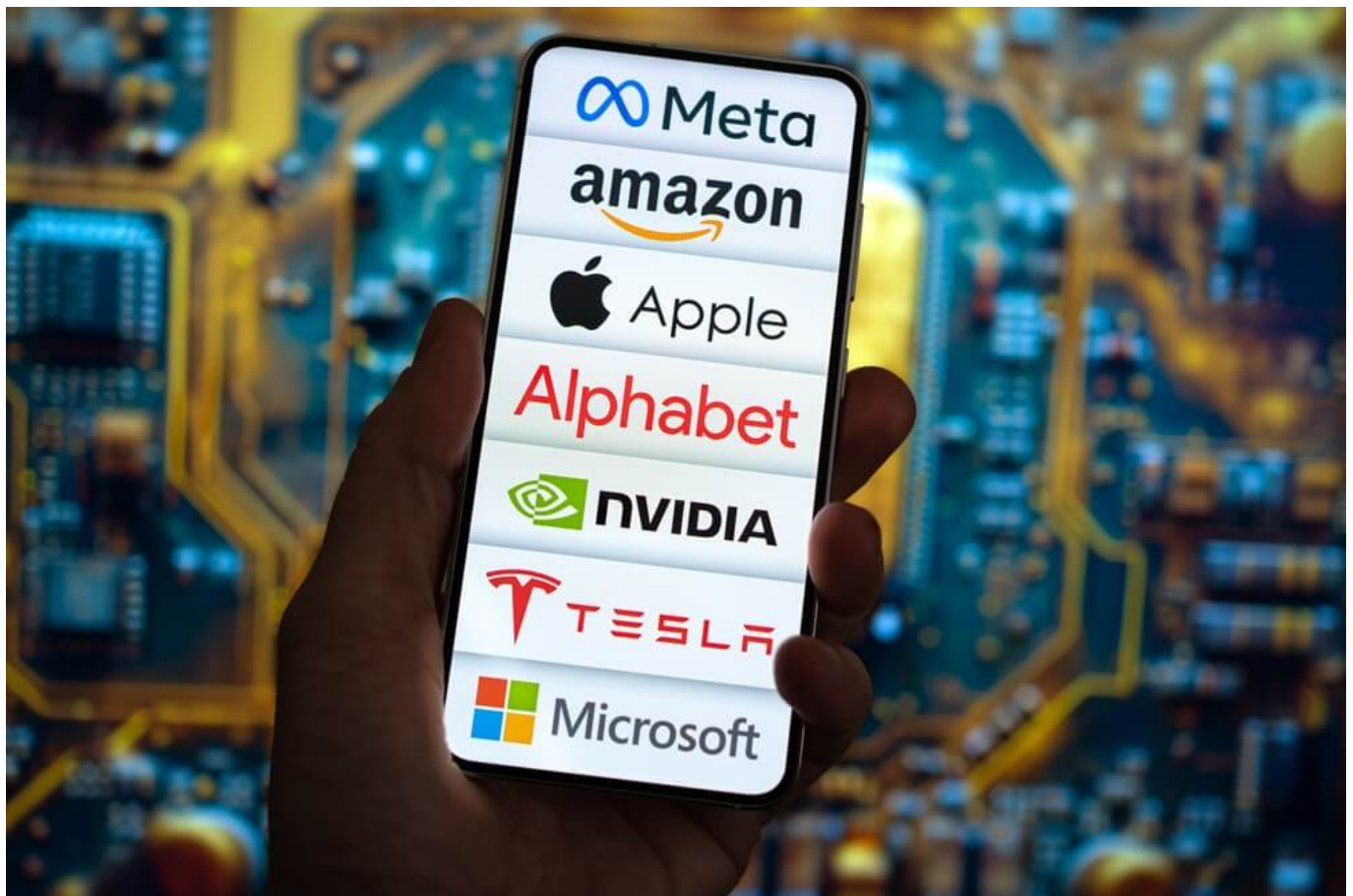




By: **Ferry Biedermann**

# Stopping the tech-billionaires, a case for regulation



“The way to make money is to buy when blood is running in the streets.” Elon Musk on X? No, another but similar robber baron of capitalism, John D. Rockefeller, some 100 years ago America’s first billionaire and the founder of Standard Oil, nowadays known mostly as Exxon or Esso.

Rockefeller also said something along the lines that with great power comes great responsibility but that part of doing business seems to be mostly alien to his modern-day successors. Which is why western societies, democracies, need to take urgent steps to protect themselves from their onslaught.

The European Union has gone some way in that direction with the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act but implementation can be problematic, see the recent kerfuffle of the Commissioner in charge, Thierry Breton, **sending** an ill-advised warning letter to Elon Musk over the latter’s interview with Donald Trump.

In the US too, some movement can be seen, with the recent court ruling that Google has a search monopoly.

But much more is required and in a much more comprehensive and internationally coordinated manner.

What is needed is not limited to clearer rules for social media platforms on things such as hate speech, misinformation and the like, or the busting of online monopolies on search, or the protection data privacy.

## A new way to run the world

The reach of technology in our lives and the mind-blowing amounts of money involved, necessitate measures that stretch, among others, into the political, such as the rules on campaign financing, and the realm of security, for example on the safeguarding of crucial infrastructure.

What oil was in the late 19th and early 20th century, technology, and particularly

information technology, is now: a new way to run the world, disrupting old orders and making obsolete established industries and trades.

Just as that era gave rise to the robber barons, exploiting and espousing capitalism red in tooth and claw, we now have a similar phenomenon in the tech billionaires, particularly a sub-set of mostly Silicon Valley, libertarian-leaning, far-right-enabling self-pronounced disruptors who cloak their greed in infantile fantasies of a technocrat dystopia purged of bothersome safeguards such as taxation, regulation and political oversight.

**The world seems to have forgotten most of the lessons of the robber baron era**

Unfortunately, the world seems to have forgotten most of the lessons of the robber baron era on how to deal with the pursuit of entrepreneurial self-interest that is so rampant and heedless that it threatens the fabric of society and politics.

Not that such lessons were ever very successfully applied; the busting up of Standard Oil under late 19th century antitrust legislation, made Rockefeller wealthier rather than poorer.

## “Don’t be evil”

While tech-billionaires Serge Brin and Larry Page do not seem to belong to the political extreme sketched above, US regulators might do well to keep the Standard Oil example in mind when they tackle the recent court decision that Google has an illegal monopoly on online search.

Now in control of its parent company , Alphabet, the pair started Google with the blatantly ridiculous and for a profit-driven company ultimately too restrictive motto, “don’t be evil”.

Partly said to have been a jab at other technology companies “exploiting” users, Google was a trailblazer of the mining of personal data for profit and it evangelised for the use of algorithms to drive our engagement, which is now so problematic in social media, all while not being evil.

**Brace yourselves for the impact that Artificial Intelligence will have on the tech sector's hold over our societies**

For whoever thought that Google, or Alphabet, has gathered too much power, like the US judge who ruled that it breached antitrust laws, brace yourselves for the impact that Artificial Intelligence will have on the tech sector's hold over our societies.

The comparison to the growing role of oil a century ago is only partially apt. Information technology now runs every aspect of our lives. When the internet goes down, nothing works anymore, the extreme effects of which were on show several years ago in Tonga.

## Regulate, regulate, regulate

The penetration of information technology into every aspect of our lives necessitates a complete rethink of how we regulate not just ‘a sector’ but in fact a necessity of life, and also how we deal with those whose are in control of it.

In the UK, this suddenly became more of an imperative after the recent racist, far-right riots and the role social media played in them.

The online aspect of the riots, which should not be exaggerated because other factors were more influential, was further emphasised by X boss Elon Musk's deceitful provocations.

His intervention at a time when blood was literally running in the streets raises questions over the motives of one of the richest men on earth meddling in the lives of those less

fortunate.



*Elon Musk is not just the mega-rich owner of X, formerly twitter, he also owns a raft of other tech business, among which, the globe spanning satellite internet system Starlink that can play a role in conflict areas*

In Musk, many strands come together. He is one of the so-called PayPal mafia, that include several other notorious right-wing libertarian tech moguls, notably Peter Thiel and David O. Sacks.

The latter two once co-authored a book, *The Diversity Myth: Multiculturalism and the Politics of Intolerance* at Stanford that criticises diversity policies and multiculturalism and was described by then Stanford provost Condoleezza Rice as “demagoguery”.

This chimes very well with Musk's new war on wokeness and his support for all matter of right-wing causes, including Donald Trump.

Musk, though, is not just the mega-rich owner of X, formerly twitter, he also owns a raft of other tech business, among which, the globe spanning satellite internet system Starlink that can play a role in conflict areas.

He appears to have been triggered into his remarks on the UK after Keir Starmer warned online platforms they could be held liable for the spread of misinformation.

Musk is just lashing out at those who'd regulate his businesses, whether in terms of policing content, holding him to environmental standards or enforcing labour or financial propriety rules.

It's not rocket science to see what drives many of the small-government, libertarian-bordering-on-far-right business moguls; it's what they are there for: maximising profits.

What the rest of the world needs to remember is that, sometimes despite appearances, they haven't reinvented the wheel when it comes to high-octane capitalism.

By all means, let them do what they do best, these are products that we all use, including to research this article. But for all our sakes, regulate, regulate, regulate.