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Problems with ‘Big Tech’ that lawmakers continually fail to address

Joanne E. Gray
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Last month, members of the US Congress grilled the heads of Google, Apple, Amazon and Facebook about the extent and use of their market power. Over the past 15 years, as our digitally connected society has evolved, these ‘Big Tech’ firms have become

extraordinarily powerful and lawmakers are right to question their dominance.

By focusing on the economic dimensions of Big Tech’s power, however, these lawmakers failed to address the full range of consequences that flow from having a digital environment dominated by monopolistic tech firms.

In the hearings, lawmakers asked Mark Zuckerberg whether he shut down competition by buying-up new companies. Jeff Bezos was probed about Amazon’s exploitation of third party seller data. It was suggested to Apple’s Tim Cook that his company acted to shut out potential competitors from the Apple App Store. Google’s Sundar Pichai was asked whether Google biased search results to favour its own services over competitors’.

But the impact on market conditions is just one manifestation of the power of Big Tech. There are also important social and political dimensions that should be a cause of deep unease for those who would prefer to eschew concentrated power in favour of a democratic social and economic order.

The social, cultural and political power of ‘Big Tech’

In one way or another, each of the Big Tech companies is a gatekeeper of information. They own and administer the infrastructure by which we share ideas, socialise and communicate.

This means they have the capacity to influence society through control over the information and ideas to which we have access. Big Tech is able to influence how we understand the world, what we care about and what we choose to take action for or against.

Next, we add to the economic, social and cultural capacities of big tech a heavy dollop of political power.

Each year the Big Tech firms spend millions of dollars lobbying governments, in the United States and Europe in particular, in an attempt to secure laws suitable to their interests.

Perhaps more importantly, beyond lobbying and negotiating with politicians, Big Tech are powerful decision-makers in the digital environment.

They regulate through design.

They design and manage the infrastructure and algorithms of the digital environment that are central in our day-to-day lives. And they continually make decisions about how these critical socio-technical systems operate.

Through various private modes — self-regulation, private agreements, terms of service, content moderation policies — these companies are powerful private decision-makers within large segments of the digital environment and therefore within contemporary life at large.

So Big Tech isn’t simply a group of monopolistic firms.

The Big Tech companies are information gatekeepers and decision-makers who enjoy a potent mix of economic, social, cultural and political power. How to effectively regulate these actors is a pressing challenge for lawmakers. And one not easily solved.

Pathways for effectively regulating Big Tech

There are multiple pathways available to those who are up to the challenge of taking on Big Tech. They can address the problem of monopoly power head on, by breaking up companies or breaking down barriers to entry in markets. Or they can acknowledge the current role that these companies play as gatekeepers and public service providers and impose upon them public interest responsibilities.

It’s very likely that a mix of these approaches will be required.

One thing is certain, if lawmakers are to address the dominance of Big Tech in any meaningful way, they will need to broaden their view out from a narrow economic lens to one that includes the full spectrum of economic, social, cultural and political consequences of a digital environment dominated by a handful of powerful technology companies.

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