Making Sense of Online Space: How Rentierism Explains Big Tech

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Few innovations have altered the way Americans interact with place like the internet. The ever-growing online terrain, now accessible for everyday people, provides a limitless number of virtual alternatives to the physical worlds our bodies inhabit. As one might expect for such a revolutionary technology, the way the internet is conceptualized in public discourse has changed dramatically. Given the power of language to shape our collective imagination, the way we speak about the internet and the large companies that profit from it would seem to warrant scholarly as well as political attention.

Far from its early association with freedom, many political leaders increasingly describe the internet as a space cartelized by "Big Tech."[1] During the Democratic presidential debate of October 2019, for instance, candidates across the crowded stage vied to voice their concern over how Big Tech influences Americans' lives. Acknowledging the "growing concerns over the power of big tech companies," *New York Times* editor Marc Lacey asked the candidates whether they agreed with fellow presidential hopeful Elizabeth Warren's call for "companies like Facebook, Amazon, and Google to be broken up."[2] Their responses echoed Warren. Cory Booker warned of a "massive crisis" taking place, "not just in terms of anti-competitive practices, but also to undermine our democracy." Robert "Beto" O'Rourke scolded social media platforms for making "extraordinary profits" while abusing the public trust. Agreeing, Kamala Harris called the situation "a grave injustice." Bernie Sanders promised to take on "these huge monopolies," and Julian Castro decried the "monopolistic practices" of tech outlets that ran up large profits while "short-changing… its workers." Even Andrew Yang, the most tech-friendly candidate on the stage, admitted the need to "balance the scales against the big tech companies."[3] Later that evening other presidential contenders such as Amy Klobuchar, Joe Biden, and Pete Buttigieg also criticized Big Tech, adding to the chorus of candidates calling for change in Silicon Valley's business practices.[4]

These former presidential aspirants are far from the only politicians to speak of large technology companies in this manner. Congresswoman Alexandria

Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) promotes "taking an antitrust approach" to Big Tech and has voiced concerns about the use of facial recognition software.[5] Across the political aisle, Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) has denounced partisan bias on online platforms, declaring:

> Every time we search on Google, we see only the web pages that Google decides we should see, in the order that Google decides we should see them.… This is a staggering amount of power to ban speech, to manipulate search results, to destroy rivals, and to shape culture. More and more Americans are demanding accountability from Big Tech for that massive power.[6]

Cruz's Senate colleague Josh Hawley (R-MO) has built a brand out of attacking tech companies as an "existential threat," voicing concern over everything from violations of child privacy to collaboration with Chinese state-owned enterprises.[7] The late Trump administration filed an antitrust suit against Facebook and ordered Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, and Alphabet (Google) to obtain information "on the terms, scope, structure, and purpose" of deals conducted from 2010-2019 for increased regulatory scrutiny.[8] And President Biden's Executive Order 14036 aimed to curtail the "harmful effects of monopoly" by targeting the anticompetitive habits of "dominant internet platforms."[9]

Taken as a whole, these criticisms cohere into three broad conclusions about the role of large technology firms in American life: (1) Big Tech has a negative influence on society, (2) the large profits generated by these companies are created at least in part through abusive practices like poor treatment of workers, manipulation of personal data, or leveraging their size to, in Castro's words, "help put small businesses out of business," and (3) those abusive practices are best addressed by government via the application of antitrust laws, perhaps even to the extent of breaking up companies. Put simply, in U.S. political discourse the tech industry is conceptualized as a monopolized economic space. It is thus unsurprising that these politicians almost uniformly employ antitrust language to make sense of this industry's harms; that is, their rhetoric depicts Silicon Valley as a monopoly in need of breaking up, a "gilded age" system of vast fortunes and exploitation that, in its most stark portrayals, ravenously devours competition as its algorithms progressively extirpate the few remain-

ing bastions of privacy and private enterprise that remain uncolonized by the web economy.[10] Far from halcyon visions of the web as a place of freedom and human connection, an unlimited discursive buffet one might surf from idea to idea, the internet is now oft described as a monopolized exchange dominated by exploitative and unaccountable technological giants.

Yet despite the agreement that Big Tech presents some new form of monopoly, this depiction can mislead if understood the wrong way. Antitrust, we argue, is not the best framework for understanding the monopoly power of web economies. While the size of these operations does perhaps lend itself to an argument for federal antitrust intervention, there is more to the story than the uncompetitive capture of wealth. Scholars of space and place would greatly benefit from taking a more accurate survey of the new economy emerging in Silicon Valley, beginning with an appreciation for rents and their resulting impacts on competitive markets. Amazon offers low prices on its products not merely through the creative manipulation of supply chains, ever-more vigilant employee surveillance, or increased data on retail storefronts, but through the leasing of its private resources to maintain much of the backbone of the internet: namely, Amazon Web Services, which netted $45.3 billion in revenue in 2020, good for 63 percent of the entire company's annual operating profits.[11]

Rather than antitrust, we propose a more compelling model for understanding the monopoly power of Big Tech: rentierism. Rentierism provides a better heuristic for making sense of Big Tech's production of value and subsequent sociopolitical impact than approaches that focus on antitrust or anticompetitive industry practices. If, as Christopher M. Duerringer notes, "the economic is rhetorical," and public discourse reflects economic as well as political and rhetorical forces, then it's worth trying to unpack how these forces work in concert to shape the "choices we make about what we buy, how and how much we work, and how we apportion the limited resources in our grasp."[12] It is our claim that, in the case of Big Tech, rentier arrangements ultimately position consumers as participants in a cyber economy based on the continual extraction and payment of rents. Interventions that miss this critical insight will misdiagnose how Big Tech's organization of online space(s) impacts the lives of everyday citizens. In this article we operate on the assumption that rhetorical scholars possess a responsibility to act as "consumer 'watchdogs' in the mar-

ketplace of ideas," thereby helping "our fellow citizens make sense of complex public policy debates."[13]

This paper unfolds in several stages. First, we construct a framework for making sense of rentierism—a concept typically confined to economic, political, and social scientific research—from a rhetorical perspective. We do this by considering the impact of rentier arrangements in Saudi Arabia and Jordan, where rentier economies have transformed social attitudes, identity categories, and the political organization of space and place. We then show how this framework applies to the tech industry in the United States, demonstrating how rentierism supplies a better lens than antitrust for understanding the way Big Tech firms generate value by examining Amazon Web Services (AWS) as a specific case study. Finally, we close the essay by considering the implications of this article for political debates surrounding Big Tech and the academic study of space and place.

Rentier Economies

The term "rentier economy" refers to a state in which the primary source of revenue is derived from external rents. Rents in this arrangement are based on the ownership of land or other resources. Traditionally, scholars have understood the rentier relationship to be between a state or nation with a coveted resource and an external renter who benefits from that resource. Because a primary source of income in these states is external rents, often the state retains or develops little productive capacity; like a slothful landlord, rentier states may languidly rely on passive income (rents) to get by.

Hazem Beblawi sets forth several general observations of rentier economies. First, he notes that "there is no such thing as a pure rentier economy. Each and every economy has some elements of rent."[14] The issue is one of degree: insofar as the exchange of rents animates an economy, we might characterize it as a rentier economy in the same way the exchange of services predominates a primarily service-oriented economy.[15] Second, rentier economies rely on outside monetary inputs to sustain themselves. If all exchanges of rents were internal to a state, society, or industry, then that would entail "no more than a situation of domestic payment transfer." [16] Lastly, the pull of a rentier economy is such that it generates the creation of markets and structures around the rentier activity to support its role and success. This effect can be observed in petrostates as well

as in digital economies, where entire markets spring up to support platforms that have attracted large followings.

For the purposes of this analysis, we will be considering rents as payments to an external entity for the use or extraction of a coveted resource, be it petroleum, physical territory, platform access, or server uptime. While many types of "rents" exist in economic theory, our intervention is focused on the ways in which rentier frameworks help explain the development of reciprocal relationships existing between tech giants such as Amazon, Google, etc. and their clients/customers. While an antitrust framework might correctly estimate the size and socioeconomic influence of companies such as Amazon, it fails to fully account for the rents extracted as payment for participation in the modern internet economy. Before addressing how digital space might be considered a resource accessed through rents in the form of personal information, attention, and cash, we first explain how physical goods like oil and territory can operate as rents and discuss the effect these rentier economies have on political norms.

The Political Import of Rentier Economies: Saudi Arabia

To restate, rentierism is a way of describing political economic systems in which the exchange of value is centered on the acquisition and distribution of rents, with political power flowing to those that control this process. Rent, from this vantage, consists of "externally-derived, unproductively-earned payments," or revenue that comes from sources other than those extracted (such as taxation) or produced within the state.[17] Rentier economies have historically been understood in terms of state development, such that "rentier state" is a label given to countries whose political economies do not appear to align within traditional Weberian or Marxist models of how a state functions. As Matthew Gray notes, rentierism is often invoked to provide an explanation for state-society relations in countries where a significant portion of revenues come from outside sources: "since the state receives this external income and distributes it to society, it is relieved of having to impose taxation, which in turn means that it does not have to offer concessions to society such as a democratic bargain or a development strategy."[18] Thus in the classic model of a rentier state, external rents accrue directly to the state, which then redistributes that income in a way that ensures the regime's political survival as opposed to relying on legitimacy derived from elections, economic growth, ideology, or other sources.

Saudi Arabia provides a quintessential example of an oil-based rentier state. The petroleum sector as a whole accounts for roughly 90 percent of Saudi Arabia's export earnings and 75 percent of its government budget revenues.[19] The state-owned oil monopoly, Saudi Aramco, has exclusive rights to drill for oil on Saudi territory.[20] Saudi Aramco employs large numbers of foreign workers to extract oil from land Saudi Arabia controls and exports it to the tune of 13 million barrels per day.[21] The profits from oil sales then fund the Saudi government, which redistributes that wealth throughout society, often in the form of public-sector jobs for vast numbers of the native population.[22] Thus, the Saudi royal family, which oversees this entire process, is able to control the country as a whole because it is the central authority that redistributes the oil wealth directly and indirectly throughout society. Although this system leads to an inefficient and over-subsidized public sector, frequently creating "neopatrimonial bureaucratic fiefdoms," it generally works to bind the Saudi population to the Saudi ruling regime.[23] In fact, one Saudi minister admitted in a 2016 interview that he thought many public sector workers did not work for even one hour per day.[24]

This political economic system has major effects on Saudi society. It contributes to authoritarianism by obstructing demand for democracy, as ordinary Saudi citizens are provided with a relatively comfortable lifestyle that might be put at risk by political reform.[25] Saudi Arabia's rentier structure also strongly disincentivizes nationals from joining the private labor force.[26] When faced with the choice between competing with foreign workers in the private sector (either highly educated technocrats or low-wage laborers) or seeking a stable, remunerative, and less demanding public sector job, it is unsurprising that most Saudis prefer the latter. Although there exists much scholarly debate over the effects and extent of Saudi Arabia's rentier system today, from a rhetorical perspective there are several clear aspects of this system worth noting.[27]

First, rentierism has generated an entrenched set of attitudes toward labor expectations among Saudi citizens. Many Saudis still desire to work in the public sector, despite attempts by the regime to use oil revenues to encourage private sector growth since the 1970s. (Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 program is the latest iteration of these campaigns).[28] Although reliable opinion data from the kingdom can be difficult to come by, a 2015 Gallup poll found that 75 percent of Saudis would prefer to work in the public sector versus

only 19 percent in the private sector; for women the gap increased to a 78-14 percent divide.[29] Given how deeply ingrained attitudes and cultural mindsets often perform "hidden dimensions of deliberation," it is not difficult to see how these strong preferences might constrain Saudi leaders' feasible range of political action.[30]

Similarly, rentierism in Saudi Arabia disrupts the associative links that bind work, reward, and wealth. In their study of the "Rentier Mentality" across the Arab world, Puranen and Widenfalk note that because "only a small fraction of the population is directly involved in the creation of wealth," views of work differed greatly from those that typically achieve prevalence in economically advanced countries: "Wealth is rather accidental, a windfall gain, or situational, where citizenship becomes a source of economic benefit."[31] Indeed, this "mentality" is reflected in the cultural value of acquiring *wasta* (واسطة), a broad term that roughly translates to a combination of nepotism, clout, and patronage.[32] Such is the ubiquity of *wasta* in Saudi Arabia that anti-corruption drives are often dismissed by many regular citizens. After several powerful businessmen were arrested for corruption-related charges in 2017, for example, one activist remarked, "This move is more a matter of organizing corruption so that it is in the hands of MBS [Mohammed bin Salman] and his coterie."[33] Cynicism of this sort carries political as well as economic ramifications, as the rentier structure of Saudi society saps individuals' belief that they can overcome barriers to improve their economic, social, or political well-being.[34]

Finally, rentierism in Saudi Arabia increases the salience of certain identity formations, as these offer access to networks of patrimonial wealth distribution. As Gwenn Okruhlik notes, class consciousness and traditional nationalism are generally weaker in rentier states, since citizens rarely define themselves by their relation to the means of production, nor do they uniformly experience "a defining exchange" with the state through extractive processes like taxation, military service, etc.[35] Instead, other identity formations tend to achieve greater salience since they play a more important role in patronage systems, which are often mediated through categories such as family, region, religion, kinship networks, tribe, or formal citizenship. The salience of these categories for social advancement can, in turn, produce powerful constitutive effects, generating a "practical consciousness" that guides beliefs, behavior, and belonging.[36]

This sketch illustrates some of the effects a rentier political economy can have on a political culture. The exchange of rents provides the locus around which domestic politics and society revolve in Saudi Arabia. However, it is crucial to note that massive amounts of petrodollars are not necessary to operate a rentier system. To illustrate how control of resources *other than commodities* can provide the basis for a rentier political economy, we now turn to one of Riyadh's neighbors: The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

Location and Space as Rent: Jordan

At first glance, Jordan might not appear to fit the definition of a rentier state. It lacks large-scale oil, gas, or other natural resource reserves that traditionally fuel a rentier economy; after all, if there's no oil money to distribute, then there's no political power that flows to the one who controls the distribution network. The small desert kingdom was created by the British delegation to the 1921 Cairo Conference, which announced that the lightly populated region surrounding the villages of Amman, Salt, Kerak, Jalon, and Ma'an—territory that had hitherto been considered either part of the Hijaz or Syria—would henceforth be considered an independent political entity.[37] Jordan has struggled to remain a viable state ever since. The monarchy has tempestuously ruled a society riven by cleavages between the wealthier north and poorer south, nomadic *bedouin* and settled *hadari*, "East Bank" Jordanians and Palestinians, urban and rural populations, refugees and native-born citizens, and numerous intertribal disputes. Consequently, the government has depended heavily on foreign aid to survive, first serving as a British client state and now relying on funds from the United States and Arab Gulf countries to remain solvent.[38]

Viewed in another light, however, these relationships demonstrate the Jordanian state's ability to extract revenue using one of its innate resources: *location*. Rather than translate a commodity such as oil to its financial advantage, Jordan leverages its territorial position. Placed in a region of critical geopolitical importance, Jordan received aid from the United States for aligning with it in the Cold War, an arrangement now updated for Amman's peace treaty with Israel and help in the American campaign against Salafi-Jihadist terrorism. This exchange can be understood in rentier terms. As Gray reiterates, rent comprises "externally-derived, usually unproductively-earned income resulting from natural resources or other natural or innate assets of an economy *or of a state's*

position or territory."[39] Like the Saudi royal family, the Jordanian monarchy uses revenue gained from an external source to fund an inflated public sector, which then solidifies the regime's political control of society; access to rent serves to make the Jordanian state "more autonomous from society and less consultative."[40] Although it lacks the opulence of a petrostate, rentierism thus also characterizes Jordan's political economy.

In other words, both Jordan and Saudi Arabia are rentier states. Saudi Arabia generates wealth by selling a commodity (oil) buried in its soil. Jordan generates wealth by leveraging its location to access largesse from the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other rich nations. Neither country's wealth is primarily generated from domestic economic activity. And in both countries, the entity that controls the distribution of wealth uses its position to control the political order. In Saudi Arabia, Aramco answers to the royal family. In Jordan, the king decides where the aid money goes. In this way, the leaders in each country rule by nature of their control of the rentier economy.

To be clear, Jordan illustrates how some actors may trade on resources other than exportable commodities to generate rents. Numerous countries use their territory to earn rents by leveraging a desirable location, allowing the presence of foreign military bases, or accepting aid to house refugees. Instead of literal commodities, these places generate rent via their control of the most "natural" resource of all: land.[41]

This phenomenon relates to rhetorical perspectives on place and space. As many scholars have noted, rhetorical studies have expanded beyond words to examine a broad range of places, objects, and locations.[42] Place, as defined by Endres and Senda-Cook, refers to "particular locations… that are semi-bounded, a combination of material and symbolic qualities, and embodied."[43] While they describe particular places in more limited terms, mentioning places like shopping malls, parks, or individual cities, their insight could be applied to larger territorial formations such as those used to generate rents in states like Jordan. The Hashemite monarchy's hosting of U.S. military infrastructure at Muwwafiq Salti Airfield, for example, carries both symbolic and material dimensions. The recent American investment of $143 million to expand the base has physically transformed the desert plain outside the historic Al-Azraq castle and also signifies the militaristic nature of Jordan's relationship with Washington.[44] This specific location, in turn, serves as a synecdoche for the

broader administration of Jordanian territory in ways that enable a rentier political economy to operate, impacting not only the organization of the nation's land but also its legal infrastructure, airspace, immigration policy, trade arrangements, educational system, and much else.[45]

If the organization of space and place enables "specific politics" such as Jordan's client relationship with the United States to exist, then a rentier political economy more widely works as a logic that "actualizes" social relations in fixed ways.[46] Namely, in the instances above rentierism functions to *insulate* the state, making it more durable, more resistant to social pressure, and more authoritarian as there is less need to consult or involve society in the political process. Amman did not need the approval of Jordanian citizens living in Al-Azraq to allow the United States to expand the Muwwafiq Salti base because the residents there have little legal recourse to challenge the monarchy's decision, and the American support the state receives in return for use of the airfield further reduces its need for popular support to maintain power. As this illustration suggests, however, rentier economies involving space or place often play out differently in liberal democratic contexts, where stronger private property laws open up new vistas within which rentier systems can operate—such as the internet.

Cookies, Apps, Tweets, News, and More: The Many Faces of the Rentier Internet

Scholars from many disciplines have pointed out the ways in which the transport and flow of goods in an online digital environment replicates rentier dynamics. Social media platforms, for instance, function as gatekeepers to all sorts of information, to which users are granted access in exchange for personal data. Dallas W. Smythe termed this dynamic the central "contradiction" by which digital audiences serve "as producers' goods in the marketing of mass-produced consumer goods and their work in producing and reproducing labour power."[47] Jodi Dean, whose work on "communicative capitalism" has been at the forefront of many academic discussions of Silicon Valley and media platforms, similarly acknowledges the role of a rental exchange when she writes of digital capitalism's markets. "In communicative capitalism," she writes, "the use value of a message is less important than its exchange value, its contribution to a larger pool, flow, or circulation of content."[48] Put simply, contempo-

rary participation in social media involves the continuous flow of information from the user (posts, location data, time spent gazing at ads) to the platform in return for access to the "larger pool, flow, or circulation of content"—the information other users have input into the system. Users gain access to valued digital spaces (Facebook pages, Twitter threads, Instagram pics, etc.) by handing over their information to the platform in a form of rental exchange.

The continued rental of access, however, comes at a noted psychological (and sometimes financial) toll for internet users. Many users now primarily experience the web through social media platforms. Countless studies have examined the changing conceptions or struggles of self as a result of extended existence in a hyper-saturated flow of content.[49] Many of these studies rightly focus on the emergence of a disciplined, mediated self that performs admirably within "neoliberal" conceptions of productivity and work ethic (#justdoit). Fueling this drive to perform for online audiences is often a desire to build one's own network of followers within the universe of the given platform; would-be TikTok influencers, for example, often pour great effort into their video productions that, ironically, seek to portray them nonchalantly at ease. An extensive network of supporters on Patreon can help support a struggling artist—if the artists can first attract a following of users willing to pay for access to content.[50] These interactions reproduce the broader rentier dynamics at play in these social media platforms writ large, illustrating how these platforms mediate smaller rentier exchanges on their networks. As in the sociopolitical systems discussed above, networks of clout, status, and patronage are immensely important on the rentier internet, both in the exchanges between platforms and users as well as interactions among users on the platform.

Another guise in which these rentier arrangements appear on the internet is the form of access agreements to digital locations. For instance, Google's Accelerated Mobile Pages (AMP) product—framed at its 2015 launch as a way to "repair an ailing 'open mobile web'"—redirected priority page view requests from mobile browsers to optimized listings hosted by Google. Pages on AMP loaded at "blazing speed," surfaced higher in news results, and integrated automatically with social media platforms like Facebook.[51] As publishers moved content to AMP they were guaranteed a favorable user experience on dominant social media platforms; their AMP-based products were able to take advantage of Google's new priority lane for web traffic in exchange for allowing

the content to be hosted on a Google server. In short, Google leveraged its position as the dominant internet search engine to induce online publishers to reformat their content for AMP distribution or risk being doomed to the second page (or lower) in Google search results. Web searches, unlike land or oil, are not a naturally occurring resource. Yet Google nonetheless receives benefits in return for granting access to publishers for placing their content at the top of search pages. These placements occupy spaces that are literally manufactured in server farms and sold as a kind of rent—guaranteed access to a territory with strategic advantage, for a price.

Many of the economies on the modern internet are quite literal rental exchanges. Print news media, which had previously subsisted on revenues from subscriptions and classifieds, clearly demonstrates this shift. The emergence of online news precipitated the collapse of innumerable newspapers as local press outlets buckled under the availability and expectations of free content. Of course, such content is often only "free" thanks to advertising and tracking technologies such as "cookies" that, yet again, access and monetize the user's personal information.[52] As a result, it is now common to encounter paywalls, location tracking, subscriptions, and yet more advertising—all rent-based revenues—in the world of online news.

Entire sectors of the entertainment economy now subsist on rents. The year 2020 saw scores of notable mainstream writers departing large publications to move their work to Substack, a company that sells monthly subscriptions to newsletters.[53] The music business, devastated by piracy and the rise of iTunes in the 2000s, has now become a rent-based industry. Music listeners in 2021 have a few mainstream options for accessing music, such as Spotify and Apple Music, but each streaming service involves renting access to an expansive music catalogue via subscriptions, exposure to advertisements, and/or limited-use agreements. Gone are days of "owning" music.

In similar fashion, app stores run by Google, Amazon, Apple, and others operate as exclusive portals through which customers can access software to use on their mobile devices. Because these stores wield virtually untrammelled control of the apps that can be downloaded for use on vast numbers of devices, they bestow immense leverage to the companies that manage them. Apple, for example, receives a quite controversial financial commission for purchases made by users while using apps downloaded from their app store, which has

led to repeated scuffles with developers. These rents may go beyond the financial. For example, these companies' control allows them to ban apps that contain political content with which they may disagree; for example, all three app stores banned the predominantly right-wing social media app Parler in the wake of the U.S. Capitol riot of January 6, 2021. In other words, corporate ownership of a valued resource (app stores) enables tech companies to extract ideological rents from app developers (i.e., conform to political standards or risk being deplatformed).[54] A similar dynamic governs the behavior of YouTube content producers, who must ensure that their channel does not run afoul of Google content codes. Otherwise, their channels may be demonetized, cutting them out of what has proven to be a lucrative market.[55]

Other forms of non-monetary rents are also extracted from users. For example, an investigation found that the Apple App Store "actively promotes pornographic content and apps like Tinder to users it believes are underage." The report continues: "In at least one case, Apple hosted an app for 'one-night stands' that allowed users to set their age as 14."[56] By promoting and hosting apps that purvey such sexual content, the Apple App Store directs its users' attention to programs that offer gateways into pornography and hookup culture, encouraging, in the words of Matthew Lee Anderson, "the commodification of sexuality, which turns other people—and the images of them—into objects for our own sexual pleasure."[57] And few corporations stand to profit more from the commodification of sex than the internet-based companies whose technology enables users to access explicitly sexual content and/or networks of prospective sexual partners.[58] At the risk of sounding trite, this is not an issue that mere trust-busting can adequately address.

Put simply, rentier logics saturate the digital online spaces in which Americans and others increasingly live their lives. The many faces of the rentier internet manifest in informational, financial, ideological, psychological, and "cognitive rents" extracted by tech companies and used, in various ways, to engineer profits.[59] Online spaces are configured in such a manner as to maximize Big Tech's revenues through innumerable, often unnoticed rents paid by users, advertisers, and other tech enterprises. Major tech companies thus specialize in the generation of online spaces, which they then creatively lease to various customers in a complex interaction that blurs traditional lines between content creator and audience member.[60] In sharp contrast to visions of techno-

utopianism that conceptualize the internet as a space of freedom and liberation from material worlds, these examples demonstrate that it is more accurate to think of the internet as an enormous collection of online spaces to which users gain access in exchange for some kind of rent.

Few tech platforms illustrate the centrality of rentierism for understanding the internet economy more clearly than Amazon Web Services (AWS). AWS highlights the importance of digital space as a commodity to be leased for profit within a rentier system on a much grander scale than any of its rivals. If, as Beblawi argues, rents may accrue from "all natural and differential endowments," which includes location, then AWS shows exactly how profitable and powerful such a system can grow to be.[61] In doing so, it illustrates the insufficiency of antitrust efforts organized around "monopoly capitalism" as a guiding frame for how to navigate the challenges of the modern digital market.

Amazon Web Services functions as the landlord of online web hosting and retail. It is a subsidiary of Amazon that provides all-in-one access to cloud infrastructure solutions and on-demand computing power. Customers of the online infrastructure service behemoth pay money for two kinds of rental access: the *time* for which a cloud-connected computer is available to them, and the physical *space* that the computer being rented takes up. AWS is based out of a number of data centers around the globe, but many of its centers have specific purposes. AWS GovCloud US, for instance, is a network of "regions" that host "sensitive data" and "regulated workloads" for the U.S. federal government. GovCloud, Amazon writes, is equipped with security measures to "address the most stringent U.S. government security and compliance requirements."[62] In addition to critical data and processing needs for the US government, AWS also hosts much of the "consumer-facing" internet.

The massive impact of AWS on the online economy is best demonstrated by what happens when its servers fail. As recently as November 2020, prolonged outages at AWS forced a good deal of the internet offline. According to Amazon, the outage was "only affecting one of its 23 geographic AWS regions," but "the problem was significant enough to take out a large number of internet services," such as Adobe Creative Cloud, Autodesk, Flickr, Glassdoor, Roku, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Pocket, *The Washington Post*, and the entirety of RSS-based podcast hosting.[63] These problems are not new, either—in 2017, a

debugging typo in the billings system at S3 (a part of AWS) took servers offline, taking the internet's commercial "backbone" with it.[64]

Amazon Web Services may support a surprising amount of internet infrastructure in the United States—41 percent of the public cloud services market—but approaching it purely from an antitrust standpoint fundamentally misunderstands its role in the digital economy. Rather than monopolize a physical resource, AWS controls access to a resource that it creates and rents. Many of the things it "monopolizes" are resources nearly impossible to publicly control or effectively regulate, such as server time or the existence of server farms it creates. And like the online examples listed above, it also wields its power to extract non-monetary forms of rent. In fact, Amazon now has an entire team whose mission is to "work with outside researchers to review and identify offending content" on any of the websites hosted on AWS servers, with the authority to "monitor and remove abusive, illegal, and violent content." Given the slipperiness with which these terms are defined in the age of social media, it is easy to imagine how this directive might be leveraged to extract conformity to Amazon's preferred niceties.[65]

Considering its size, it is tempting to view AWS as nothing more than a modern-day Standard Oil run by a keyboard Rockefeller. But regulatory discourse that approaches AWS like a Gilded Age robber baron obscures the centrality of rental exchanges—not a lack of competition—as the key source to AWS monopoly power. That antitrust regulatory discourse may be at hand because it invokes a predictable pattern of response—break up the companies in question and redistribute their holdings so as to disrupt the monopoly's hold on the market. But as long as legislators and critics fixate on policies designed as a "silver bullet" to break up Big Tech, they will fail to address the underlying rentier logic that governs so much of the modern-day internet. Attempts to split up the tech titans will likely only exacerbate the ills of the internet economy, as other platforms may simply reproduce the same rentier effects and fill vacated market share with new networks organized around extracting similar rents in exchange for access.

To sum up, there are at least two main ways in which the internet operates as a rentier system. The first is the explicit renting of cyberspace through services like AWS and Google Search, which literally sell access to digital spaces these corporations have created on the internet (generating a handsome profit as they

do so). The second is the way that individual users are compelled to rent their personal information to entities like Spotify, Facebook, Tinder, and Apple to gain access to their platforms in a form of exchange that transfigures the user into the product and the consumer simultaneously (this dynamic is obvious with dating apps and Instagram). Given the dominance of a small number of Big Tech corporations over these exchanges, these relationships are fraught with potential political, social, and economic problems.

Discussion: Implications of a Rentier Internet

This article argues that a rentier framework is a better way to make sense of the reciprocal relationships established between tech giants such as Amazon, Google, Facebook, etc. and their clients/customers than the dominant forms of framing Silicon Valley corporations in current U.S. political discourse. Using Saudi Arabia and Jordan as explanatory models, we have shown how rentier systems can manipulate control of physical goods like oil and territory to generate rents in the real world. From that foundation, we then identified rentier logics at work across the contemporary online world in everything from app stores to AWS. Amazon Web Services especially illustrates how the internet now functions as a space that is rented, an ever-expanding collection of online places accessed by paying Big Tech either in cash (for companies whose web presence relies on AWS infrastructure) or information (for internet users). Four implications follow from these claims.

First, as students of political discourse, we should be mindful that discussions of Big Tech that *exclusively* rely on an antitrust frame might provide an incomplete account of how Big Tech firms impact American society and thereby offer a limited imaginative horizon upon which to enact policy reform. While a trust-busting approach may make sense in certain circumstances, it also risks narrowing how citizens and policymakers conceptualize the challenges Big Tech presents. If, as we have argued, a rentier model better explains many of the ways Silicon Valley interacts with customers and clients, then we should be wary of any policy recommendations that are presented as quick, if painful, fixes. Scholars have long forecasted that the rentier economies of Saudi Arabia or Jordan would soon lead to their collapse.[66] Yet these systems remain, having long outlasted most of their critics' predictions. The durability of these rentier political economies suggests that contemporary prophets of

doom might also be misjudging the durability and resilience of Silicon Valley's systems of exchange, and so an antitrust monopoly framework might be too simplistic to account for the power these companies wield or their ability to maintain such power. Like Standard Oil, tech companies may prove able to quickly reconstitute their power if formally broken up.

Second, understanding Big Tech as a collection of rentier systems complicates the rhetoricity of space and place. Numerous studies view prisons, plantations, museums, and shopping malls as sites of political, social, or economic meaning-making that can be subverted or seized upon for strategic or reconstitutive purposes.[67] A rentier model reframes the online spaces created via AWS and other tech giants as a literal place, which opens up new possibilities for critical evaluation of the way technological influence is leveraged between physical and digital spaces. The ability of AWS to create *new* digital space, and then to extract rents in the form of payment or political leverage for access to that space, points toward the need to rethink place-based arguments, place-as-rhetoric, and how places acquire pre-assigned meaning in an internet age.[68] The question of how citizens might challenge or reconstitute the meaning of cyber*spaces* created by socially progressive, wildly profitable corporations for the purpose of commercial exchange remains to be fully addressed. A rentier approach helps us better appreciate the enormity of that challenge by reframing how we view the economics of online interactions among corporations, consumers, platforms, servers, and brands.

Third, this paper highlights helpful ways to incorporate insights from the field of political economy in studies of rhetoric. Our work here provides one example of how rhetorical scholarship can be beneficially informed by social scientific and economic scholarship, which we hope will spur others to find creative ways to bridge real or imagined divides between different academic disciplines. As we have aimed to demonstrate, rentierism itself is a rich concept ripe for rhetorical application. It should be especially apt for those interested in the rhetoric of technology, because rentierism operates according to *networks* of influence mediated through patronage and clientelism. Moreover, as the examples of Saudi Arabia and Jordan illustrate, rentier networks shape sociopolitical incentives in ways that can be difficult to perceive without requisite cultural awareness. Our call to incorporate social scientific concepts such as rentierism in communication studies should therefore also be understood as a

desire for more research to be done that involves fieldwork, in situ observation, and non-western cultural contexts.

Lastly, rentier systems operate in tandem with a rhetorical emphasis on identity. The associative links between work and reward that undergirded much of the 20th century industrial and service economies are now experiencing the unrest of a changing labor market and the shifting labor expectations that market brings. Rhetorics that reconstitute political clout through identity may, rather than disrupting capitalism, actively reinforce and encourage rentier systems of exchange. Being able to approach rentierism and the platform internet from a political economic standpoint allows social scientific scholarship to inform contemporary economic policy debates and encourages lines of contact between disparate academic disciplines (not unlike the mission of this very academic journal). Furthermore, an economy based on rentierism confronts issues of cost disease, environmental impacts, and sustainability quite differently than liberal democratic capitalism. Rather than institute long-term market controls, applications of antitrust as a solution to the overreaches of Big Tech risk entrenching networks of influence mediated through patronage and clientelism.

Conclusion

By utilizing rentierism as a heuristic for understanding the societal role of large technology firms, scholars across disciplines can better appreciate the logics animating the political debate over Big Tech and shaping the organization of online space. These two issues—the way the internet is spatially ordered and the way the online world is discussed—matter for us as scholars living in the internet age. Policy deliberation, after all, does not take place in a vacuum. As one of the 2020 presidential candidates said, "monopolies have to be dealt with. They either have to be broken up or regulated."[69] For many politicians, there is a clear link between conceptualizing the internet as a monopolized space and proposing antitrust policies as the solution. This paper has attempted to refine that analysis by showing how the monopoly power of Big Tech firms primarily expresses itself through the (re)production of rentier dynamics across online spaces.

According to Vice President Kamala Harris, Big Tech perpetuates a "grave injustice, when rules apply to some but not equally to all, and in particular when rules that apply to the powerless don't apply to the powerful."[70] Harris

has an excellent point—the "rules" of the economy should apply equally to all. Yet unless regulatory discourse shifts to understand the emerging reality of technological rentierism, treating tech companies as just another monopoly to be broken up will not solve that problem. The internet has introduced profound challenges to our understanding of space and how one might prudentially inhabit both physical and virtual worlds. This article, we hope, has helped illuminate several steps in the path toward creating a more just world that affords dignity to all persons—online and off. By foregrounding the importance of rentierism to the organization of online space, we can advocate for policies that stand a better chance of improving life for all participants in the internet economy. As scholars, educators, and global citizens, we stand a better chance of advancing the common good if we acknowledge that the true power of Big Tech lies not in its profitability, but more foundationally in its ability to entice us to give up parts of ourselves for entertainment.

NOTES

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