

# Help or Hindrance: Big Tech's Impact on Your Business



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Welcome to Thrive, a Paychex business podcast where you'll hear timely insights to help you navigate marketplace dynamics and propel your business forward. Here's your host, Gene Marks.

**Gene Marks:**

Hey everybody, and welcome. This is Gene Marks talking. And, you're about to listen to a conversation that I had with Gilad Edelman, who covers technology and politics for WIRED magazine. He's been writing for WIRED for a number of years now. And basically, his deal is the overlapping behind Big Tech and government. We're talking Facebook, Google, Amazon, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube. All of these big platforms are platforms that you and I rely on to run our businesses. There are freelancers out there that get their entire livelihoods from operating on some of these platforms. And there are a lot of other of us that, that generate leads and new work by advertising on these platforms.

**Gene Marks:**

So, you know, there are rules that we have to follow, and there are questions that need to be answered. Questions about privacy, questions about, are these platforms just getting too big and monopolistic? Questions about the rise of Amazon as a search engine giant, and whether or not we should be advertising there versus just advertising on Google. And, the fact that we can only advertise on Google is a little frustrating for a lot of business owners. So, Gilad covers all of this. And, our conversation is going to be about what he recommends, how he feels the impact of these Big Tech companies are having on small businesses. And also where he thinks some of this stuff is going in the years to come. He'll do his best to make some predictions for us. So again, if you're in the online world, if you've got activity on Google, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, all this affects you. So, to know the latest stuff that's going on and where things are heading, I think you'll enjoy this conversation very much. So, we'll be back in just a minute.

**Gene Marks:**

All right, everybody. Thanks for joining me. I'm really happy to be here with Gilad. We're going to be talking about all sorts of things are affecting your business from a social media privacy standpoint. That is what he covers, the political aspects of technology. But before we even get in there, so Gilad, thanks for joining me. Tell me a little bit about your background and how you ended up at WIRED.

**Gilad Edelman:**

Sure. So, like a lot of people who don't know what to do with their lives, I went to law school before getting into journalism. And, realized pretty quickly I did not want to be a lawyer. So, what did I want to do? Well, I always had aspired to be a journalist, but didn't know how to start. And, the fear of spending my life instead writing legal motions was the kick in the pants I needed. So, after law school, I freelanced for a bit, and then I got a job at a small Washington DC magazine called Washington Monthly, which is this very wonky, policy-oriented magazine. And while I was there, I edited and wrote a few stories about Big Tech.

**Gene Marks:**

Right.

**Gilad Edelman:**

And, we were very interested in antitrust and monopoly. So, that's where the interests converged. And so, then from there, I got hired by WIRED. My title is politics editor, but I end up writing about all the, all the places where the tech industry intersects with concerns that we might think of as more political or government related, so things like privacy, and monopoly power, and online free speech. And so, every once in a while, I feel like I'm getting a little bit of value out of the \$150,000 or whatever that I paid for the law degree, but only —

**Gene Marks:**

And still paying.

**Gilad Edelman:**

Yes, I am. Yeah.

**Gene Marks:**

Well, that's good. So obviously, you've got a political background, you've got a bit of a legal background as well. And, obviously politics and technology had been so overlapping of late. Earlier this year, Parler, which was your right-of-center social media site, kind of like Twitter, was taken down. It was operating on Amazon Web Services, which is the largest hosting service, I think, in the world. And, it was taken down for various reasons. Amazon said that it was violating their rules and it was a big controversial thing. It was very highly politicized. I wrote about it actually in "The Hill." And I actually talked about it. I had this back and forth with Maria Bartiromo — of all people — on Fox Business about-

**Gilad Edelman:**

Wow.

**Gene Marks:**

... Yeah. I mean, my point of view as a business owner is — forget about politics, this is a real lesson for business owners themselves. In other words, the social media platforms that we're operating on, these are not utilities. They're not publicly owned, quasi-governmental organizations, they're private corporations, and we have to abide by those rules. I mean, what are your thoughts on that?

**Gilad Edelman:**

It's really complicated, what you just said packed a lot of complexity. And so, so ...

**Gene Marks:**

Break it down.

**Gilad Edelman:**

... in the Parler story, it wasn't just Amazon Web Services. What made it even more interesting is that also the Google and Apple app stores ...

**Gene Marks:**

Yes.

**Gilad Edelman:**

... kicked Parler off. And, you know what? I should say, I don't remember if they even had an Android app, but I do know that Apple kicked them out of the App Store, and that was a death sentence, because they were a social media app in 2021 ... It's mobile, right?

**Gene Marks:**

Yes.

**Gilad Edelman:**

Very few people are accessing that on their desktop. So, what this episode revealed was ... There's a lot of, there already was a lot of controversy over the content moderations that the social networks were doing themselves. So, Twitter, Facebook — what do they allow? And Parler was controversial for allowing more of it. It doesn't advertise itself as a conservative network. It advertises itself as a free speech network, where they're going to be much more hands-off with what you're allowed to post. And what this controversy, which took place in the aftermath of the January 6th rioting at the Capitol, where there was just a widespread sense of, "Somebody's got to do something about this," what this did, was it pushed that controversy one step further — I can't remember if it's up the stack, or down the stack — because I'm a writer, not a technologist.

**Gene Marks:**

Right.

**Gilad Edelman:**

Right? It took the decision making up from the level of the social media platforms themselves to the technological infrastructure that they rely on to reach customers or users. And so, that includes Amazon's cloud service, but it also includes the companies that control the distribution of apps, Apple.

**Gene Marks:**

Right.

**Gilad Edelman:**

So, to your question, do I agree that the companies that run these platforms need to be able to enforce their own rules? Yes. Stated at that degree of generality? Yes. But I think there are two things that make it a little bit more complicated. One is that, there's very little ... it's not clear to me what guardrails exist to make sure they're enforcing those rules fairly or consistently. And, I think in the case of Parler itself ... you know, I was on the phone with their executives when this was happening and they felt very persecuted, and the leadership of the company at the time was colorful. But I don't think they were completely making that up, because I think, how many apps in the App Store do you think Apple and Google, or Amazon for that matter ... You really think that they've got a team of people spending, you know wading through all the terms of service and seeing how they're applied? I don't think so, right? I think the crisis happens and they respond to the crisis.

**Gilad Edelman:**

So, issue one, I would say is consistency and fairness. And right now, I think it's kind of like scout's honor. And then, I'm sorry this is such a long answer, but just the —

**Gene Marks:**

No, keep going. That's great.

**Gilad Edelman:**

– the last thing that I'll say is, I agree with you these are not public utilities. However, it is the case that, a very small number of companies — especially when it comes to app distribution — a very small number of companies have government-like power to determine who can access the market. And in those circumstances, it is fair to say that you might need different rules in markets that are so concentrated, than you would if there were 20 cloud hosting providers and 20 app stores.

**Gene Marks:**

What do you think? If you're running a business and say, you're really dependent on a social media platform like a Facebook, like an OnlyFans, and then, the rules change. I mean, what impact does that have on freelancers, entrepreneurs, small businesses that rely on those platforms for their livelihoods? What advice would you have for those business owners?

**Gilad Edelman:**

Have a backup plan. This is something that has hit, that hits my business hard. It's been well documented how a lot of media organizations made these big bets on different platforms, especially Facebook.

**Gene Marks:**

Yeah.

**Gilad Edelman:**

And, the messiest version of this was the famous pivot to video, where a lot of publications decided that the big thing to do was create video content for Facebook. And then, one, one reason that unraveled is it turns out that Facebook had been — accidentally they say — wildly inflating the metrics on how those videos were performing. And the bottom really dropped out of that business strategy. But, this cost people jobs, you know? Writers were fired to make room on the payroll for video editors.

**Gene Marks:**

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Gilad Edelman:**

So, that's an example for my business. It does feel like you have to ... I mean, I'll just talk about what's going on in journalism, because that's the business that I know a little bit.

**Gene Marks:**

Sure.

**Gilad Edelman:**

One trend you are seeing, very broadly across the business, is a push to be, to get more revenue from subscriptions, and have more direct economic transactions with audience, and also sponsors than before to ... And one reason for that is to minimize our reliance on these intermediary platforms.

**Gene Marks:**

Right.

**Gilad Edelman:**

It's a little bit more complicated if you're somebody whose line of work didn't even exist until the platforms, right? There's people who make a living on YouTube.

**Gene Marks:**

Right.

**Gilad Edelman:**

And, if YouTube went away, or kicked them off, there's no, there really is no alternative to that.

**Gene Marks:**

Right.

**Gilad Edelman:**

And so, yeah, I guess for that person, my advice would be you know, marry someone with a steady job.

**Gene Marks:**

That's exactly right. Or cozy up to your rich uncle. Because I do think about freelancers that do rely on sites — YouTube is a perfect example. Because you're right, if YouTube changed its rules of engagement, or if it bans YouTube creators — and it has in the past based on their behavior. And like you just said, the rules that they have, sometimes they're applied inconsistently, but you had mentioned, who knows if they have enough resources to really fairly apply those rules across all their users, I mean, right? They have billions of users. It's kind of tough for one company to monitor that. You could be set up for a big problem with your business if you are just reliant on that stream of revenue for your business.

**Gilad Edelman:**

Definitely. I mean, one of the big, underappreciated trends, I think, of the current internet economy is that, a lot of it is just a customer service problem. The biggest platforms are so big that they ... And I apologize for the background noise here.

**Gene Marks:**

That's okay.

**Gilad Edelman:**

The big platforms are so big, and so successful, and have so many users that they ... They might say, they can't. The truth is no one is *making* them provide the resources that you would need to reach the help desk.

**Gene Marks:**

Yes.

**Gilad Edelman:**

So, if you're having a problem with YouTube, with your YouTube channel, or getting Google Ads approved for your small business, unless you're a real big fish, you might just not really be able to talk to anyone who's in any position to help you resolve the problem. And, that's because of this combination of, they have so many users that they try to automate as much as possible. But then also, because they don't face competition, they don't really have to worry about, this YouTube creator's fed up, so he's going to take his talents to that other really big viable video platform. So, they don't have to cater quite as hard, or cater quite as attentively, I suppose, to people's complaints.

**Gene Marks:**

Now, you mentioned YouTube, which we've been talking about, which is owned by Google. Gilad, do you think Google is a monopoly?

**Gilad Edelman:**

So, yes. But we should unpack what that even means.

**Gene Marks:**

Okay.

**Gilad Edelman:**

A few points. First, it's good to keep in mind that for the purposes of antitrust law ... "Monopoly" is an unfortunate word, because everybody knows mono means one, but you don't have to literally be the only company in a market to be a monopoly for legal purposes. That's just one thing to keep in mind.

**Gene Marks:**

Okay.

**Gilad Edelman:**

Google is such an interesting case, because they dominate several industries simultaneously. And, that presents its own competition problem. But it's also helpful to try to pull apart the different lines of business Google's in. So, the easiest one is search. Google, any way you want to slice it, obviously monopolizes search, or you could describe it as the market for search advertising, but we're talking about 90% market share.

**Gene Marks:**

Right.

**Gilad Edelman:**

And, that's at the heart of Google's business. I mean, it's such a complicated company, but most of the money still today comes from search advertising. And so, that is just a really obvious one. And that being said, Google also has arguably monopoly-level shares of at least two other markets. So, mobile operating systems: Android is the most popular globally, and it's a little bit less than half the market in the United States. So, you could say that it and Apple have a duopoly. But, I don't think that should make us feel great.

**Gene Marks:**

Right.

**Gilad Edelman:**

It's significant that they both have been taking the exact same 30% cut of in-app purchases. Right? That's an odd coincidence, if this was a market with real competition. No one thought, "Hey, what if we do 29%?" So, that's two, right? So, we've got search, and we've got mobile operating systems. And then, the third area would be advertising on the open web. And this is something that I'm sure your listeners have some familiarity with, but the average person I don't think understands that the architecture of how ads are served everywhere on the web, that's not a social media platform, Google is by far the dominant player there. And, there's been some really interesting academic work pointing out that, because Google controls both the buy side, and the sell side, and the exchange of online ads ...

**Gene Marks:**

Yeah.

**Gilad Edelman:**

... that it's, if you analyze this in terms of securities law, you'd realize this is an absolutely scandalous set of state of affairs.

**Gene Marks:**

Yeah. I have to say, I was just talking about this with another social media expert on a previous episode that we did. And so, Gilad as a small business owner myself, if I want to advertise on Google, first of all, my choice is to advertise online. You're right, it's just Google. Secondly, if I'm going to spend a thousand dollars in advertising, first of all, I'm going to be buried by the bigger advertisers who, like you said earlier, they're going to get more of the customer service. But more importantly, I don't understand — and I talk to clients about this too — I don't understand how I can give Google a thousand dollars of my money, and they

come back to me, and report to me what clicks there were that ate up that budget. It's not coming from an outside source –

**Gilad Edelman:**

Right.

**Gene Marks:**

– or independently. You know what I mean? It's like, you're giving money to the lion, and the lion is saying, "Yeah, I spent your money wisely." You know what I mean? You don't even really have any outside authentication as to what's eating up that budget. And, when you cover Google, when you cover the concerns that people have about a company like that, don't you think it pushes small businesses? It just makes this a really difficult option for us to even consider for online advertising, if anything else?

**Gilad Edelman:**

Absolutely. I mean, I think that's a really great point. There's this saying, "The scandal isn't what's illegal, it's what's legal."

**Gene Marks:**

Yeah.

**Gilad Edelman:**

And, I have that thought so often when it comes to, how the biggest tech companies operate, because they just, they were born in a moment where the government had sort of decided not to really regulate very much. And look at these wonderful, valuable companies. And now, they've matured and they're allowed to do a lot of stuff that when you step back and just describe, it seems kind of crazy. I think, the issue of how this stuff affects small business is really interesting, and it's really complicated. On the one hand, Google and Facebook will say, "Our advertising tools are an absolute boon to small businesses, because it's so much cheaper."

**Gene Marks:**

Right.

**Gilad Edelman:**

You have a startup that you're running out of your home. You can't afford TV advertising. So, it's so cheap, you just set up your own little shop here with Google search ads, or Facebook, or Instagram direct response ads. And, you can find small business owners who have a lot of success with that. I'm sure you have a lot of listeners, who are saying to themselves right now, "Yeah. I ran an ad campaign on Instagram, and it worked great." At the same time however, small business — if we zoom out a little bit — is not doing great. It's not like the rise of Facebook and Google as ad platforms have coincided with a period of increased startup creation. In fact, it's the opposite. At best, it seems to be just basically stagnant. If you look at the statistics compiled by the federal government, you would think that the introduction of these wonderful tools for small business development — meaning Google and Facebook ads — you would expect that to coincide with more small business creation, and –

**Gene Marks:**

Sure.

**Gilad Edelman:**

And it doesn't. And, I can't prove to you what that means, but what it makes me think is that yeah, you can find a lot of success stories, you can also find a lot of failure stories, which has been true for as long as people have been starting businesses. But, it should make you question whether these platforms are really

net advances, because you have to ask, "Well, what would the alternate world look like if you didn't have these intermediary, advertising platforms sitting in between small businesses and customers?"

**Gene Marks:**

Sure. So, you cover a lot of Big Tech. I haven't seen .... I didn't go back that far in your writings, but I wasn't seeing anything specifically being written about Amazon. And, I mean, Amazon is part of this Big Tech crowd and the reason why I bring them up is, have you given thought or, again, from a small business owner standpoint, you mentioned before about when you're doing searching online, the statistics are also showing that, when people are searching to buy something or products, rather than going to Google, they use Amazon as their search engine. And, Amazon is having a growing-by-leaps-and-bounds advertising business, specifically for their smaller merchants, but obviously some of bigger ones as well. Do you think that Amazon is going to give Google, Facebook a run for their money? Actually provide that level of choice maybe instead of a duopoly, it's a three-opoly?

**Gilad Edelman:**

I mean, yeah. I've been thinking about this a lot lately, actually. A lot, a lot, because I just moved. And I've been buying a lot of stuff and I don't –

**Gene Marks:**

You go right to Amazon.

**Gilad Edelman:**

– I don't do all my shopping online. And, I'm a niche consumer who will do weird things like go to the actual website of the product that I'm buying, and order it from them. Even though, it's going to take longer to ship. Because I'm too aware of the cut that I otherwise would be paying to an e-commerce site for no reason. It rhymes with, let's say, Jamazon. But, so anyway, one thing that I've noticed — and I think everyone has had this experience lately — is you could type in a specific product, and what are the top results on Amazon?

**Gene Marks:**

Right.

**Gilad Edelman:**

Not that product. They sell it, but you have to scroll past a full page of ads. And then, even after you get past the ads, you might not be seeing the thing you're searching for. Because, over the years... I was just talking about this yesterday. Amazon is an e-commerce site, right? It is a website where you go to buy things. You would think that the process of finding the thing you're looking for would be core to the UX on that site. And it's not anymore. Right? Why is that? Well, it must be because Amazon makes more money by showing you things that you weren't looking for.

**Gene Marks:**

Yeah.

**Gilad Edelman:**

Whether it's ads, that's the primary category ...

**Gene Marks:**

Right.

**Gilad Edelman:**

... or, just other products that for some reason are better for Amazon to sell you. And this to me — to go back to the question of monopoly power — one way that the law and economics fields define monopoly



power is, when you're so powerful that you can do things that are bad for the customer and not suffer any consequences. And, I don't think there is a clearer example. They've made it really hard to find the thing you're looking for. And it's a shopping site. That tells you, that they have so much power that they're not worried about customers going somewhere else to find what they're looking for.

**Gene Marks:**

Well, it also tells me as well, if I'm searching for squash balls, because I play squash ... And the same thing, I'll put that into Google, it's a full page of Amazon ads of other things, which tells me that Amazon has got the resources, and the power, the money, to just dominate the keywords on anything related to this in Google. I mean, any small company that's selling squash balls, they won't even be anywhere near the first two pages because big brands like Amazon dominate and push them out.

**Gilad Edelman:**

Right. And these are called — you've heard the phrase "barriers to entry." This is a kind of barrier to entry, right?

**Gene Marks:**

Yeah.

**Gilad Edelman:**

— a company that's doing so well can devote resources to protecting its competitive advantage. And I mean, just to go back, you brought up the really important point about, when you said the duopoly giving way to a third competitor, when it comes to the digital advertising market, absolutely. For years, it was accurate to say, Facebook and Google account for more than 90% of ... excuse me, it was like 99% of all growth in online advertising. It was something insane.

**Gene Marks:**

Right.

**Gilad Edelman:**

In the past few years, you have to, you know, you get a note from your editor and Amazon, because Amazon has broken into this market. And that's reflected in the experience of being someone who shops on Amazon, because — think about it, you're seeing all these ads, Amazon's making more money off ads, "Oh, those two things go together." So, why has Amazon been able to have this meteoric growth in its ad revenue? It seems to be the case — it certainly seems to be the case to the Attorneys General of the various United States who are suing Amazon — that it just has this gatekeeper power. And, I mean, it's very similar to having the experience of a small business and you have to pay for Google search ad, you have to pay for your own brand name, you have to buy those keyword searches.

**Gene Marks:**

It's a keyword, right, for your own company.

**Gilad Edelman:**

For your own company. Because you're worried about if people search for, to keep it in squash, if they're searching for—

**Gene Marks:**

Squash racket.

**Gilad Edelman:**

Who makes squash rackets?

**Gene Marks:**

Shoot, Harrow.

**Gilad Edelman:**

Yeah. They're searching for Harrow, like Spalding racket is going to have bought that search term and come up first.

**Gene Marks:**

Right.

**Gilad Edelman:**

So, now the same thing's happening on Amazon, right? Amazon has done a really effective job at becoming an indispensable part of a business strategy for so many merchants. This isn't universally true, but it is broadly true, that if you don't have access to Amazon, you're done. So, in that situation, I think there's a lot of businesses out there that just feel like they *have to pay* for Amazon ads, because now they know the organic result's going to be buried.

**Gene Marks:**

Right.

**Gilad Edelman:**

And that— I mean, gosh, just as a person who buys stuff online — that just seems unfair.

**Gene Marks:**

It does. It does. So, listen, you cover this for a living, and you overlap between the political side of this and obviously, the technology side. So, where do you think this is heading, Gilad? I mean, it seems like neither the Democrats or the Republicans are crazy about Big Tech, although Big Tech funds so many of their campaigns. The public seems to be in mostly agreement. Although we love Amazon, we love searching on Google. I mean, everybody understands all the benefits of these great platforms, but we also recognize that these companies really seem to have a little bit too much power. When I can be talking about playing squash in front of my Amazon Alexa, and then start getting fed ads for squash rackets on Instagram, there's something really weird going on here. So, where do you think this is heading? Do you foresee a breakup of these large technology companies? Because this will impact small businesses.

**Gilad Edelman:**

It absolutely will impact small businesses. I hate trying to make predictions.

**Gene Marks:**

Understood.

**Gilad Edelman:**

It's always been a safe, conservative investment to bet against government fixing problems, and especially, when that involves regulating really valuable industries.

**Gene Marks:**

Sure.

**Gilad Edelman:**

So, if you're close to retirement, that's probably the bet that I would make. But, there is a lot of action, there's a lot of action going on and it's coming from three distinct sources within the United States, and then, plus a lot of activity going on internationally. First, you have Congress. So, there is real bipartisan interest in passing new antitrust laws. I'm not super bullish on certainly any aggressive antitrust legislation making it through, because we see in Congress, the Republican party is so obstructionist that Congress

can't even agree to pay back America's existing debts. So, it's a dreary thing to pin one's hopes on. So, maybe we'll see some decent legislation come through. I don't know.

**Gene Marks:**

Nothing.

**Gilad Edelman:**

It's certainly something that The White House is interested in and you've got Democrats and Republicans, who, especially in the House, who are sincerely interested in fixing some of these issues. Okay. You've got that. Then you've got lawsuits by the dozen.

**Gene Marks:**

Right.

**Gilad Edelman:**

Against Google, against Facebook, against Amazon, against Apple. Well, Apple — it's been a civil lawsuit brought by Epic, the gaming company — but we know that there's government lawsuits waiting to be sprung. And, these lawsuits face an uphill battle, because the federal judiciary, the doctrine of antitrust law has, since the 1970s, become increasingly favorable to monopolists, essentially. Just long story short: it's just gotten really hard to win an antitrust lawsuit, if you're trying to break a company up, or get them to stop doing something that's unfair.

**Gene Marks:**

Right.

**Gilad Edelman:**

So, they all face uphill battles, but that doesn't mean that none of them are going to succeed. And then finally, you've got the Federal Trade Commission, which is now led by Lina Khan, who was my law school classmate. And, her claim to fame is that she's incredibly, she has a very aggressive, and coherent, and visionary view of how antitrust law needs to be more vigorously enforced, particularly against, but not exclusively against, the Big Tech companies. And, one way that manifests is lawsuits, so the FTC is one of the entities that's bringing some of these lawsuits that I was talking about. But the other thing that the FTC can do is set rules. And that, I think, is the place, especially if I'm a business owner, to the extent that I'm paying attention to this stuff, I would keep an eye on, what's the FTC up to? What rules are they proposing? Because, they have a lot of untapped power to declare certain kinds of business contact to be unfair methods of competition. And then, you're just not allowed to do them.

**Gilad Edelman:**

So, I'm talking about privacy stuff. I'm very curious what the FTC is going to do about privacy and data use. Certain kinds of contracts, I would not be surprised if the FTC cracked down on click wrap bullshit, where you agree to some terms that we all know nobody reads.

**Gene Marks:**

Sure.

**Gilad Edelman:**

And then, it turns out that you agreed, that you'll never sue the company and all kinds of nonsense. And so, I think that's a really interesting domain.

**Gene Marks:**

Gilad Edelman covers technology and politics for WIRED. Very much appreciate you joining me Gilad. It was a great conversation. Still have other topics to cover with you in the future, I hope, including, I think you wanted to bring back cargo pants? We're going to have to talk about that some other time, but ...

**Gilad Edelman:**

Hey, listen, man, those clicks don't come out of nowhere. Sometimes you got to bait the reader.

**Gene Marks:**

Fair enough. Fair enough. Well, thanks. Congratulations on your move to California as well.

**Gilad Edelman:**

Thank you.

**Gene Marks:**

And great work that you do at WIRED. So, if you guys want to listen to, read, Gilad's writings are all covering politics and technology, check him out on wired.com. Again, thank you so much. And I look forward to speaking with you later. Take care.

**Gene Marks:**

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