

# Responding to the Power of FANG

*Stephen Doel celebrates the creative and communal gifts brought by God through the companies that dominate the internet, notes the dangers and problems of accountability and regulation which their power implies, and concludes with a positive as well as critical appraisal of how Christians could react to the reality of their power. One day they will be no more, but God will always be.*

We are all aware of the huge power now concentrated in the hands of a few US companies that dominate the Internet: Facebook, a massive global club; Amazon, a vast global bazaar; Netflix, a global TV, movie and video service; and Google, essentially a huge global library. You could throw Apple and Microsoft in as well as the main suppliers of software and hardware. It is interesting that Europe seems to have conceded US domination in this area very easily.

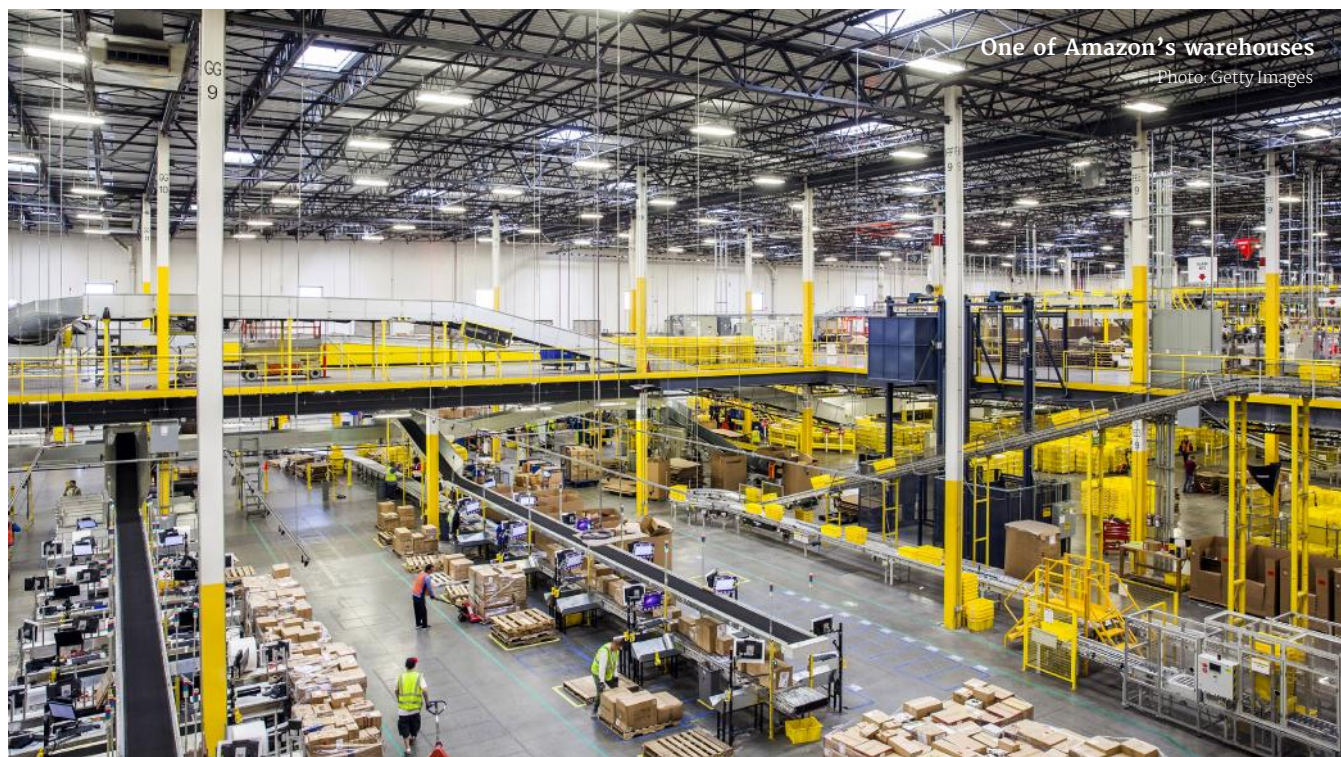
China is putting up more of a fight.

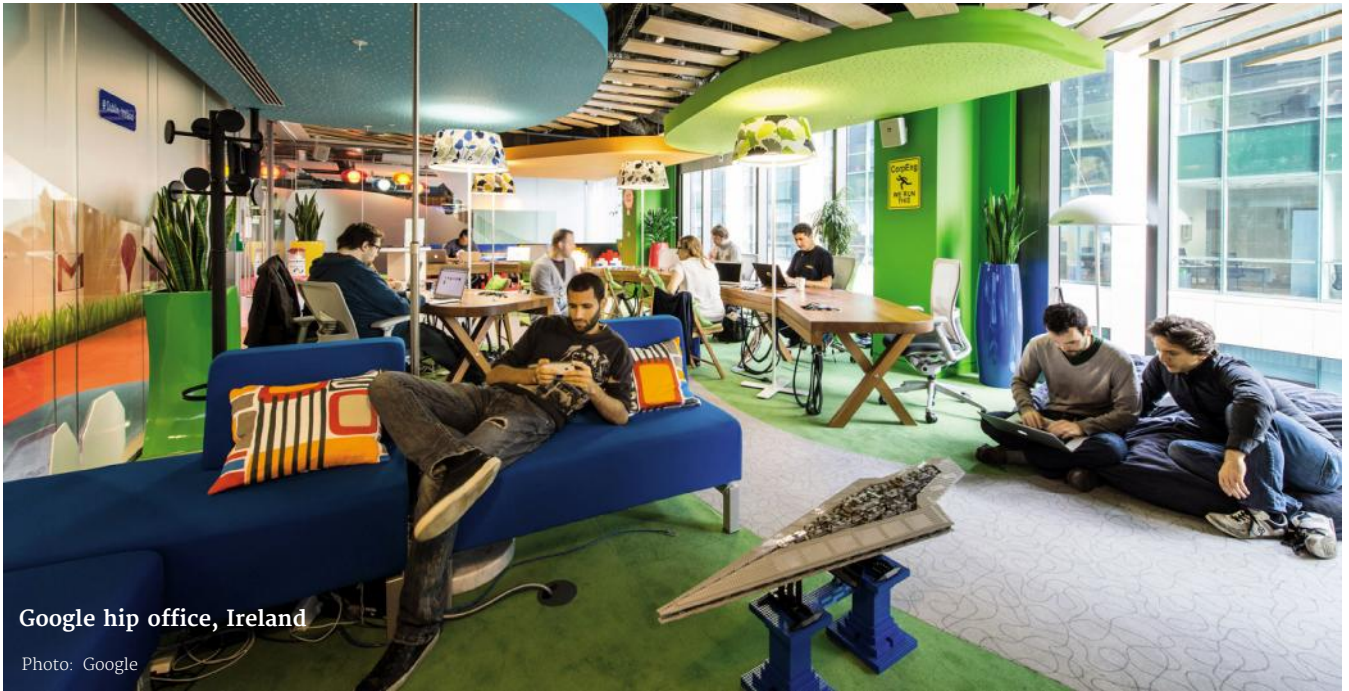
This article seeks to address such a massive concentration of power from a Christian perspective, hopefully without reacting in a knee-jerk way but with a mature assessment, weighing the ways these companies use their power both for good and bad. Clearly there are issues of censorship as well as market dominance, which are now extremely topical.

## The Rise of FANG

Facebook has 2 billion active users – that’s almost 30% of the world’s population. Amazon is worth more than all the bricks and mortar retailers in USA – combined. 65% of 16-24 year olds in USA use Netflix every month. Google processes over 1 trillion searches per year – that’s 40,000 per second.

And yet less than a quarter of a century ago, none of these companies existed.





Google hip office, Ireland

Photo: Google

The rise of these internet giants – collectively known as FANG – has been faster and caused more disruption than any other business and technological change in history. Information, friends and the latest gadget are all now just a click away.

But such rapid change has also brought its share of problems, as governments, regulators and the companies themselves have struggled to respond to the increasing global power these corporations wield over the world’s population.

We will explore some of the positive and negative ways FANG have impacted upon society, and suggest ways that Christians may respond.

### How FANG has Changed Society

When I left University in 1995, I spent a few months travelling the world before entering employment. I kept a diary and posted excerpts back to my parents every few weeks. I was able to phone them around once a month when I came across a reliable phone and could reverse charges. I took lots of photos, and finally got to see them five months later when I arrived home and printed them at Boots. I read *Lord of the Rings* when

travelling the Trans-Siberian Express.

Earlier this year, my daughter went to stay with her German Exchange partner in Heidelberg. She video-called us each evening on her Google Android phone using Facebook’s What’s App, sharing photos on the same app as we talked. She downloaded movies from Netflix to her phone to watch on the journey there and back. She stayed in touch with her friends on Snapchat. And I guess if she’d needed anything, we could have bought it for her and she’d have received it in Germany next day, using Amazon Prime.

This is the power that we, as consumers, feel from FANG: instant and close connection, simplicity and speed. Getting what we want, when we want it. It’s made our world smaller and more accessible. These companies have transformed society – and will continue to do so.

The positive impacts to business and the economy have been just as profound. New ecosystems like the app economy have been created, stimulating innovation and generating jobs. Small businesses can now raise brand awareness and find far wider markets locally, nationally and globally: It’s estimated that last

year, Google’s search and advertising tools helped provide \$222 billion of economic activity for 1.5 million businesses, website publishers, and non-profit organisations.

FANG constantly raise the innovation bar, forcing traditional businesses to improve. Amazon is perhaps the leader here, relentlessly delivering platforms that each serve their customers in the best and fastest possible way. All these are now considered the norm: next day delivery of almost anything, packing dozens of books to read on holiday with an e-book, remote hosting of company web services, streaming any song to your phone.

And FANG are changing the workplace as they compete with each other to hire and retain the best talent. As well as top drawer compensation, they are at the forefront of innovations in employee benefits. Netflix doesn’t have a vacation policy, trusting its employees to manage their own time. Facebook offers four months of paid parental leave to mothers and fathers. Google is famous for free lunches and hip office layouts.

However, these enormous companies are now able to exert unprecedented levels of power. In the modern

economy, information and data are the most valuable currencies. And because FANG manage and service our data really, really well, they own and control more of it than anyone else. This leads to accusations of anti-competitive practices, unacceptable monitoring of users, and censoring or promoting preferred content – to the extent Facebook was alleged to have influenced the 2016 US election through “fake news”.

Other practices considered to be unfair regularly make the headlines. In January 2016, Google agreed to repay £130M to the UK government in back taxes covering the previous decade, the latest in a long line of global companies exploiting loopholes to minimise their tax obligations. Google has also been subject to anti-trust investigations by both European and US authorities over concerns it abuses its dominant position in the search process, leading to a record £2b fine for breaching EU competition rules. And Amazon was exposed in 2016 by *The Times* amongst others with accusations that it exploits and abuses staff in its warehouses, particularly agency workers and those working in the ‘gig economy’.

Governments are increasingly concerned about the power and monopolistic status of these companies. As they continue to assess options to regulate them fairly, some critics are even suggesting a form of 21<sup>st</sup> Century nationalisation. But regulation across geographical boundaries is a problem governments have always struggled to address effectively. And so as politicians continue to deliberate, FANG continue to grow in size and influence, becoming larger than the economies of many countries around the world.

So how are we, as Christians, to respond? How do we balance enjoying all the benefits FANG provides with allaying some of the concerns outlined above?

### Suggestions for a Christian Response

We should recognise and celebrate that these companies are doing much that is good: as they innovate and explore they are revealing aspects of God’s creation that were previously hidden. They are generating wealth and employment. They are thriving because they provide services which customers appreciate and feel they

can’t do without. They are modern-day ‘powers and authorities’ (Col.1:16). Ultimately, they were created by God and are successful only because God allows them.

Christian businesses and business people will therefore rightly utilise the resources provided by FANG – Amazon Web Services to host online infrastructure, Gmail and Google’s integrated office suite, Facebook for marketing and promotion and so on.

In particular, we should be keen to use them to progress and advance the gospel and social action. Great examples of this include:

**MicroEnsure** which provides ultra-low cost insurance to more than 55 million vulnerable people in the developing world, using mobile phones and text messaging

**Premier Radio**, now a successful online radio platform, has used the digital platform to grow its fundraising capability manifold over the past few years. It actively promotes and helps other Christian organisations to utilise digital media, notably through its annual PremDAC conference



**YouVersion's Bible app** – the whole Bible and vast additional resources on your phone, installed over 100 million times from Google Play across the globe

The church should continue to engage more and more with FANG, using its technology to post sermons and other helpful material online, raise awareness of the persecuted church, and stay connected with missionaries in a way that simply wasn't possible a few years ago.

But we need also to recognise that they are fallen, imperfect organisations run by worldly people, sinners like you and me. So we can admire Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos and the other great leaders and technologists in these companies. And we can admire the companies they have built. But we must recognise some of the problems their existence has introduced or exacerbated.

Arguably the biggest of these problems has been to create an overwhelming focus on "me". Because a focus on "me" is something humankind likes and wants, we are often prepared to overlook the potential dangers.

Right back to Adam and Eve, we have an insatiable desire for knowledge and information to the point of spoiling our relationships with others and with God.

Knowing this, FANG feed us with more and more ways of generating and accessing information – data which they use to personalise our experiences with them, implying a personal interest in us which can be deceptive. This increases our dependency on them and their services, and expands their power seemingly exponentially in an economy where data is now the most powerful currency.

I believe as Christians we are called to challenge these issues. Here are some specific ways we should look to do this:

**We must not overlook ethical problems for our convenience:** So we support governments seeking to limit their powers, for example as they crack down on tax avoidance. Or perhaps more difficult for many – we support Transport for London in their dispute with another rising 'giant', Uber. We rightly recognise its failure to properly report sex crimes and other systemic operational failings, even if that makes our travel in the capital harder

**We must remember we are God's precious people, made in his image:** The convenience provided

by FANG depersonalises our interactions with those who actually provide our services and goods, creating a tendency to treat people as interchangeable units of consumption and production. So whilst we like the concept of overnight delivery, we must also ensure that Amazon addresses its employee working

conditions.

**We must see the idolatry exposed in our society:** FANG aim to give us what we want now, and to determine what we will want in the future. They both reflect the values of society and also shape society. They are exaggerating our idolatrous culture, often by fanning it into flame. Where society seeks to address this, Christians can take the lead by showing self-restraint and demonstrating our contentment in Christ.

**We must avoid harmful behaviours ourselves:** FANG aim to create a dependency for their customers, so they become the platform of choice. We need to be cognisant of how this may affect us individually, for example resisting the temptation of our own addictive behaviors which can be exacerbated on these platforms, or from making insensitive comments on social media.

**We must work faithfully:** For those working in the FANG companies – or the many other companies who are similar or seeking to emulate them – we can have no better example than the Old Testament character Daniel. "Headhunted" into a senior position in the Babylonian court, he faced difficulties working in an empire that was not God-focused. He found ways to operate in a godly way but kept red lines, issues on which he was prepared to take a stand: for example, eating unclean food (Daniel 1) and praying to false gods (Daniel 3 & 6). He wasn't prepared to compromise on these issues, no matter what the risks – and nor must we. Christians working in FANG companies have a great opportunity to challenge issues like the ones identified above – from within – and must seek to do this with wisdom and grace.

**We must consider alternatives:** Either as consumers or businesses, we should assess whether there are alternative choices to the pure convenience of using FANG's services. So we may choose to buy direct from a Christian publisher, Eden or 10ofThose, rather than from Amazon. Or use search engines that either promote Christianity or Christian values, like ProLifeInternet.

And what about the companies themselves? Their rise has been so

fast and dramatic, and their power is now so great, that it can feel as if they are incapable of self-restraint. Not content with establishing a near-monopoly of the book trade, Amazon is now penetrating many other retail markets. Having conquered the internet, Google is now using voice technology to become ubiquitous in the home and car. Facebook acquires almost every successful competitor to stay ahead.

The Bible teaches us it was always like this, starting soon after the creation of humanity with the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11). The people then had great intentions, to build a city and live in community. But as they established the city, instead of creating a community with God at the centre, the builders put a tower there. So God frustrated their plan and their community was destroyed.

Similarly, Facebook, Amazon, Netflix and Google all started from essentially worthy beginnings, seeking to bring together communities and make the world a better place. But over time, they all have or will overreach themselves. So we can know that one day they all will be replaced or destroyed. We see this repeated throughout history with the rise and fall of empires: the Babylonian Empire, Roman Empire, British Empire. And we see this with companies over the last century or two – Enron, Woolworths, Standard Oil.

Because what starts as worthy is corrupted by sin, especially the sins of pride and idolatry, and eventually

destroyed. So, no matter whether we see FANG as overall good, or overall bad, we know that God is more powerful than all these companies. We need the faith to know that he will never allow their power to become too great. One day they will be no more, but God will always be.

### Conclusion

To finish, therefore, it feels appropriate to encourage a virtue that has been strongly emphasized in the Christian tradition, that of moderation.

King Solomon was the wisest king to ever rule over Israel, and he experimented with excess. In Ecclesiastes 2, Solomon lists many different projects and pleasures he pursued: “I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labour, and this was the reward of all my toil” (verse 10). Yet, in the end, he was left dissatisfied: “When I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun” (verse 11).

FANG companies similarly have changed our world. Their innovation has revealed many good things in God’s creation, that we as consumers

either cannot – or believe we cannot – now do without. However, their desire to continue to grow, to be the biggest, the most important, the most valuable, has resulted in a number of questionable business practices.

Similarly, as consumers, we have embraced the technologies, benefits and pleasures these companies offer. But in doing so we often find ourselves overlooking some of these practices in the pursuit of comfort, convenience and connection for ourselves.

**‘So, no matter whether we see FANG as overall good, or overall bad, we know that God is more powerful than all these companies.’**

Solomon not only tested the limits of pleasure; he did the same with things we normally see as good, like wisdom (Ecclesiastes 1:12–18) and hard work (Ecclesiastes 2:17–23). Solomon’s conclusion was that every endeavour of his proved meaningless by itself.

The same opportunities and warnings expressed by Ecclesiastes are similarly present now, both for the FANG companies and their consumers today: God’s gift to human beings is to enjoy our life and His gifts (Ecclesiastes 5:19) in the sufficiency of Christ. When we value those things more than God, we are ultimately frustrated, disappointed and destroyed – because we’ve forgotten what our hearts really need – Him. 🙏



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