

IDEAS

# The Death of the Public Square

Today's most powerful companies are enemies of free expression.

By Franklin Foer



A lithographic print featuring John Milton ([Library of Congress](#))

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***About the author:** Franklin Foer is a staff writer at The Atlantic. He is the author of World Without Mind and How Soccer Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization.*

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**W**HAT IS GOD? When the question first rattled my adolescent mind, I took it to my mom and dad, and received wildly divergent answers. I cracked the beige-in-every-way set of World Book encyclopedias in our attic. And after poking around on the shelves of my anti-clerical father, I found Nietzsche and realized that God was actually dead.

If I were a boy now, we all know exactly where I would turn for an answer. All of us enter our questions, both about where to brunch and the meaning of life, into a box with a magnifying glass at its right edge, next to the multicolored logo of the deity that presides over our informational world. Its name, like the lord of the universe, begins with the letter G.

What is God? It is only a subject that has inspired some of the finest writing in the history of Western civilization—and yet the first two pages of Google results for the question are comprised almost entirely of Sweet’N Low evangelical proselytizing to the unconverted. (The first link the Google algorithm served me was from the Texas ministry, Life, Hope & Truth.) The Google search for God gets nowhere near Augustine, Maimonides, Spinoza, Luther, Russell, or Dawkins. Billy Graham is the closest that Google can manage to an important theologian or philosopher. For all its power and

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influence, it seems that Google can't really be bothered to care about the quality of knowledge it dispenses. It is our primary portal to the world, but has no opinion about what it offers, even when that knowledge it offers is aggressively, offensively vapid.

**I**F HAROLD BLOOM or Marilynne Robinson had engineered Google, the search engine would have responded to the query with a link to the poet John Milton, who is both challenging on the subject of God and brave on the subject of free speech—and who would have been a polemical critic of our algorithmic overlords, if he had lived another four hundred years.

If we're going to pay tribute to the idea of free expression, then we need to pause to pay obeisance to Milton's exhilarating, timeless statement of first principles, the pamphlet *Areopagitica*. It appeared in 1644, long before he went blind and dictated *Paradise Lost*. He wrote *Areopagitica* in the shadow of the English Revolution, a revolution against theocracy that came to exhibit its own theocratic tendencies. It was a moment when the cracks in English society permitted the growth of dozens of religious sects, each with its own evolved doctrine, many of them—Quakers, Baptists—still with us.

Milton was a Puritan himself, but a comrade in the left wing of the movement. A left-wing Puritanism, let alone a sensualist Puritan, is admittedly hard to imagine. But Milton wrote passionately and bravely in defense of divorce on the

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to Democratic Control

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grounds of spousal incompatibility. (An argument that he perhaps came to consider after his 16-year-old wife returned to her family, taking a three-year break from Milton.)

The English Revolution was a time when spiritual, intellectual, and rhetorical foment began to wildly accelerate towards anarchy. It was during these very years that Thomas Hobbes wrote his famous response to these chaotic conditions, the *Leviathan*, yearning for a heavy-handed reassertion of order. And the Parliament obliged that yearning, hoping to regain control with a little bit of old-fashioned suppression. It wanted to require the licensing of books prior to their publication. Censorship. This is what riled Milton to write the *Areopagitica*.

Beyond the *Areopagitica*'s condemnation of censorship, Milton was really defending the underlying spiritual and intellectual chaos, and the institutions that nourished it. In his lifetime, the printing press had changed everything. The machines churned out religious propaganda, designed to infuriate, which had the effect of eliciting an endless series of rebuttals. There was a national mania for newspapers. The *Areopagitica* paid implicit homage to the printing press and explicit homage to everything that rolled off it. He accorded books religious significance, which was really the highest compliment he could offer, since he took his religion so seriously: "Who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself,

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Criminal-Justice Reformers  
Chose the Wrong Slogan  
CONOR FRIEDERSDORF

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Why More Americans Aren't  
Happy for Gregg Popovich  
JACK MCCALLUM

kills the image of God, as it were, in the eye ...”

At the core, Milton was defending something intensely private—the conscience, the freedom of each citizen to arrive at their own religious conviction. “Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.” But Milton also stirringly articulated how the formation of private convictions required public spaces, public institutions—what Jürgen Habermas so famously defined as the “public sphere.”

At the time of Milton’s birth, in 1608, there wasn’t much of a public sphere in England. By the time he wrote *Areopagitica*, it was robust: coffee houses, newspapers, bookstores, theatres, and meeting places—the locales that allowed individuals to come together to form a public. These were spaces largely outside the grasp of church and state—and, in fact, many of these institutions emerged with the express purpose of liberating society from the grasp of church and state.

Nobody designed the public sphere from a dorm room or a Silicon Valley garage. It just started to organically accrete, as printed volumes began to pile up, as liberal ideas gained currency and made space for even more liberal ideas. Institutions grew, and then over the centuries acquired prestige and authority. Newspapers and journals evolved into what we call media. Book publishing emerged from the printing guilds, and eventually became taste-making, discourse-shaping enterprises. What was born in Milton’s lifetime lasted until our own.

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Nothing was perfect about this public sphere. It could be jealously exclusive, intolerant of new opinion, a guild that protected the privileges of its members and blocked worthy outsiders. Its failings are legion. Still, the public sphere provided the foundation for Western democracy; it nurtured a faith in reason and the intellectual powers of the individual; it was the platform for free expression and a shield against tyranny.

Ye cannot make us now lesse capable, lesse knowing, lesse eagarly pursuing of the Truth, unlesse ye first make yourselves that made us so, lesse the lovers, lesse the founders of our true Liberty. We can grow ignorant again, brutish, formall, and slavish as ye found us, but you then must first become that which ye cannot be, oppressive, arbitrary, and tyrannous as they were from whom ye have free'd us.

[Milton's *Areopagitica*]

**I**T TOOK CENTURIES for the public sphere to develop—and the technology companies have eviscerated it in a flash. By radically remaking the advertising business and commandeering news distribution, Google and Facebook have damaged the economics of journalism. Amazon has thrashed the bookselling business in the U.S. They have shredded old ideas about intellectual property—which had provided the economic and philosophical basis for authorship.

The old, enfeebled institutions of the public sphere have grown dependent on the big technology companies for financial survival. And with this dependence, the values of big tech have become the values of the public

sphere. Big tech has made a fetish of efficiency, of data, of the wisdom of the market. These are the underlying principles that explain why Google returns such terrible responses to the God query. Google is merely giving us what's popular, what's most clicked upon, not what's worthy. You can hurl every insult at the old public sphere, but it never exhibited such frank indifference to the content it disseminated.

This assault on the public sphere is an assault on free expression. In the West, free expression is a transcendent right only in theory—in practice its survival is contingent and tenuous. We're witnessing the way in which public conversation is subverted by name-calling and harassment. We can convince ourselves that these are fringe characteristics of social media, but social media has implanted such tendencies at the core of the culture. They are in fact practiced by mainstream journalists, mobs of the well meaning, and the president of the United States. The toxicity of the environment shreds the quality of conversation and deters meaningful participation in it. In such an environment, it becomes harder and harder to cling to the idea of the rational individual, formulating opinions on the basis of conscience. And as we lose faith in that principle, the public will lose faith in the necessity of preserving the protections of free speech.

At the core of the public sphere was the idea of individual choice, of autonomous individuals independently arriving at their opinions. Truth was always messier than this. The public sphere was always rife with manipulation—political persuasion, after all, involves a healthy dose of emotionalism and the tapping of submerged biases. But humankind is entering into an era where manipulation has grown simultaneously invisible, terrifyingly precise, and

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embedded in everyday life.

And now, the tech giants are racing to insert themselves more intimately in people's lives, this time as personal assistants. The tech companies want us to tie ourselves closely to their machines—those speakers that they want us to keep in our kitchens and our bedrooms: Amazon's Echo, Google Home, Apple's Siri. They want their machines to rouse us in the morning and to have their artificial intelligence guide us through our days, relaying news and entertainment, answering our most embarrassing questions, enabling our shopping. These machines don't present us with choices. They aren't designed to present us with a healthy menu of options. They anticipate our wants and needs, even our informational and cultural wants and needs.

What's so pernicious about these machines is that they weaponize us against ourselves. They take our data—everywhere we have traveled on the web, every query we've entered into Google, even the posts we begin to write but never publish—and exploit this knowledge to reduce us to marionettes. All this has become painfully evident in the controversies over Facebook. With this intimate portrait of our brains, Facebook maps our anxieties and pleasure points. It uses the cartography of our psyche to array the things we read and the things we watch, to commandeer our attention for as long as possible, to addict us. When our conversation and debate is so intensely and intricately manipulated, can it truly be said to be free?

**N**OW THE BILL IS coming due. Big tech is no longer a magical new invention; it is an established social fact. People can see the ugly implications of its creation, and they're begging the companies to

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clean it up. People are asking them to eliminate links to sex trafficking, to stymie hostile foreign powers intent on exploiting their technologies. And if we stopped there, we might cheer them for exhibiting a new sense of responsibility. But we won't stop there. We will have glimpsed the ability of the big tech companies to purge the detritus from the public sphere, to broom away the broken bottles of hate speech and the shards of noxious opinion. People will increasingly ask them to create a safe, hygienic space for conversation—and they will acknowledge this request. As Facebook puts it in its recently released “community standards”: “People need to feel safe in order to build community. We are committed to removing content that encourages real-world harm, including (but not limited to) physical, financial, and emotional injury.”

It's hard not to be sympathetic to this impulse. Does anyone other than ISIS really want Google highlighting ISIS recruitment videos? Do people want Facebook used as a haven for the sharing of white-supremacist ideas? But there's no way that Facebook and Google can play this role with any sense of true neutrality. (The fear of political backlash will always haunt them. That's why Facebook created a group of advisers to make sure that it wasn't being biased against conservatives. Somehow I doubt that they will have a similar board to ensure against anti-socialist bias.) To state the obvious, these are multinational corporations, with an ultimate interest in their bottom lines. They will never be capable of regulating the public sphere that they control in any name other than their own profit.

It is stunning to watch the ideological backsliding of Big Tech. Not so many years ago Silicon Valley postured as libertarian. But when Lindsey Graham, a

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Republican senator, asked Mark Zuckerberg a pointed question about his power, the Facebook CEO supplied a response that befuddled the senator: “I think the real question, as the internet becomes more important in people's lives, is what is the right regulation, not whether there should be or not.” And then in an unintentionally revealing moment that captured the danger inherent in this answer, the senator asked Zuckerberg to submit a draft of regulations that he might accept. Once Facebook uses its political muscles to sculpt regulation, it becomes almost impossible to imagine that the regulation will advance the common good.

In fact, now that these companies bestride the markets in which they roam, the primary danger they face isn't meddling regulators or hyperactive legislators. What the behemoths of Silicon Valley truly fear is the possibility that antitrust laws will be deployed to shatter them into much smaller units. Mark Zuckerberg can live with the government imposing rules about harassment, hate speech, and even privacy, because those rules will help stave off the debate over monopoly. And such regulation would likely even entrench Facebook's power. Smaller challengers to Facebook will struggle to deal with a complicated, pricey regulatory apparatus. Facebook could come to be seen as the necessary bulwark against the demons of the Internet, the demons that it helped unleash.

We knew well about the dangers of a cozy relationship between the state and giant corporations—and how regulations that are ostensibly designed to limit corporate power are captured and twisted by the most powerful companies to stymie competition. Such relationships define our political economy. But tech companies carry a very different sort of cargo—they trade in the commodities

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of speech. Once we extend the state into this realm, we're entering danger territory.

John Milton railed against this very thing in *Areopagitica*—the dangerous hubris of government playing the role of gatekeeper to the world of knowledge:

Are twenty men enough to estimate all the genius and the good sense of England? Is there to be a monopoly of knowledge; are the products of all English brains to be stamped like broadcloth and woolpacks? The affront is not to the educated alone: the common people are just as much wronged by the notion that they are too giddy to be trusted with a flighty tract.

We don't need to use our imaginations here. There are examples all over the world—in Russia, in China—where governments have made their peace with social media, by setting the terms that govern it. These regimes permit a cacophony of ideas, except for the ones that truly challenge political power.

Donald Trump should be the object lesson that shuts down this debate before it begins. Not since World War I has the United States had a president who so disrespects the idea of free speech—who threatens to file libel lawsuits and muses openly about loosening libel laws, who attempts to rile hatred of media, who talks fawningly of authoritarian leaders in other countries.

Yet these times, for all of their historic echoes, are different. The political

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dynamic is familiar, but the technology is unprecedented. The present global explosion of anxiety and hate is unlike anything most of us have ever witnessed. People don't know how to confront these evils, which come in nearly every direction, in the form of theological zealots, demagogic populists, avowed racists, and trollish misogynists. In the face of such menace, it's natural to appeal to a higher power for protection—but in our panic we need to be clear about which threats are genuine and which are merely rhetorical. And panic shouldn't lead us to seek protection that inadvertently squashes our own liberties.

John Milton was an expert on dangerous ideas. His greatest work, of course, was *Paradise Lost*—about the Garden of Eden, the ultimate story of human exposure to danger. Even in the *Areopagitica*, he had interesting thoughts about the lessons of Adam and Eve—about how the forbidden fruit is the essence of freedom and the precondition for morality. Long before John Stuart Mill wrote about the marketplace of ideas, Milton wrote beautifully about the imperative of testing our ideas:

Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: That which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. ... They are not skillful considerers of human things who imagine to remove sin by removing the matter of sin. Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparably.... It was from out of the rind of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evil, as two twins cleaving together, leaped forth into this world. And perhaps this is that doom which

Adam fell into of knowing good and evil, that is, of knowing good by evil.

Milton, the Puritan, believed that Truth could never be known until the second coming. Until then, it would remain elusive. And in the meantime, we all search for the truth, discovering it through errors, unimpeded by censors, unafraid of what we might encounter.

Now stand that faith in reason next to the ethos of Big Tech, next to the Google and Facebook attitude toward truth. Silicon Valley doesn't understand truth as a quest or trial, but as an engineering challenge. They believe human behavior and human choices can be predicted by algorithms on the basis of past behavior. (Eric Schmidt has boasted that Google can predict where you will be 24 hours from now based on where you have been.) They believe that our lives can be programmed to be more efficient. By steering and nudging us, by designing the architecture of our decision-making process, they claim to be relieving of us of the burden of choice. Silicon Valley talks endlessly about the virtues of the frictionless life.

Facebook has made it possible to live in a filter bubble, where we don't have to contend with the unpleasantness of confronting opinions we dislike—and where there's a mute button to effortlessly quiet voices we would rather not hear. Mark Zuckerberg's dream, the dream he continues to profess, even after all of the controversy, is the dream of global community—the idea of a global network that transforms the planet into a place of understanding. As we join Zuckerberg's community, he fantasizes that the sense of connection will cause

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our differences to melt away—like a digital version of the old Coca Cola commercial, or, as I argue in my book, World Without Mind, a revival of the '60s counterculture and the vision of life on a commune.

Yet the Miltonic search for truth and knowledge is all about friction, about the human growth that comes with the complications of human existence. Argument is the most important form of friction, and the distilled essence of democracy. Our public sphere has been a place of profound discomfort, because “that which purified us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary.”

Preservation of democratic society means that there is no escaping the trial, no fleeing from the discomfort.

In other words, preservation of democracy requires preserving this ecosystem of ideas that has miraculously persisted with us since the 17th century. People can't afford to be seduced by the false prophets of disruption, the charlatans who argue that we abandon old wisdoms in the face of new gadgets. Just because Facebook insists that media shifts its resources into video doesn't mean that media needs to oblige. We need to shape the culture so that the prestige of engineering doesn't continue to come at the expense of the humanities. We need to preserve literature as a primary technology for interrogating the meaning of life. We need to resist the tendency to reduce the world to data. And when an adolescent asks us about God? We can at least answer in the negative, by holding up our phones and saying, “It's not this.”

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*This essay was adapted from a lecture delivered in Hilversum, Netherlands, on May 2, 2018.*

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