. We're now seeing people feel sorry for Walmart. I mean, can you imagine? Walmart is now one of the major online competitors to Amazon. But you say that they already

have 200,000 robots. It won't be long, right, Alec, when they'll have more robots than workers; the number of workers will diminish in warehouses and elsewhere. And it'll be trying to get the FAA to authorize delivering their products by drones to neighborhoods. Is there any doubt about that being part of Amazon's business model?

Alec MacGillis: Oh, no, there's no doubt at all. It's all just a technical question at this point. It's interesting, when you get into the warehouse work, the big remaining hurdle before they can get rid of a lot of the humans that are still working there, is the technical challenge of getting robots, teaching robots how to grab things. It's hard to teach robots how to grab things of different sizes and shapes. And that's the one thing that they still kind of need the humans for in the warehouses. So, it's astonishing what's happening, the warehouses in recent years where the work has gotten much more automated. They have these incredible robots that zoom around with big, tall stacks of shelves on them with kind of towers of shelves. And they zoom around and they somehow manage not to crash into each other and then they bring the stack of shelves to a human picker, who is standing there and just taking stuff out of the drawers as we the consumer orders it. And that picker used to be roaming the aisles and corridors looking for items that were stacked in permanent shelving and but now you have the robots that zoom around and bring the stuff to the picker. So, in a way the pickers' work has gotten even more robotic itself. They're really just there standing in place taking stuff out of the drawers, essentially reduced to this one task of grabbing. They will be replaced by a robot once they figure out how to teach the robot to grab.

Ralph Nader: Well, I noticed at the beginning of your book you quote from Rudolph Wurlitzer's work *Nog, N-O-G*. Here's the quote, "I remain near the entrance, handling goods as they are shoved in, listening and nodding. I have been slowly dissolving into this cavity." We've been talking with Alec MacGillis the author of *Fulfillment: Winning and Losing in One-Click America*. I think this has got to be a candidate for the nonfiction National Book Award or a Pulitzer Prize, listeners. You'll see when you get the book, when you contribute it to your local library, which is under severe budget strain all over the country. And when you talk it up among your thousands of book clubs, which if you have a bylaw preventing nonfiction books from being discussed, because they're argumentative and controversial, and you go for fiction instead. This is stranger than fiction. I always look at the way an expose book or an analytically revelatory book in your case ends. And you end in the following way. It's quite memorable [on] page 337. "A man was standing outside the hiring office run by Integrity [Staffing Solutions], the human resources contractor, waiting for his Lyft ride home after coming to file a job application. He was 33 years old, and he was applying for the first regular job of his life. He had spent most of his adulthood, making a good livelihood in selling heroin and Fentanyl near Lexington Market on the west side of Baltimore's downtown. But that had gotten harder during the pandemic. With stores closed, his usual customers couldn't steal things to sell to support their habit. "You can't steal; you can't do nothing." He said, "It's definitely tough out here; ain't no money out here." So here he was accepting the path that everyone it seemed, was now taking. "My other homeboy was talking about driving for Amazon; everyone trying to come to Amazon." He wasn't sure how he was going to get by on warehouse wages, but he didn't really have a choice. "It's definitely

tough out here; it definitely ain't the same.” He said, “I got to change up how I'm doing everything.” End of book. Your comment.

Alec MacGillis: I was just amazed when I found/encountered that man; [it] was my last piece of reporting going to the warehouse last spring, late spring. And I could not believe that this gentleman I started talking to is a fairly major opioid dealer in Baltimore. And I really felt almost like I'd stepped into season six of *The Wire* where the drug dealers have to go to Amazon to get a job because that's now the world and it's that the company is now so dominant, so ubiquitous, that even the hardened drug dealer ends up working there.

Ralph Nader: And what kind of feeling, Alec do you think you left your many thousands of readers when they ended the books that way?

Alec MacGillis: I hope that that last line would resonate with readers in a personal way that we got to change up how we're doing everything because otherwise, you know, it's going to get even worse, more dystopian.

Ralph Nader: Well, it was memorable end all right. And it made me think that maybe Amazon is ready to have a movie like *Chinatown*, made in Hollywood on it. Our time is up, unfortunately. We've been talking with Alec MacGillis the author of *Fulfillment: Winning and Losing in One-Click America*, published by Farrar Straus. Thank you very much. We look forward to all the awards this book is going to get before you come out with your next book. And your next book. Thank you for your great work for our country's right to know, Alec MacGillis.

Alec MacGillis: Thank you Ralph; thanks to all of you.

Steven Skrovan: We've been speaking with Alec MacGillis. We will link to *Fulfillment* at Ralph Nader Radio hour.com. Let's take a short break. When we return, we're going to welcome back Dr. Michael Carome from Public Citizen who's going to give us the latest in the COVID-19 variants and a new drug for Alzheimer's. But first let's check in with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber.

Russell Mokhiber: From the National Press Building in Washington, DC, this is your *Corporate Crime Reporter* “Morning Minute” for Friday, May 7 2021. I'm Russell Mokhiber. Think of corporate crime and think men getting into trouble; women not so much. And that's not because women are more ethical. It's because women haven't broken through to the top corporate ranks. Give women equal opportunity and they will be equal to men in buckling to the corporate pressures to cut corners, get it done and get in trouble. Mary Dodge is at the University of Colorado, Denver. She studies women in white collar and corporate crime from all angles. Women are going to have to concede the point that there are very few women involved in instigating corporate crime, Dodge told *Corporate Crime Reporter* in an interview last week, “My argument is that women have not had the opportunity to engage in corporate crime. If women were given the opportunity, perhaps we would see more corporate crime engaged by women.” For the *Corporate Crime Reporter*, I'm Russell Mokhiber.

Steve Skrovan: Thank you, Russell. Welcome back to *The Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. I'm Steve Skrovan, and along with David Feldman and Ralph. If you're a regular listener to this show, you may remember that we were talking about the possibility of a global pandemic four years ago. So, on medical issues, we know who to turn to, to stay ahead of the curve. David?

David Feldman: Dr. Michael Carome is an expert on issues of drug and medical device safety, FDA oversight and health care policy. He is the director of Public Citizen's Health Research Group. Welcome back to *The Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Dr. Michael Carome.

Dr. Michael Carome: Thank you for having me.

Ralph Nader: Thank you, Michael. You know, the main concern now of people in this country, other than the vaccination of more and more people, are the variants and the media is full of variants; they're coming from India, from Brazil, from South Africa, from Great Britain. And so far, the best medical advice out of people like Dr. Fauci is that the existing emergency approved vaccines still can embrace them and keep you from going to a hospital or coming down with a serious case of COVID-19. But on the horizon, there's fear that some of these new variants may actually override the vaccine. What's the latest that you can tell us?

Dr. Michael Carome: Sure. So, these variants that we're talking about are mutated forms of the original virus that originated in China. And like all viruses, the COVID virus over time mutates, as it proliferates from person to person and within a person. And there are actually already dozens of variants [that] have been identified to date. And that's not unexpected. And fortunately, the variants that are currently spreading across the United States, it appears that the vaccines that are authorized protect people from these variants. You know, one in particular that's very common in the United States is from the United Kingdom. That variant actually is, in the most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control, and Prevention is causing more than 50% of new infections in the US. But fortunately, the available vaccines are protective against that variant. The concern is though, what's going to happen in the future? Because the virus is just on fire in other parts of the world. Particularly the news out of India is distressing with hundreds of thousands, and probably, close to a million cases a day that are being missed. With that much proliferation of the virus going on, the opportunity for new mutations to develop is just very, very high. And the concern is that in the future, we are going to see a variant from this massive proliferation of the virus and other parts of the world that is resistant to the protection that we get from the currently available vaccines. And what that might mean is that we could have new outbreaks of infection in this country that are resistant to the vaccine, and we'll have to develop modified vaccines. And people who are currently protected would need probably booster shots that have been modified to protect against these new variants should they develop. And so, we'll have to sort of go back and start all over in terms of vaccinating our population in the US and anywhere else in the world where the vaccinations are being made available.

Ralph Nader: Michael, all these variants so far is that I mentioned in these various countries don't seem to be that worrisome to infectious disease specialists here yet, in terms of their being [able] to override the vaccinations. Are you mostly referring to some new ones not yet detected that may come up in the coming months?

Dr. Michael Carome: Yes. So, since the original outbreak of the Coronavirus, there have been dozens of variants identified to date, and many of those are circulating in the United States. And so far, the authorized vaccines that are available, appear to offer significant protection against the common variants that are in this country. And one in particular from the United Kingdom is actually causing about 55% of the infections of the new infections in the US. And, fortunately, the vaccines that we have are protective against that variant. The real concern is that as the vaccine proliferates and spreads in other parts of the world and what's going on in India, for example, is just tragic with hundreds of thousands of people getting sick, where people are not vaccinated. That increases the likelihood that we're going to have additional mutations that lead to new variants that may escape the protection offered by the currently available vaccines. So that's the real danger that until we suppress and control the pandemic around the world, we in this country and other countries where the vaccine is being used, remain at risk for future variants that could reignite the panic here and lead to the need for changing our vaccines and beginning the whole vaccination process over for our population.

Ralph Nader: Well, the reach out from the US is a no brainer it seems, otherwise we're going to get a boomerang and it'll be more devastating. Public Citizen has estimated that for \$35 billion, everybody in the world could be vaccinated. \$35 billion is 1/5 of the fortune of Jeff Bezos. So, the other thing is, the patents that these drug companies have got on some aspects of all these vaccines, even though many of them were funded in terms of research and development by the taxpayer through the National Institutes of Health, they can be overridden too under the World Health Organization treaty and even under federal law. Could you tell our listeners, how do we sweep aside those two barriers? Otherwise, we're just inviting deadlier and deadlier extensions of the COVID-19 pandemic! I mean, it's a no brainer.

Dr. Michael Carome: Absolutely. The amount of money you know, \$25-30 billion, which is what we believe the US should make available to make vaccines for the entire world, is a drop in the bucket. We are faced with an international public health catastrophe that is getting worse by the day. And what we need is to not have the monopolies of the vaccine makers stand in the way of the ability of countries to manufacture vaccines for their populations. And so, we believe that through the World Health Organization, the monopolistic practices and patents need to be removed. The technology needs to be shared with countries so that they can ramp production of these vaccines, so that we can basically protect the entire world population. Otherwise, this pandemic will go on forever, and it will indeed boomerang back to the US.

Ralph Nader: So, the corporate capitalist system can't even allow a government like ours, to confront omnicide. I mean, this is really getting serious, listeners. And again, let your members of Congress know how relatively easy it is to both overcome the patent monopoly obstacle and to, with other wealthy countries, ante-up 30 \$35 billion for rapid onsite manufacturing in those third world countries, the necessary vaccines. We're out of time. Thank you, as always, Dr. Michael Carome, director of the Health Research Group of Public Citizen. Michael, give our listeners the direct website and how they can learn about all the best pills, worst pills database you have.

Dr. Michael Carome: Sure. Our main website is www.citizen.org. And our website for Worst Pills is worstpills.org.

Ralph Nader: Thank you very much, Michael.

Dr. Michael Carome: You're welcome. Thank you for having me.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking with Dr. Michael Carome; we will link to his work at Ralph Nader Radio hour.com. Now we're going to do a little segue here to a listener question that we received a couple of weeks ago from a listener Mark Erickson, who said, "I have told my friends and family to avoid flights that use the Max series planes. After I told my parents this, they took it seriously, and became active in being sure to book flights, they used non-Max planes. Recently, they were able to arrange for another flight using a different aircraft, when they learned that the original one was a Max, but they were charged higher fees, not for the change but because the other flight was just more at the time of the booking. Is there any way around this? Should my parents or anyone else in the situation simply ask for their original rate, which was lower?" So, we contacted Kendall from Flyers Rights, and she gave us the following response. David?

David Feldman: Four US airlines currently operate the Max; American United, Southwest and Alaska. Even if a passenger avoids the 737 Max at the booking stage, airlines can change the type of plane at any time. One, Alaska does not have a 737 Max policy. Their website is silent on the flight change issue. But a spokesperson told *Business Insider* that they will work with passengers who are "uncomfortable with the Max." Two, Southwest likewise does not have a guarantee. If you ask they will try to put you on a new flight within three days of the original flight with no change fees or fare differentials. This policy ends on June 1st. Three, American and United guarantee to put you on the next available non-Max flight with no change fees or fare differentials. United's policy is set to expire at the end of April for basic economy and the end of May for everyone else. Without these Max policies, some passengers can still change their flights without change fees under the airline's "COVID-era change fee waivers." However, passengers are on the hook for fare differentials. If a passenger is changing their flight, especially late in the game because of the Max, their new flight will likely be more expensive. The passenger will have to pay extra and fare even if they are not paying a change fee. While Southwest has not had change fees for a while, the general change fee waiver policies for American, United and Alaska do not extend to Basic Economy saver tickets [which are] the least expensive class of tickets on these airlines. The American [and] United 737 Max guarantees are the friendliest while they last, as passengers including basic economy, will not have to pay change fees or fare differentials provided that the next available flight is suitable for them.

Ralph Nader: You know the phrase while they last--it all comes down to how much heat we airline passengers put on airlines. And so, here's what I suggest. You have a minute to spare, call up your airline and give them a piece of your mind about the need to ground those planes until they're fixed in ways experts have pointed out again and again to the FAA, and to make it as easy as possible, if they're up in the air, for you to switch without you being charged reservation change fees. That's one. The second is if you are flying make a big deal. And you say, "I want to

fly to Albuquerque from Boston, you don't have a 737 Max flying that do you?" And feedback to them that way. And then the third, if you ever are at the airport and they switch planes on you, and they haven't notified you, you should treat it like denied boarding. When you have a confirmed seat on an airplane and they overbook it, they've got to give you denied boarding compensation. So, you have to fight back. Now, if you want to get up in the internet, on your displeasure of the 737 Max, our buttons "axe the Max", designed by Mr. Fish of Philadelphia, beautifully designed to convey the dangers of the plane are available. You can get them from going to go to nader.org, and you'll see how you can get 10 of them in one package. And look at the leverage. You put them on your lapel, and your friends and relatives. You take a picture, you put it up on the web, and thousands or tens of thousands of people will get the message. So, use your leverage. Otherwise, you'll find more and more of the 730 Max is being bought by the airlines, and more and more of your choices being limited until on various routes, you may have no choice. They're going to all be 737 Max's. The families of the victims of the Indonesian Ethiopian crashes are still pressuring the FAA to get rid of the four top officials and have the Biden administration put a new team at the head. So, they're fighting for you. And they've got good support in Congress. And to keep update go to lyfersright.org flyersrights.org

Steve Skrovan: So, thank you for that question, Mark and Kendall for your answer from Flyers Rights. I want to thank our guests again Alec MacGillis and Dr. Michael Chrome. For those you listening on the radio, that's our show. For you podcast listeners, stay tuned for some bonus material we call "The Wrap Up." A transcript of this show will appear on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* website soon after the episode is posted.

[music]

[David Feldman: Subscribe to us on our *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* YouTube channel and for Ralph's weekly column, it's free; go to nader.org. For more from Russell Mokhiber go to corporatecrime.com

Steve Skrovan: And Ralph has provided two separate form letters sent to you representatives demanding they take action on corporate crime and taxing the rich, two separate things. Just click on the clearly marked boxes in the right-hand corner of the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* landing page where it's all laid out there for you to fill in and personalize any way you want. Go to ralphnader.radiohour.com and take action.

David Feldman: To support Whirlwind Wheelchair, visit whirlwindwheelchair.org. They do great work showing people in United States and around the world how to build sturdy, economic wheelchairs from local materials, whirlwindwheelchair.org.

Steve Skrovan: And for an independent news source that believes people are more important than corporations, go to populist.com to read or subscribe to *the Progressive Populist*.

David Feldman: The producers of the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* are Jimmy Lee Wirt and Matthew Marin. Our executive producer is Alan Minsky.

Steve Skrovan: Our theme music “Stand Up Rise Up” was written and performed by Kemp Harris. Our proofreader is, Elisabeth Solomon. Our associate producer is Hannah Feldman.

David Feldman: Join us next week on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* when we'll welcome author Pete Davis, whose book *Dedicated*, explores how our restless modern society can get us stuck in infinite browsing mode. Thank you, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Thank you, everybody. And for your airline questions, go to flyersrights.org. They're there for you.