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Technology

The only way to rein in big tech is to treat them as a public service

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Tue 23 Apr 2019 09:00 BST

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The drive for profit is behind many of the ills of Google, Facebook et al. Unions and public ownership are the only way to solve this



‘It’s competition – not size – which demands more data, more attention, more engagement and more profits at all costs.’ Photograph: Jochen Tack/Alamy

After years of praising their virtues, governments across the world are belatedly waking up to the problems posed by big tech. From India and Australia to France and America – and now the UK, with its [report from the Digital Competition Expert Panel](#) – politicians have been reckoning with how to mitigate the harms of the world’s largest technology platforms. And they all seem to arrive at the same answer: competition is the magic mechanism that will somehow tame the giants, unleash innovation and fix our digital world.

But what if competition is the problem rather than the solution? After all, it's competition – not size – that demands more data, more attention, more engagement and more profits at all costs. It's competition that demands the tech giants expand. It's competition for ad dollars that drives Google, Facebook and [Amazon](#) to ignore privacy concerns and expand data collection. It's the struggle to dominate voice interfaces and smart-home data that leads Amazon and Google to aggressively push their surveillance machines into our homes. It's competition for attention that leads apps and platforms to make their products as addictive as possible. It's competition for users and engagement that makes Twitter, Facebook and others turn a blind eye to abuse, fake news and far-right radicalisation. And it's competition over who will be the dominant AI provider that leads the tech giants to constantly colonise new sources of data. The government's efforts to increase competition risk simply aggravating these problems.

“ We could go even further and socialise the platforms instead of leaving them in private hands

So if increasing competition won't hold big tech in check, what will? Too often, discussions about this start and end with government and consumers, and pay little heed to workers. That's a mistake: larger and stronger tech unions can be an important counterbalance to the power of big tech. One area where the lack of competition really matters is in terms of wages: new research suggests that the bigger and more concentrated companies are in a particular industry, the more [wages](#) are [suppressed](#).

The right solution is to support efforts to organise tech workers into unions. While still in their early stages, unions of tech workers have already made significant progress in terms of [improving working conditions](#), [blocking tech's cooperation with the surveillance state](#) and [bringing to light the tech industry's latent sexism and racism](#). The Independent Workers Union of Great Britain, for example, has [made major strides in getting basic rights for gig economy workers](#).

A second step would be to regulate social media platforms like the public utilities they are. In an earlier era, governments didn't hesitate to regulate natural monopolies where services provided were essential public goods. It didn't make sense, for instance, to lay down two sets of railroad tracks next to each other in a wasteful and desperate effort to maintain competition. In cases like this, monopolies were recognised as inevitable, but were subject to strict regulations that ensured they worked for the common good and not just private profit.

Today, [these regulations could apply to some of the services](#) provided by big tech, and might include rules around who

can use the platforms, limits on how the platforms can prioritise their own products on them, restrictions on how these companies can collect and use personal data, and requirements to open up intellectual property or licence patents cheaply. US Senator Elizabeth Warren has, for instance, suggested this recently in her [proposals to tackle big tech](#).

Or we could go even further and socialise the platforms instead of leaving them in private hands, shifting ownership and control to workers, users and citizens. For example, one of the major problems posed by private ride-sharing apps such as Uber is that they produce negative externalities such as [congestion and air pollution](#). A publicly owned platform, by contrast, would have a much wider mandate than simply adding more vehicles on to the road. Transport for London (TfL) could build and run a ride-sharing app that enabled low-emission movement across London. And the data from that platform could then be freely shared with other public bodies, ensuring better planning for housing and transportation.

“Big tech has too much monopoly power - it's right to take it on”
Kenneth Rogoff

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At a different scale, we could decisively move away from Amazon, Google and Microsoft's control over cloud computing and imagine computing as a basic 21st-century utility. Initiatives such as the European Union's [Open Science Cloud](#) demonstrate one model for providing a publicly funded and operated cloud infrastructure. There's no reason why governments shouldn't provide citizens with free access to a public cloud that ensures privacy, security, energy efficiency and equal access for all. Our digital infrastructures should not be left in the hands of profit-seeking monopolies, but instead run democratically for the common good.

Something needs to be done to rein in the increasing economic and political power of big tech, and fast. But the instinctual liberal belief in the value of competition will exacerbate rather than solve the problems. We need to think bigger if we are to take back control of our digital lives.

- Nick Srnicek is a lecturer in digital economy at King's College London and the author of Platform Capitalism

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