‘Here in the U.S.’: Identity narratives, national beliefs and corporate governance values in Big Tech Hearing discourse
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Abstract
Starting from the idea that understanding Big Tech ideologies is a prerequisite for assessing how major tech corporations see a (re)organization of society, this paper offers an analysis of the opening statements of the CEOs of four of these corporations during 2020 antitrust hearings before the U.S. House Judiciary Antitrust Subcommittee. These statements were ‘critical discourse moments’ that foregrounded the beliefs of the CEOs in the collision between their discourse and that of government and politics. Using a critical perspective on discourse analysis as a main research approach, this research found that the opening statements blended (inter)national imaginaries, identity narratives and corporate values. Together, these factors communicated the notion of an ideal society in which tech companies awarded themselves a dual role: (1) national conductors towards what we call ‘techno/opportunity’ for individuals, and (2) politically neutral agents in the service of American world dominance. In this sense, ‘competition’ was reconstructed as a practice that, on a national level, must occur within Big Tech instead of between tech corporations and other actors. On an international level competition existed between ideologically opposed nation states where corporations were envisioned as representatives of these states.

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1. Introduction

During the sixth hearing of the congressional investigation into “Competition in digital markets” (Cicilline, 2019), Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos began his opening statement with: “My mom, Jackie, had me when she was a 17 year old high school student”. Only a few minutes later, Google and Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai narrated that he “didn’t have much access to a computer growing up in India”, which was followed by Apple CEO Tim Cook’s description of Apple as a “uniquely American company” and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s statement that the “tech industry is an American success story”. If we hadn’t known better, we might have guessed these remarks were spoken during motivational speeches or celebratory events — an assumption that is in fact partially true. Within a time span of approximately 20 minutes, Bezos, Pichai,
Cook and Zuckerberg utilized the limited speaking time that was allocated to them as part of the 2020 hearing to share a variety of stories and ideas, not only with the U.S. House Subcommittee on Antitrust, Commercial, and Administrative Law of the Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee’s panel, but also with millions watching the event through a variety of broadcasts.

This was not the first nor the last time leading individuals from major tech companies were questioned by U.S. congressional or Senate committees. Zuckerberg, for instance, was heard in 2018 in relation to the Cambridge Analytica scandal, in 2019 over the intended founding of Libra currency and in 2021 about disinformation and extremism. Regarding the latter, then Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey and Pichai were heard as well. Pichai was also heard in 2018 in relation to accusations of political bias on Google’s platforms. Meanwhile, pressure to organize European Big Tech hearings had been mounting (Larger, 2021). While the 1998 Microsoft antitrust case is remembered as a historic “earthquake” (Luckerson, 2018), tech hearings have now become relatively ‘normal’; providing a familiar stage for public clashes between representatives of the people and members of the global tech elite.

A significant amount of research has been conducted on the intersection of Big Tech and various dimensions of society. Some of this research is celebratory; classifying the Internet and related mechanisms as a neutral ‘democratizing force’ (Laidlaw, 2015), thereby embracing ‘technological optimist’ views (Krier and Gillette, 1985). Other academics describe negative consequences — some of which are, according to them, already manifest. They point, for instance, to the manner in which tech companies strain information and journalism (Vaidhyanathan, 2012; Bucher, 2018), take advantage of the poor’s educational and leisure needs (Arora, 2019) and affect Western democracy (van Dijck, et al., 2018; Maly, 2018), social cohesion and human rights — like the right to privacy (Srnicek, 2016). Many of these studies argue that some tech companies are becoming too powerful and occupy monopolistic or near-monopolistic positions.

Building on these and other sources, this paper engages with the power of Big Tech by critically analyzing how major tech corporations construct their societal position(s) on a global stage in a context of conflict and power (re)distribution. We demonstrate how Big Tech CEOs utilize restricted, publicly streamed speaking time in a context of power and scrutiny to (re)produce beliefs about their societal roles. Rather than exhaustively explain the exact content of the investigation into “Competition in digital markets”, we use the hearing during which the CEOs spoke as a window into the values and beliefs of Silicon Valley’s tech industry.

2. Data and analytical approach

The United States’ House Committee on the Judiciary announced on 3 June 2019 that it would investigate “the rise and use of market power online and assess the adequacy of existing antitrust laws and current enforcement levels” (U.S. House Judiciary Committee, 2019b). As part of the investigation, seven public hearings were organized. During the sixth hearing — which took place on 29 July 2020 and was organized as a hybrid event due to COVID-19 restrictions — the CEOs of Amazon, Google, Apple and Facebook (now known as ‘Meta’) were heard. The opening statements the CEOs produced at the beginning of this hearing served as the main data for this paper. A YouTube livestream (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBFDQvIrWYM) of the House Committee on the Judiciary entitled “Online platforms and market power: Examining the dominance of Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google” was used to access the data. A similar livestream was shown on at least 35 other YouTube channels, some of which also offered public live chats and expert commentary. In accordance with the applicable “Rules of procedure”, the hearing was also covered by “television, radio and still photography” (U.S. House Judiciary Committee, 2019a).

Due to the circumstances under which these statements were produced — stemming inter alia from looming antitrust regulations and public criticism — the opening statements were regarded as ‘critical discourse moments’ (Chilton, 1988). The values and beliefs of the CEOs were foregrounded in the collision
between their discourses and the discourses of government and politics. Though the opinions of the different committee members diverged, the significance of the threat that was at the heart of this collision might best be understood by considering statements that were given to the press by chairman of the committee David Cicilline. He described the investigation as “a broad investigation of these digital platforms ... how the market is failing, why the Internet is broken and why it’s not functioning well, and then looking at what we need to do in terms of legislative action.” (Lima, 2019)

Though it might be too early to comment on the long-term effects of the CEOs’ performances, we should take into consideration that “communicative success ... is always extremely relative and can never be taken for granted” [1]. This is also the case for “communicative success vis-à-vis future generations” [2] — a notion that is significant since recordings of the hearing remain publicly available online. The short-term effects might be assessed by considering reports by news media covering stock markets and businesses. Investor’s Business Daily, for instance, reported:

Investors took in stride an antitrust hearing featuring the CEOs of Apple (AAPL), Amazon.com (AMZN), Facebook (FB) and Google parent Alphabet (GOOGL).

Apple stock, Amazon stock, Facebook stock and Google stock all rose more than 1% Wednesday.

... The CEOs of Apple, Amazon, Facebook and Google appeared to emerge from Wednesday’s antitrust hearing largely unscathed, though questions continued into the evening. (Carson, 2020)

The interpretation that the CEOs “emerge[d] largely unscathed” appeared to be confirmed by reports from mainstream media, concluding that committee members agreed tech companies were indeed monopolies, but disagreed about actions that should be taken. This led to proposals that were often ambiguous and sometimes even contradictory (Ghaffary and Rey, 2020). Hence, though mainstream news reports appeared to frame the results of the investigation as negative for the tech companies — their ‘evil’ monopolistic conduct was exposed — the practical outcome of the investigation was that, in relation to antitrust, the companies were allowed to continue ‘business as usual’ pending political negotiations. This situation persists, as it remains unclear if and when the proposed “American Innovation and Choice Online Act” [3] will become law and how the U.S. courts will interpret it. The notion that no major material adaptations have been made, however, does not mean nothing has changed. Considering the visibility of this specific hearing and the visibility of Big Tech discourse in general, it is hardly surprising that at least parts of the CEOs’ narratives have been routinely reproduced, transformed and challenged by others. Relevant examples will be provided as part of the analysis of the opening statements.

Analyzing the (re)production of ideas

This paper employs a critical perspective on discourse analysis as its main research approach (Blommaert, 2005; Verschueren, 2013) to examine ideological beliefs about the organization of society that have surfaced in Big Tech’s discourse when confronted with power and its potential redistribution. Adopting the idea that a text cannot be interpreted “detached from the social and political context in which [it] is used” [4] and that the construction of context(s) can be linguistically traced, this paper attends to indexical meanings to uncover implicit meanings (Silverstein, 2003). Therefore, contextual data will also be taken into account. Furthermore, the argument that the CEOs can’t just say anything and that their text must be “drawn from the community’s repertoire of things it is possible to say” [5] and are “constrained by the range and structure of their repertoires” [6] reinforces the idea that the opening statements, although produced by four individuals — arguably in collaboration with experts from their respective companies —
offer opportunities to uncover beliefs that are more widely accepted, both within the tech industry and beyond.

**Addressing audience(s)**

As noted earlier, the opening statements were made to the committee and an (inter)national audience via YouTube livestream and other broadcasting platforms or services. Because of their direct involvement in the discourse of the CEOs, the committee members served as directly present interpreters (Verschueren, 1999). The people who viewed the opening statements through live streams served as “virtual interpreters”, since they were in substance “only imagined at the moment of producing the utterance” [7]. Considering the amount of press coverage that the hearing received in advance, the committee’s historic use of YouTube and the CEOs’ expert knowledge, the CEOs must have been aware of their virtual interpreters. They could not, however, be entirely familiar with the characteristics of these interpreters, and were therefore at least partially reliant on their imagination of them. The CEOs could be seen as addressing a ‘super-addressee’; an abstract “evaluating authority” [8] that might, in this case, be envisaged as a mix of individual representatives of ‘friendly’ nation states, or even the ‘citizens’ of the Internet.

The question which audiences were immediately present and might have been explicitly or implicitly addressed was further complicated by the ‘hybrid’ structure of the hearing. At least a dozen committee members were physically gathered in a room in the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington, D.C. while the CEOs and other committee members “participate[d] remotely” considering the “public health emergency due to a novel coronavirus” (U.S. Congress. House of Representatives. House Rules Committee, 2020) — ‘COVID-19’. Though it is not the aim of this paper to map the effects of ‘video conferencing’, it should be noted that the mode of video conferencing allowed the CEOs to address both the committee members and their other, more remote audience(s) directly, simultaneously and equally through gaze and gesture — looking all of them ‘straight in the eye’ through webcams (see **Figure 1**).

![Figure 1: Screenshots of the CEOs while speaking during the public hearing.](image-url)
A potential effect of this dimension that was reported by some media, was that the CEOs’ remote appearance demonstrated they “were unmoved by the material world” and had “already won” (Bogost, 2020), since the hearing displayed the pervasiveness of their technologies. The former could be contested based on the different opening statements’ spatial deictic centers (Verschueren, 1999), which appeared to be located in the United States — Bezos, for instance, firmly set his discourse “here in the U.S.” twice.

The existence of pre-produced written versions of the opening statements was seized to facilitate a more elaborate revealing of relevant contrasts (Cameron, 2001). This helped to understand “patterns of language use” [2] and demonstrated how the CEOs imagined their different audiences. The spoken text, however, serve as the main data for this paper because the written text was specifically produced “for the record” of the House Judiciary Subcommittee’s antitrust panel and might therefore have had less reach and impact — an assumption supported by the observation that mainstream news media merely focused on spoken statements, ignoring the existence of prepared written versions.

3. Analysis

Speeches at a congressional hearing are heavily scripted, governed by both formal and informal rules, and largely focused on the production of answers regarding specific questions, considering the context’s “demands for rationality and efficiency” [10]. The CEOs must have felt the desire to at least appear as if they were fulfilling all appropriate maxims of conversation (Grice, 1975). The opening statements that were produced at the beginning of a hearing were less restrictive from a substantive perspective. The rule that “your sworn testimony must be your own” and that a witness must adhere to the request to “summarize your testimony in five minutes” did not appear to impose a consideration of any particular topic. The call for a summary might suggest that the spoken statement must mirror the prewritten statement that was submitted before the start of the hearing. However, to what extent both texts must resemble each other was unclear, since Zuckerberg’s written statement deviates significantly from his spoken remarks. The notion that the CEOs were requested to speak in response to concerns regarding antitrust instead of about concerns regarding antitrust might explain why the word “antitrust” was only used once, by Zuckerberg, at the end of his opening statement. This did not mean, however, that the opening statements were not in service of a single preferred outcome, preventing the adjustment of antitrust regulations in a manner that might be disadvantageous for tech corporations.

**Tech CEOs as personifications of the American dream**

Following Cicilline’s spoken cues, ending with “Mister Bezos you may begin”, Bezos was the first CEO to speak. He opened with a bootstrap narrative:

My mom, Jackie, had me when she was a 17 year old high school student in Albuquerque

Certainly, Bezos’ mother nor the circumstances surrounding his birth appeared logically connected to the specific topic of “Competition in digital markets”. These remarks were, however, connected to the circumstances with which Bezos and the other CEOs were confronted. Bezos’ origin story established a personal narrative that might evoke empathy under certain circumstances and might be characteristic of victimization (Ben-David, 2020). Bezos further emphasized ‘his’ historic struggle by stating that “the school tried to kick her out” and “she couldn’t have a locker, no extra curriculars and couldn’t ...”. Discursively, the situation was becoming increasingly distressing through accumulation. In spite of these ‘hurdles’: “she graduated and was determined to continue her education.” By demonstrating how his mother emerged victoriously from a difficult situation by (re)taking control, Bezos presented himself as having emerged from an environment of ‘overcomers’ (Ben-David, 2020). It was a textbook example of a “fundamentally American” myth that “grit, determination and hard work are all it takes to be successful in
The significance of Bezos’ bootstrap narrative became evident when similar text from other speeches was examined. In 2018, for instance, Bezos shifted the direction of an interview by saying: “My mom had me when she was, uh, 17 years old. And she was still in high school, in Albuquerque New Mexico” (Personal Finance Insider, 2018). Apparently, his mother’s recounted struggle in relation to his origin was a decisive feature of Bezos’ identity, and not just relevant in relation to an antitrust hearing, but rather of more general importance. Bezos repeated this patter in introducing his adoptive father:

He was 16 when he came to the U.S. from Cuba, by himself, shortly after Castro took over. My dad didn’t speak English and he did not have an easy path. What he did have was grit and determination.

Cuban history and language problems could, like teenage pregnancy, be indexed as struggles. The relationships between Cuba, the United States and the English language, however, also signal nationalist— even ‘linguistic nationalist’ (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1992)— anti-communist beliefs. Together, these remarks produced an image of an ideal struggle. Specific American values were threatened, but were eventually secured and allowed to prevail through “grit and determination,” personal traits vital to the American dream. Furthermore, the script of the American dream was completed through an emphasis on fiercely independent individualism (Spence, 1985)— “by himself”— a narrative element that cannot be maintained when the written version of the statement and historic contexts were considered. In reality, Bezos’ father was not only supported by his parents, but also by the anti-communist government of the United States. Here, the notion of marked individualism was constructed through the discursive strategy of ‘erasure’ (Hart and Cap, 2014). It is a technique that is regularly employed in relation to the American dream to conceal the reality that, without help, it is increasingly difficult to ‘make it’ in the United States (Young, 2021).

**Techno/opportunity and the American dream**

Pichai also shared a personal struggle at the beginning of his opening statement:

I didn’t have much access to a computer growing up in India. So, you can imagine my amazement when I arrived in the U.S. for graduate school and saw an entire lab of computers.

For Pichai and the other CEOs, having access to technology equated to having access to opportunity. Cook, for instance, argued: “The first Mac brought opportunity and possibility into the home”. Pichai’s struggle of not having access to what we call ‘techno/opportunity’ was linked to him growing up in India, and subsequently resolved by moving from India to the United States. In this sense, the American dream was updated through an incorporation of technology. While historically, courageous individuals would go ‘out’ to seek their fortunes, today, it was suggested, individuals can access opportunity from their homes through American technology, or even from their garages, in tune with Silicon Valley’s “garage myth” (Erlanger and Govela, 2018).

Like Bezos, Pichai recounted and readjusted his narrative regularly; “in my life, getting access to computers made a big difference...” (BiscootTV, 2017). We also noted how this tale of hardship was reproduced by his audience. Within the first 30 seconds of an interview that took place at Stanford University in 2022, the interviewer mentioned: “This conversation is extra special for me because your story hit so close to home. Like you, my dad is from South India, he is an alumnus of IIT, and immigrated here about 30 years ago, with grit and determination...” (Stanford Graduate School of Business, 2022). Looking at the statement superficially, we might argue this “story” displayed more similarities with Bezos’ narrative than with Pichai’s, as opposed to what the interviewer appeared to believe. The ensuing interaction between Pichai and the interviewer, however, demonstrated how Pichai accepted the interviewer’s account, and how a more
abstract notion of “grit and determination” might be discerned in every opening statement, and subsequently in other text generated by the CEOs.

Ultimately, all CEOs produced discourse that connected their identities to a particular imagined identity of the United States and a positive interpretation of ‘going against the grain’. In this connection, not having opportunity — caused by prejudice, communism or inaccessibility to technology — was fiercely contested, even when this was difficult and not considered ‘normal’. Through the accumulation of these types of personal overcomer-narratives, the image that the CEOs became courageous winners by challenging norms was rendered a crucial part of a broader discursive strategy that, in turn, made it increasingly difficult to fault the CEOs and their corporations. If the committee members, for instance, would have tried to condemn the CEOs, they would have been condemning the CEOs’ construct of the American dream, taking on the role, for instance, of the ‘backwater’ school of Bezos’ mother. In the CEOs’ ‘heroic’ bootstrapping histories, the committee and its investigation might have become just another struggle, caused by a type of parochialism and mediocrity that they had successfully defeated in the past on personal levels.

**Fighting the American fight**

Despite the observation that Cook and Zuckerberg employed fewer personal narratives to celebrate and frame their individual Americaness, their opening statements were imbued with similar nationalist values, and contained corresponding discursive constructs that secured ideological alignments between Big Tech and the United States. Cook, for instance, began his opening statement by introducing Apple as “this uniquely American company”. In this sense, Cook did not merely equate Apple’s values with American values; his use of “uniquely” also reflected that both Apple and the United States possessed qualities that set them apart from others, thereby creating a hidden category of ‘other’ actors that are un-American, and therefore ‘strange’ to the superior Americanness of Apple. Similar strategies were present in Zuckerberg’s spoken opening statement, who argued:

> Facebook stands for a set of basic principles. Giving people voice and economic opportunity, keeping people safe, upholding democratic traditions like freedom of expression and voting and enabling an open and competitive market place. These are fundamental values for most of us, but not for everyone in the world. Not for every company we compete with or the countries they represent.

Before elaborating on the substance of the “basic principles” or “fundamental values” Zuckerberg was referring to, the emphasis on the observation that not every actor shared the same principles or values must be visited. Through this emphasis — which is strengthened by Zuckerberg’s intonation and use of repetition (Rabab’ah and AbuSeileek, 2012) — the existence of diverging principles was not chiefly portrayed as, for instance, a sign of diversity, but rather as an ideological threat. Similar “national threat construction[s]” (Yuan and Fu, 2020) were present in other opening statements. Pichai, for instance, noted: “Just as America’s technology leadership is not inevitable, Google’s continued success is not guaranteed.” Because Big Tech, the United States and their values were intrinsically connected in the discourse of Big Tech, threats to, for instance, Facebook’s principles and the United States’ “technology leadership” became synonymous with threats to the United States as a whole. In this sense, the CEOs’ opening statements might have aimed to unite the United States and its supporters in a struggle against a complex network of associated hegemonic and pre-hegemonic threats, like the threat of communism during the Cold War. Bezos’ utilization of “Cuba” and the observation that Zuckerberg noted that many new companies were “Chinese”, of course, underlined how the ‘new’ threats that were present in the spoken opening statements borrowed and reproduced elements from these ‘old’ threats, a technique that rendering the CEOs discourse more familiar and therefore more convincing. Eventually, like condemning the CEOs might risk a transferred condemnation of the CEOs’ constructs of the American dream, attempting to counteract the continued dominance of Big Tech might be presented as ’s shared capabilities to maintain their leading international position, playing into the hands of companies and countries that threaten to jeopardize
American-tech symbiosis and its associated ideals.

**The true nature of major tech corporations**

Thus far, this paper has engaged with techniques of discursive assimilation that were deployed by the CEOs to construct parallels — or even ‘sameness’ — between their ideological beliefs and the values that, according to them, signaled American morality. Though these parallels might turn out to be powerful discursive tools in various efforts to dishearten government criticism and gain political and public support, they didn’t necessarily touch upon potential material consequences for the societal role of Big Tech. Zuckerberg’s notion that there were “compan[i]es we compete with or the countries they represent” demonstrated, however, that attaining the role of ‘representative’ in international contexts was at least perceived to be a possibility. This notion might have fit a more innovative perspective on contemporary interrelations between nation states and globally operating corporations. Major corporations are neither “multinationals as subordinated to state power”, nor a “transnationally organized power as the primary factor in the era of globalization”; indeed, states and corporations may rather be “not subordinate to each other, but juxtaposed and intertwined; they use each other to increase their respective power positions.” (Babic, et al., 2017). Big Tech, however, proposes a relationship in which global tech companies are not equal to their ‘home nations’, but the spearheads that constitute and champion their nation’s international, ideological power. This novel role also emerged from elements of Zuckerberg’s spoken opening statement:

> The tech industry is an American success story. The products we’ve built have changed the world and improved people’s lives. Our industry is one of the ways that America shares its values with the world and one of our greatest economic and cultural exports.

The idea that the tech industry was “one of the ways that America shares its values with the world” once more underlined Big Tech’s proposed extraordinary, advanced position on the global stage in relation to the United States. It should also be noted that Zuckerberg’s statement appeared to confirm some conclusions from research that was referenced earlier. The products of Big Tech have not just changed the world materially, but also ideologically (Vaidhyanathan, 2012; van Dijck, et al., 2018; Maly, 2018), in line with notions of the United States’ imperial power (Foner, 2001). Together, the spoken opening statements demonstrated how major tech corporations might not merely be ‘in it’ for the money, an incentive that even appears partially pushed to the background in the spoken opening statements. They appear to be seeking ideological power as well.

**The basic principles of Big Tech governance**

The CEOs’ personal narratives provided clues as to which beliefs might have informed the substance of the tech companies’ envisaged ideological dominance. As mentioned earlier, the celebration of Bezos’ father’s decision to “[come] to the U.S., by himself, shortly after Castro took over”, for instance, rejected communist values and embraced the American dream. Further elaborating on elements of Zuckerberg’s spoken opening statement, it must be noted that, just as in the spoken opening statements of other CEOs, the connection between Big Tech and its ‘endowment’ of opportunity was presented as one of the most significant values that tech companies adhere to. Additionally, safety, “upholding democratic traditions like freedom of expression and voting” and “enabling an open and competitive market” were referred to as Facebook’s basic principles. While it can’t be argued that a particular text is more ‘real’ or ‘true’ than any other (Blommaert, 2004), it must be observed that the principles that Zuckerberg utilized in his spoken opening statement derogated from Facebook’s ‘official’ principles. Before Meta transformed its values to include “Meta, Metamates, Me” (Isaac and Frenkel, 2022), it focused on “giving people a voice”, connecting communities, serving “everyone”, keeping people safe and promoting economic opportunity. Given Facebook’s historic ‘official’ principles, Zuckerberg’s mentioning of “democratic traditions” and “enabling an open and competitive market place” appeared conspicuous. The reference to the latter might be explained in relation to its partial consistency with the hearing’s main subject, antitrust, an observation
we will return to. Zuckerberg’s mentioning of “democratic traditions”, however, appeared less straightforward, as it can be interpreted in different ways. One of the most (in)famous texts that was produced by Zuckerberg regarding this topic was probably his 2017 letter “Building global community”, in which Zuckerberg engaged with the role that Facebook wanted to play in creating “civically-engaged communities”. In that letter, Zuckerberg argued that “[o]ur societies will reflect our collective values only if we engage in the civic process and participate in self-governance” and explained how democracy was currently not functioning optimally while Facebook had the ability to remedy this wrong by giving people “voice” (Zuckerberg, 2017), thereby linking democratic practices to one of Facebook’s other principles. In this sense, just like in relation to other subjects that were addressed in the spoken opening statements, Zuckerberg’s 2017 letter presented an ideological concern, accompanied by an insistence on mass support for Big Tech through a mass utilization of Big Tech as a solution.

In Zuckerberg’s solution to uphold “democratic traditions”, “self-governance” was a central feature, which was based on “collective values”, an approach that corresponds with the perspectives and discursive techniques that were both explicitly and implicitly present in the four opening statements, and enabled by the “voice” and empowerment people receive through techno/opportunity. Considering the foundational role Facebook envisions for itself in relation to democratic processes, the word “self-governance” — specifically the “self”-component — appears hardly accurate from the perspective of individual citizens, who would not be governing themselves in interaction with other individual citizens, but rather be allowed to engage in pre-designed practices within and through the constraints of Facebook. Indeed, words like “self-governance”, “self-regulation” and “market-based regulation” were often used to “obscure the public impact of private rules and to deny the claims of outsiders to be formally represented” in relation to the concept of “private governance” [11]. Major corporations might cultivate features of private governance through public “tacit acceptance” or formal rules that accept and legitimize specific governing powers [12]. The spoken opening statements of the CEOs and related public text might plug into both approaches towards private governance. On the one hand, there was an attempt to convince a broad audience to accept “self-governance” via Big Tech as a proper response to dire circumstances. On the other hand there was an attempt to convince government officials that Big Tech is well equipped to execute and control specific tasks, like facilitating the democratic tradition of “voting”. In this sense, a particular type of self-governing democracy — resembling Maly’s “gov-corps” “operating’ societies and abolishing ‘real’ democracies [13] — must not merely be understood as a ‘value’ of Big Tech, but also as a practical goal that Big Tech is working towards, using a public hearing to share their beliefs about (un-)democratic self-governance. The potential involvement of Big Tech in democratic processes has routinely appeared in news and opinion pieces, describing how “Big Tech companies want to act like governments” (Schaake, 2020) or might “absorb[s] the power of democratically-elected governments” (Fernandez, et al., 2021), demonstrating that Big Tech’s allusions to a reconstruction of democratic society are not just rhetorical.

Considering the notion that even “in principle self-contained” tightly controlled trials are “embedded in a much wider context” [14] that can seep into its content and operations, relevant topical contexts regarding the potential meanings of democracy and “free speech” should also be considered. For example, potential meanings that relate to Donald Trump’s presidency and the conflicts between Trump and ‘his’ conservatives and Big Tech (Lakier, 2021) should be noted. These meanings might not be accessible to individuals watching the recorded opening statements at a later time or lacked experience with the nuances of the Trump presidency. The CEOs — note that Bezos also mentions “the freedom of democracy” in his opening statement — utilized their opening statements to refute Trump’s claims that Big Tech was a threat to free speech and thereby to “maximize common ground” [15] in anticipation of critical questions from the committee and discerning responses from other audiences. This contextual link, of course, did not dismiss other meanings that aligned with Big Tech’s tendencies towards private governance. One could argue that a potential transformation of Trump’s signification of concepts like “democracy” and “free speech” in accordance with Big Tech’s objectives could even facilitate the acceptance of both formal and informal private governance practices through tech. References to “democracy” and “free speech” might appeal to different people in different ways, but could none the less deliver the same outcome: the hegemonization of Big Tech’s involvement in democratic society.
Enabling the fight for an American future

In the principle of “enabling an open and competitive market place”, the word “enabling” is of particular interest. It reveals how Facebook establishes itself in relation to the “open and competitive market place” that it aspires to. By the use of “enabling”, Facebook is constructed as an authoritative actor that renders the market place operational for others, thereby producing a dependency relationship in which other companies benefit from Facebook. This use of “enabling” was present in other public text produced by Zuckerberg. In January 2020, for instance, Zuckerberg posted on his Facebook page: “… technology will continue to create opportunity, but more through enabling all of the other parts of the economy …”. In his opening statement, Zuckerberg envisioned Facebook becoming the underlying structure of a general market — meaning that it will not merely “enable” businesses, but also individuals — that aligns with Big Tech’s ideological beliefs. In contrast to most other companies that tend towards private governance (Rudder, et al., 2016), Facebook and its associates are not dedicated to the appropriation of power or the construction of rules in relation to particular artifacts, practices or fields. Rather, they seem to be interested in incorporating “all ... parts of the economy” into their infrastructures of techno/opportunity. Comparable infrastructural approaches were also present in the other spoken opening statements. Bezos, for instance, employs the term “real estate” to begin to explain what Amazon meant for other companies:

To share the same valuable real estate we spend billions to build, market and maintain.

As a metaphor, the words “real estate” might demonstrate how Bezos envisions Amazon as a property, similar to a building or a piece of land, though without a tangible form. Just like a real brick-and-mortar shopping mall, Amazon is expensive to “build” and “maintain”. Taking these financial costs into account, which Bezos draws attention to by mentioning “valuable” and “we spend billions”, the use of this particular metaphor produced its discursive effect by highlighting the exceptionalism of Bezos’ decision to “share” his “valuable real estate”, rather than collect rent from it or sell it, like a ‘normal’ real estate mogul. In this sense, Amazon, Facebook and other tech companies demonstrated how they were committed to the greater good and how what they were doing might partially be explained in familiar terms, but cannot be approximated through these terms. This was also illustrated by Cook’s remark that:

If Apple is a gatekeeper, what we’ve done is open the gate wider. We wanna get every app we can on the store, not keep them off

The CEOs seized an opportunity to engage with their companies’ practical socio-economic functions to underline both their positive distinctiveness and the notion that their companies met common needs and were of value to the American public. The fact that they meet these needs as ‘platforms’ (Srnicek, 2016) — as Pichai also noted, “open platforms like Android also support the innovation of others” — was of significance, since this novel role played a crucial part in the attempted transformation of the concept of ‘competition’ and societal role of Big Tech. Since major tech corporations, according to the CEOs, didn’t focus on competing with other companies within the United States, but provided infrastructures that enabled and supported competition between companies within the United States, accompanied by techno/opportunities and innovation that was vital for the United States to maintain international dominance, they could not be understood in ordinary terms connected to traditional social, political and economic discourse. Their roles, as entities that fostered national markets and championed Americanness in international contexts, were sufficiently different from the roles of other companies. In the view of the CEOs, the underlying message was one of rethinking the fundamental definitions of ‘antitrust’ might indeed be necessary, beyond the mere definitions of Cicilline and other members of the committee. Instead of trying to equal the playing field between Big Tech and other companies, the CEOs envisioned a world in which Big Tech was welcomed to actually become the playing field. ‘Competition’ meant something completely different for Big Tech.
4. Discussion and conclusion: The societal meaning of Big Tech

This paper was designed to describe how Big Tech CEOs utilized restricted, publicly streamed, speaking time in a context of power and scrutiny to (re)produce beliefs about their societal role, and to explain how these beliefs fit into a broader discourse. Though it might appear the CEOs addressed a variety of topics during the sixth hearing of the 2020 Big Tech antitrust investigation, these topics contributed to a single vision. The CEOs construct the world — or at least parts of the world that they deemed relevant — as a socioeconomic environment in which ideologically opposed, all-encompassing corporations competed for dominance on behalf of their countries and the people that shared their values, while presenting themselves as individuals that were perfectly suited to lead under such conditions.

In this sense, the CEOs were actively engaged with the transformation of the meaning of ‘competition’ and hence the transformation of the relationships between governments, citizens, companies and major corporations. Whilst a traditional interpretation of competition might entail multiple actors working to establish superiority over each other, for Big Tech, their superiority should not merely be accepted as ‘good’ and necessary, but should be reinforced by the United States and others who support Big Tech’s construct of the American dream to ensure that their shared, techno/opportunity-driven values prevail. In order to secure this prevalence, Big Tech envisions society as a market that is increasingly absorbed by its infrastructures, leading to a situation in which it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between major corporations, governments, markets and society.

In Big Tech’s vision, governments and Big Tech pull together to produce a new type of society. This society is one where democracy and techno/opportunity are linked, under the responsibility of tech companies by means of people — “users” — that they claim to represent. Working from a completely different perspective of members of the committee’s antitrust panel, tech CEOs aimed to be accepted as the true “voice” of the people, transforming their tech companies into virtual ‘market-governments’ and their platforms into virtual ‘market-countries’.

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Notes

5. Cameron, 2001, p. 15.

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