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Softening the oligarchy: the normalization of Big Tech power

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Introduction

Drive along the north shore of Long Island in New York, and you will see the spoils of America's previous Gilded Age. Vast estates of hundreds or thousands of acres, with turreted castles and residences in the style of eighteenth-century English manor houses, the more modest houses containing thirty-two rooms and the roomier estates more than twice as many – a stark contrast to the crowded New York City nearby. In the words of Robert Caro,

> The huddled masses of New York City had a (…) powerful enemy. It was wealth – vast, entrenched, impregnable wealth – and the power that went with it. For it was to Long Island that the robber barons of America had retired to enjoy their plunder. (Caro, 1975, p. 148)

The so-called robber barons – the Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, and their likes – had become rich on oil and railways and steel, in many cases obtaining monopolies in their sectors and gaining enormous political and economic power.

The exploitative practices of the railroad monopolies sparked the first wave of antitrust reforms in the US (Bagg, 2023). The so-called Progressive-era reformers worried not only that the mega-corporations controlled large swathes of the economy but also that their economic power corrupted politics itself as the corporations co-opted parties and government institutions for their own interest (Rahman, 2017). Then Supreme Court justice Lois Brandeis famously warned against 'The Curse of Bigness.' Concentrated private power is a threat by itself, he argued, and a crucial role for antitrust enforcement is to prevent concentrations of wealth and power. From its Progressive-era roots,

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antitrust remained a strong political focal point throughout the New Deal era. Over time, however, American antitrust enforcement evolved into a more technical and depoliticized enterprise heavily influenced by Chicago-school economic theory and a narrow standard of 'consumer harm' (Crane, 2008; Foster and Thelen, 2024). According to several sources (e.g. Rahman, 2017; Wu, 2018), we are now in a second Gilded Age. This time its reach is global, and its products are not oil and railways but software, data, and advertising. Big tech is today routinely called an oligarchy, even by establishment figures like former President Biden. In this Forum Article, we examine how the emerging tech oligarchy is treated in the media's coverage of antitrust enforcement in the European Union and the United States. Here, we focus on the framing of antitrust as a system-conforming, technical enterprise. Modern antitrust, rooted in economic analysis, is often portrayed as a neutral and scientific field, which privileges technocratic claims while sidelining deeper questions of power, democracy, and structural dominance. By theorizing and assessing the prevalence of such system-conforming technical language in media coverage of Big Tech regulation, we aim to bring together insights from political economy and political science research on the politics of antitrust with science and technology studies (STS).

We show how the prevalence of certain frames contributes to a depoliticized understanding of Big Tech's dominance, casting it primarily as a technical problem of market efficiency rather than a democratic and structural challenge. We see media as sites where expertise and legitimacy are reflected and co-produced (Ezrahi, 2004; Jasanoff, 2004). We treat media outlets primarily as important sources of dominant narratives about antitrust (i.e. who is recognized as an expert, and how regulatory action is understood by the public), while recognizing that they have their own agenda-setting and framing power, making them important sites of selection, amplification, and framing. Rather than focusing on the neo-Brandeisian critique of Big Tech, our contribution lies in examining how different understandings of antitrust are translated into media discourse and rendered intelligible to wider audiences through processes of selection, framing, and contestation.

Two ideal-type models of antitrust

The history of antitrust enforcement touches on many of the themes that most interest scholars in the STS tradition. It is a story of how a field fluctuates between being treated as a political matter, where the dominant experts come from the legal profession, to being treated as a much narrower technical matter where economists are in the driver's seat (Berman, 2017). Here, we will not present a detailed history of antitrust but rather sketch two ideal-type models, synthesized from existing scholarship. One model, which we call 'wide,' treats antitrust as a fundamentally political question, while the second, which we call 'narrow,' treats it as a technical matter of economic analysis. Where the first allows for considerations of power, fairness, and relatively sweeping state intervention, the second treats antitrust as a 'mild constraint on a relatively small set of practices that pose a threat to allocative efficiency' (Crane, 2014, p. 835).

We argue that the wide approach offers a sharper critique of Big Tech's structural power. A critical framing highlights issues of monopoly, democracy, and market dominance, while the narrow model reinforces the status quo by adopting a system-conforming nature that treats these issues as technical or efficiency-related problems rather than questions of power.

The depoliticized (narrow) mode of antitrust

According to the Chicago School, the single goal of antitrust is to maximize efficiency in markets, guided by a standard of *consumer welfare*. Under this paradigm, economics is the dominant form of expertise in antitrust policy (Berman, 2017), and enforcement and litigation are based on economic analysis and arguments about market inefficiencies. The structuralist paradigm, which it replaced, relied less on formal economic modeling and more on structural indicators about the market at large. In the earlier Harvard School model, courts and regulators were more skeptical of market power and more likely to rely on legal and structural assessments of concentration, alongside broader concerns about fair competition and the political consequences of private economic power (Levine, 2021).

The Chicago School approach leaves a relatively restricted scope for antitrust policy. It is limited to the 'prevention of price-fixing and perhaps very large horizontal mergers' (Berman, 2017, p. 14). While the approach has come under increased scrutiny and much of academia has moved away from it, its ideas are still guiding antitrust decisions, especially in the United States. Indeed, although the Chicago School has lost much of its uncontested dominance in academic debate, its core assumptions continue to shape antitrust doctrine, institutional practice, and public-facing discourses of competition, particularly through the enduring influence of consumer welfare reasoning. In part, this is due to the influence of big business and interest groups that embraced Chicago School thinking because it advanced their interests (Lancieri *et al.*, 2023).

There is a robust literature in STS studies on the role of expertise in democracy in general (Fischer, 2009) and the construction, performativity, and political effects of economic indicators in particular (MacKenzie, 2003; Breslau, 2013). Politicians and policymakers, faced with the complexity of the social world in general and the economy in particular, are drawn towards numbers that simplify and describe the world and therefore allow them to act (Scott, 1998). We can view the Chicago school's consumer welfare standard as a simplifying *policy device:* a sociotechnical device that brings together 'people, knowledge, and material things in ways that turn the messy, endlessly complex world into a formal, calculative order that can be used productively' (Hirschman and Berman, 2014, p. 796). Since consumer prices are the most readily measurable part of a consumer welfare standard, regulators adhering to this standard tend to privilege prices over other conceivable forms of welfare, not to mention over aggregate effects on the economic system.

Moreover, treating antitrust decisions as strictly a matter of microeconomic analysis and expertise, guided by an established technical standard, may help legitimize decisions by framing them as value-free, technical, and apolitical (Fischer, 2009). This reflects what Feenberg (1999) describes as the 'instrumental rationality' of dominant technological discourses. By portraying economic expertise as a purely technical field, antitrust policy risks becoming a 'second nature' beyond public scrutiny, thus reinforcing existing power structures rather than questioning them.

Crucially, some have argued that this economics-driven, narrow mode of antitrust does not in fact remove politics from antitrust policy. Instead, it channels policy through expertise (Berman, 2017). The consumer welfare standard will, for instance, tend to call for less regulation and be more permissive towards the emergence and dominance of very large firms – clearly an outcome with political consequences. We argue this mode of reasoning may be especially poorly suited to deal with the distinct challenges posed by the emerging tech oligarchy.

We conceptualize this Chicago School model as closely aligned with what we call 'system-conforming' framings in the media. System-conforming framings reproduce the underlying logics of narrow antitrust by treating regulatory action as a technical exercise rather than as a question of power, democracy, or structural inequality. These framings rely on technocratic language, emphasizing economic expertise or market efficiency, which serves to sideline deeper political debates. Ezrahi (2004) suggests that such framings function as 'outformations' that privilege accessible, surface-level narratives over critical reflection on structural dynamics.

The political (wide) mode of antitrust

The other mode of antitrust policy is wider, more explicitly political, and open to other types of expertise beyond the economic. This mode harkens back to the Progressive-era reformers who saw antitrust policy as a tool to deal with the threat of concentrated private power. Current-day proponents of this approach are often called Neo-Brandeisians. They are not only, or even primarily, worried about the consumer harm caused by monopoly, 'but rather about the exclusion of competitors from the market and the manipulation of the political system for economic ends' (Lamoreaux, 2019, p. 113). This move does not as easily lend itself to a strictly technocratic understanding and pure econometric analysis, as it involves a difficult balancing of different concerns. Neo-Brandeisians are reluctant to view the market as a natural or self-justifying structure and hold instead that 'the political economy is structured only through law and policy' (Khan, 2018, p. 132). Antitrust enforcement unavoidably involves political judgment: How big is too big? How to balance economic efficiencies against the risks of private domination? Tim Wu claims, for instance, that it is a mistake to try to avoid the politicization of merger review: 'Big mergers *are political*, and the idea that the public or its representatives be kept in the dark is hard to support' (Wu, 2018, p. 130, emphasis ours).

Scholars describe an 'Atlantic divide' in antitrust enforcement (Gifford and Kudrle, 2015). While the American system is deeply committed to the Chicago School approach (with a brief intermission under Lina Khan's leadership of the FTC), the EU is more concerned with abuses of market power, more hospitable to wider considerations of fairness, and more comfortable with centralized state intervention in the economy (Foster, 2022; Foster and Thelen, 2024). Europe is now a global leader in the regulation of Big Tech, including, notably, a string of large cases against Google (e.g. the Google Shopping Case, the Google Adsense case and the Google Android case).

We conceptualize the wide approach to antitrust as a reference point for identifying what we call 'power-critical' claims in the media. Here, we use the wide/narrow distinction as an ideal-typical framework to identify whether media claims center around structural power, domination, and democratic consequences, or instead remain confined to technical, legalistic, and efficiency-based concerns. These claims challenge the narrative that corporate dominance is a natural outcome of innovation or market efficiency and instead expose the socio-political consequences of concentrated private power for democracy, competition, and the public sphere. By foregrounding issues such as monopoly power, infrastructural control, and the manipulation of democratic processes, power-critical frames seek to highlight issues not only with the tech oligarchy itself but also with the current antitrust paradigm.

The consumer welfare standard does not capture threats from tech oligarchy

With the 'big technification of everything' (Hendrikse *et al.*, 2022), scholars increasingly worry about the concentration of power in the world's large tech firms. We point out three factors that might make a narrow mode of antitrust especially poorly suited to capturing the threats posed by the concentrated private power that the tech oligarchy holds.

First, when the product is free, the consumer harm standard runs into trouble. Big Tech firms are platform firms, meaning that their business model depends on pursuing 'growth over profits' (Khan, 2017, p. 710). They capture and extract value not from selling goods to consumers but 'through their capacity to extract and harness immense amounts of data in ways that allow them to operate as critical intermediaries and market makers' (Rahman and Thelen, 2019, p. 178). The user often pays nothing to use the product, meaning that a price-centered understanding of consumer welfare is powerless to pick up any non-price-related harms. When user data is the product and winner-takes-all market dominance is the business model, competitors – and the health of the market or democracy as a whole – may be harmed even when consumers rejoice.

Second, Big Tech firms have vast political power through campaign financing and virtually unlimited lobbying resources. When wealth is severely concentrated within a few companies, these companies gain disproportionate political power. This was a core concern of the first antitrust movement, but such effects fall outside the bounds of the relevant parameters in a Chicago School consumer welfare analysis.

Third, as they shape the very fabric of our information environment, tech oligarchs might have direct democratic effects that no large monopolies in the past have come close to. The platforms 'structure the rules and parameters of action' that are available to their users, with extensive power to decide what users see and how they interact (Rahman and Thelen, 2019, p. 179). These powers are core parts of the democratic public sphere itself, far beyond anything that is captured by a focus on market efficiency and consumer harm. Thus, the depoliticized, narrow mode of antitrust enforcement seems particularly poorly suited to deal with the distinct challenges posed by the tech oligarchy.

We expect public contestation over the content and definition of antitrust, and we expect that the media will be one of the primary turfs on which this battle is fought. The media is a venue 'through which the production of science and technology becomes entangled with social norms and hierarchies' (Jasanoff, 2004, p. 2). It is not merely a neutral transmitter of information but a producer of what Ezrahi (2004, pp. 258–261) calls 'outformations': highly accessible and affective forms of communication that normally tend to privilege surface-level impressions over deep structural critiques.

Claims of tech oligarchy in antitrust cases

As a first step towards understanding how antitrust discourse relates to our two ideal types of antitrust enforcement, we analyze the claims that different political actors make in the media regarding antitrust cases surrounding Big Tech (i.e. Meta, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, and Google). News outlets play a crucial role in shaping digital technology, governance, and market power. Therefore, we selected media sources that not only reflect different geopolitical locations (Ireland and the US) but also serve as influential sense-making institutions within their respective contexts. For Ireland, we chose the Irish Independent and the Irish Times. Irish media provides us with insight into how a country that represents the European base for many US tech firms interprets controversies surrounding the tech oligarchy. We also chose to analyze the EUobserver and Euractiv, which offer access to Brussels-based discourses. In the US, we analyzed The New York Times (NYT) and The Wall Street Journal (WSJ), which capture the discursive framing of tech power, antitrust, and regulation in the country of origin of most Big Tech firms.

For each newspaper, we analyzed a sample of 50 news articles for each outlet between January 2010 and December 2023. We selected this sample size to ensure comparability across outlets. We selected news articles through keyword searches, which combined the names of Big Tech firms (Google, Amazon, Meta, Microsoft, and Apple) with antitrust-related terms (e.g. antitrust, competition, monopoly and market power). After this, 3 coders read the news articles and screened them for substantive relevance to antitrust controversies involving those companies. We only included claims where the object of the claim was one of the Big Tech firms or the relevant competition authority/regulator in relation to an antitrust issue. As we are interested in the general discourse around antitrust enforcement, we include both editorial content, op-eds and news coverage in our sample. However, it is important to note that we excluded guest commentary and other externally authored op-eds. We only included news articles and editorials and opinion pieces produced by the outlets themselves. This allows us to analyze both claims mediated through journalistic reporting and claims articulated through the outlet's own editorial voice. We acknowledge that news and in-house editorial content are distinct genres. Claims in the news are selected and contextualized by the journalists. Meanwhile, editorials express a more direct evaluative stance. Here, we treat both as relevant forms of mediated public discourse.

Building on the approach developed by Koopmans and Statham (1999), we performed a claims-making analysis to examine how different actors in the media construct and present their demands or critiques in public discourse. Claims-making is defined here as the expression of the political demand of actors in the public sphere (Koopmans and Statham, 1999). Claims are coded in numeric and string variables and categorized as follows: the claimant (the actor making the claim), the issue raised regarding the antitrust case (e.g. Google Shopping) and how the issue is framed (e.g. Google's market dominance or Big Tech's power).

We include claims from a wide variety of political actors (e.g. policymakers, businesses, citizen groups, NGOs). The claims also have a frame variable, which shows the main justifications that political actors make regarding the selected antitrust cases surrounding big tech companies. By systematically categorizing claims as either system-conforming or critical (and within critical we have subcategories of soft-critical and power critical), we can see how political actors contest or not the power dominance of the tech oligarchy in the media.

System-conforming claims are those that actors use in the media to talk about the Big Tech giants but where they are not really criticized. Meanwhile, critical claims are those where actors actively criticize the companies. As we will show below, criticism shown in the media by different political actors towards these companies does not necessarily challenge the deeper structures of socio-technical power. Much of it remains at the surface level, which leaves the core logics and infrastructures that sustain Big Tech's dominance intact. Hence, the need for two subcategories: *soft critical* and *power critical*.

Soft critical claims are the criticisms that point out problems or limitations in Big Tech's practices (e.g. privacy concerns, pricing, procedural violations), but which stay within the boundaries of the current regulatory or technological system. They tend to reproduce the dominant sociotechnical order by making certain issues visible without necessarily interrogating the underlying power relations that sustain corporate dominance. These critiques often accept the legitimacy of Big Tech's role and propose reforms or corrections rather than structural change. This reinforces a sense of neutrality and expertise that distances the public from the underlying stakes and contributes to the depoliticization of technology, which renders structural critiques less visible (Feenberg, 1999).

Finally, claims made by political actors within the *power critical* frame directly question or challenge the structural power, legitimacy, or socio-political consequences of the tech oligarchy. These types of claims tend to challenge the taken-for-granted authority of tech firms and highlight how technologies and markets are co-produced with legal, institutional, and epistemic power.

When media criticism still reinforces the system

On the surface, it looks like critical claims tend to be more popular than system-conforming ones. Critical frames outnumbered neutral ones in five of the six analyzed outlets (all but the WSJ). The Irish Independent, Euractiv and The Irish Times show a strong critical orientation, with 74.2%, 66.7% and 64.4% of claims respectively. Meanwhile, the EUobserver and NYT show the most even split overall, with 56.8% and 50.7% respectively. Lastly, the more conservative WSJ shows 43.8% of claims coded as critical and 56.2% as system-conforming (Figure 1).

So far, we have seen that in the Irish newspapers and Euractiv tend to lean towards having more critical stances towards Big Tech companies. Next, we categorize criticisms into two types: 'soft critical' and 'power critical' (see Figure 2). Out of the analyzed news sources, EUobserver and Euractiv, both EU-focused sources, tend to lean more toward soft critical frames (80.9% and 56.5% respectively). This means that even though both tend to show more critical stances towards these large tech companies, they do not fundamentally challenge the underlying power structures or the broader socio-political dynamics

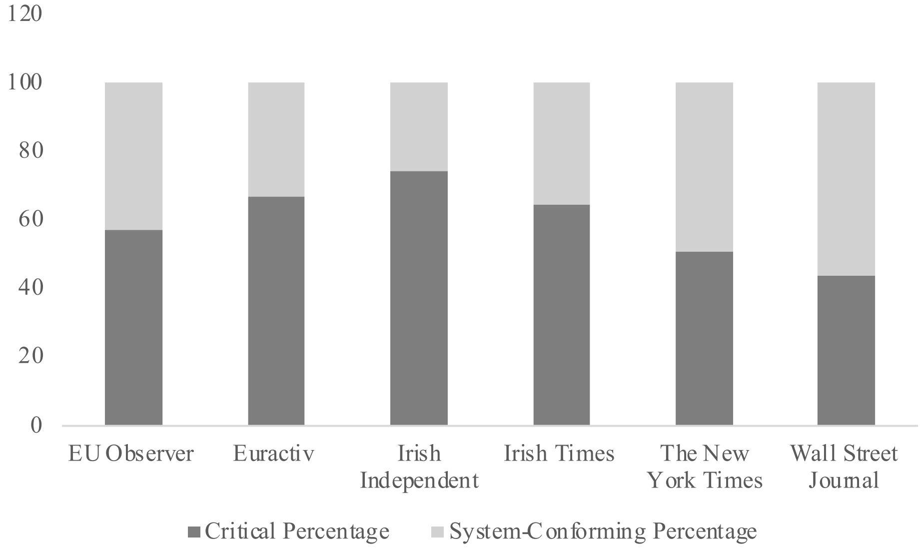

Figure 1. Proportion of critical vs. system-conforming claims by news source (%).

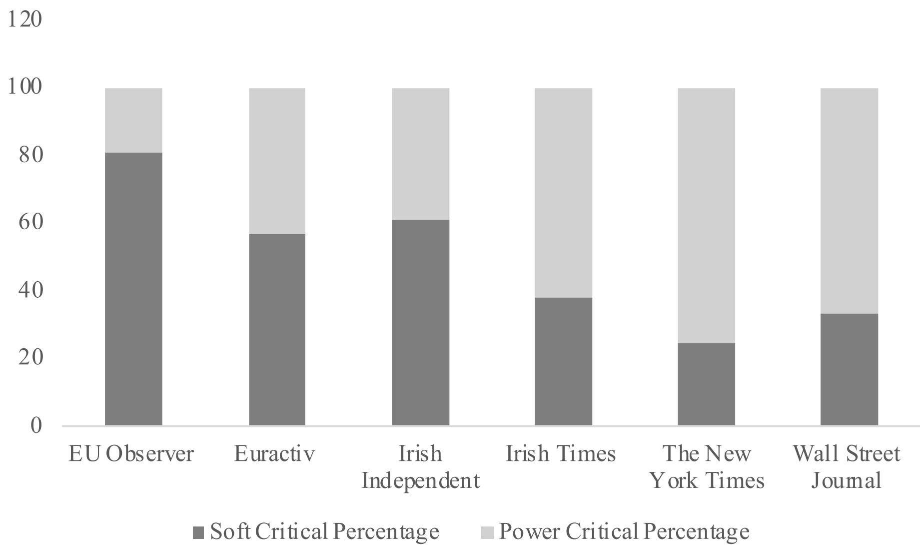

Figure 2. Soft critical vs. power critical claims by news outlet (% of total critical claims).

that enable Big Tech's dominance. These tendencies are also visible in the Irish Independent (60.8%). Meanwhile, The Irish Times, NYT, and WSJ display a higher share of power critical frames (62%, 75.6%, and 66.6% respectively). This shows a certain polarization in the US corpus: while we find less criticism in US-based outlets overall, the criticism we do find is more power-critical.

Soft claims are those that may criticize the Big Tech companies without touching on the underlying structures of power or question the system that enables corporate dominance:

> The executive also blames Google for requiring manufacturers who wish to pre-install Google proprietary apps such as Google Play Store and Google Search to enter into an "Anti-Fragmentation Agreement" preventing manufacturers from selling smart mobile phones running on competing operating systems based on the Android open source code. Such financial incentives are given in the form of a revenue share which is not problematic as such. (…) The Commission would be concerned that there would not be revenue share if they breach the condition not to pre-install competing services (…) and that if manufacturers do not pre-install Google Search, they cannot have Google Play Store. (Claim made by the European Union spokesperson, Euractiv, 28th April 2016)

In the claim above, the concern is not framed as an ethical or structural challenge to Google's market dominance, but rather as a question of regulatory compliance and procedural fairness. This soft critical frame raises concerns but does so within the boundaries of accepted market logic and institutional norms. The claim refrains from questioning the legitimacy of Google's power or the broader implications of tying products together in ways that limit user and manufacturer choice. This depoliticized approach aligns with what STS scholars have identified as the privileging of technocratic and legal reasoning (i.e. Feenberg, 1999; Jasanoff, 2004), which can obscure more fundamental critiques of platform capitalism and the structural asymmetries it creates. Indeed, the discourse is still structured around the technical and procedural categories of the narrow approach to antitrust.

Power critical claims shift attention away from the language of compliance and toward the broader societal consequences of corporate practices. This tends, somewhat surprisingly, to occur more frequently in the US media. Even though we find fewer critical claims than system-conforming claims in US media, the criticism that arises in US media more often highlights these power dynamics. This might indicate that the politicization of antitrust takes on a different, more polarized charge in the US than in the EU and its member states. One example:

> As you can probably tell, we're not a fan of bullies. Google and other Big Tech monopolists have run rampant and unchecked for far too long. There was a time, as recently as 1998, when the government was far more assertive against an all-powerful and abusive tech monopoly, and innovation in Silicon Valley thrived because of it. (Claim made by Jeremy Stoppelman (Yelp), New York Times, 5th May 2022)

Similarly, we can see here how a lot of the power criticisms also tend to question how antitrust currently works in its current form:

> Those penalties may sound massive, but they are in fact a pittance relative to Big Tech's coffers. Apple, Amazon, Alphabet, and Facebook had more than $420 billion in cash between them at last count. No action from regulators or lawmakers has yet resulted in a significant change to how these companies operate. (Claim made by Dan Gallagher (journalist), The Wall Street Journal, 24th July 2020)

This claim points out that fines amount to little more than a 'pittance' relative to the financial power of Big Tech. Thus, this critique moves beyond individual corporate behavior to question whether the existing frameworks of antitrust enforcement and regulation are structurally capable of addressing the asymmetries of power in the digital economy. This shows how the financial infrastructures of Big Tech (i.e. their vast cash reserves and global networks) neutralize regulatory action. Any type of penalties by regulators risks becoming merely symbolic rather than transformative. This type of criticism directly challenges both the financial dominance of these firms and the current limitations of regulatory tools that remain rooted in the Chicago School framework (particularly in the US). It challenges the assumptions and established policy devices that are taken for granted in system-conforming claims, potentially opening space for a more radical critique. However, such explicit claims are relatively rare.

System conforming claims

System-conforming claims range from Big Tech companies seeking to reassure the system to actively defending it as both efficient and centered on user needs. For instance:

> But Google responded (…) "Showing ads based on structured data provided by merchants demonstrably improves ad quality and makes it easier for consumers to find what they're looking for … That's not 'favouring' – that's giving our customers and advertisers what they find most useful" (Claim made by Google representative, EUobserver, 28th August 2015)

In the claim above, the representative from Google reframes accusations of favoritism as a matter of user benefit and relevance by stating that structuring ads around merchant data 'demonstrably improves ad quality' and serves consumer needs. This kind of framing draws on the logics of consumer welfare, which is central to the Chicago School of thought.

These types of claims by Big Tech attempt to sidestep any concerns about structural dominance as well as legitimize their practices as natural extensions of market rationality. These companies are quite good at convincing users that they offer the best products and that their dominance is a natural outcome of innovation, efficiency, and consumer preference instead of the result of strategic positioning and abuse of their market dominance. A recurrent argument is that such firms lower search and transaction costs, improve matching between users, buyers, and sellers, and therefore promote rather than restrict competition. In this sense, companies draw on Chicago-School reasoning to argue that their platforms do not threaten competition but in fact enhance it, as they provide the infrastructure for fast, frictionless information exchange and matching between buyers and sellers (cf. Pasquale, 2017). By emphasizing price, efficiency, consumer benefit, and market matching, the consumer welfare standard makes these dimensions of Big Tech's conduct visible while placing political influence, infrastructural dependency, and democratic control largely outside the frame.

Some of these system-conforming claims can also be depoliticizing, including when regulators (i.e. the European Commission) attempt to downplay tensions:

> DG-Competition Commissioner Almunia stressed that "these fast-moving markets would particularly benefit from a quick resolution of the competition issues identified," and emphasized the "repeated willingness" Google had expressed to avoid a dispute. (Claim made by DG-Competition Commissioner Almunia, Euractiv, 22nd May 2012)

In this claim, the Commissioner renders structural power relations less visible as he presents the conflict as a matter of technical adjustment rather than political contestation. By doing this, he diverts attention from broader critiques of Big Tech dominance and market concentration. These types of claims may contribute over time to the stabilization of existing institutional arrangements in Europe by framing these matters best handled by experts rather than as a subject that should be a matter of public debate. Another type of depoliticizing system-conforming claims comes – unsurprisingly – from the companies themselves:

> Android means manufacturers don't have to buy or build expensive mobile operating systems. As a result, smartphones are now available at dramatically lower prices – as little as €45 – and have become much more accessible to many more people. (Claim made by Google's senior vice president and general counsel Kent Walker, EUobserver 10th November 2016)

By framing Android as a tool that lowers manufacturers' costs and makes smartphones cheaper and more accessible, Google presents its business model as efficiency-enhancing and pro-consumer. This is a clear system-conforming claim as it justifies Google's market position through the language of price, innovation, and consumer benefit rather than engaging with structural questions about dominance, dependency, or market foreclosure. In this way, the claim reproduces the core logic of the consumer welfare standard as a policy device and depoliticizes the broader power implications of Google's control over the mobile ecosystem. In the US, by contrast, large corporations and advocates of the Chicago School approach to antitrust engage in highly personalized critiques of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and its leadership (particularly when it was under chair Lina Khan). These critiques often go beyond challenging regulatory decisions on substantive grounds (as it tends to happen within the European Union) and instead aim to delegitimize the agency's authority by attacking the credibility, competence, or motivations of its leadership. For example, a WSJ editorial claimed the following:

> Yet this is Ms. Khan's method: Sue first based on dubious or long-repudiated antitrust legal theories, then scramble to find evidence to support the agency's claims. A CEO with her record of failure would be out of a job (Claim made by WSJ The Editorial Board, Wall Street Journal, 12th July 2023)

This type of claim shows us how the US system-conforming actors are more successful in framing regulatory interventions as illegitimate. This contributes to the lack of change in how Big Tech is being framed in terms of what they truly are: tech oligarchies.

Discussion and conclusion: reclaiming political dimensions of antitrust

While early antitrust efforts were explicitly political and concerned with safeguarding democracy, contemporary antitrust (especially in its Chicago School form) has been depoliticized and narrowed to consumer welfare and allocative efficiency. We find that a large part of our analyzed news media coverage is system-conforming and reinforcing of a narrow and depoliticized understanding of antitrust. This technocratic framing obscures the broader political and democratic consequences of platform capitalism. Most outlets (particularly EU-focused ones) rely heavily on soft-critical frames that emphasize procedural, legalistic, or technical issues (e.g. compliance with competition law or pricing practices). However, they rarely really interrogate the deeper structural power relations that underpin Big Tech's dominance.

Our analysis also shows that within the critical accounts, power-critical frames are more frequent than soft-critical in the US outlets we analyzed. This is perhaps surprising, as the US is often taken to be more heavily influenced by the Chicago-School approach to antitrust. But on the other hand, it might be this exact dominance that drives US media discourse. US debates are more polarized and openly see regulatory authority itself as a topic of contestation. EU outlets (and those within member states), on the other hand, tend to privilege the authority of the Commission and legal expertise, which contributes to the ongoing depoliticization of competition policy within the EU. Our findings also suggest that media discourse does not simply mirror the formal orientation of antitrust regimes. Although the EU is institutionally more open than the US to wider understandings of market power and stronger regulatory intervention, its media coverage may still be more deferential to established legal and technocratic authority. By contrast, the more power-critical character of US coverage may reflect a more polarized and conflict-driven public sphere in which the legitimacy of antitrust itself is more openly contested. This very well may be partly linked to the recent neo-Brandeisian revival in the US, but it may also indicate a broader tendency in US media to frame antitrust as a site of political conflict. This shows how the media can play different roles across contexts. In some settings, it can stabilize existing antitrust narratives. In others, it opens space for their contestation. Our findings show the extent to which media claims move closer to, or remain distant from, a wider structural understanding of antitrust and platform power.

It is productive, therefore, to view antitrust through an STS lens. Certain policy devices can act to stabilize and normalize a messy reality while removing issues from day-to-day political contestation. At the same time, these devices embed political judgments. Our analysis shows how the consumer welfare standard operates not only as a regulatory principle but also as a sociotechnical policy device whose categories are reproduced in media discourse. When dominant discourses reproduce the view of antitrust as a technical enterprise, they make it harder for citizens to perceive Big Tech dominance as a matter of democratic concern. This 'instrumental rationality' (Feenberg, 1999) masks the inherently political nature of technological systems and their governance. Here, we have shown how 'system-conforming' and 'soft-critical' frames can contribute to the retrenchment of existing narratives as they reinforce the perception that Big Tech regulation is primarily a technical challenge rather than a societal struggle over power. And one way to challenge the dominance of Big Tech is to challenge the policy devices used to regulate it. Our findings suggest that media discourse is one important site through which the legitimacy of Big Tech's power is normalized, negotiated, and rarely challenged. Power-critical claims can reopen questions that the narrow policy device places outside ordinary antitrust analysis. Yet because these claims remain rare, media discourse more often stabilizes than disrupts this narrow understanding of antitrust.

Confronting the tech oligarchy is a question of restoring a political language capable of addressing the critical implications of digital infrastructures. Without more critical forms of engagement, discussions of Big Tech obscure its broader political and democratic significance. A more fundamental critique would give greater visibility to claims that frame Big Tech as a problem of structural power, democratic governance, and infrastructural control rather than primarily one of compliance, efficiency, or consumer welfare. Only then can antitrust enforcement (as well as democratic oversight) match the scale and complexity of the tech oligarchy.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Elena Escalante-Block:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Trym Nohr Fjørtoft:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are openly available in Zenodo at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16637401.

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