

Framing Big Tech: News Media, Digital Capital and the Antitrust Movement

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Abstract

This article analyses US news media’s coverage of the collision between Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple, and an emergent antitrust movement aiming to break up or curb their powers. A study of over 700 articles from 2019 and 2020 shows how news media “frame” this controversy by their selection of storylines, subjects, sources, signs, and solutions. Many stories stress the benefits of Big Tech—the cheapness and convenience of products and services, its importance to the US economy and stock market, and its central role in the Covid-19 pandemic emergency. However, a preponderance of stories supportive of antitrust initiatives seeking to rein in digital monopolists; the narrative of an “antitrust bipartisan alliance” crossing the Republicans/Democrats polarity has become a dominant frame. Yet, the media focus on antitrust legislation and prosecution tends to marginalize more radical proposals for challenging digital corporate power, such as those from the Black Lives Matter movement. Our analysis relates the contested media framing of Big Tech both to inter-capitalist struggles within the communications industry and to a hegemonic crisis in US politics, as an entrenched neoliberalism faces populist challenges from both left and right.

It is antitrust time for Big Tech: Google/Alphabet, Facebook, Apple and Amazon. At the centre of a whirlwind of controversies over competition, surveillance, misinformation, discrimination and exploitation, they face numerous attempts to regulate or dissolve their power. This article reports on an analysis of over 700 news stories from 2019 and 2020 and examines how US news media “frame” Big Tech and its critics. Many storylines are favorable to the giant digital corporations, emphasizing the convenience of their cheap (or free) products and services, their role in buoying the US stock market, their apparent indispensability in the Covid-19 emergency and their centrality to national security in conflicts with China. Nonetheless, a wide range of coverage agrees that the remedy for oligopolistic concentrations of ownership lies in the revival of the US “trust busting” tradition. Such coverage does not map neatly onto the news media’s standard two-party construction of US politics.

Instead, the primary narrative presents a conflict between powerful tech companies and a bipartisan alliance of reformers. This framing, which in part reflects tensions between old and new segments of the communications and media sector, but also arises from populist movements of both left and right, often generates storylines sympathetic to the antitrust movement. However, they tend to marginalize more radical challenges to digital capital.

Context and methods

Todd Gitlin's *The Whole World is Watching*, the ur-text of "framing analysis", defines media frames as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual." They are "principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters" (Gitlin, 1980: 7-6). In the context of the Vietnam war, Gitlin (1980: 10) saw media framing working to contain social dissent within the boundaries of capitalist order, "uniting persuasion from above with consent from below."

Gitlin and other critical theorists note, however, that in crises when political and corporate elites are divided and disoriented, news frames can become fragmented and contested. The Big Tech antitrust movement arises in such a moment. Nancy Fraser (2017) proposes that since the Wall Street crash of 2008 the US has experienced a "crisis of hegemony." The "progressive neoliberalism" of the Obama regime, combining capitalist globalization with limited social palliation, was assailed by new populisms—the right nationalist populism of Trump and the left socialist populism of Sanders. Both challenged corporate elites associated with the previous regime; the most prominent were the companies of Silicon Valley, who had successively cultivated an image as freewheeling, quirky, garage-invention innovators of quasi-miraculous machines.

"Big Tech" is itself a micro-frame, a journalistic invention. There is no "Big Tech" in the North American Industry Classification System or Standard Industrial Code used by government agencies. Nor does the phrase originate in business or economic literature. It is an abbreviation of "big digital technology companies", which appeared in the early 2010s on the websites of what would become "tech journalism." Sarah Lacy's (2011) "Yawn: how did Big Tech companies turn into big boring banks?" announced the transformation of the computer industry's legendary start-up culture into a set of massive, vertically integrated and apparently infinitely avaricious mega-corporations, but it was not until 2013 that "Big Tech" really "began to gain currency in the mainstream media" (Oremus, 2017).

It did so in two registers: celebratory and condemnatory. The celebratory stories came in business media applauding the skyrocketing stock prices of a cluster of US companies that Jim Cramer, television host of CNBC's *Mad Money* show, named "FAANG" (Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, and Google), all "totally dominant in their markets" (Brodie, 2013). Subsequent usage rung the changes on the new acronym, eliminating Netflix in favor of the "Big Four" and adding Microsoft to make a Big Five of GAFAM or FAAMG. Sometimes lesser companies, such as Uber or Twitter were thrown in. But whatever way the precise composition of Big Tech was shuffled, for business media, "bigness" was a positive attribute for investors wanting to enlarge their portfolios.

The other, critical strand of Big Tech coverage was typified by San Francisco resident Dan Gillmor's (2013) "Has Big Tech got too big for its boots?", which declared "Silicon Valley is an economic powerhouse—we all benefit from its innovation. But its dark side is an ugly hubris...Never have the wealth and income gaps been greater, but never have the problems of the people at the bottom been less visible in my two decades here." Other stories criticized "Big Tech" for its collaboration with the NSA surveillance PRISM program and other privacy intrusions (Stern, 2013; Tate, 2013; Van Allen, 2013), tax avoidance (Bergin, 2013), and monopolistic media take over (DeBord, 2013; Tonner, 2013).

As Will Oremus (2017) observes, "Big Banks", "Big Tobacco", "Big Pharma" and "Big Oil" have all been objects of public opprobrium: "society does not prepend the label 'Big,' with a capital 'B,' to an

industry out of respect or admiration. It does it out of loathing and fear—and in preparation for battle”. This antagonism was made explicit in another neologism-generating article. Adrienne Wooldridge’s (2013) *Economist* story, “The coming tech-lash” opened with an account of the plutocratic multi-million-dollar Lord of the Rings-themed California wedding for Sean Parker, first president of Facebook. Woolridge predicted that while Silicon Valley had so far escaped the rage against the super-rich visited on the financial sector by Occupy Wall Street, this was likely to change as a “growing peasants’ revolt against the sovereigns of cyberspace” assigned the “tech elite” next to “join bankers and oilmen in public demonology.”

This forecast was prescient. Over the next seven years, Big Tech would grow at an unrelenting pace; economic recovery from the 2008 crash was widely described as “tech driven.” The profits and stock-values of the GAFAM group soared. At the same time, it became the target of a widening array of criticisms. The GAFAM complex exemplified problems in the US economy—gross disparities of wealth between owners and employees, and between different strata of workers, loss of jobs to automation and offshoring, and patterns of race and gender discrimination—that were becoming increasingly salient.

They also developed and directed digital technologies crucial to the political unfolding of the crisis. They were at once indispensable to, and suspected by, all the contending political forces. Obama’s 2011 digitally targeted election advertising was followed by Trump’s Twitter feed, Facebook campaigning and the scandals of Cambridge Analytica, Russian cyber-propaganda, and alt-right networks. A wave of liberal recriminations drove the corporate gatekeepers of the internet to belated and erratic attempts to police their platforms. This in turn alienated the political right, which increasingly presented itself as a victim of digital censorship. Big Tech made itself loathed at both ends of the political spectrum.

From 2017 onwards, research surveys showed declining US public confidence in the giant digital corporations, and a mounting demand for their regulation. This cause too found its own micro-frame phrase: “antitrust.” This is, as even its enthusiasts concede, an archaic phrase. It derives from late 19th century US populist movements against corporate combinations and cartels, known as “trusts.” Although it is often associated with agrarian unrest, antitrust involved broader, urban, constituencies which contested not merely concentrations of ownership but also larger questions concerning the proper relations between government and the market and between state and society (Sklar, 1988; John, 2021). In this sense, antitrust was both a movement and a set of policy measures that ebbed, flowed and changed in complexion over the 1890-1970 period before virtually going into abeyance with the rise of neoliberalism (Christophers, 2016). Its periodic surges of activity do, however, constitute a tradition with clear potential application to Big Tech. Antitrust activists have typically been concerned with monopoly power exercised over large social infrastructures, such as energy and transportation systems. The same logic can be transferred to today’s digital infrastructures. Indeed, antitrust has repeatedly taken up issues of communication. Western Union’s telegraph monopoly was a target of 19th century anti-monopoly movements (John, 2017). Antitrust politics and policy were eventually adapted to telecommunications regulation: the breakup of AT&T in 1984 is considered one of the last effective exercises of antitrust measures (and an inaugural moment in the advent of post-Fordist capitalism) (Lüthje, 1993). Even after that date there was a precursor to today’s encounter with Big Tech in the Clinton administration’s 2001 prosecution of Microsoft for abuse of monopoly power. Gates’ company was found guilty, but its breakup was averted by an incoming Republican administration. The eventual “slap on the wrist” penalties were generally considered a failure of antitrust law, though some observers believe they curbed Microsoft’s aggressive squashing of software rivals (Blumenthal and Wu, 2018).

Leaders of today’s “antitrust” surge have suggested that a more legible update of the term might be simply “competition policy” (Klobuchar, 2021). However, “antitrust” carries an evocative range of historical connotations, such as Louis Brandeis’s denunciations of “the curse of bigness”, Theodore Roosevelt’s reputation as a “trustbusting” President, and the populist slogan, “Break ‘Em Up.”

Since these stirring origins, “antitrust” had shrunk into a byzantine and increasingly conservative branch of American jurisprudence, assessing concentrations of ownership according to the narrow criteria of “consumer welfare”—equated with economic efficiency—rather than its broader socio-political implications.

However, its 21st century revival in post-crash America drew on social energies released by the Occupy Wall Street crisis and the net neutrality fight. The first site for exorcising the “curse of bigness” (Wu, 2018) became digital capital, with “Break ‘Em Up” re-specified as “Break Up Big Tech.”

These events correlate with media lexicons. The Factiva database of US news stories (of which more below) shows less than a hundred, probably serendipitous, uses of “Big Tech” in headlines or first paragraphs from 2010 to 2012. In 2013 this jumps to 169, rises to 222 in 2016, more than doubles to 498 in 2017, does so again to reach 1292 in 2017 and 3872 in 2020. “Techlash” does not appear in headlines or lead paragraphs at all until 2017, when it occurs once. But then the numbers shoot up—25 in 2018, 47 in 2019, 64 in 2020. The Google N-Gram viewer, which charts the annual frequency of words or phrases in books shows a similar pattern. “Big Tech” rarely occurs before 2012, then rises sharply; “techlash”, non-existent before 2013, takes off in 2014. Each year from 2010 to 2016, “Big Tech” is paired with “antitrust” once or not at all in Factiva stories, except for 2014 (the year of the final Microsoft decision) when they were paired five times. In 2017, however, the two phrases were coupled 17 times, 86 times in 2018, 737 in 2019 and 857 in 2020.

This is the background to our research into media coverage. We analyze news stories about Big Tech in US publications over two periods: December 1, 2019 - May 30, 2020; and October 2020 - December 2020. Connections to coverage were also made before and after these dates. The reasons for selecting these periods are discussed in the next section.

We used a database, Factiva, owned by Dow Jones & Company, accessible to us through our university library. For searches limited to the United States, Factiva makes available stories from a wide range of news sources; mainstream centrist news sources such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, centre-left and centre-right organs such as *The Nation*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Business Insider*, and *The New York Post*; wire services such as *Reuters*; numerous local papers; specialist legal, financial and “techie” websites (*CNET*, *TechCrunch*, *Slashdot*, *Ars Technica*); the web pages of television enterprises such as *CBS* and *Fox News*; a scattering of articles from the international press (reappeared on US websites); and outliers such as *Prison Planet*, *Zero Hedge* and *Sputnik News*. Despite Factiva’s scope, however, we suspect it does not adequately represent a sharply bifurcated and polarized US media landscape, and in particular the emergence of a distinct right-wing media “ecosystem” (Benkler et al., 2018: 13). We therefore supplemented its results with special searches of *Fox News*’ website and *Breitbart News Network*.

To identify relevant stories, we started with broad searches such as “Big Tech”, “antitrust”, “censorship”, “net neutrality”, “free internet”, “gig economy”, “net neutrality”, “public utility.” These yielded thousands of results, most outside our scope of political interest. We narrowed the field by constructing search strings that combined terms including “Big Tech” and/or “Silicon Valley” with a) antitrust b) censorship or monitoring c) basic income d) surveillance e) fake news f) gig economy. We also conducted searches on neologisms and slogans, such as “techlash” and “Break Up Big Tech.”

By this process we derived a data set with 719 articles (305 in period one and 414 in period two), organized to identify their primary and secondary topics. We coded each article to indicate its stance on its primary topics—neutral, positive or negative, or neutral-leaning-positive, neutral-leaning-negative. For example, an article dealing with digital surveillance and opposition to it would be coded negative, one attempting a balanced coverage would be neutral and one emphasizing supposedly benign aspects of surveillance—such as national security priorities or advertising targeted to customer interest—would be positive.

We then moved to qualitative assessment of the stories. Drawing not only on Gitlin, but also more recent media scholarship (Altheide and Schneider, 2017; Cohen and de Peuter, 2018; Entman, 1993; Kuehn, 2018), we identify major frames by applying a five-point grid:

1. Stories: What is the basic narrative structure? Is this a story of two-party political competition; of a popular crusade against corporate oligarchy; of citizens standing up to an authoritarian state; of technological progress and the benefits of economic growth; or of response to national safety and security threats?

2. Subjects: Who are the protagonists, actors or agents identified in the story? What adversaries emerge from “conflict frames” (Kuehn, 2018)?

3. Sources: Taking as our point of departure Kuehn’s (2018: 405) proposition that “Sources are messengers used to support frames,” we ask what voices a story selects and affirms as authoritative on its topic.

4. Signs: Here we consider the characteristic metaphors, historical references, keywords, stock phrases and jargon that condense the narratives and subject positions discussed above.

5. Solutions: We identify what each story offers as the solution to the perceived problem it posits, the moral compass it explicitly or implicitly proposes, and the policy or political recommendations it implies or asserts.

This fivefold division between stories, subjects, sources, signs and solutions is admittedly somewhat artificial, as each of these categories is very much embedded in all the others. However, abstracting them is useful methodologically; a consistent set of questions can be defined and applied to each item.

Media moments

Our analysis covers a period of sharply rising media interest in the social controversies surrounding Big Tech. The first (December 1, 2019 – May 30, 2020) includes the Democrat Party’s primaries, which selected a presidential candidate for the 2020 election. Three of the contestants—Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders, and to a lesser extent, Andrew Yang—were critics of Big Tech and populist tribunes of “techlash.” None of their campaigns were successful (Yang dropped out on February 12, Warren on March 5, Sanders on April 16). But while they were in the running, we could reasonably expect to see media discussion—pro and con—of Big Tech issues, especially as in this period both the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and Department of Justice (DOJ) were actively engaged in antitrust probes into Facebook, Apple, Amazon, and Alphabet/Google. Moreover, between March and May the coronavirus pandemic became a breaking US news topic, allowing us to see if and how the pandemic changed coverage of Big Tech.

The second search covered a three-month period, from October 2020 to December 2020. We undertook this search because surprising events occurred even as we were finalizing our analysis of the first period. Criticisms of Big Tech, rather than fading away with Warren’s and Sanders’s defeated campaigns, entered the mainstream of US politics. Late 2020 saw the House of Representatives hold hearings and issue its report on market abuses by Alphabet/Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon. Trump Attorney General William Barr’s DOJ prosecuted Alphabet/Google for anti-competitive practices. The US FTC sought to divest Facebook of Instagram and WhatsApp. Other investigations were underway into Apple and Amazon, with further prosecutions possible. There were also international regulatory moves from the EU, UK, India, Australia and elsewhere. Meanwhile, the full force of the coronavirus pandemic swept America, underlining social dependence on digital networks. The Black Lives Matter uprising (exploding at the very end of our first research period) raised major issues about racism and digital technology. In this context, we thought it important to investigate media coverage of Big Tech.

Our first and second research periods are of unequal length, the first covers six months, the second, three. Yet the number of relevant articles increased from 305 in the first period to 414 in the second, an increase of 35.7% over a period half as long. In both periods, the most frequent category for media discussion of Big Tech problems was “antitrust.” This was the primary category for 44% of the Big Tech stories in the first period and 91.5% in the second. The number of stories mentioning the “Break up Big Tech” slogan rose from 7 to 17. Conversely, use of the term “techlash”—indicating a diffuse current of Big Tech critique, less tied to a specific policy solution—declined, from 25 to 12 stories.

Among the growing number of stories critical of Big Tech, there were shifts of focus between our study's two phases. In the first period, surveillance was a primary topic of 30 Big Tech stories; in period two this number fell to 9. By contrast, the number of stories primarily focused on "censorship" rose from 41 to 73. Over the same period there was a falling off in coverage of labor issues related to Big Tech. The handful of stories focused on basic income issues in the first period disappeared in period two. Stories focused on gig-economy regulation and/or minimum wage issues fell from 44 to 14, a marked drop even allowing for the shorter time frame of period two.

News stories in both periods showed significant sympathy for regulating or even breaking up Big Tech. Out of 137 Big Tech stories focused on "antitrust" in period one, 20 favored antitrust positions, 53 were neutral-leaning-favorable, 54 neutral, 6 neutral-leaning-negative, and only 4 outrightly hostile. In period two, of 379 antitrust stories, 81 were positive, 81 neutral-leaning-positive, 180 neutral, 16 neutral-leaning-negative and 21 negative. Thus, in period one, 53% of stories about the antitrust movement were very or somewhat sympathetic, and only 7% unfavorable. In period two, 43% were broadly favorable and 10% were unfavorable. This slight shift against the antitrust position might be a sign of Big Tech mustering forces against an increasingly serious threat. The really significant issue, however, is the overall increase in coverage of the antitrust agenda.

These results follow the long-term trajectory that we have already outlined. Mounting news coverage of social controversies associated with Big Tech, and rising interest in antitrust policy as a response to these issues. Such interest was, however, accelerated by the appearance of Zuckerberg, Pichai, Cook and Bezos before the House subcommittee; the publication of the inquiry's voluminous and damning report; and the filing of DOJ and FTC cases against Alphabet/Google and Facebook, respectively. The rampaging pandemic highlighted social digital dependency, and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) uprising foregrounded matters of surveillance, social media hate speech and racialized employment patterns. All these factors drove media interest in Big Tech stories to a new level.

In our first period of analysis, at least some of the media reportage on Big Tech related to Warren's and Sanders's campaigns raised issues beyond monopolistic practices. Especially in Sanders's case, surveillance and the gig economy were prevailing themes. In the second period, there was a sharp swerve towards stories about Big Tech censorship in content moderation. This can be attributed to the controversies concerning President Trump's use of social media against the BLM uprising, and the varied responses of Twitter and Facebook to his infamous tweet: "when the looting starts, the shooting starts." Claims by Trump and his followers that their opinions were suppressed on digital platforms rose during the election campaign and reached a crescendo after his defeat. Polls suggest that the disaffection of Republican voters from corporate capital rose throughout 2020 (Auxier, 2020). Increased conservative support was probably one of the reasons for the increasingly positive attention media gave the antitrust cause. To understand these complex, contradictory shifts in the media framing of Big Tech, we move from quantitative to qualitative examination.

Subjects, signs, sources

In the periods we examined, antitrust investigations become a central focus for media coverage of Big Tech. A consequence, and probable cause, of this trend is that news stories draw on a familiar range of authoritative sources—corporate leaders and businesspeople, elected members of the legislature (Senators and Congresspeople), lawyers and policy experts. They were often associated with think tanks and foundations aligned with political parties. Antitrust news comes from "inside the beltway." The interests of other, wider social groups—"consumers", "users", "workers"—are of course invoked by all sides in antitrust debates but are usually relayed and refracted through these socially legitimated figures.

Within this field, we identify five major *subjects* or collective agents in the trust-antitrust spectrum: corporate oligopolists, light touch regulators, neo-Brandeisians, right-wing populists, and Demo-eco-socialists. Representing these agents are corresponding *sources* (frequently referenced spokespeople, whose

viewpoints are often co-opted by or imbricated with those of journalists) and *signs* (metaphors, symbols, and catchphrases).

For corporate oligopolists, the prime sources were the CEOs of the GAFAs platforms, Mark Zuckerberg, Sundar Pichai, Tim Cook, and Jeff Bezos. Their virtual appearances before the House inquiry become a major focus of antitrust news. Leaders of smaller companies involved in Big Tech controversies, such as Jack Dorsey of Twitter, were also important. Behind these leadership figures was a formidable apparatus of corporate public relations, eminent lobbyists and supportive, usually tech-funded think tanks and non-profits, such as Google-sponsored NetChoice and sympathetic business associations (Kang et al., 2021). These voices constantly remind media of the injustice of “punishing successful American companies.” Consumers are said to benefit from the free or cheap services their platforms provide. Big tech is complimented for their contributions to national security and their capacity to sustain essential services in pandemic conditions.

Big Tech has historically been protected by light touch regulators coached in the Chicago School “consumer welfare” doctrine that sees the aim of antitrust legislation as price control rather than democratic protection. This doctrine emerged in the context of Reaganite neoliberal de-regulation during the 1980s and has inhibited even ostensibly progressive governments. The Obama administration enabled Big Tech’s rise by minimal antitrust enforcement and through revolving door government appointments from Silicon Valley. Ironically, Republican Federal Communication Commissioner Brendan Carr could tell journalists he preferred “light touch” regulation to the Obama “no touch” regime (Eggerton, 2020). Successful presidential contender Joe Biden and many on his team, including Vice President Harris, came from this background, a theme of media commentary. Advocates of light touch regulation—often from legal backgrounds, sometimes with connections to tech company-funded think tanks (Wakabayashi, 2020) feature in stories supporting regulation limited to issues of “consumer harm” and warn against “heavy handed” or “blunt instrument” regulation that might “drop the hammer” on Big Tech.

At the cutting edge of the new antitrust movement are “neo-Brandeisians” (Wu, 2018), sometimes unkindly referred to as “hipster antitrust.” This group includes Democratic legislators such as Elizabeth Warren, Amy Klobuchar, and David Cicilline, and scholars and lawyers such as Lina Khan, Tim Wu and Zephyr Teachout. A major institutional matrix for this group is the Open Markets think tank, which updates the positions of Justice Louis Brandeis, the pioneer of US anti-monopoly regulation. Here, the goals of antitrust policy are re-articulated not just in regard to price but in terms of the power to protect democracy from billionaire oligarchs of a “new gilded age.” This stance encompasses issues of surveillance and labor rights. Increasing competition will, neo-Brandeisians argue, give consumers a greater range of privacy options, and free workers from the “monopsonist” companies who dominate sectoral labor markets. Alongside these issues of liberal rights are commercial arguments emphasizing the innovation-stifling tendencies of monopoly and advancing the importance of small business to a thriving US economy. Neo-Brandeisian antitrust activism is not anti-capitalist but limits concentration of ownership to create a more robust market. It is therefore not surprising to find clustered around the neo-Brandeisian position an array of commercial opponents to Big Tech. They include digital startups, businesses disadvantaged by the “self-preferencing” practices of Amazon and other major platform proprietors, and, as we will discuss later, segments of the traditional news industry. They are adversely affected by Alphabet/Google and Facebook’s algorithmic advertising and their unpaid aggregation of journalistic stories.

Increasingly important to revived antitrust sentiment are right-wing populists, including Republican legislators such as Ted Cruz, Ken Buck, Jim Sensenbrenner and Josh Hawley. They are pro-business, but critical of “The Tyranny of Big Tech (Hawley, 2021) either because they share Adam Smith’s distaste for monopoly or because they have moral concerns around privacy, speech freedoms or screen addiction. Their positions shade into that of former President Trump and his base, who incessantly bemoan the alleged liberal bias of “Silicon Valley Titans.” In 2017, when social media platforms began to recoil from hosting far-right sites, Trump’s strategist Steve Bannon declared that Facebook and Google should be regulated like “public utilities” (Siddiqui, 2017). The appearance of social conservatives invoking governmental action as a corrective to Big Tech’s purported liberal bias is becoming widely adopted on the right, with Fox News host

Tucker Carlson acting as a major media promoter. This has led to a major split with the Republican party, with Carlson accusing the right-wing Heritage Foundation, an important funder which maintains a “light touch regulation” stance, of actively “shielding” Big Tech “left-wing monopolies” (Nix and Light, 2020).

At the opposite end of the antitrust spectrum within news coverage stand Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. They are amongst the few media-acknowledged spokespeople for a range of social movements seeking to place digital capital under public or communal ownership, and render it accountable for labor conditions, wealth redistribution, post-colonial justice and ecological sustainability. This Democratic Socialist or New Green Deal grouping is often presented as allied with neo-Brandeisians in the shared goal of diminishing corporate power. This is clearly often the case. Although Sanders’s early initiatives against Big Tech were principally concerned with workers’ wages and conditions, he supported Warren’s proposal to dis-aggregate Facebook’s consolidated platforms and wrote a preface for Teachout’s (2020) *Break ‘Em Up*. But, as we will discuss later, voices from this quarter are often critical of antitrust solutions that retain a market-based, corporate managerial logic.

Stories

The news media frame various protagonists through recurring “conflict frames” (Kuehn, 2018). Here, the predominant frame can be termed “Big Tech vs. the bipartisan alliance.” We also identify three subordinate media framings: “mirror wars: Democrats and Republicans”; “pandemic or/and techlash”; and “our tech or theirs: US versus China.” These storylines are not exclusive; rival conflict frames can sometimes be seen jostling for preeminence within a single narrative.

Big Tech versus the bipartisan alliance

The field of antitrust politics cannot be made to conform to the familiar news frame of two-party opposition, as our review of its *dramatis personae* established. A compelling alternative is to pit groups 1 and 2 (Big Tech and light touch regulators) versus (3, 4 and 5), the bipartisan alliance. Within the prevailing beltway optic, a story of “bipartisan backlash” against Big Tech coming on “both sides of the aisle”, “across the political spectrum” and “agreeing on the basics” had novelty value (Gold, 2020; Lima, 2020; Reardon, 2020). A favored construction is that of “unlikely allies”, pairing iconic champions of right and left Steve Bannon or Josh Hawley with Elizabeth Warren, or Robert Reich. An early example even envisages such pairs “singing from the same hymn sheet” and “like Romeo and Juliet ...both falling in love with the idea of breaking up Big Tech” (Singh, 2018). This frame can be articulated in various ways. For news stories favoring antitrust positions the narrative is one of lawmakers crusading to rescue American freedoms and enterprise from extraordinary corporate rapacity. For stories favoring Big Tech, it is a saga of opportunistic demagoguery by a class of “politicos” stifling the real economic achievements of digital capital. For neutral stories, the narrative becomes a matter of balancing these rival perspectives. In general, however, this narrative of conflict between technology corporations and a coalition of Democratic and Republican politicians plays out in favor of antitrust positions.

Mirror Wars: Democrats contra Republicans

The simplicity of the “Big Tech versus the bipartisan alliance” frame is, however, disturbed by contradictions within the antitrust coalition, particularly over Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (CDA). This gives platform owners immunity from being sued over the content they host, while allowing them to moderate this content. Not intrinsically an issue of competition policy, Section 230 is wrapped into the antitrust debate as an issue which exemplifies the power of Big Tech. But while dissatisfaction with Section 230 is widespread, within the bipartisan alliance there is a mirror effect whereby the apparently united participants actually have reverse positions. The Republican concern about the alleged censoring of conservative content is at odds with the Democrat desire to restrict the circulation of hate speech. The misinformation Democrats want curtailed is the freedom of speech Republicans want to protect.

Instead of featuring “bipartisan cooperation”, some journalists instead emphasize that Democrats and Republicans “have two distinct, and often opposing approaches” to revoking Big Tech’s power (Adkisson, 2020) such that “party differences on how to fix the problem make it doubtful sweeping regulation will come to pass” (Kovach, 2020).

Pandemic or/and techlash

The Covid-19 pandemic introduced another framing of antitrust issues. Initially, the main storyline was that of “the end of techlash.” This frame posited that the centrality of Amazon’s deliveries to lockdown life, the widely publicized Google/Apple contact tracing app, and digital work-from-home initiatives were reminders of Big Tech’s positive contribution to society. Booming GAFAM profits and stocks in the midst of massive economic meltdown became the material proof of their indispensable status. Typical headlines in early 2020 included “Tech’s moment to shine (or not)” (Fried, 2020), “Big Tech’s key role in fighting the coronavirus outbreak” (Kazaryan, 2020), “Robots are Very Good at Social Distancing” (Baker, 2020), “Time to Rethink Techlash, Some Say” (“Due to coronavirus,” 2020). However, suggestions that the pandemic gave Big Tech a “get out of jail free” card triggered a new round of techlash. Antitrust advocate Scott Galloway accused Big Tech of “play[ing] offense in the middle of a pandemic” (Dwoskin, 2020). It was also argued that Big Tech’s wave of mergers and acquisitions emphasized, rather than diminished, the need for regulation. David Cicilline criticized “pandemic profiteering” (Hatmaker, 2020). Naomi Klein (2020) and Franklin Foer (2020) denounced the prospect of Big Tech’s invasion of health care services. Thus, although the pandemic seemed to offer technology companies an opportunity to reframe media coverage and sideline their opponents, this was not a final accomplishment.

Our tech or theirs: US versus China

Another frame that seemed to reposition antitrust issues favorably for the GAFAM complex focused on economic and military competition between the US and China. This “new Cold War” narrative, building on a long-standing theme in American culture, was bolstered by Trump’s antagonistic rhetoric on trade policy and the so-called “China virus.” Stories written in this frame implied that “breaking up” or even restraining the GAFA complex would diminish US capacities to develop new technologies, such as AI, and give China dangerous advantages: “Any effort to punish or break apart the technology companies...would, in effect, dismember the golden goose of American innovation and competitiveness and feed its carcass to the People’s Republic of China” (Agarwal, 2020). Less lurid coverage sternly decreed that because of international realpolitik Big Tech breakup “won’t happen” (McBride, 2019). However, the “China threat” trope could on occasion play against Big Tech. Breitbart News’ “anti-globalist” coverage of the high-tech “Masters of the Universe”, which voices a right-wing populist position, sometimes equated Chinese digital totalitarianism with supposed US state/corporate collusion over social media censorship. Evidence that US firms were supplying China with repressive surveillance technologies was also highlighted. Moreover, by late 2020 more liberal commentators were pointing out that even China was starting to bring antitrust pressures to bear on its own technological monopolists, such as Alibaba and Tencent. It appeared that China’s regulators shared an interest with their US counterparts, in curbing “internet titans” (Zhong, 2020).

Solutions

The bipartisan alliance narrative—combining the criticisms of social conservatives, democratic socialists and pro-market neo-Brandeisians—provides journalists with a formidable, multi-charge indictment of Big Tech. Nevertheless, even when “antitrust” narratives appear to be winning the news wars, there remain powerful contrary currents within media reportage that throw the extent of this victory into question. The argument for “consumer welfare”, repeatedly affirmed by Big Tech CEOs, exerts a strong influence even over stories that give a full or explicitly favorable depiction of the antitrust case. A common narrative ploy is to list the many good reasons for reform and regulation of Big Tech before a questioning conclusion. Can such initiatives

prevail if they disturb consumer habituation to cheap or free digital services, or investor reliance upon buoyant Big Tech stocks? This “last word” can twist what appears to be an affirmation of the antitrust crusade towards an assertion of cynical resignation. This performs what Roland Barthes (1972: 151) described as ideological “inoculation”, upholding the status quo by exposing audiences to a certain amount of social critique, which is then withdrawn or cancelled by denying the feasibility of change.

Given the near invisibility of antitrust reportage since the 2004 Microsoft case, reviving the issue required the reintroduction of a dormant political vocabulary. “Antitrust” is an umbrella term for various remedies to problems of corporate ownership concentration. The most dramatic of these is “trustbusting”—the legally compelled disaggregation of giant corporations into separate, smaller companies—an approach encapsulated by the “Break ‘Em Up” slogan. But antitrust advocates, historic and contemporary, often prefer a variety of less draconian measures, such as regulatory scrutiny of future mergers and acquisitions, or specific measures against predatory or discriminatory pricing. To convey this complexity, the news media often resort to the phrase “break up or rein in Big Tech.” Proposals to prevent Google or Amazon giving preferential platform treatment to their own entities are explained by drawing an analogy with the regulatory distinction which ought to divide commercial and investment banking—“Glass Steagall for Big Tech” (Brennan, 2020; Tracy, 2020). Mandatory “interoperability” and “portability” are explained as ways of making it easier for customers to switch between rival options (Tracy, 2020). Both the possible application of existing antitrust legislation, such as the Sherman Act, and the calls for new legislation to deal with the “network effects” of Big Tech are discussed. The goals of specific prosecutions, investigations and legislative proposals are parsed.

Media focus on antitrust initiatives can marginalize other critical issues around the ownership and control of digital networks and technologies. Neo-Brandeisians champion a wide interpretation of anti-monopoly policy and argue that breaking up monopolies and monopsonies strengthens privacy protection and labor conditions by giving consumers and workers more vendors and employers to choose from. However, such issues are not necessarily dependent on antitrust measures, and could be addressed differently, and perhaps more directly, by outright privacy regulation, limitations on targeted advertising or by labor legislation. The latter could make union organizing easier and establish mandatory worker representations at corporate level. Antitrust advocacy in one sense opens the door to wider criticism of tech companies, but it also affects its own intellectual narrowness. Other possible responses to the power of Big Tech are driven to the periphery of public discussion. This marginalizes solutions that more radically threaten the basic premises of markets, commodification, and corporate ownership.

It is around these themes that neo-Brandeisians separate from Demo-eco-socialists, who do not see antitrust as a substitute for more frontal approaches to these problems. Highlighting this distinction is the question of “public utilities” (Mosco, 2017; Schiller, 2020), a term arguably part of the antitrust lexicon, but one that can point in directions very different from the enhanced market competition objectives of neo-Brandeisians. Public utilities for digital services may be conceived either as closely regulated private companies or as government run organizations, administered at municipal, regional or national levels. There is often slippage between these two meanings in media discussion. But both versions of the “public utility” proposal point to an antitrust strategy differing from the neo-Brandeisian “Break ‘Em Up” logic. It accepts there are “natural monopolies” for digital networks, as there are for electricity, water, or sewage services but wants to place these intrinsically big enterprises under public control (Hanna and Brennan, 2020).

Some Demo-eco-socialists take a public utilities approach to Big Tech. A version that briefly won some media attention, relating not so much to the GAFAs complex, but rather to the telecommunications networks it depends on, was Sanders’s proposal for low cost and subsidized public access to broadband internet (Gilbert, 2020). Other proposals include a public cloud computing platform, or even social media positioned as platform utilities funded by government but operated by independent statutory organizations. However, at least in the periods of our study, the growing centrality of neo-Brandeisians and right-wing populist approaches to antitrust policy seems to have pushed radical possibilities to the margins of media discourse.

Calls to make the great digital platforms a public utility appeared in socialist online publications, but were absent from major news publications (Muldoon, 2020).

A striking example of critical coverage of Big Tech outside the antitrust frame came from the BLM rebellion that exploded during our two research periods. We conducted a special search on “Big Tech” and “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) in news coverage from May 2020 to January 2021, which added 78 articles on this topic to our database. If BLM demonstrated the emancipatory uses of digital networks, it also raised concerns about the intertwining of digital capital with systemic racism. These were exacerbated rather than addressed by GAFAM’s ostentatious expressions of support for the revolt. BLM helped to foreground news stories about Big Tech’s AI applications within police facial recognition technology; an advertising boycott of Facebook for hosting white supremacist content; and Silicon Valley’s racialized and gendered employment practices. These stories do not necessarily contradict antitrust perspectives (neo-Brandeisians insist on the anti-racist potential of competition policy). But they place the question of technology and power in the radically alternative frame of racial justice. Reporting demands for the defunding of police, the withdrawal of facial recognition surveillance or for “a Digital Bill of Rights [that] could bring the most criminalized populations in the country into the creation of technologies that support racial justice as well as criminal justice” could, potentially, reshape public debate (Srinivasan and Bermudez, 2020).

One possible countermeasure comes from Michael Kwet’s (2020) call for a “Digital Tech New Deal.” He fiercely criticizes the pretensions of the new progressive neo-Brandeisians and “mainstream ‘tech critics’ across the political spectrum. Kwet refers to the so-called ‘techlash’...celebrating [an] antitrust agenda led by the US Congress and the intellectuals informing the hearings.” This standpoint is seen to accept the legitimacy of “the American legal system reshaping corporations that dominate markets outside US borders.” On the premise that Big Tech is ultimately a model of “digital colonialism”, Kwet argues against restoring a “competitive capitalism.” Instead, he proposes a program for the abolition of software copyright and patents and the advancement of strong free and open-source licenses. Broadly, he advocates “socializing financial, intellectual and physical property,” which would, as a “first step... impose heavy taxes on the rich to fund a global digital commons, produce plans to phase out private ownership of information and the means of computation.”

Conclusion: frames and hegemony

News about Big Tech is meta-news. Google, Facebook, Twitter and digital capital at large have remade the production and circulation of news by siphoning up advertising revenues, changing reception habits and distributing news-making tools. News stories about Big Tech involve many issues—business competition, labour conditions, privacy invasions, algorithmic bias—but they are also stories about what is “news” and what is “fake news.” Who is an authoritative source and who is a partisan mouthpiece? What ought to be the proper scope and limits of regulation. This recursion has led some observers to attribute the growing media criticisms of Big Tech as internal to a changing news industry—an attack on the digital corporations by journalists hostile to the disruptive threat posed to their profession. Indeed, the issue of “tech versus journalism” has itself become a minor motif in news coverage of Big Tech (Wallace, 2020).

More important than the hostility of individual journalists to Big Tech is the structural antagonism between “legacy” news industries and their new digital rivals. Alphabet/Google’s and Meta/Facebook’s algorithmic advertising and news aggregation, and the circulation of stories researched and produced in other companies’ newsrooms, are bitterly resented by older media capital. This is especially the case for former newspapers bleeding from lost revenues who are now themselves rapidly digitalizing content and fortifying behind virtual paywalls. These once well-established media organizations have fiercely led the charge against the new communications and media technology entities they perceive as a threat to their interests.

In the US, this animosity finds organizational expression through the News Media Alliance (NMA), a trade group bringing together news enterprises such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post* as well as regional papers. Since 2017, this alliance, led by David Chavern, has sought

to make collective interventions for the regulation of Big Tech. It also requested exemption from antitrust legislation in order to bargain on behalf of its members with Alphabet/Google and Meta/Facebook (Rutenberg, 2017). In June 2019, the NMA and Chavern produced a report making large claims about losses inflicted on newsrooms by algorithmic advertising. This was well-covered in news stories by NMA members (Tracy, 2019), though its accuracy was seriously challenged by other journalists (Ingram, 2019). Over the periods which we sampled in our research, NMA and Chavern had a lower profile but nevertheless featured in several stories which highlighted the destructive effects of digitalized advertising on local newspapers (Har, 2019; Chavern, 2020), problems with “fake news” on social media (Chavern, 2019) and criticism of the legal immunities provided by Section 230 of the CDA (McCabe, 2020). After the election of Biden to the Presidency in 2020—beyond the scope of our sample—NMA vigorously renewed its campaign for the regulation of Big Tech.

Of special importance in the combat between “old” media and the new data giants is the towering presence of Rupert Murdoch and his massive media empire, orbiting around the twin companies News Corp and Fox Corporation. This duo between them, command international media sources ranging from *Fox News* to *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Times*. Since 2017, Murdoch and his first lieutenant Roy Thomson have waged public war against their high-tech rivals; Murdoch regularly denounces “Big Digital” in News Corp shareholder meetings (Steffens, 2017; Perlberg and Di Stefano, 2017). The period of our sampling did not include any of his most bellicose interventions. However, towards the end of our second sampling period, initial coverage (Greber, 2020) revealed a developing issue which would eventually place Murdoch at the centre of the antitrust debates.

In 2020 the Australian government was considering a new policy, the News Bargaining Code (NBC), requiring Alphabet/Google and Facebook to negotiate payments to national news organizations for use of their content. The Big Tech companies opposed the measure. In February 2021 Facebook even retaliated by briefly terminating news feeds to Australian users. International outrage compelled Zuckerberg’s company to retreat, and Google made a settlement within the terms of the new code. In the US media, these events were widely depicted as an “antitrust” victory. This narrative obscures the influence exerted on Australian government policy by lobbyists for Murdoch, whose media career began in Australia news. He continues to hold major assets in that country, and his business empire was arguably the true “winner” from the NBC deal (Brevini, 2021; Brevini and Ward, 2021). Murdoch himself was less reticent. In November 2021, at a News Corp shareholder meeting, he triumphantly pilloried Google and Facebook for their alleged silencing of conservative voices and for their advertising and aggregation practices, declaring that “For many years, our company has been leading the global debate about Big Digital” (“Notable & Quotable,” 2021). The speech was widely reported by Murdoch-owned news outlets (Chmielewski and Coster, 2021; Turvill, 2021; “Notable & Quotable,” 2021; “Rupert Murdoch takes another swing,” 2021). Other coverage also mentioned the substantial expenditures by News Corporation and Fox Corporation on lobbying US Senators concerning “competition issues” (Gold and Harding, 2021).

The irony whereby the owner of one of the most massive concentrations of media power on the planet situates himself as a champion of “antitrust” needs no underlining. More generally, the structural antagonism of traditional news media to digital rivals must be considered in explaining the critical tone of much reporting on Big Tech. Such coverage tends to overlook how news industry woes have been caused by internal processes of commercialisation and consolidation. It does not often mention the self-interested stake news organizations have in urging antitrust regulation of Big Tech. When such issues are raised, it is often by “techie” media (Perlberg and Di Stefano, 2017; Thompson and Vogelstein, 2018). One such story within our sample period bluntly suggested that critical stories on Big Tech from mainstream media were “a coordinated hit” by “a few larger, legacy industries who have failed to adapt to a changing time” and have “[plotted] to take down internet companies by making use of the news” (Masnick, 2019). This is a hyperbolic suggestion, but not groundless. To acknowledge that business rivalry informs some negative reporting on Big Tech is not to exonerate the data giants but to say that the public airing of often well-deserved criticism owes something to commercial *realpolitik*.

These journalistic turmoils are imbricated with wider social turbulences: the neoliberalism of the Obama administration carried to new heights; the benign attitude of US governments to the entirety of digital capitalism; light- or no-touch regulation enabling the ascent of platform capitalism's titans. But these tendencies were, especially from 2016 on, challenged by populisms of both right and left—primarily from the movements of Trump and Sanders. They carried previously marginalized voices into the beltway world of Federal politics. These movements were themselves empowered by new digital media, be it by the migration of Occupy media activists to Sanders's electoral efforts, or through Trump's alt-right networks. But both movements also spoke in the name of constituencies who saw various—though often contradictory—dangers in the mounting power of Big Tech. Sharply divergent policy perspectives towards digital capital erupted within and across the Democratic-Republican parties and their associated political elites. This volatility affected the media framing of Big Tech. There are still numerous media celebrations of, and apologetics for the GAFAM corporations. But they have been matched, and even outweighed, by an unusual outburst of media criticism against this corporate complex. Increasingly sympathetic coverage of a “bipartisan antitrust alliance” endorses initiatives to curb digital capital's concentration of ownership.

This “antitrust” framing of the Big Tech problem seems to challenge the assumptions about the hegemony-preserving function of news framing propounded by Gitlin and other critical media theorists (Bennett, 1990). It undoubtedly marks a startling shift away from the previous media adulation of Silicon Valley and indifference to issues of monopoly power. But this apparent radicalism has its limits. Antitrust challenges Big Tech in terms that remain consonant with corporate capitalism, even as it seeks to discipline and restrain excesses. The neo-Brandeisians tradition is explicit about its intent of preserving—and protecting—a robust capitalism. Favorable news coverage of the “bipartisan antitrust coalition” remains true to the function of news framing as a means of containing crisis within boundaries whose flexibility ensures the reproduction of established power.

A half century of neoliberal governance has deepened the subsumption of life, and thought, by the world market in profound and capillary ways, so that it seems “common sense”—in Gramscian terms—to frame critiques of corporate power around solutions realizable within that system, an optic espoused not only by enthusiastic champions of the existing order, but by critical realists convinced of the necessity for compromise and gradualism. The Biden administration has, to the surprise of many observers, made antitrust measures an important policy plank, with Big Tech the obvious target. Given the chimerical nature of the bipartisan antitrust alliance, the prospects of its success are uncertain. However this project fares, it is intended as a reform that will strengthen American capitalism, at home and abroad. And yet the ferment of antitrust reportage and commentary has also catalyzed, if in its margins, other narratives envisioning forms of organizing networks outside of corporate governance. News from nowhere, maybe, but perhaps also framings for a world to come.

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