



2021: A Year of Reckoning

No doubt about it: last year was a real mess all around. Much labor in 2021 will be devoted to clean up after the disasters, make things work right again, and prevent those nightmares from ever repeating.

This will not be easy, not least because so many of the conflicts resulting in the massive failures of last year are still in dispute. Many of the basic issues had been slowly building for years or decades, but the crises of recent times have brought them into high definition with an urgency unknown before.

This is particularly true in the technology sector, where corporate giants, including **Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft**, must now grapple with the consequences of their own ruthless global rivalry for users, money, and influence.

Brought to this point by their own greed for the bottom line, Big Tech faces a widespread revolt from those they supposedly serve around the world. How it will play out is unforeseeable, but the problems clearly show why, despite these firms' immense wealth, unmatched power, and huge investments in coddling users, many people are so furious at them.

In this issue, we will briefly preview the ongoing conflicts and some of the reasons for them.

The struggle of all against all

There is a lot more than a tug-of-war between corporate behemoths and unhappy users here. Big Tech companies are fighting each other as well as users and states, which have been locked in their own struggles with other nations for ages. And each is using the others and being used by them too.

This has all taken place in the middle of a deadly global plague, which greatly adds to the general strain. **Covid** has shown the vast inequality of wealth both between and within nations, making the digital divide much more serious and unfair. Social restrictions have made major online retailers like Amazon essential lifelines for many as well as making Facebook the sole source of news for those who, under lockdown, have thoughtlessly bought into conspiracy theories, absurd lies, and cancel culture.

Meanwhile, autocratic countries like China have become even more repressive and all-seeing in their attempts to suppress the pestilence, while other nations, including the US, have had violent struggles over individual freedoms versus the common good.

The result is nothing less than **pandemonium** – a general, worldwide online riot, feeding insecurity and ramping up historic conflicts between nations. Yet, while the US intently monitored net activity to ensure the presidential election stayed free from outside interference by the Russians and others, those same old foes freely rummaged through American computer networks to spy on them.

The hack, called **SolarWinds** after the software company that was an early target, was different in a few crucial ways. First, it used a vulnerability widely known since Snowden's leaks, of slipping malware inside a trusted upstream supplier. Plus, the hack seems to have been strictly for espionage rather than sabotage or extortion. Finally, it was accidentally found by a security firm and not the government, despite all the millions spent on cybersecurity.

The extent of the penetration, its purpose, and whether it is really over are still completely unknown. Unfortunately, there's no way to be sure the infection is cleaned out unless *all* the hardware and software are replaced, which is far too expensive to be realistic. What it undoubtedly means, however, is that the undeclared war in cyberspace is heating up.

Ever since the **Stuxnet virus** crippled Iran's atomic centrifuges, the malware to physically destroy industrial equipment has been available to hackers. Russia took down parts of Ukraine's **power grid** twice, in the winter of 2014 and the one after, and might be responsible for an attack trying to **poison** the water supply in Florida during the 2020 election.

Publicly, President Obama minimized Russia's hacking interference before the 2016 election. But due to fears that they already placed **cyberweapons** throughout our electrical infrastructure, he secretly ordered US agencies to do the same to the Russians.

There's little doubt that the US has responded in kind by now and infiltrated the systems of our adversaries. We are now undoubtedly locked in a cyberspace **Cold War** standoff just like the nuclear one. This showdown may even be more dangerous, for unlike nukes, which can be attributable, online attackers are much harder to identify accurately.

Firewalls are rising online around the planet as governments try to protect themselves from direct attack, control the flow of unwelcome information to their people and grab as much as possible of the loot made by Big Tech. The worldwide internet is slowly but surely **splintering** into national and regional networks even as the planet splits into armed camps.

When corporate kingdoms clash

Yet such divisions are not the sole fault of paranoid authoritarian regimes. Another factor is the nearly unimaginable piles of cash and influence of the tech firms and the billionaires who run them. Estimates indicate that the 664 billionaires in this country are **worth \$4.2 trillion – \$1.3 trillion** made from profits during the pandemic alone. Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, for instance, made *\$41 billion*.

Jeff Bezos, who recently **stepped down** from Amazon to compete with Elon Musk for the title of richest person in the world like a Bond-villain, made *\$73.6 billion* during the lockdown. This, while his company cynically **fights unions** and unending exposés of harsh warehouse conditions. And the secretive company pays very little **income taxes** – in 2018 likely none at all – by using every tax dodge.

The CEOs of all these multinational corporations maintain that they are fostering innovation, but they constantly choke off new ideas to protect their core technologies. Microsoft began the widespread practice of buying out small potential competitors, but Apple totally **perfected** it, purchasing **another company** every 3 or 4 weeks. Google does much the same, buying and then regularly throttling and tossing out **acquisitions** and new features that do not fit into their corporate strategy. But it's Amazon that is now the most notorious, accused of stealing data from **third-party sellers** it hosts on its site to make its own versions of products that sell for less. The internet's robber barons of the 21st century seem to be no better than the industrial ones of the 19th.

Unquestionably, many people have suffered from these wasteful practices. Dreamers have been crushed; promising, maybe even revolutionary, ideas have been discarded for threatening the monopolist money-makers; small new start-ups and respected establishments which could not stand up to their unfair competitive advantages, have been buried.

Among the greatest sufferers are newspaper publishers and journalists. Google has made a neat fortune from linking to stories, which the company says leads readers to the publications, but the news industry claims it shortchanges them of revenue.

Likewise, Facebook claims that listing news, fake or otherwise, in its news feed just makes all points of view freely available. But **experiments** have shown the algorithms that select stories are weighted. Despite Facebook's and Google's saying they only want to share information, the fact is their systems are carefully designed to keep eyeballs on their sites, to absorb data from users and make money off them.

Likewise, Apple's claims to protect user privacy come at the price of committing to a **closed system**, whose products cannot be modified or fixed by outsiders. Much of their effort has always seemed to be directed at keeping their products incompatible with those of their longtime rival, Microsoft.

Europe leads the charge

Among governmental institutions, the European Union was the first to rise to the challenge posed by the tech giants. They have passed laws to protect the data of their citizens and news services and the **right to repair**. With their size and influence, the measures they adopt will inevitably affect the entire globe.

And they are not alone. Australia recently tried to charge Facebook for using news feeds from Down Under. When the company showed its might by removing content and links, Australia **backed down** fast, settling for a vague promise of an agreement.

The US has belatedly tried to rein in Big Tech also, **summoning** the CEOs time after time to explain their actions to Congress without much progress. Yet the companies are slowly repositioning. Google just **announced** it is phasing out third-party tracking around the internet in its **competition** with Facebook. Meanwhile, Apple and Facebook, long **feuding** over privacy issues, might soon wind up in court. Apple wants to give its users the ability to opt out of Facebook tracking, which would directly cut into the social media giant's advertising revenue.

Stay tuned. It's going to be interesting.



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