



IJIDI: Book Review

Moore, M., & Tambini, D. (Eds.). (2018). *Digital dominance: The power of Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. ISBN 9780190845117. 440 pp. \$34.95 US.

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Keywords: digital infrastructure; information and communication technology; internet; new media; social media platform

Publication Type: book review

Marc Andreessen, the co-founder of the search engine Netscape, stated, “The spread of computers and the Internet will put jobs in two categories: people who tell computers what to do, and people who are told by computers what to do.” (Mullaney, 2012) Andreessen also warned that companies in every industry needed to assume that a software revolution was coming. People have access to smart phones while lacking access to other resources—water, health services, sanitation, food, and markets. There is, therefore, this possibility that digital technologies—software, hardware, applications, the world wide web and the internet—could enable these same people access to resources Digital technology’s impact on society is apparent at the economic, social and political levels around the globe. Their actions, thoughts, conduct, and communication on the internet is impacting society both positively and negatively.

Digital Dominance: The Power of Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple, edited by Moore and Tambini, is an attempt to decipher these tech giants’ digital effects on society, the economy and politics, as well as to explore if and how these dominant players influence these arenas. In addition to exploring if and how digital technologies have come to serve and/or dominate human lives, the book also explains the Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft (GAFA-M) factor in this struggle. The GAFA-M as the five largest digital companies, are here to stay and will continue to impact humanity and the lives of individuals. The authors in this edited collection attempt to answer the prime question posed in the book, “Will the market end the tech giants’ digital dominance?” (p.24).

Although there are many articles and books that attempt to delve into the implications and questions around the dominance of Google and Facebook (such as Linares, 2015; Desjardins, 2016, 2018; Szramiak, 2017), Moore and Tambini introduce the conversation on the need for maintaining a healthy discourse around the issue while also strongly highlighting the democratic decline and the government-industry nexus that undermine the basic principles of the web.

When the World Wide Web was created in 1989, inventor Tim Berners-Lee envisioned the web as a global information sharing platform. Thirty years later, the web has created greater opportunities, given marginalised people a voice and has altered our lives, --and to a great extent--making our lives easier. On the other hand, the web has also introduced countless

problems, including that of scamming, criminalisation, and hate speech; in addition to challenges associated with the pure commercialisation of the platform and attempts to centralise the web as a dominant force. In his own words, at the 30th anniversary event of the World Wide Web in London, Berners-Lee lists the rise of Wikipedia and blogs as among the most unexpected, yet wonderful things. But he also acknowledges that he “couldn’t have predicted some nasty things” (Ranger, 2019), noting the rise of the giant corporation who now control much of the web.

Noting these detrimental effects, Berners-Lee is compelled to once again remind users of the intended basic principles of the web he created in the form of a manifesto or contract. The preamble to the contract for the web proposed by Berners-Lee reads as such: “The web was designed to bring people together and make knowledge freely available. Everyone has a role to play to ensure the web serves humanity and help protect the open web as a public good and a basic right for everyone” (Ranger, 2019). Berners-Lee is inviting national governments, companies, and citizens to sign this contract to ensure the principles are honoured by everyone who uses the web.

Tim Berners-Lee calls for companies to make the internet accessible and affordable to all people globally; respect consumers’ privacy and personal data; and, develop technologies that support the best in humanity but also challenge the worst aspects, whereby making the web a true public good. This poses the questions: When would the internet become fully accessible and affordable to the 50% of the world that do not currently have the means to access? When would these people have access to what they need and be ‘true participants’, shaping their own lives rather than being influenced by GAFA-M companies’ agenda? Would these companies survive and evolve into a business model which does not exploit privacy and personal data? Should only a handful of companies develop technologies and survive in the marketplace? How can we resist their dominance over the millions of small and local companies and web entrepreneurs? Although Moore and Tambini do not offer any concrete answers to these questions, they do explore the evolution of this digital dominance and the development of the GAFA-M factor while also predicting that these dominant players can only be eclipsed rather than displaced.

How have the GAFA-M factor maintained their dominance? Various reasons include the shortcomings of anti-trust policies leading to the dominance of web platforms; the inadequacies of competition law that lead to data becoming the new lucrative commodity akin to ‘oil;’ and, the challenges posed by end-to-end services offered by companies such as Amazon.

Digital dominance is also evident in society through the emergence of new information intermediaries replacing the traditional ones and the biases these new intermediaries could bring about, and how they are able to set the agenda for the world; arguably monitoring online content and surveilling citizens and ultimately endangering freedom of speech on the internet. There is also the emerging struggle between the dominant press and the independent journalism the web has the potential to offer.

Digital dominance is also evident in politics where social media can undermine a political election’s legitimacy, manipulating people’s minds at important junctures of critical decision-making. The book also explores the misinformation factor, perpetuated by the culture of spreading fake news as witnessed in the UK referendum and the US elections in

2016 undermining the credibility of social media.

Digital Dominance has much to offer to those who are eager to understand the politics and political economy of the web, and the tensions between the commercial web and the democratic web originally envisioned by Tim Berners-Lee. The book also exposes the rise of these tech giants' platforms and their growing influence on the media landscape. The impact they are making in terms of the personal recommendations and the algorithmic filtering of users' information online are nothing but intrusive and an invasion of privacy. Not only are users' web behaviours captured every second, they are also profiled for targeted marketing, or, in certain cases, the opposite--targeted exclusion from news access. If and when a State decides to enforce a total digital 'black out,' it can raise national security concerns and do so. It is not just the GAFA-M factor that is in serious discussion today, but also several other applications, including that of the deep fake video app that made the rounds earlier this September. The need for undertaking numerous efforts such as promoting digital literacy are now having to be scaled to that of promoting media and information literacy (MIL) and the fight against the dynamic fake news menace the world is facing today. Organisations such as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and UNESCO are undertaking certain concerted efforts to mainstream MIL in the daily lives of citizens, and by introducing the curriculum in formal and informal educational settings.

Information poverty, a phenomenon that grips the developing world, has now made life much more challenging with the abundance of information, both authentic and unauthentic and many a times, purported misinformation too. The role of traditional infomediaries is of paramount importance today and these roles are increasingly rendered artificial intelligence systems that benefit from deep learning, machine learning, and big-data analytics. Each of these tech giants is investing in these streams with a view to regain their control and dominance of the web.

This book, therefore, is a great and timely read for all policymakers who are striving to develop knowledge-based economies around the world. Infomediaries such as the content gatekeepers, librarians, journalists, and educators will find this a "must read". This work may also help agents of the dominant GAFA-M companies determine their own future course of actions, to address the concerns raised.

In the backdrop of the complex world that we live in, *Digital Dominance: The Power of Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple*, offers all readers the opportunity to learn about how the entire digital infrastructure is controlled by corporations while also posing many unanswered questions facing the future of the web. While a large number of users of social media today in the developing world are oblivious to the various concerns raised in the book, it is important for those who are at the helm of digital policymaking and t who are concerned with issues around internet governance to read this book without fail.

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Basheerhamad Shadrach (shaddy@shadrach.in) has been an information professional for over three decades, largely interested in rural informatics and pro-poor information access. His research and work revolve around the role of infomediaries in meeting the knowledge demands of the poorest of the poor in order for them to escape the poverty trap through their own capabilities and based on informed decisions. Dr. Shadrach earned his PhD for proposing a new methodology to assess the impact of pro-poor information services from Loughborough University, UK. He is largely involved in research work in areas such as skills development, appropriate technologies, ICT for Development and internet governance. In all these, he tries to locate the role of public libraries and the role staff could play in improving the lives of people they serve.