



Conservatives must oppose Trump's bogus claims of Big Tech bias

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There is very little that America's two major parties can agree on these days. But one area where there is at least a degree of common ground is on the idea that, one way or another, Big Tech must be brought to heel.

That rare bipartisanship was on show on Tuesday, when Republican and Democrat members of Congress subjected executives from Facebook, Amazon, Google and Apple to a wide-ranging interrogation.

The intensity of the opprobrium is striking. The five most valuable companies in the world are all US tech firms — the four firms who sent representatives to the Hill this week, along with Microsoft. It is symptomatic of the current anti-market mood that this is overwhelmingly seen as something to agonise over, rather than a triumph of American capitalism deserving at least some celebration.

Of course, Big Tech should not be exempt from criticism or above the law. And, self-evidently, it isn't. Yet, for all the political energy that is poured into the issue, America's 'techlash' is striking for how few good ideas policymakers, regulators and politicians have come up with. And sorting the good from the bad is imperative when some sort of action feels increasingly inevitable.

In that spirit, there is one decidedly non-cross party aspect of the debate which is especially dangerous, uniquely moronic, dishearteningly popular on the right and deserves no serious part in the politics of Big Tech.

It is the three-fold idea that large tech firms have an anti-conservative bias, that they are using their power to suppress right-wing voices, and that this is something the state should do something about.

This was the subject of an unseemly summit at the White House last week, to which Donald Trump invited an array of trolls, cranks and meme lords. Ironically, the guest list was full of digital media figures who overwhelmingly owed their fame — or infamy — to the platforms that we are supposed to believe they are being silenced by. It included 'Carpe Donktum', who holds

the dubious honour of winning an InfoWars meme competition, and Bill Mitchell, a radio host who has promoted the far-right QAnon conspiracy theory.

Perhaps the most concrete claim concerns deliberate bias in Google's algorithm. The accusation has been given fresh impetus by James O'Keefe, a conservative activist who runs something called Project Veritas. He recently released a video in which an anonymous Google employee claims to lift the lid on a "highly biased political machine that is bent on never letting someone like Donald Trump come to power again". O'Keefe was at last week's White House summit, and was praised by Trump for the film: "That was incredible, what a service you do, okay? You don't get credit for it, you should get credit for it."

The film's mix of misleading claims, out-of-context quotes and outright falsehoods have been comprehensively debunked by the Cato Institute's Matthew Feeney.

Elsewhere, a recent Economist study of Google's news tab found no left-wing bias. Instead, it found that "Google's main form of favouritism is to boost viral articles". A problem, but not the one that has the President and his supporters so angry.

It isn't just Google. The President has criticised Twitter for limiting his reach: "What they did to me on Twitter is incredible. I have millions and millions of followers, but I will tell you, they make it very hard for people to join me in Twitter and they make it very much harder for me to get out the message." As the last few days have made clear, there are problems with the President's relationship with Twitter. It is not obvious that an inability to get the message out is one of them.

The President's whinging is tedious. Like so much of what he does, his summit demeaned his office, and it is tempting to simply ignore his complaints. But doing so would be a mistake, for they form the basis of an illiberal legislative agenda.

Josh Hawley, a Republican Senator from Missouri who spoke at Trump's social media summit, last month introduced the Ending Support for Internet Censorship Bill. Hawley wants to make Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, the law that protects online companies from lawsuits based on user content, conditional. Every two years, the Federal Trade Commission would decide whether firms were moderating content "in a manner that is biased against a political party, political candidate, or political viewpoint". Fail to pass that test and firms would lose an exemption that has been instrumental in the formation of the internet as we know it.

Aggrieved right-wingers should oppose such a move on principle, but failing that, there is a practical case for restraint. How comfortable they would be with such a system were a left-wing Democrat in charge of the executive branch? It is hardly a far-fetched thought experiment.

Censorship in the name of free speech is an appropriately Trumpian inversion — it is hardly surprising from a President with an unhealthy fondness for the world's strongmen. But conservatives with a more heartfelt respect for free speech should know better.