

Google is coming after critics in academia and journalism. It's time to stop them.



By Zephyr Teachout August 30 at 12:52 PM [Follow @ZephyrTeachout](#)
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Meet your new government. (Mike Blake/Reuters)

About 10 years ago, Tim Wu, the Columbia Law professor who coined the term network neutrality, made this [prescient comment](#): “To love Google, you have to be a little bit of a monarchist, you have to have faith in the way people traditionally felt about the king.”

Wu was right. And now, Google has established a pattern of lobbying and threatening to acquire power. It has reached a dangerous point common to many monarchs: The moment where it no longer wants to allow dissent.

This summer, a small team of well-respected researchers and journalists, the Open Markets team at the New America think tank (where I have been a fellow since 2014), dared to speak up about Google, in the mildest way. When the European Union fined Google for preferring its own subsidiary companies to its rival companies in search results, it was natural that Open Markets, a group dedicated to studying and exposing distortions in markets, including monopoly power, would comment. The researchers put out [a 150-word statement](#) praising the E.U.’s actions. They wrote, “By requiring that Google give equal treatment to rival services instead of privileging its own, [the E.U.] is protecting the free flow of information and commerce upon which all democracies depend.” They called upon the Federal Trade Commission and Department of Justice and state attorneys general to apply the traditional American monopoly law, which would require separate ownership of products and services and the networks that sell products and services.

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Google has been [funding New America for years at high levels](#). Within 24 hours of the statement going live, Google representatives [called New America’s leadership](#) expressing their displeasure. Two planned hires for the Open Markets team suddenly were canceled. Three days later, the head of the

Open Markets team, the accomplished journalist Barry C. Lynn, received a letter from the head of the think tank, demanding that the entire team leave New America. The reason? The statement praising the E.U.'s decision against Google was, according to New America President Anne-Marie Slaughter, "[imperiling the institution](#)." (As of this writing, [Slaughter has denounced the story as false](#), claiming that Lynn was dismissed for failures of "openness" and "collegiality.")

When Google was founded in 1998, it famously committed itself to the motto: "Don't be evil." It appears that Google may have lost sight of what being evil means, in the way that most monarchs do: Once you reach a pinnacle of power, you start to believe that any threats to your authority are themselves villainous and that you are entitled to shut down dissent. As [Lord Acton famously said](#), "Despotic power is always accompanied by corruption of morality." Those with too much power cannot help but be evil. Google, the company dedicated to free expression, has chosen to silence opposition, apparently without any sense of irony.

Google did not always operate this way in relation to think tanks, even those it funded. The head of Google's parent company, Eric Schmidt, served on the board of New America starting 2000 and was chairman from 2008 through May 2016. The Open Markets institute has long studied excessive corporate power and argued for the importance of antimonopoly laws. They were not previously punished for their work.

[\[Democrats say they want to go after monopolies. Here's why that's a great idea.\]](#)

But in recent years, Google has become greedy about owning not just search capacities, video and maps, but also the shape of public discourse. As the Wall Street Journal recently reported, Google has [recruited and cultivated law professors](#) who support its views. And as the New York Times recently reported, it has become invested in [building curriculum for our public schools](#), and has created political strategy to get schools to adopt its products.

This year, [Google is on track](#) to spend more money than any company in America on lobbying. [In 2015](#), it was the third biggest corporate spender, paying more than Exxon Mobil, Lockheed Martin or the Koch brothers on lobbying. Much of what it is spending its money on has nothing to do with technical details regarding its search engine and everything to do with using its power in its search engine to shut out some competitors and build power over others.

It is time to call out Google for what it is: [a monopolist](#) in search, video, maps and browser, and a thin-skinned tyrant when it comes to ideas.

The imperial overreach of Google in trying to shut down a group of five researchers proves the point that the initial release from Open Markets was trying to make: When companies get too much power, they become a threat to democratic free speech and to the liberty of citizens at large.

In 1948, in the Supreme Court case [U.S. v. Columbia Steel Co.](#), Justice William O. Douglas [explained that](#) the traditional philosophy of American antitrust law is that "all power tends to develop into a government in itself. Power that controls the economy ... should be scattered into many hands so that

the fortunes of the people will not be dependent on the whim or caprice, the political prejudices, the emotional stability of a few self-appointed men.”

[Big businesses tell big lies.]

Google is forming into a government of itself, and it seems incapable of even seeing its own overreach. We, as citizens, must respond in two ways. First, support the brave researchers and journalists who stand up to overreaching power; and second, support traditional antimonopoly laws that will allow us to have great, innovative companies — but not allow them to govern us.

Google’s actions forced the Open Markets team to leave New America. But, thankfully, it did not succeed in silencing them entirely. Open Markets will continue on as a separate organization, which I will chair. Their work exposing corporate monopolies and advocating for regulation is more important than ever. Google shows us why.