

Scholar says Google criticism cost him job: 'People are waking up to its power'

Barry Lynn has spent years studying the growing power of tech giants such as Google, and asking if they are monopolies. He believes the answer is yes



Barry Lynn was until recently a senior fellow at thinktank New America Foundation, which has received millions in donations from Google. Photograph: Leon Neal/Getty Images

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06.00 EDT 10.43 EDT

Every second of every day Google processes over 40,000 search queries – that’s about 3.5bn questions a day or 1.2tn a year. But there’s one question that Google apparently doesn’t want answered: is [Google](#) a monopoly?

Barry Lynn, until this week a senior fellow at Washington thinktank the New America Foundation, has spent years studying the growing power of tech giants like Google and Facebook. He believes the answer is yes. And that opinion, he argues, [has cost him his job](#).

This week Lynn and his team were ousted from New America after [the New York Times](#) published emails that suggested Google was unhappy with his research. The tech giant, along with executive chairman Eric Schmidt, have donated \$21m to New America since 1999. Schmidt chaired the organisation for years and its main conference room is called the “Eric Schmidt Ideas Lab”.

Google-funded thinktank fired scholar over criticism of tech firm

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“I’ve been there for 15 years,” Lynn told the Guardian. “And for 14 everything was great. In the last year or so it has got more difficult. And from every piece of evidence that we are seeing that has to do with pressure from Google.

“Every day I see people waking up to the power of Google, Facebook and Amazon. We have to do something as a people, we have to do something through our government and address the power of these companies. The number of congressmen and others making statements on Capitol Hill about this is growing very rapidly. The number of businesses who are saying that something must be done about the power of these companies and the way they use their power.”

Google enjoyed a long honeymoon where it was seen as a force for good. But as fears over tech oligopolies grow, industry giants such as Amazon, Google and Facebook have found themselves the subject of greater scrutiny from governments and skeptics in academia.

Lynn, who ran New America’s Open Markets Initiative, said his problems began last June when the European Union fined Google a record [€2.42bn](#) (\$2.7bn) for breaching antitrust rules and abusing its market dominance.

Lynn posted a brief note applauding the decision and calling on US regulators “to build upon this important precedent”. The post effectively ended his 15-year career at New America, he claims.

In a statement New America’s chief executive Anne-Marie Slaughter called the claims “absolutely false” and blamed Lynn’s “repeated refusal to adhere to New America’s standards of openness and institutional collegiality” for the decision.

Google said it would “not be a fair characterization at all” to blame Google for the decision. “I can confirm that our funding levels for 2017 have not changed as a result of NAF’s June post, nor did Eric Schmidt ever threaten to cut off funding because of it,” a spokeswoman said via email.

But for Lynn and others, this was more than just an office spat with a thinktank backer or office politics gone wrong . It represents a threat to independent research at a time when companies like Google are consolidating their enormous power.

“Things started going wrong last summer,” Lynn told the Guardian. Open Markets began working with senator Elizabeth Warren to help her prepare a speech on America’s monopolies and what to do about them.



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Eric Schmidt, executive chairman of Alphabet, Google’s parent company. The conference room at New America Foundation is called the ‘Eric Schmidt Ideas Lab’. Photograph: Christophe Morin/IP3/Getty Images

Google, Amazon and Facebook were platforms that could become tools “to snuff out competition,” [Warren warned](#). “Anyone who loves markets knows that for markets to work, there has to be competition. But today, in America, competition is dying. Consolidation and concentration are on the rise in sector after sector. Concentration threatens our markets, threatens our economy, and threatens our democracy.”

Before the conference Slaughter’s response was to email Lynn, a correspondence which the New York Times obtained. “We are in the process of trying to expand our relationship with Google on some absolutely key points ... just *think* about how you are imperiling funding for others.”

Shortly after the Times story was published earlier this week, Lynn and his team were out.

New America had traditionally given its experts autonomy. “They could say what they wanted to say,” said Lynn. “We had these units of expertise and the tradition at New America was that you trusted these experts.”

Lynn said he would guess that Google’s attitude had changed for two reasons. First, Open Markets had been gained greater weight in the eyes of policymakers and enforcers. Second, regulators, especially in Europe, have clearly moved towards taking more action.

“Google is a very sophisticated team of people. They know how to spend their money and wield their influence in ways that usually get them what they want,” Lynn said. “In terms of researchers, the danger is that research and work writing about Google, about platform monopoly in general, work that should be doing for the good of the American public will not be done.”

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Marshall Steinbaum, research director and fellow at the Roosevelt Institute, agrees. “On one level it is completely shocking that something like this has taken place, but it is also not surprising given the degree of market power these companies have.

“This is a huge issue in higher education policy. Given the diminished financing from state and federal sources, independent research has become more reliant on corporate sources,” he said. And with that comes strings.

Pressure for change is mounting. Luigi Zingales, a professor at the University of Chicago Booth School, recently told [the Financial Times](#) that he and others believe antitrust laws should be reverted back to old laws that also limited political power – and in particular, continued the FT article, “the ability of rich companies and people in coastal areas to control everyone and everything else”.

Lynn has incorporated Open Markets Initiative as a separate entity and is working on launching a new thinktank. He said he hopes his new group will provide a platform for independent research into the power of companies like Google and Facebook.

“These effects are in so many corners of the political economy,” said Lynn.

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The story in the *New York Times* this week was unsettling: The New America Foundation, a major think tank, was [getting rid of one of its teams of scholars](#), the Open Markets group. New America had warned its leader Barry Lynn that he was “imperiling the institution,” the *Times* reported, after he and his group had repeatedly criticized Google, a major funder of the think tank, for its market dominance. The criticism of Google had culminated in Lynn posting a statement to the think tank’s website “[applauding](#)” the European Commission’s decision to slap the company with a record-breaking \$2.7 billion fine for privileging its price-comparison service over others in search results. That post was briefly taken down, then republished. Soon afterward, Anne-Marie Slaughter, the head of New America, told Lynn that his group had to leave the foundation for failing to abide by “[institutional norms of transparency and collegiality](#).”

Google denied any role in Lynn’s firing, and Slaughter tweeted that the “facts are largely right, but quotes are taken way out of context and interpretation is wrong.” Despite the conflicting story lines, the underlying premise felt familiar to me: Six years ago, I was pressured to unpublish a critical piece about Google’s monopolistic practices after the company got upset about it. In my case, the post stayed unpublished.

I was working for *Forbes* at the time, and was new to my job. In addition to writing and reporting, I helped run social media there, so I got pulled into a meeting with Google salespeople about Google’s then-new social network, Plus.

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The Google salespeople were encouraging *Forbes* to add Plus’s “+1” social buttons to articles on the site, alongside the Facebook Like button and the Reddit share button. They said it was important to do because the Plus recommendations would be a factor in search results—a crucial source of traffic to publishers.

This sounded like a news story to me. Google’s dominance in search and news give it tremendous power over publishers. By tying search results to the use of Plus, Google was using that muscle to force people to promote its social network.

I asked the Google people if I understood correctly: If a publisher didn’t put a +1 button on the page, its search results would suffer? The answer was yes.

After the meeting, I approached Google’s public relations team as a reporter, told them I’d been in the meeting, and asked if I understood correctly. The press office confirmed it, though they preferred to say the Plus button “influences the ranking.” They didn’t deny what their sales people told me: If you don’t feature the +1 button, your stories will be harder to find with Google.

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With that, I published a story headlined, “Stick Google Plus Buttons On Your Pages, Or Your Search Traffic Suffers,” that included bits of conversation from the meeting.

The Google guys explained how the new recommendation system will be a factor in search. “Universally, or just among Google Plus friends?” I asked. ‘Universal’ was the answer. “So if *Forbes*

doesn't put +1 buttons on its pages, it will suffer in search rankings?" I asked. Google guy says he wouldn't phrase it that way, but basically yes.

(An internet marketing group scraped the story after it was published and a version [can still be found here](#).)

Google promptly flipped out. This was in 2011, around the same time that a congressional antitrust committee was looking into whether the company [was abusing its powers](#).

Google never challenged the accuracy of the reporting. Instead, a Google spokesperson told me that I needed to unpublish the story because the meeting had been confidential, and the information discussed there had been subject to a non-disclosure agreement between Google and *Forbes*. (I had signed no such agreement, hadn't been told the meeting was confidential, and had identified myself as a journalist.)

It escalated quickly from there. I was told by my higher-ups at *Forbes* that Google representatives called them saying that the article was problematic and had to come down. The implication was that it might have consequences for *Forbes*, a troubling possibility given how much traffic came through Google searches and Google News.

I thought it was an important story, but I didn't want to cause problems for my employer. And if the other participants in the meeting had in fact been covered by an NDA, I could understand why Google would object to the story.

Given that I'd gone to the Google PR team before publishing, and it was already out in the world, I felt it made more sense to keep the story up. Ultimately, though, after continued pressure from my bosses, I took the piece down—a decision I will always regret. *Forbes* declined comment about this.

But the most disturbing part of the experience was what came next: Somehow, very quickly, search results stopped showing the original story at all. As I recall it—and although it has been six years, this episode was seared into my memory—a cached version remained shortly after the post was unpublished, but it was soon scrubbed from Google search results. That was unusual; websites captured by Google's crawler did not tend to vanish that quickly. And unpublished stories still tend to show up in search results as a headline. Scraped versions could still be found, but the traces of my original story vanished. It's possible that *Forbes*, and not Google, was responsible for scrubbing the cache, but I frankly doubt that anyone at *Forbes* had the technical know-how to do it, as other articles deleted from the site tend to [remain available through Google](#).

Deliberately manipulating search results to eliminate references to a story that Google doesn't like would be an extraordinary, almost dystopian abuse of the company's power over information on the internet. I don't have any hard evidence to prove that that's what Google did in this instance, but it's part of why this episode has haunted me for years: The story Google didn't want people to read swiftly became impossible to find through Google.

Google wouldn't address whether it deliberately deep-sixed search results related to the story. Asked to comment, a Google spokesperson sent a statement saying that *Forbes* removed the story because it was "not reported responsibly," an apparent reference to the claim that the meeting was covered by a non-disclosure agreement. Again, I identified myself as a journalist and signed no such agreement before attending.

People who paid close attention to the search industry noticed the piece's disappearance and [wrote about it](#), wondering why it disappeared. Those pieces, at least, are still findable today.

As for how effective the strategy was, Google's dominance in other industries didn't really pan out for Plus. Six years later, the social network is a ghost town and Google has basically [given up on it](#). But back when Google still thought it could compete with Facebook on social, it was willing to play hardball to promote the network.

Google started out as a company dedicated to ensuring the best access to information possible, but as it's grown into one of the largest and most profitable companies in the world, its priorities have changed. Even as it fights against ordinary people who want their personal histories removed from the web, the company has an incentive to suppress information about itself.

Google [said it never](#) urged New America to fire Lynn and his team. But an entity as powerful as Google doesn't have to issue ultimatums. It can just nudge organizations and get them to act as it wants, given the influence it wields.

Lynn and the rest of the team that left New America Foundation plan to establish a new nonprofit to continue their work. For now, they've launched a website called "[Citizens Against Monopoly](#)" that tells their story. It says that "Google's attempts to shut down think tanks, journalists, and public interest advocates researching and writing about the dangers of concentrated private power must end."

It's safe to say they won't be receiving funding from Google.

About the author



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