

Big tech is changing the world — but we need to have a say

By Charlie Angus (The Toronto Star, May 25, 2018)

This week, Google quietly dropped its defining motto, “don’t be evil.” The move comes as Google recently entered into a deal with the Pentagon to develop better artificial intelligence for facial recognition in its killer drone program. That Google is using its massive research capacity for military applications should make citizens and legislators around the world shudder.

We have come a very long way from those heady days of the early digital revolution when edgy startup companies like Google sold us a vision of a democratic digital commons, where people around the globe were brought together by access to knowledge and ease of communication and connectivity. Google even talked about creating the greatest library the world had ever known. What we didn’t know was that library was our own personal lives — and the beneficiaries were Google’s investors, not the general public.

Nobody paid much attention to how Google was amassing this massive library of our digital lives as its steadily grew into a corporate conglomerate of unprecedented size. But it was our search histories, browsing habits and a meticulous record of — literally — every step we take that transformed Google from a cool search engine into the colossus it is today.

Google is not alone. The domination of the digital realm by an oligarchy consisting of a few massive firms raises many disturbing questions for legislators, regulators, and the public. Their unprecedented control of digital space has the potential to stifle innovation, undermine the rights of citizens, and upend the democratic processes of sovereign countries.

Facebook is currently under fire for its role in the breach of the personal information of millions of users to a sketchy political data firm that may have undermined the most important election in recent memory. In other parts of the world, they’ve been raked over the coals by NGOs, journalists and civil society

groups for, among other things, the platform's role in facilitating the genocide of Rohingyas in Myanmar.

Amazon's controversial bidding process for cities, with its own second headquarters as the prize, can only be called an organized campaign of public extortion, with cities tripping over each other to offer more public dollars to one of the most mercenary companies on Earth. Meanwhile, in Amazon's Home Town of Seattle, it is publicly fighting the city council over a modest increase in taxes to address the city's homelessness crisis, driven in part by spiking housing prices thanks to an influx of tech workers.

As an artist, activist, and MP, I've been a digital idealist for years. I bought into the notion of a deregulated internet because it was supposed to usher in a new frontier of public space and innovation. Instead, we have seen the rise of monopolistic giants that are squeezing out young startups while showing a disturbing disregard for the right of sovereign jurisdictions to hold them to account.

This is why we see the move toward legislation and regulation. In Europe, there is the landmark General Data Protection Regulation, while the U.S. is home to a rising antitrust movement and savvy legislators, journalists and citizens asking tough questions of their homegrown titans.

But in Canada, the extremely close relationship between the Trudeau government and the digital oligarchy is cause for concern. Good relations with Google, Facebook and Amazon are deeply entwined in the Trudeau agenda, and it is unlikely that such a cosy relationship between the Liberal brand and the Silicon Valley lobby machine will be upended — unless, of course, Canadian citizens begin to demand better of both government and the digital giants

That day has arrived in Canada. We need to begin a national conversation on creating a rights — and sovereignty-based — approach to personal data regulation, ensuring a fair and competitive economic environment, and reviving the promise of a truly democratic digital commons.

The idea that we should just trust these giants not to simply abstain from doing evil just doesn't cut it anymore.