

## Big Tech Giants Get a Grilling Again!

*Shôn Ellerton, October 29, 2020*

*The CEOs of Facebook, Google and Twitter get a roasting by angry Democrat and Republican senators but for mainly selfish reasons.*



Once again, big tech is under the spotlight on grounds of being censorious, spreading misinformation, inciting hatred violence, being politically biased, and, of course, having far too much power overall. Having watched the complete three-hour video of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee grilling the CEOs of Twitter, Google and Facebook earlier this week, it is very clear that there is a very big problem with the triumvirate monopoly held by these three organisations.

This is not, of course, the first time these hearings have taken place with big tech, the most recent of which took place only a couple of months ago with the CEOs of Amazon, Google, and Facebook. Prior to that, there was another that was held back in 2018, which seems to suggest that these hearings simply represent a lot of ‘hot air’ being blown and nothing more.

The format was predictable as were the questions. Democrat and Republican senators took turns grilling each of the three CEOs, Jack Dorsey, Mark Zuckerberg and Sundar Pichai in turn who, of course, represent Twitter, Facebook, and Google, respectively.

The Democrats were right on cue. Every Democratic senator, or certainly that I can recollect, predictably began their 7-minute speech by accusing the Republicans of holding this hearing just days before the election in order to bolster the Trump campaign. They also accused the CEOs of spreading

misinformation on social media by not reacting to suppress tweets, posts, and videos which they consider dangerous, misleading, or false before they go viral. Examples of such posts, tweets and videos include a Facebook group of a right-wing militia group calling to arms to ‘defend’ Kenosha in Wisconsin following the events of the shooting of Jacob Blake. Other examples include Russian misinformation and tweets by Donald Trump, notably of the recent ones where he said he was immune to the virus and that the end of the virus is just around the corner. In a nutshell, the Democrats made it clear that they want the CEOs to make every effort to remove material of a dubious nature.

The Republicans were equally predictable. Each one complained bitterly that the tech giants were unfavourably biased towards the Democrats and were quick to censor material in favour of Trump but not of Biden. Examples cited included the fact that Trump got his Tweets censored 35 times, and yet, the Ayatollah never got censored when he made such allegations as being in denial of the Holocaust. The case of the New York Post article—blocked for redistribution by Twitter and Facebook--about the Hunter Biden laptop emails came up frequently as expected of course. One senator even challenged the CEOs to name one high-profile Democrat who was censored but none could come up to the challenge. Unlike the Democrats, the Republicans took the polar-opposite view that the big tech social media giants are *withholding* information and making their own decisions as to what should be seen by the public.

From a viewer’s perspective, I was disappointed that less emphasis was placed on the need to address the global power that these three mega-large companies possess. There has been much talk on both sides of the fence on the need to break up these monsters but, in practice, how can this be achieved? I asked this question to some of my colleagues at the Supreme Court of South Australia, but none could answer only to say it would be extremely difficult and complex. There is no question to me that these three companies hold the underlying power to create nations, depose kings and presidents, and to generally divide and rule the global populace, at least of those who have access to these social media platforms. I am not a proponent of building national firewalls, of which China is so famous for, however, I can place some element of understanding why some nations do so. Take the populace of Australia for example. Facebook and Twitter have made it possible for Australians to have more exposure to American politics than their own. It has made it possible for many Australians to know far more about the new US Supreme Court justice than their own two

recently appointed ones to the Australian High Court. The hearings turned out to be one slanging match between the Democrats and Republicans with the ‘piggy-in-the-middle’ CEOs being bombarded from all sides. By and large, it is regrettable that this hearing focussed on politics rather than dealing with how to make the social media market more competitive.

Watching this coverage put some perspective just how far the genie escaped from the bottle. After all, we have three CEOs being questioned, and expecting to know the answers. Naturally, no mortal in control of a company of this magnitude employing hundreds of thousands of staff worldwide, could possibly know all these questions. For example, it was cited in the hearing that Facebook, alone, employs 35,000 staff worldwide on content moderation.

The senators pre-prepared their questions beforehand having thoroughly researched the answers. They would ask the CEOs in turn and if they did not know the answer, they would give them the answer. Most questions were the sort of bulldog questions that interviewers commonly ask politicians, expecting not an answer, but rather, a confession. For example, questions such as why certain posts are not removed immediately, or questions asked of the CEOs if their companies have any influence on politics. The obvious answers to these questions respectively are that it is nigh on impossible to identify material which should be removed immediately and yes, of course, Facebook and Twitter influence politics. For the first question, the CEOs of Facebook and Twitter could only reply that they are working on improving their AI but as for the second question, both simply skirted the issue. Frankly, it probably would have been better just to say yes to the second question, but there you have it.

Finally, to put some perspective on this. It is easy to forget just how enormous these companies are and how they span across all the world’s countries which allow their services within their borders. Zuckerberg stated, during the hearings, that two billion people log on to Facebook every day. Think about that for a moment. That is over a third of the global population! Think about all the other countries in the world, along with their own set of political, social, and economic issues, which these tech giants have control over. Think about all the other senior executives of Facebook, Twitter, and Google worldwide which have sovereign control over what material is allowed or what is not. For me, the mind boggles how little ventures springing from house garages and small apartments can develop into monsters which, quite possibly, the creators can no longer control.