The tech backlash is real, and it's accelerating

Is there a backlash toward the technology industry in the culture? I tend to think so, having written about its various twists and turns most weekdays for the past couple years now. But sometimes an obsession with a beat can lead to myopia, and so it can be useful to check in with your assumptions from time to time to see whether they still hold up.

Such an occasion presented itself over the weekend, when the *New York Times* published an op-ed by Rob Walker with the provocative title "There is no tech backlash." Walker argues that whatever jaded media types and politicians might be saying about the big tech platforms, consumers remain enamored of them, and the companies' financial performance has been superb. He writes:

> *According to its most recent quarterly report, the number of Facebook accounts used daily (1.59 billion) and monthly (2.4 billion) each increased by 8 percent over the prior quarter. Despite all the anecdotes you've heard about people deleting their accounts, the company's flagship app added about a million new daily users in the United States alone. Revenue was up 28 percent. Even factoring in the F.T.C. fine, Facebook recorded a profit of $2.6 billion.*
>
> *Facebook is not the only demonized tech platform; social media companies in general are routinely criticized as toxic swamps full of trolls, liars and bots. But again, there's no evidence of any exodus. In the same quarter, Twitter added five million new daily users, and Snap reported that the daily user base of its flagship Snapchat app grew 7 percent, its best-ever performance as a public company. According to*

> *the Pew Research Center, 72 percent of Americans use some form of social media, a percentage that has risen steadily for years and shows no sign of flagging. (The people I know who quit Facebook all use Facebook-owned Instagram, WhatsApp, or both.)*

Moreover, Walker writes, consumers continue to buy potentially privacy-destroying gadgets like voice-controlled speakers and surveillance-camera doorbells. And so while it might *seem* like there's a backlash, the argument goes, in reality technological progress is proceeding apace — and the rest is just noise.

Elements of Walker's argument are true on their face. Technology companies indeed remain big, successful, and admired. And regulatory action, which so far has taken the form of relatively small fines, has spurred little change. But if you're trying to evaluate whether cultural attitudes toward the technology industry have changed — whether there is a tech backlash — this strikes me as the wrong place to put the goalposts.

What would be a fairer way?

First, we could look at direct consumer actions against tech companies. In the aftermath of the 2016 election, we have repeatedly seen consumers protest the big tech platforms. In 2017, Tristan Harris began leading a consumer movement accusing Google, Facebook et al of creating a "digital attention crisis" by "hijacking our minds." Within a few months of Harris' work gaining attention, Google, Facebook, and Apple had all introduced robust screen time controls into their services.

In 2018, the Cambridge Analytica scandal went supernova. It caught Facebook by surprise, in large part because the basic facts of the case had been public for years. What turned it into crisis was global consumer outrage — outrage that has

contributed to dramatic changes in Facebook's product roadmap, most notably this year's pivot to privacy.

You simply can't understand Cambridge Analytica as anything other than a groundswell of people suddenly awakened to the ways, both real and imagined, that social media can manipulate their behavior — and perhaps that's why Walker leaves the most famous tech backlash of the past two years out of his tech-backlash essay entirely.

Second, we could examine how consumer attitudes about tech have changed. As it so happens, Pew Research released some new findings on the subject just over a month ago. Authors Carroll Doherty and Jocelyn Kiley write:

> *Four years ago, technology companies were widely seen as having a positive impact on the United States. But the share of Americans who hold this view has tumbled 21 percentage points since then, from 71% to 50%.*
>
> *Negative views of technology companies' impact on the country have nearly doubled during this period, from 17% to 33%, according to a new Pew Research Center survey.*

That all feels like a meaningful backlash to me. And it offers some statistical weight to all the conversations you likely had with friends and family last year as they explained why they deleted their social media accounts, or dramatically scaled back their usage.

Third, we could look at all the government action that has resulted from changing consumer attitudes. This month, the *New York Times* posted a handy tool for tracking ongoing investigations into the big tech platforms. It found there to be two Congressional, six state and local, and eight federal investigations now underway. (Some of them made progress over the weekend, as you will read below.)

When I made this observation on Twitter yesterday, some folks responded that government action did not count as a backlash, it had not come from "consumers." This strikes me as a strange argument to make about a representative democracy, in which consumers (or citizens, as they were previously known!) elect people to protect their interests. Politicians responding to changing consumer attitudes to crack down on the excesses of large companies has a long history in the United States, and strikes me as rather powerful evidence of a backlash.

If all that's true, though, why *are* tech companies still so successful? Well, that's one of the many nice things about monopolistic businesses: it's very hard to avoid being a customer. Kashmir Hill demonstrated that fact earlier this year in a brilliant series of stories in which she attempted to cut out the big five tech platforms from her life. Doing so required the use of special hardware, custom software, and an effort that could only be called Herculean. It's little wonder that customers haven't been fleeing the platforms en masse — it's unclear how they even can, assuming they wish to continue using the modern internet.

Now, it's certainly still possible that the platforms will emerge from this regulatory moment relatively unscathed. It's a concern I raised here myself this summer, when Facebook shrugged off an FTC fine. But to make that argument at *this* moment — when US antitrust forces have roused themselves to attention for the first time in a generation — strikes me as very strange. The tech backlash is here, it's real, and it's accelerating.

The Interface Live!

Have you ever read this newsletter and wished that you could experience it as an audience member in an intimate venue surrounded by other smart people, listening to a conversation between me and a person whose work is regularly featured in

this space? If so, I invite you join us in San Francisco for our first ever *Interface Live!* The event starts at 6PM on Tuesday, October 22nd at Manny's in the Mission. Here's the official description:

> *How well prepared is Facebook for the 2020 election? And who is doing the hard work of protecting the platform? In this conversation, Verge senior editor Casey Newton will talk with misinformation researcher Renee DiResta about efforts the company is making to protect itself against attacks in the upcoming US presidential election. What steps has Facebook taken so far? What avenues of attack are still wide open? And how does it affect the moderators who are doing the hardest work? We'll tell you what to expect — and how to spot misinformation on social networks yourself.*

Consider this a test run for a series of events we're planning to host in 2020. It's a chance to meet me, network with other tech and policy folks, and hear what should be a great conversation about some pressing issues. You can get tickets at Eventbrite and Facebook. And let me know if you're planning to come — I'd love to meet you.

The Ratio

Today in news that could shape public perception.

Trending up: **Snapchat** launched a political ads library ahead of the 2020 election. The library shows all political and issue-based ads on Snapchat, along with the names and addresses of the people who paid for them. **Twitter** and **Facebook** launched similar initiatives last year, after Russia-linked ads prompted Congress to call for more transparency. (Kerry Flynn / CNN)

Trending up: **Twitter** deleted a threat from a Texas lawmaker against presidential candidate Beto O'Rourke, showing some

spine despite the certainty the move would be used against them by conservative critics. The threat ("My AR is ready for you Robert Francis,") came in response to remarks O'Rourke made about gun reform during Thursday night's Democratic presidential debate. (Makena Kelly / *The Verge*)

Trending sideways: U.S. national-security officials had a tense meeting with tech executives from **Facebook**, **Google**, **YouTube**, **Twitter**, and **Microsoft** to discuss 2020 election security. The officials allegedly told tech executives to hand over more user data. A Twitter executive reportedly responded that the administration should share more information about election threats. (Dustin Volz and Deepa Seetharaman / *The Wall Street Journal*)

Trending down: **Facebook** suspended the editor-in-chief of Russia's top government-run news network after wrongfully flagging one of her posts for violating its community standards. It later apologized. (Kevin Poulsen / *The Daily Beast*)

Trending down: The Hong Kong protests are mysteriously missing from **TikTok**, raising fears that the Chinese government is censoring the app. (Drew Harwell and Tony Romm / *Washington Post*)

Governing

 The House Judiciary committee requested sensitive documents and email from top executives at Apple, Amazon, Facebook and Google related to the ongoing antitrust probe. They're looking for information about international operations, finances, and potential merger targets, and the letters are all publicly posted. (Tony Romm / *The Washington Post*)

> *The requests sent by Democrats and Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee ask the companies to share detailed information about their internal operations, including*

> *financial data about their products and services, private discussions about potential merger targets and records related to "any prior investigation" they have faced on competition grounds.*
>
> *The documents could shed light on whether the companies' dominance of search, advertising, e-commerce and other digital markets is rooted in anti-competitive practices, such as gobbling up or squashing rivals, and the extent to which their leaders participated in, or had been personally aware of, any wrongdoing. The lawmakers' letters are not official legal demands, though the panel does have key powers to compel the four tech giants to turn over records or appear at hearings if necessary.*

Separately, the committee sent a survey to **Apple**, **Amazon**, **Facebook**, and **Google** customers who pay for digital ads and cloud computing services. The panel is trying to learn more about competition in digital markets. (Spencer Soper / Bloomberg)

The committee is also looking into **Apple's** repair monopoly, according to an open letter to the company. They've asked Apple to turn over internal communications from 14 top executives, including CEO Tim Cook, related to restrictions on third-party repairs (among other things). (Jason Koebler / *Vice*)

The California assemblywoman behind an industry-backed bill that would narrow the state's Privacy Act is married to a top executive at **Amazon**-owned Ring — a company with a big financial stake in killing data privacy legislation. (Katy Murphy / *Politico*)

Meanwhile in California, state lawmakers have introduced a new bill to stop people from knowingly distributing deepfakes 60 days before an election. (Dustin Gardiner / *San Francisco Chronicle*)

Facebook representatives working on the new cryptocurrency Libra met with regulators from the Federal Reserve and the Bank of England. The move comes as France has said Libra would undermine its sovereignty and should not be allowed to operate. Mehreen Khan, Sam Fleming and Caroline Binham / *Financial Times*)

U.K. politicians have spent a collective $1 million on partisan **Facebook** ads since mid-June. They're using user data from social media companies to target voters ahead of an expected election in late November. (Mark Scott / *Politico*)

Kickstarter is facing blowback for firing two employees involved in its ongoing unionization efforts. A Kickstarter spokesperson said the employees were fired because of low performance, but some users seem skeptical and are already planning protests. (Russell Brandom / The Verge)

Industry

 Amazon employees say the company changed its search algorithm to favor its own products in search results. The report from Dana Mattioli in the *Wall Street Journal* could provide ammunition to antitrust regulators. Amazon denied the substance of the report:

> *Amazon.com Inc. has adjusted its product-search system to more prominently feature listings that are more profitable for the company, said people who worked on the project—a move, contested internally, that could favor Amazon's own brands.*
>
> *Late last year, these people said, Amazon optimized the secret algorithm that ranks listings so that instead of showing customers mainly the most-relevant and best-selling listings when they search—as it had for more than a decade—the site also gives a boost to items that are more profitable for the company.*

Facebook's 'undesirable' appearance policy – meant to block ads that target people who are overweight or have skin conditions and sell them dangerous miracle cures – keeps blocking body positive creators who are trying to celebrate those very things. (Makena Kelly / *The Verge*)

Facebook and Social Science One finally released a data set to help people study the sources of misinformation. Funders have recently threatened to pull out of the project over what they perceive as Facebook dragging its feet.

Facebook rolled out new video tools, including improvements to live video that will allow creators edit the beginning and end of clips and broadcast rehearsal videos just to page admins. On **Instagram**, creators will now be able to publish and schedule Instagram Feed and IGTV content for up to six months. (Sarah Perez / *TechCrunch*)

YouTube announced it will no longer allow paid views and advertising to influence its YouTube Music Charts, calculating them instead from view counts on organic plays. Reports recently showed music labels were spending a lot of money on ads to pump up views on newly debuted songs. (Sarah Perez / *TechCrunch*)

The BBC found 100 videos on **YouTube** promoting misleading health information – including fake cancer cures – and showing ads from major brands. (Flora Carmichael and Juliana Gragnani / BBC)

YouTube's algorithm promotes videos with misleading health information – including fake cancer cures – and shows ads from major brands before they play. This means **YouTube** and people creating fake health videos are profiting off the content. (Flora Carmichael and Juliana Gragnani / BBC)

ByteDance, the company behind **TikTok,** might have another hit on its hands with a news aggregation app called **TopBuzz**. The app it's based on, Toutiao, is extremely popular in China.

(*What's New In Publishing*)

Urban Dictionary, the venerable repository of slang and cultural memes, has become "a harbor for hate speech" thanks to lax moderation. (Jason Parham */ Wired*)

A climate reporter argued that social media is making the outdoors more accessible to people who might not normally #OptOutside, even if it's also making scenic locations more crowded. (Mélissa Godin */ The Globe and Mail*)

And finally…

Facial recognition technology in China beaten by a nose job

Here's a story whose headline makes it read like it might represent the momentary triumph of human ingenuity over dystopian surveillance. But really this Mandy Zuo story is just a preview of the Kafkaesque nightmares to come:

> *Speaking on Wenzhou City Television, Huan said she discovered she had been logged out of the online shopping and payment gateways she used because the secure identification process, backed by facial recognition technology, simply did not know who she was. […]*
>
> *Huan said her work was also affected as she could no longer sign in and off work by scanning her face. Checking in to hotels and boarding high-speed trains had also become a problem as she had used facial recognition to register on those platforms, the report said.*

Needless to say, I've put my nose job on hold while we get this all sorted.

Talk to us

Send us tips, comments, questions, and examples of tech backlash: casey@theverge.com and zoe@theverge.com.

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