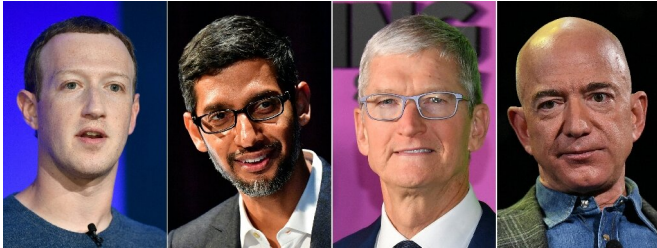


US tech giants too powerful, antitrust panel chair warns

29 July 2020, by Rob Lever



Big Tech CEOs Mark Zuckerberg, Sundar Pichai, Tim Cook and Jeff Bezos were testifying remotely at a congressional antitrust hearing

Amazon, Apple, Google and Facebook are too powerful and will likely emerge from the coronavirus pandemic even stronger, the head of a US congressional antitrust committee said Wednesday at a high-stakes hearing featuring the CEOs of the four US tech giants.

"Simply put, they have too much power," Representative David Cicilline said in his opening remarks at the hearing expected to feature a grilling of the leaders of the technology companies.

"Whether it's through self-preferencing, predatory pricing, or requiring users to buy additional products, the dominant platforms have wielded their power in destructive, harmful ways in order to expand," the Democrat from Rhode Island said.

"Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, these corporations already stood out as titans in our economy," Cicilline said. "In the wake of COVID-19, however, they are likely to emerge stronger and more powerful than ever before."

Republican Representative Jim Sensenbrenner struck a more moderate tone, saying "being big is not inherently bad."

"Quite the opposite, in America you should be rewarded for success," Sensenbrenner said.

The unprecedented joint appearance—remotely by video—before the House Judiciary subcommittee features Tim Cook of Apple, Jeff Bezos of Amazon, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook and Sundar Pichai of Google and its parent firm Alphabet.

The hearing is part of a probe into the competitive market landscape and [antitrust law](#), but questioning is likely to veer into other areas such as [hate speech](#) and content moderation, economic inequality, privacy and data protection and even claims of political "bias" from President Donald Trump and his allies.

Ahead of the hearing, the top executives of the firms sought to offer an upbeat assessment of the tech landscape, highlighting their roots and values and how the companies have benefitted average Americans.

"An important way we contribute is by building products that are helpful to American users in moments big and small, whether they are looking for a faster route home, learning how to cook a new dish on YouTube, or growing a [small business](#)," Pichai said in his remarks.



The major tech firms have seen their market value soar in recent months despite a pandemic-induced economic slump

Only in America

Cook said Apple is "a uniquely American company whose success is only possible in this country," and that the California giant is "motivated by the mission to put things into the world that enrich people's lives."

Bezos, in his first appearance before a congressional committee, spoke of his modest upbringing and initial backing from his parents to start Amazon and its early losses of billions of dollars.

"I walked away from a steady job into a Seattle garage to found my startup, fully understanding that it might not work," said Bezos, who is the world's richest person based on his Amazon stake.

Zuckerberg called social media colossus Facebook a "proudly American company" and added that "our story would not have been possible without US laws that encourage competition and innovation."

But hours ahead of the hearing, fast-growing video app TikTok accused Facebook of "maligning attacks" that are part of a movement "disguised as patriotism and designed to put an end to our very presence in the US."

TikTok welcomes "fair competition" chief executive Kevin Mayer said in a blog post, while adding that "without TikTok, American advertisers would again be left with few choices."

Political theater?

The hearing is part of a congressional probe into "online platforms and market power" and takes place against a backdrop of antitrust investigations in the United States, Europe and elsewhere.



Rep. David Cicilline heads the House of Representatives panel holding the antitrust hearing on Big Tech

Current US antitrust laws make it difficult for enforcers to target companies simply for being large or dominant without also showing harm to consumers or abuse of market power.

The committee, however, could lay a blueprint for antitrust in the digital era that would require a fundamental rewrite of the century-old competition rules.

Some analysts say the hearing could offer fresh insights into how Big Tech "platforms" squelch competition by buying rivals or copying products from rivals.

Apple's hefty commissions for its App Store and Amazon's dealings with third-party sellers are expected to come under scrutiny.

Google, which has faced antitrust investigations in Europe, will face questions on whether it favors its own services to the detriment of rivals and Facebook for its dominance of the social media landscape including its acquisitions of Instagram and WhatsApp.

Robert Atkinson of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, a think tank often aligned with the sector, said the political theater may distract from the issue of competition and focus on

issues "from privacy to political speech."

"These companies create enormous value for hundreds of millions of users and small businesses," Atkinson said. "Congress shouldn't twist antitrust law to launch an ill-defined broadside on internet platforms as a class."

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