



Getting at Gafam's "Power" in Society: A Structural-Relational Framework

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A discourse on GAFAM's power

Over the past decade, a discourse about the power of Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft (or, the "GAFAM") has grown in North America and around the world. This discourse is constituted by news media stories, business reports, policy documents, public rhetorics and popular cultural works that make innumerable claims and statements about GAFAM's power in society. Talk of GAFAM's power expresses anxieties and fears about the ubiquity of Silicon Valley's "Big Five": GAFAM are commonly described as the world's [most powerful corporations](#), having [too much power](#), and using and [abusing that power](#) for selfish or nefarious ends.

While much is regularly said about GAFAM's power, what often goes without saying is what is meant by it. GAFAM is surely omnipresent and perhaps even omnipotent, but what is "power" and how does GAFAM possess or operationalize it? When GAFAM's power is posited without definition or explanation, it becomes nebulous and opaque. To clarify the extent and quality of GAFAM's power, I conceptualize power and illustrate GAFAM's power with some current data and exempla.

To this end, I build upon my first [book](#)'s structural-relational framework for probing the economic, political and cultural "power" of the world's biggest media conglomerates (e.g., Walt Disney Company, Comcast, and News Corporation). This framework conceptualizes and analyzes GAFAM's: 1) *structural power* (ownership and control of capital resources and resource allocation, and influence on State decisions about public law, policy and regulation); and, 2) *relational power* (governing with tactics of persuasion

and coercion to get subjects to act in concordance with preferred ends). While this framework for getting at GAFAM's power in society is not prescriptive or comprehensive, it aims to provide communication and digital media studies researchers with a useful entry point for understanding and analyzing the Big Five's power. This framework also suggests that neo-Marxian and neo-Foucauldian conceptualizations of power, though different, can be brought together in a complimentary way when interrogating GAFAM's power in society.

GAFAM's structural power: Capitalism and the state

Capitalism is a system in which corporations mobilize technology, human and non-human labor, and energy forms to produce and sell goods and services as commodities in markets to profit, rather than to meet social need. Political economists (within and outside of communication and digital media studies) take it as axiomatic that the ownership and control of resources—capital—is integral to power in society, the crux of the divide between the rulers and the ruled, the bourgeois and working classes, and as Occupy Wall Street's unifying slogan puts it, the [1% and the 99%](#). Today, bourgeois collectives, or, corporations, crown capitalism's commanding heights, and the power of corporations derives from their ownership and control of capital, as well as from their ability to allocate capital to strategic ends that maintain and extend that power. GAFAM's power is manifested by their outsized market value, market capitalization, net income and revenue, mergers and acquisitions, market share, intellectual property (IP), and CEO wealth. Consider:

- The [Forbes Global 2000 list](#) ranks GAFAM among the world's top fifty largest corporations (by market value): Alphabet-Google (#13: \$919.3 billion), Amazon (#22: \$1,233.4 billion), Facebook (#39: \$583.7 billion), Apple (#9: \$1,285.5 billion), Microsoft (#13: \$1,359 billion).
- Between 2015 and 2019, GAFAM's market capitalization jumped by \$2.7 trillion. In 2020, GAFAM achieved a total combined market capitalization valuation of [\\$6.4 trillion](#), a 53% increase from 2019. That sum is greater than the combined 2019 gross domestic product (GDP) of Australia, Canada, France and the United Kingdom—four of the world's wealthiest countries. GAFAM's gigantic valuation is also over two times the combined GDP of Africa (\$2.6 trillion).
- According to [Investopedia](#), three of GAFAM place in the top ten of the most profitable companies in the world (as measured by net income and revenue): Apple (#1: \$58.4 billion/\$273.9 billion), Microsoft (#2: \$44.3 billion/\$143 billion), and Alphabet-Google (#5: \$31.5 billion/\$166 billion).
- Over the past decade, GAFAM consolidated an [Internet oligopoly](#) by merging with or acquiring over 400 corporations encompassing everything from start ups to potential rivals. Between 2014 and 2019, GAFAM integrated nearly [250](#)

companies from across the communications and digital hardware, software and service sectors, and from 2015 to 2017, brought [175](#) into their holdings. Though rivalled by a few Chinese Internet giants (e.g., JD.com, Alibaba, and Tencent), GAFAM are now the global Internet's gatekeeper of the biggest platforms and they use the interactions of the billions of people that use their goods and services for profitable ends.

- GAF (though not A and M) take over half of the market share of global digital [advertising spending](#). In 2019, Google was the largest digital ad seller in the world, accumulating \$103.73 billion. Facebook came in second, with \$67.37 billion in net ad revenues. Amazon was the fourth. In that same year, [two out of every three dollars](#) spent on digital advertising in the US went to GAF, and [74%](#) of digital ad revenue made in Canada was absorbed by Google and Facebook. Despite the current economic slump, GAF took over [60%](#) of the global digital adspend in 2020: Google (29.4%), Facebook (23.4%), and Amazon (9.5%).
- GAFAM have concentrated control over vast intellectual property (IP). In 2019, these titans of the digital age were some of the world's largest [patent holders](#): Alphabet-Google (#14: 21,084), Amazon (#52: 9,455), Facebook (#131: 3,716), Apple (#27: 14,849), and Microsoft (#5: 29,824). Between 2019 and 2020, GAFAM accumulated a [record number](#) of new patents.
- GAFAM's CEOs are some of the world's [wealthiest billionaires](#), or, the richest of the "ruling class." The combined net worth of Jeff Bezos (\$178 billion), Bill Gates (\$123 billion), Mark Zuckerberg (\$96.7 billion), Larry Page (\$71.4 billion), Sergei Brin (\$69.2 billion), and Tim Cook (\$1 billion) is a whopping \$539.3 billion. The personal fortune of these five white American men exceeds the 2019 combined GDP of Alberta, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Nunavut, and the Northwest Territories. Worldwide, about 750 million people still struggle to meet their [basic needs](#), but GAFAM billionaires like Bezos accumulate \$152,207 [per minute](#) — and \$2,537 per second. In Canada, the median annual pay per worker is \$52,600, meaning Bezos accumulates more in under thirty seconds than the average full-time Canadian worker makes in an entire year.

Evidently, GAFAM's ownership and control of capital resources is vast. While the scale of GAFAM's power is unparalleled in modern history, they share with the Gilded Age's behemoths—Standard Oil, U.S. Steel, and the American Tobacco Company—the ability to allocate a portion of their incredible wealth to influencing the political process and the decisions the US State makes.

The State possesses the authority to develop, preserve or transform the general legal, policy and regulatory rules of society, and so competition and conflict between different interest groups to influence State decision-making is a constant. In democracy, the

State is supposed to be representative of the people, not partial to or privileging of the interests of any one social group or class over another. Yet, as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels pithily put it in the [Manifesto](#), “The executive of the modern state is nothing but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.” In the US, the [State in capitalist society](#) has largely served the interests of a class of wealthy white men (and the corporations they own and control) by facilitating and legitimizing their accumulation of capital over and above the interests of working class and oppressed peoples.

For all of US history, the ideal of a State “of, by and for the people” has always clashed with the actuality of a State that makes and enforces collective rules on behalf of some people, to the detriment of others. As [research](#) demonstrates, “organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence.” In some instances, mass reformist and revolutionary interest groups have effectively pressured the US State to mitigate capitalism’s myriad social harms or make positive social changes. But most often, business interests are privileged by State decision-makers, and to be sure, corporations allocate a portion of their wealth to systematic political influence. For example, GAFAM mobilize advocates and lobbies, think-tanks, political action committees (PACs), legislators, policy makers and regulators, parties, and presidents to try to ensure the US State will support their private interests and represent those interests as the public or “national interest.” A flip through GAFAM’s political rolodex finds:

- GAFAM run their own “in-house” political advocacy agencies. For example, [Facebook’s Vice President of Public Policy](#) aims “to ensure Facebook maintains a voice in public policy discussions that impact” its “business,” “employees” and the people that use its “products and services.” Likewise, [Apple’s Public Policy Advocacy](#) agency “engages in policy discussions where they matter to our business and customers” and strives “to help policy makers at every level of government understand our products, our innovations, and our business.”
- Some of GAFAM pay lobbies such as the [Internet Association](#) (“the unified voice of the Internet economy”) the [Computer & Communications Industry Association](#) (“the eyes, ears, and voice of the world’s leading providers of technology products and services in Washington”), and the [Information Technology Industry Council](#) (“the trusted leader of innovation policy that drives sustainable, ethical, and equitable growth and opportunity for all”) to try to design the country’s overall framework of digital technology law, policy and regulation.
- GAFAM speak with one voice on some policy issues, but they do not always agree on everything. In capitalism, corporate collaboration is coupled with competition, and so each of the Big Five pays lobbyists to push their specific

political interests to different State institutions and decision-makers. In 2019, [Facebook](#) spent \$16.7 million lobbying over sixteen Federal departments including the Departments of Commerce, Homeland Security, Justice, Labor, State, Treasury, Federal Communications Commission, Federal Trade Commission, Office of US Trade Representative, Patent & Trademark Office, US Copyright Office, and the White House. In that same year, [Apple](#) spent nearly \$2 million lobbying some of the above State institutions, but different ones as well, including the Department of Defense, Energy, and Transportation, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, and the National Aeronautics & Space Administration.

- GAFAM mobilize intellectuals across the spectrum to co-author or support their public policy ideas by donating to major [think-tanks](#), both conservative (e.g., American Enterprise Institute, Cato Institute, Heritage Foundation) and liberal (e.g., Center for American Progress, New America Foundation, Progressive Policy Institute). Reactionary and progressive intellectuals clash over many public policy issues, but GAFAM pay both to rally for its interests. GAFAM also try to integrate academics when partnering with public universities and colleges all too eager to subsidize privatize-able research and development (R&D).
- GAFAM operate PACS such as [Google NetPAC](#) and the [Microsoft Political Action Committee](#) to donate to parties and political candidates. Despite Silicon Valley's liberal brand image, GAFAM PACS spread their political monies around both sides of the aisle, and in 2019, they gave nearly [equally](#) to Democrats and Republicans. From 2015 to 2018, GAFAM spent over [half a billion](#) dollars cajoling Congress-persons to ensure that the State's governmental framework for the digital age synced with their own.
- GAFAM run a ["revolving door"](#) between themselves and the US State that empowers corporate outsiders to become political insiders and vice versa. As this door [spins](#), GAFAM's private proxies move in and out of public policy-shaping positions and craft and enforce digital age policy. In 2017–2018, 93 out of 113 Alphabet-Google lobbyists had worked for the US State. In that same period, 76 out of 114 of Amazon's and 42 out of 50 of Facebook's lobbyists had done the same. In the first three months of 2019, nearly 75% of the 238 lobbyists for Big Tech had formerly been employed by the State or political officials.
- GAFAM are in the business of shaping legislative proposals put before the US Congress. In 2019, Facebook tried to shape at least 26 of these Bills, including the "Save the Internet Act" (H.R.1644), the "National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020" (S.1790), and "United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement Implementation Act" (S.3052). In that same year, Amazon paid to shape 81 Bills, such as the "Internet of Things Cybersecurity Improvement Act" (S.734), the

“Keep Big Tech out of Finance Act” (H.R.4813), and the “AI in Government Act of 2020” (H.R.2575). In the first half of 2020, GAFAM spent [\\$20 million](#) to try to steer coronavirus relief legislation, perhaps to ensure their pandemic pledge would pay dividends via State procurement contracts to build critical infrastructure.

- For the past decade, GAFAM have been a top contributor to Democratic presidential campaigns, and in 2020, they put at least [\\$10 million](#) behind Joe Biden’s election, hoping to win the favor of the new US president. In the 2020 election cycle, rich white men such as Microsoft board member Reid Hoffman, Amazon general counsel David Zapolsky and former Google CEO Eric Schmidt donated a total [\\$16 million](#) to Democrat-related groups and causes. The Biden and Trump campaign teams bought about \$158 million worth of algorithmically targeted political ads from Facebook in 2020, and Biden spent over \$8 million more than Trump for this service. Appropriately, Biden’s [political transition team](#) includes at least eight former GAFAM employees, and they will ask for and mostly likely get a GAFAM-friendly presidency.

Evidently, GAFAM have enormous means with which to effectively influence State decision-making. While GAFAM are not Government, GAFAM shape State decision-making by indirectly paying or directly pressuring political officials to translate their private interests into public legislative, policy and regulatory outcomes. Frequently and perhaps as expected, GAFAM get what they want from the State. This is indicated by the US State’s advancement of GAFAM’s [digital trade interests](#) around the world, doling out of massive [tax breaks](#) and billions in [subsidies](#) and [hundreds of procurement contracts](#) with the Department of Defense (DOD), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and tolerance for massive [tax loopholes](#) that save GAFAM billions. In the US, concentrated economic and political power go hand in glove, and the State’s embrace of GAFAM’s private interests over the public good [corrupts democracy](#).

GAFAM’s relational power: Governing with coercion and persuasion

Accounting for GAFAM’s capitalist and State power is vital to any substantive understanding of GAFAM’s *structural power* in society, but this macro-level political economic assessment can be supplemented with micro-level interrogations of GAFAM’s *power relations* with subjects. While a structural approach to power takes power to be the ownership and control of capital and the influence of the major decisions the State makes for all of society, a relational approach takes power to be a dynamic relationship between at least two or more entities, with one of those willfully acting to try get the other to act in ways that align with their strategic goal. As [Michel Foucault](#) famously put it, “The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of [a subject’s] conduct and

putting in order the possible outcome.” For Foucault, power was basically tantamount to the effective governance of subjects, or, an entity’s capacity to structure “the possible field of action of others” and direct “the conduct of [free] individuals or of groups” toward a desired end.

This relational approach to power supplements rather than replaces a structural approach, and this approach is helpful to conceptualizing GAFAM as being in the business of “governmentality.” When GAFAM govern, these corporations structure the field of action of subjects and motivate subjects to do what they might or might not have done of their own volition. Each day, these corporations strategize to guide the conduct of individual and large groups of subjects (e.g., the politicians they lobby, the companies they do business with, the workers they employ, the consumers they sell to, the citizens their conduct in democracy impacts, and the “users” of their goods and services) toward ends that they choose (e.g., policy outcomes, repeat and return clientele, productivity, brand loyalty, contented or compliant publics, and updated user data profiles).

GAFAM’s power relations are not bound by the Southern San Francisco Bay region of California (e.g., in “Silicon Valley”), centralized in the headquarters of Google, Amazon or Facebook, or contained within the US Federal government’s executive-level decision-making institutions. Nor are GAFAM’s power relations hidden “behind closed doors” in some shadowy corporate or State agency. Rather, a relational approach to GAFAM’s power relations takes them to be diffuse, in motion and observable all the time within and across every place or space where GAFAM interact with subjects (e.g., households, factories, warehouses, shopping malls, streets, computers, smartphones, TV sets, as well as in planes, automobiles, trains, ships, and the Internet and Web). While Foucault’s notion of governmentality emphasized the willing and consensual participation of subjects in an asymmetrical power relationship, [Max Weber](#) conceived of power as the “probability that one actor within a social relationship will be able to carry out their will *despite resistance*, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests.” Relatedly, GAFAM may guide subjects’ conduct in concordance with ends they decide, within and across multiple places and spaces, using a combination of positive and negative techniques, or, tactics of persuasion and coercion.

A persuasive power relationship typically involves one entity motivating one or more subjects to identify with and do as it wants them to do with help from moral authority (e.g., “follow our lead because we are good and right”) and positive incentives (e.g., “do this and get that in return”). From the late 19th century forward, corporations have tried to make themselves look virtuous with help from experts in public relations (PR) and [spin](#), and today, GAFAM know that it is easier to do as they like when subjects like them. For example, in response to the recent “[tech-lash](#)”, GAFAM ratcheted up [PR](#) and [spin](#) oriented to producing images of themselves as upstanding corporate citizens and

shining beacons of [corporate social responsibility](#) (CSR). Also, their philanthropic initiatives and charitable donations make them look good, and let them enjoy [big tax breaks](#). GAFAM's perception management regimen seems to be paying off: these corporations are lauded by Forbes 2020's [study](#) of the "The World's Most Valuable Brands" and cheered by the [Interbrand Best Global Brands 2020](#) as having the world's most recognizable, appealing and engaging brands.

GAFAM's governance of people's perception of their brand identities and actions in society is coupled with efforts to try to persuade the subjects that use their sites and services to conduct themselves in accordance with rules they decide. GAFAM "[impose rules](#)" upon the interactive agency and expression of the subjects "logged in" to and using the Internet sites and services they own and (try to) control. Yet, GAFAM's imposition of rules is established through a formal relationship of consent between GAFAM and subjects, even when that consent is [elicited](#) through a manipulative or dubious mechanism (e.g., with or without genuinely "informed" consent). GAFAM do not let their subjects (constituted as "users") use their sites and services without first inviting and requiring their users to freely click "I agree" or "I accept" to "terms of service" and "community guidelines" that rationalize appropriate and inappropriate communicative conduct and expression. GAFAM decide what is and is not allowed or permitted on their platforms, but they try to get their users to take responsibility for their own conduct, and the conduct of other users as well. And behind the sites and screens, GAFAM's HR regimes [incentivize](#) workers to identify with corporations, internalize a branded way of being, and self-optimize their own productivity.

A coercive power relationship usually entails one entity motivating and getting one or more other subjects to conduct themselves as it wants them to by making threats (e.g., "act in this way that we've determined to be good or right, or else there will be consequences") and delivering punishments (e.g., "you acted in a way that subverted the action we prescribed, and this is the penalty for your offense"). In the case of GAFAM, these corporations employ *coercive tactics* such as threats and punishments to try to ensure that all those subjects they interact and transact with play by and obey the rules of their game. For example, Amazon [threatened](#) to cancel the building of its headquarters in New York City unless New York State gave it \$3 billion in public subsidies. Apple [threatened](#) to terminate Epic Game's membership in the Apple Developer Program (and cut off Epic's access to all iOS and Mac developer software) for sneaking a new payment application into the Battle Royale game *Fortnite*, and then punished Epic Games by banning this app from the App Store. Apple also [punishes](#) foreign manufacturers of Apple devices by cancelling contracts or ceasing business relations when they fail to follow Apple's Supplier Code of Conduct. Google has used threats to [deter workers from unionizing](#) and reporting [sexual harassment](#), and Google [punishes](#) website companies whose content conflicts with the platform's advertising

model. GAFAM's coercive tactics may effectively achieve the ends to which they are put but may also result in discontent and backlash, creating an additional governmental challenge.

Conclusion: The American empire endures in the digital age

To get at the essence of GAFAM's power, this essay's structural-relational framework probed GAFAM's ownership and control of resources, and use of these to influence State decisions, and interrogated GAFAM's governance of subjects using techniques of persuasion and coercion. In the last instance, the more capital resources GAFAM own and control, the more easily they can coordinate campaigns to influence the big decisions the State makes for everyone else. The more GAFAM's interests become State and national interests, the easier it is for GAFAM to govern, to structure the social field and motivate subjects to freely think and do as these behemoths wish. GAFAM's structural and relational power extends to the international or "global" field as well.

All of history's Empires have gone to great lengths to shape and superintend the global communications, technology and media system. In the context of a rising China, the [American Empire](#) endures, and the GAFAM have become especially significant to this Empire's economic, military and cultural-ideological power. Apropos the new [digital media imperialism](#), the US State and GAFAM are aligning, even integrating, to protect and promote a global order in which a US-centered global capitalism still rules, over which the US security State presides, and wherein American digital media-culture is the most ubiquitous and popular. GAFAM's platforms, products and services largely bolster neoliberal ways of being and doing, boost the US military's cyber-war arsenal, and are a boon to the US State's planetary propaganda campaigns and surveillance practices. Meanwhile, Canada and other US proxy States embrace American digital policy prescriptions and acquiesce to GAFAM's market primacy, seeing these as synonymous with their own national "interest."

For Californian-ideology soaked technophiles and Silicon Valley brand boosters, the "digital age" is often imagined to be a "revolutionary" rupture from the past. Yet, GAFAM have not made a radically new and different type of society, nor a better society, not in the US, nor globally. Instead, they preside over a society in which long standing inequities and oppressions are being intensified. Criticisms of GAFAM's power mount from multitudinous sources and sites. But the world is still very far away from an emancipatory internationalist politics that counters, let alone contests, GAFAM's ever growing structural and relational power in the US and across the globe.

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