

The Guardian

Yes, Silicon Valley needs regulation. But Trump's reason why is misguided

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Trump claimed that Google and Facebook suppress conservative content. The reason why is simple: we see what they think we want to, because it's in their business interest

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In a head-turning move that has pitted him squarely against Silicon Valley's most revered companies, Donald Trump proclaimed last week that algorithms developed by the likes of Google and Facebook fail to offer consumers politically-balanced news about American politics and his presidency itself.

The underlying insinuation was that firms like Google, in designing features like search engine results pages and the algorithms that power them, perpetuate a kind of bias against conservative media in the US. His message, in all its brashness, was very clear: that there is an insidious suppression of certain kinds of US news outlets, and that should the internet platform companies

fail to address it, the president himself will do so through the power vested in him - including, potentially, by levying heavy-handed regulation.

Trump might indeed be right that this industry deserves some kind of up-regulation. But his premise for that policymaking conclusion - that internet companies knowingly suppress conservative content - could not be more off-point and misguided.

We must first acknowledge the effects that have raised Trump's ire. As the president suggests, it's most likely true that, in most cases, a consumer who searches for "Trump news" on Google will see links to news stories that are produced and published by what Trump regards as "fake" news outlets - his parlance for traditionally liberal media sources; among the typical top results, one might find outlets such as CNN under Google's present algorithm.

Trump may have noticed similar effects on such platforms as Facebook and Twitter - namely, that they at times appear to give preference to the news produced by American newspapers traditionally associated with liberal viewpoints among the editorial boards, like the New York Times or the Washington Post. Indeed, conservatives ranging from the far right to former Facebook contractors to sitting US senators have accused the internet companies - and particularly Facebook - of perpetuating and enforcing this form of anti-conservative bias for the past several years now. And though difficult to verify, it is also probably true that most companies in Silicon Valley - including all the major brand names the president implicated last week - continue to employ many, many more liberals than conservatives within their ranks. This might be so much the case that at certain companies, conservatism itself feels taboo, viciously reinforcing the uncomfortable idea that the Valley is only for Democrats.

All of those are real things that conservatives justly feel. They are right to voice their tremendous concern about these social issues. No one should feel uncomfortable about their political beliefs so long as those beliefs are not overtly harmful to others.

But we have to be very careful before ascribing such insidious motivations and behaviors to the technology firms as the president has done. There is a far simpler explanation for all of this: that the companies are simply showing us what they think we're likeliest to want to see, because that's what is most in their business interest.

We must keep in mind the business model that is at play here. The commercial success for each of the aforementioned internet companies is entirely premised on their ability to recommend highly engaging content to the user. Tailoring the content that a user sees based on his or her personal preferences - as inferred through analysis of the vast stores of personal data that companies like Facebook and Google collect on individual users - is the modus operandi for this sector.

Each of the firms wishes to recommend the most predictably engaging content tailored to each individual because doing so keeps the user scrolling down news feeds, clicking through YouTube video playlists, and scanning search results for longer periods of time - and that in turn helps the platform companies sell more ad space so that marketers can find and target users with ads about their products and services. It is a commercial regime that rewards engaging content, and that means that platform companies simply don't care about the nature of the content as a general matter, let alone its political leaning. As long as the content isn't offensive or harmful in some explicit way, they're usually just fine with it. The primary variable that they optimize for is the number of clicks on that content: only that approach, not political censoring, will contribute most effectively to the bottom line. Pairing this reality of the market with the fact that there are simply

fewer legitimate conservative political news media outlets in the United States than there are liberal ones, we begin to see the difficult tension that faces the industry.

Silicon Valley is being accused of liberal bias, when in fact the evidence that conservatives point to is only a manifestation of the American political culture itself. That the algorithms recommend certain political news sources instead of others on Google - such as CNN over Breitbart, NBC over Fox, or the New York Times over the New York Post - is an artifact of the modern American culture itself, more so than any sort of nefarious proactive or oblivious suppression of politically conservative content.

If certain outlets are being favored over others, it is likely because they are more trustworthy to the average reader. That might be because they are more factual or fact-based (or both) in their reporting. Similarly, if certain types of people are hired more often by the industry than others, it is likely because the American culture itself is so designed as to promote and perpetuate that bias - in the same way that women and minorities also have much lower representation in the Valley.

These are effects that certainly deserve attention and policy change, but to claim political bias pervades the tech giants' talent search is a stretch. After all, we should also keep in mind that the internet platforms are just that - neutral platforms. They work hard to execute on their promise of political neutrality. And they do so not necessarily out of the goodness of their hearts, but rather for their shareholders. If they don't protect their neutrality with vigor, their profitability itself risks some curtailing by virtue of governmental intervention and regulation of speech.

But after his diatribe against the tech industry for all its supposed political bias, Trump slipped in another important remark last week: that antitrust is, perhaps, the answer to dealing with such companies as Amazon, Facebook and Google. And while he may have taken an illogical and circuitous route to arrive at that conclusion, the conclusion itself may nevertheless be true.

This is an industry that has grown quickly and, after a matter of a few years, concentrated its commercial power into a constellation of a handful of powerful behemoths. And while there is nothing necessarily wrong with a company becoming large, the American public, among certain other global constituents, has witnessed the evolution of a set of vicious negative externalities that have overrun the leading internet platforms.

The paucity of competition in the sector forms the foundation of the problem at hand; without the pressure of an earnest rival, a company like Facebook, in the absence of government regulation, is less likely to take content down, even if it clearly violates corporate policies addressing hate speech, political disinformation, fake news, discriminatory material, or other malicious content. Doing so cuts into its business. This persistent, emblematic hesitation - which we saw rear its head again last month in the case of the Alex Jones takedowns - suggests that regulation may be needed to correct the system.

Americans - and the global citizenry that cares about fairness and truth - do indeed require a far more robust policy framework to contain and extinguish the hideous outgrowths of the commercial internet. This will not be easy. It will necessitate grafting an information system that truly puts the sanctity of the truth above all else - including any competing commercial or political interests. But this is the step we must now take to protect our democracies.

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America faces an epic choice...

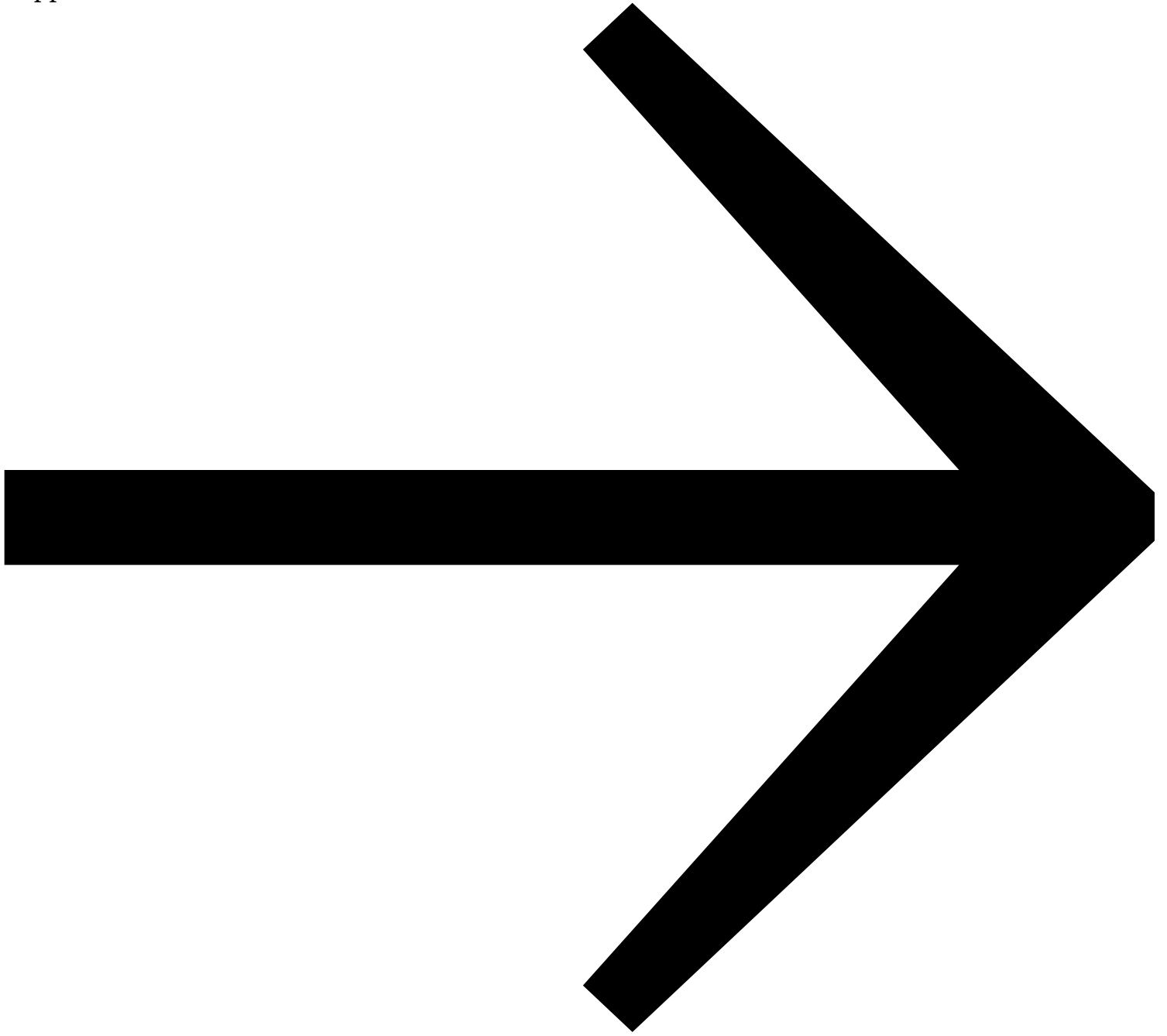
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