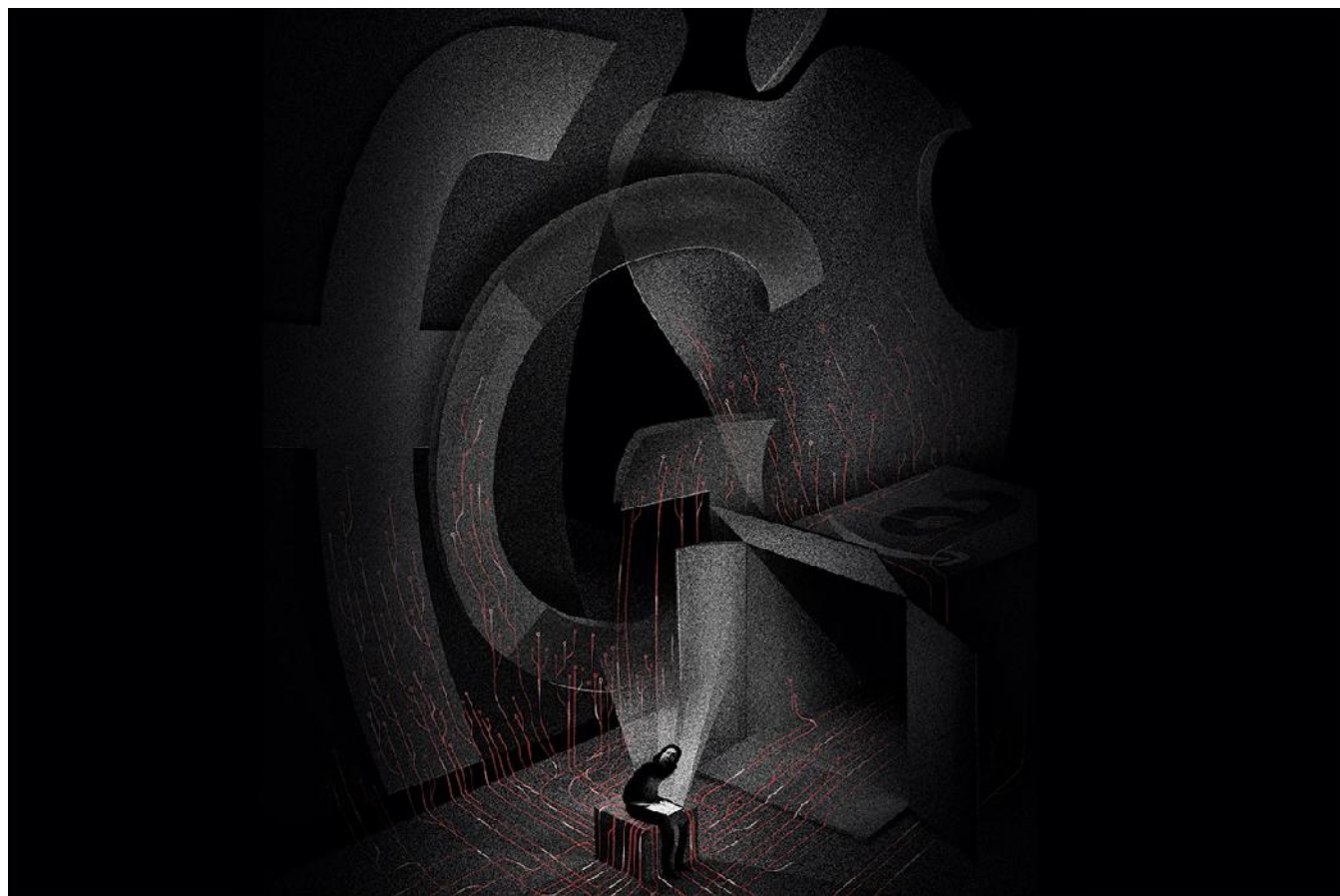


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How Google and Facebook hooked us – and how to break the habit

Big tech companies avoid taxes and have taken over our lives and created monopolies – but what can we do about it and how much change do we really want?



In 2018, a “techlash” is in full flow

Daniel Stolle

By Douglas Heaven

RARELY has a thumbs up led to such bad feeling. Back in 2009, Justin Rosenstein created Facebook’s “Like” button. Now he has dedicated himself to atoning for it.

Rosenstein’s voice is far from a lone one. A decade ago, society was wide-eyed at the possibilities of social networks, web search, smartphones and online shopping. The Google motto “Don’t be evil” expressed a prevailing optimism about how the internet, and the companies shaping it, would create a better, more open world.

No longer. “Just a few years ago, no one could say a bad word about the tech giants,” says Martin Moore of King’s College London. “Now no one can say a good word.” Facebook, Google, Apple and Amazon variously avoid tax, crush competition and violate privacy, the complaints go. Their inscrutable algorithms determine what we see and what we know, shape opinions, narrow world views and even subvert the democratic order that spawned them.

In 2018, a “techlash” is in full flow. There is broad agreement that something must be done about big tech. But must it? And if so, what?

To understand big tech’s peculiar power, it helps to get to grips with the roots of its success, and they lie deep in the human psyche. Take the Like button. On the face of it, there is a lot to like about it. Why bother typing out a negative comment to a post, when you can communicate a positive response to something else with a click? “It was a conscious exercise to inject more positivity into the world,” says Rosenstein.

But it also unleashed a monster inside us. Desperate for the approval of others, and never long satisfied when we get it, we became hooked into an endless loop of posting and reciprocal clicking: thrilled when the Likes clocked up, despondent when they didn’t.

2 billion Active Facebook users

Source: Facebook

Facebook knew right from the start it was making something that would exploit vulnerabilities in our psychology, its founding president and now critic, Sean Parker, has said. And similar insights from the field of “behaviour design” or “persuasive tech”, a discipline founded at Stanford University in California in the 1990s, are baked into much of big tech’s hardware and software. Whether it is Amazon’s “customers who bought this also bought” function, or the eye-catching red or orange “something new” dots on your smartphone app icons, big tech’s products are not just good, but subtly designed to control us, even to addict us – to grab us by the eyeballs and hold us there.

The result is the attention economy, whose currency is data. Every time we search for something, visit a website or like an image or news story or brand, Google and Facebook learn a little more about us. They use that information to tailor their services to us and keep us coming back – as well as to sell highly targeted advertising space. Similarly, the more Amazon knows about us, the more it can recommend items we really do want – and are more likely to buy.

Big tech’s power comes mainly in the form of small, yet constant, behavioural nudges, so it is often hidden. But its cumulative effect is like nothing before seen. It encourages us to think less about our decisions, be they which news stories we see, friends we interact with or events we go to, and be less aware of any alternatives. That crowds out competition, but also means information, for example, becomes judged not on truth, but on popularity: that’s a big part of how the algorithms determine which stories to serve us. The result is fake news, accusations of fake news and suggestions of elections lost and won through social media manipulation.

“The companies often don’t know what they’ve built – it’s a

Frankenstein problem”

“We’re no longer talking about harmless search algorithms. These companies permeate fundamental aspects of our lives,” says Olaf Groth of Hult International Business School in San Francisco. “These companies often don’t really know what they’ve built,” says internet policy adviser Anri van der Spuy at Research ICT Africa in South Africa. “It’s sort of a Frankenstein problem.”

And the monster looks unstoppable. Eric Schmidt, former CEO of Google’s parent company Alphabet, has said that the real threat to the company was the person working on the next big thing in a garage somewhere. But that’s become just a fairy tale, says Moore. “When you now have to invest upwards of £300-400 million in server farms to make your system work, it’s very hard to see anybody but the biggest people competing.” And the established giants are streets ahead at collecting and analysing the data central to their business models. If they see anything threatening it, they just copy it – or buy it.

Take Waze. In 2006, Israeli coder Ehud Shabtai launched this app as a community project to let drivers share traffic information, for example about roadworks or an accident. By 2013, 50 million people were using it around the world, so Google bought it. Similarly, Facebook bought photo-sharing app Instagram and messaging service WhatsApp. When Twitter became a competitor, Facebook made its newsfeed more Twitter-like. And when picture-messaging app Snapchat took off, Facebook added some of its popular features to its own service – so Snapchat is struggling. “Any new competitor has a real mountain to climb,” says Moore.



Apple is among the big tech companies that have faced protests, here in France

AFP/Getty Images

Sometimes this means better results for consumers. Waze’s maps, for instance, now benefit from Google’s unrivalled location data, and Waze’s alerts pop up in Google Maps. But this market-

narrowing behaviour has also caught the attention of perhaps the most public face of techlash, Margrethe Vestager, the European Union's antitrust commissioner. In July 2017, Vestager fined Google a record €2.4 billion for abusing its dominance in search to promote its online shopping business. She has also ruled that Amazon's EU tax arrangements are illegal, ordering it to pay back €250 million. Not content with that, European regulators are making noises about using antitrust laws to break up big tech companies – as are US politicians following the recent controversies about unregulated social media skewing elections.

But is that sensible? “Antitrust law is a big tool, but it's a blunt tool,” says Moore. It was first used in the US in the late 19th century to loosen the grip of large industrial monopolies such as the Standard Oil Company and keep consumer prices low. Even just a decade or so ago, Microsoft was forced by the EU to stop bundling its Internet Explorer browser and other proprietary software with Windows, which the EU viewed as abuse of its near-monopoly of computer operating systems.

This move, ironically, gave Google and its Chrome browser its big break. The problem now is not just that the tech giants give their best products away for free, but that they are also less easily cut down to size. Android phones alongside Google Maps, Chrome, Gmail and YouTube draw on a common pool of our data. Divorce any of those services from that source and they no longer work so well, while the central data hoard itself isn't obviously divisible. Ditto Facebook. Amazon, meanwhile, is essentially a logistics company with a vast shop window. Forcing it to stop selling certain types of product is like telling supermarkets they can sell fruit but not vegetables, says Benedict Evans, a technology analyst at venture capitalist firm Andreessen Horowitz in San Francisco.

88 per cent of Google's 2017 income came from advertising

Source: Alphabet

An alternative is to change data protection laws to limit the power of companies whose lifeblood is data. That's the thrust of the EU's General Data Protection Regulation laws, which come into effect in May. These will give people in Europe more say over how information about them gets used and force companies to be more transparent about what they do with it.

It is difficult to argue that's a bad thing, but Moore worries about unintended consequences. “Not many policy-makers have thought through the whole ecosystem,” he says. “If they kick in one place, it's going to have a big effect somewhere else.”

“The internet is a global resource,” says van der Spuy. “You can't legislate or make decisions in one country, because it's going to affect the rest of the world.” Clip the wings of big US companies and pretenders from other domains will take their place – Russia's search giant Yandex, for example, or Baidu, Weibo and Alibaba, China's answers to Google, Facebook and Amazon. Germany recently legislated to fine internet platforms if they don't take down fake news quickly, with the result, says Moore, that one of his students now sees his newsfeed differ dramatically depending on whether he views it in Germany or the UK.

That means the end to the web as a universal experience, even among countries with the same

broadly liberal approach to censorship. But the distinction between even well-meaning state regulation and state censorship isn't a clear one. In 2014, Brazil enacted its Marco Civil, a bill of internet rights designed to protect people from surveillance and ensure access to popular online services. It has instead been invoked to ban WhatsApp in the country on at least three occasions, albeit only briefly, most recently when Facebook refused to provide chat logs related to a criminal investigation. Conversely, Apple's refusal in 2016 to weaken security features such as encryption to allow the FBI to crack phones apparently shows how big tech can stand up to overweening state power and defend privacy.



More and more people are falling out of love with Facebook

Ira Berger/Alamy Stock Photo

Arguably, big tech and the state now exercise similar power over our lives – with the difference being that we at least nominally have control over the state's actions. “We don't want any one company, no matter what it is, having exclusive say over how decisions in our lives are made,” says Groth. For him, the answer is self-regulation, and a 21st-century Magna Carta: a code of conduct that tech companies will voluntarily subscribe to. “I don't want to stir up some anti-data intifada,” he says. “But as with other issues like climate change and sugar content in foods, we need to become better educated and have some form of constructive voice in this as a society.”

That would require engagement from big tech beyond “do no evil” self belief. Facebook only tardily and begrudgingly admitted that its platforms might have assisted Russia's misinformation campaign during the 2016 US presidential elections, while claiming that they were the best ones to deal with it by forging a global Facebook community. “From Facebook's perspective, taking more responsibility and doing better means us doing more on Facebook, and them having more control of it,” says Moore. “That doesn't seem to be a place we want to be heading.”

Turn off, tune out

Rosenstein certainly wants to find a different way. Now CEO of a company called Asana, he is still building software designed to funnel our attention. But his goals are now aligned with the principles of an organisation called Time Well Spent, set up by other big tech alumni, including some of Rosenstein's former colleagues. "A lot of software tries to align users' attention with itself, with notifications or advertising," says Rosenstein. "Our goal is to align users' attention with themselves."

For him, this means building software that shields us from distractions such as emails, app notifications and non-essential task reminders, and nudges us towards habits that help us focus on what we want to do.

A pipe dream, given big tech's attention-driven business model? Perhaps, but one positive consequence of techlash could be that the companies are taking heed. It is probably no coincidence that Mark Zuckerberg wrote last month (on Facebook, naturally) that "one of our big focus areas for 2018 is making sure the time we all spend on Facebook is time well spent". He was introducing changes to the platform's newsfeed that would give more weight to friends' posts, rather than news or commercial posts – part of Facebook's attempts, some think, to win back lost goodwill. Google, too, has begun a clean-up effort to stop controversial and "fake news" videos on YouTube getting an audience, as well as introducing stricter criteria for videos that want to earn money from ads, and vetting its more popular content. Apple has just faced calls from two shareholders to develop ways to combat smartphone addiction in the young.

20 per cent of global spending on advertising goes to Facebook and Google

Source: Zenith

Time will tell how much of that is window dressing. Certainly, Facebook's refocusing does nothing to move away from the cycle of liking and wanting to be liked that hooks us to start with. But if big tech's power is based entirely on our behaviour, the most effective brake on their influence is to change our own bad habits. The web is filled with tips for tuning out. There are apps that hide notifications from other apps. Some people recommend setting your phone's screen to greyscale so your eye is less drawn to the candy-coloured icons. Or you can uninstall the apps that vie for your attention the most, keeping only those that you know you can control your use of, such as mapping apps.

Even Rosenstein, one of the architects of the modern social world, has now decided to opt out. "I no longer have news apps on my phone or pretty much anything that could distract me," he says. "If you're trying to lose weight, don't keep cookies in your pocket."

Ultimately, changing big tech will probably need a combination of approaches: governments nudging them from above, us squeezing them from below. Techlash serves a purpose in asking us what we want out of big tech, whose products make all our lives easier and more colourful. "We veer between love and hate for these companies, but neither is quite right," says Moore. "At the moment, there's a sense that we must intervene, we must bash them. But bashing for the sake of bashing

doesn't seem very constructive.”

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Leader: “Big tech is unpopular, but we mostly have ourselves to blame”

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