

# Reining in the 'Big Tech'!

Social media platforms should be subject to the same policies that drive the media within the country

**E**arly this month, I got a frantic message from the founder of one of my portfolio companies saying that Google had taken their App down from the PlayStore, mistaking it as an unauthorised loan app. This company is well-funded and well-run business, fully compliant with Google, Reserve Bank of India and other applicable laws. Most within the industry felt that Google was acting as a super regulator, seeking details that not even the banking regulator asks for. Within a week, the issue was resolved, but there was a week of stress and loss of revenues for the business.

This incident played into my thinking of the unbridled power that the Big Tech wields in today's world. Nearly 50 per cent of the world population has smartphones, pushing the smartphone population to about 3.6 billion. Of this, about 750 million are iPhones, with most of the remaining being Android phones. These two companies, through their distribution arms of GooglePlay and Appstore, control the entire ecosystem and have a total monopolistic control over what the consumers can get access to. A case in point is Parler, a neo-conservative social media, which was taken down by both the stores recently.

While I am inherently against government interference in business, I think the time has come for governments to look deeply into the power that is wielded by Big Tech. No sovereign nation can fall prey to the distribution might of Big Tech. This has clearly been manifested by the actions of Twitter, Facebook, Apple and Google, among others.

What gives Big Tech the right to act as a super regulator, whenever they wish to? What gives them the right to monitor views and own the internet communication?" With the global events ensuing during the last month, these questions are being asked in all corridors of government.

Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other social media platforms grew on the theory that they were merely outlets for people's opinion and not entities empowered to moderate them. Unlike traditional media, they were never subject to the local content laws, as they always said that they were not responsible for the underlying content. Yet, Facebook and twitter took it upon themselves to review the context around the recent tweets by President Trump and took it upon itself to decide how they were being interpreted or were going to be interpreted in the immediate



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future and eventually concluded that suspending the account was necessary to curb the risk of further violence. This clearly shows that Big Tech represented by Google, Apple, Facebook, Twitter will use their distribution might to censor contents which, they feel, are not to their liking or doesn't fit in with the prevailing political correctness.

As the world becomes totally digital in the minds of most consumers globally, the positioning of the internet is of akin to a public utility. We think of them as being 'accessible to all and meant for all, irrespective of one's caste, creed, colour, gender, sexual orientation or political affiliations'. But, recent actions of the Big Tech have changed that perception among a lot of thinkers. And the fact that all of them swung into action together raises concerns about the collective power of the Big Tech and how the digital world of today is subservient to their decisions.

**F**or India, this is the time of reckoning. "Should we as a democracy allow the Big Tech to regulate an elected government and the nation's thinking or should Big Tech, like all media, be subject to the national regulations that govern an independent nation state?" It is good to note that recently the government has brought OTT (Netflix, Amazon Prime, etc) under the regulation of the ministry for information & broadcasting, like in the case of the traditional media.

According to the current growth data, by 2025, India will have over 1 billion internet users communicating regularly in all languages amidst themselves. The very thought that these one billion will be subject to the vagaries of Apple and Google as the only monopolistic distribution platforms and to a single messaging platform of whatsapp is scary and unnerving for any independent free-thinking liberal individual.

Just as the Modi government brought out the Universal Payment Interface (UPI) in the face of resistance of the international credit card companies and banks for the betterment of the nation and to facilitate digital payments ecosystem, so also the government should come out with an independent AppStore which all apps, local and global, would necessarily be a part of. Also, the data from these would be stored within the borders of the nation and all content owners within this AppStore would be subject to the same Content Policy that drives the traditional media within the country. ♦

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