FINAL WORD BY TIM ROWLAND

The New Trustbusters

America has truly come full circle when the conservatives become the trustbusters and the liberals are backed into the corner with their business cronies, hissing and clawing as the spotlight shines upon them. This role reversal has the feel of Dick Cheney saying that Standard Oil was entirely too big or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez coming to the defense of Jay Gould.

You would think it impossible, but here we are. In particular, it has now become an article of conservative faith that tech "monopolies" need to be broken up and their CEOs hauled before congressional committees so that their sins can be dutifully entered into the record of American consciousness.

These companies are heavy hitters, to be sure. Tech giants are the railroaders, oilmen, and financiers of today. But, instead of controlling great transportation networks and oil patches, they control what people think about the *90210* reboot. Still, a monopoly is a monopoly, so obviously a path needs to be cleared for other would-be tech companies to gain entry into matters of similar import.

Right away, the thought of breaking up Google, Twitter, and Facebook gives one pause. How do we do that? Does Facebook spin off one company to produce cat videos and another to handle photos of restaurant desserts? The trustbusters of old probably would have difficulty figuring out exactly what it is these companies produce.

Mostly, of course, these antitrust attacks say less about tech than about politicians' vast overestimation of their own importance. Democratic presidential candidate Tulsi Gabbard, bless her heart, sued Google after a presidential debate because her ad account had briefly been suspended. Google said Gabbard's big ad buy (to take advantage of people searching her name after the debate) tripped an anti-fraud mechanism that shut down the account automatically. But the Gabbard campaign was sure this was all part of some covert act to advance Google's anti-Tulsi agenda. Too bad she couldn't see Google brass, after being served with the paperwork, tapping their styluses on the table and saying, "Gabbard ... Gabbard. Which one is she again?

On the Republican side, hidden-camera clown James O'Keefe has produced one of his selectively edited videos purporting to show how Google algorithms manipulate data inputs to the detriment of conservatives. O'Keefe's argument that Google is biased—when his own name pops up immediately in a Google search and his videos litter the web like peanut shells at a ballpark—takes a degree of chutzpah that most people would be quite incapable.

But these are not normal times. It is, to be sure, easily argued that tech companies have made some serious mistakes, mostly in the arenas of privacy and safeguards against foreign adversaries. If you want to grab Facebook by the shoulders and give it a good shake, feel free.

But how this is supposed to be an antitrust violation is a mystery. Suppose that Google is indeed biased to the core against Republicans. So what? If that's the bar, what would stop Democrats from breaking up the myriad of conglomerates whose billionaire owners are heavy donors to the Republican cause?

And please, let's not confuse Facebook with the New York Central. First, you don't have to lay a dual set of railroad tracks to compete in social media. If someone wants to start a Conservative Facebook, there is nothing standing in the way, just as conservatives created their own Wikipedia to insist that evolution is the work of Satan. Then it's up to the market to accept or reject.

It is true that Facebook likes to buy up anything it perceives as a threat—or a good idea, like Instagram and WhatsApp. But the mere fact that these companies can pop up at any place and time without any appreciable outlay of capital is, if anything, an argument against antitrust rather than for it.

Remember, too, that antitrust's *raison d'etre* is to prevent companies from raising the price of their goods or services without fear of competition. Google and Facebook are free. If their intent is price gouging, they are doing a poor job. This brings up the heart of the matter: to bastardize Huck Finn," Facebook didn't charge nuthin' for its product, and it was worth it."

If Facebook or Google or Twitter decided to charge a $500-a-year subscription, what would happen? Nothing, that's what. Google customers would simply move to some other search engine and most social media users would find they didn't need social media after all. And you know what? After a few weeks, they would probably discover that they were the better for it. *R*

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