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Internet giants need to be reined in for the public good

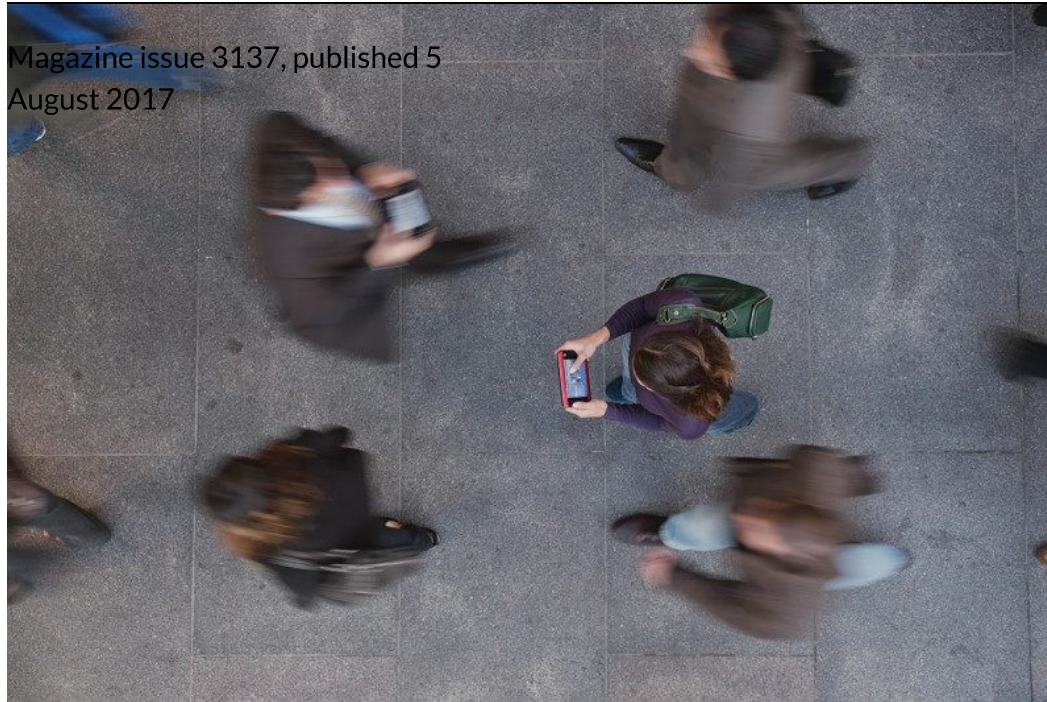
Self-regulation doesn't work for information monopolies like Facebook. Should we treat them as if they were utility companies to protect ourselves?

ARE Facebook, Google and Amazon monopolies that need to be regulated like utility companies? That anti-free-market position has reportedly won an unlikely champion in the White House, in the form of chief strategist and presidential right-hand man Steven Bannon.

Bannon's position is that these services have become an essential component of modern life, yet tend towards a natural monopoly status. Hence, like water and energy suppliers, they should be regulated to protect consumers.

His contention was met with widespread derision in the tech world. After all, these services are both free and optional; nobody will freeze to death in their house or catch dysentery because they can't pay their Facebook bill. And even if they are monopolistic, their particular monopolies do consumers no harm.

The idea went down badly in political circles too. It flies directly in the face of the US government's bid to abolish net neutrality, which demands that broadband is treated as a public utility and obliges internet service providers to



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make it available at a reasonable price. Opponents want to allow ISPs to privilege certain websites, loading some faster than others, for example.

Never mind the apparent contradiction. Bannon and co are clearly aware that there are pressing issues around monopoly and public good that need to be settled sooner rather than later.

But how? The starting point has to be that web services are neither as optional nor as free as their providers would have us believe.

Search, online shopping and socialising are woven into the fabric of life, and avoiding them is increasingly inconvenient. The currency we exchange for them is personal data.

A much bigger issue is the social cost of information monopolies. Facebook's footprint as a distributor of news, for example, is expanding without any of the oversight you might expect from a press freedom watchdog. Yet we know that

Facebook is a prolific vehicle for fake news, and that political agitators exploit the platform for their own ends (something that also makes Bannon's position appear incongruous, given that he practically invented the genre).

“There are issues around internet monopolies and the public good that need to be settled soon”

This week, the first proof emerged that Facebook's news feed can be systematically hijacked to sway people's political opinions (see “First proof that Facebook dark ads could swing an election”).

Right now, efforts to filter out the most harmful content are largely a voluntary exercise undertaken by Google and Facebook when their bottom lines are under threat. Such action is better than nothing, but as the old saying goes, self-regulation stands in relation to regulation the way self-importance stands in relation to importance.

The sensible option would appear to be some form of regulation, and the utilities model is a good starting point.

That doesn't mean government ownership. Anyone who wants to supply tap water, for example, simply needs to obey a certain set of agreed standards. And while a city's water supply has to meet certain minimum criteria, individuals remain free to get their water from unregulated and free sources.

Regulating the internet giants like utilities could bring similar standards to information. People would still be free to poison their minds with the internet equivalent of sewage, but nobody would have it dripped into their pipeline by an unfettered and unaccountable monopoly.

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