


NITASHA TIKU BUSINESS 03.13.19 04:58 PM

HOW GOOGLE INFLUENCES THE CONVERSATION IN WASHINGTON



Google allies came to the company's defense in the weeks surrounding CEO Sundar Pichai's testimony to Congress in December.  JENS GYARMATY/REDUX

A FEW DAYS after last year's midterm election, a Google policy manager and lobbyist sent an email to a congressional staffer with a link to a [blog post](#) on the right-wing news site Red State, written under the name The Real DC. In the post, the author accuses Google's competitor Yelp of prodding President Trump to tweet a "professionally designed" video about Google's alleged bias, which The Real DC calls "fake news" because it "bears many similarities" to content produced by Yelp.

In the email, a copy of which was viewed by WIRED, Ed An, the Google lobbyist, said he does not typically share articles from Red State but thought the staffer would find this one interesting.

Neither Red State, its publisher Townhall Media, nor its owner Salem Media Group responded to repeated questions about The Real DC. In a statement, An, the Google lobbyist, said he has no knowledge "of the author who goes by The Real DC." Yelp vice president of public policy Luther Lowe denied any connection to the video or tweet.

The Real DC appears to have posted seven times on Red State. The posts touch on a range of policy issues, such as mortgages, ticket sales, and shareholder rights. All are topics that align with the clientele of a Washington, DC, public affairs firm called CLS Strategies, which first worked with Google in 2008, when Google was trying to stop Microsoft's potential acquisition of Yahoo. On its website, CLS lists as a client the Computer and Communications Industry Association, a trade association in which Google is an influential member. The Real DC first posted about Yelp in March 2018, after Lowe, a vocal anti-Google instigator, called CCIA the "shadiest front group for Google."

<https://twitter.com/springboardccia/status/971818332595916800>

CLS declined to comment. CCIA president Ed Black said, "A good look at our website and history will show our strong independent streak amid a diverse membership." CCIA's relationship with CLS ended in August 2017.

A spokesperson for Google said the company would never ask someone to write an anonymous piece. "We are transparent about our policy work—we disclose all significant affiliations and grants on our [transparency page](#) and we require all people whose work or research we fund to disclose that fact," the spokesperson said in a statement.

Still, the email offers insight into how Google, a shrewd Washington player, has shifted into overdrive and adapted its approach as calls to regulate Big Tech have grown louder.

In the latest sign of the more hostile environment for tech, Democratic presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren last week issued a [far-reaching plan](#) to break up dominant tech platforms; she suggested Google be required to unwind its acquisitions of Waze, Nest, and DoubleClick. Rebukes from the right are just as vehement. During a congressional hearing [on monopolies](#) last week, Senator Josh Hawley (R-Missouri) lit into tech companies. "When they spy on their consumers, when they take data without disclosing it, when they use it for things that consumers have not approved, I mean every day brings some creepy new revelation about these companies' behaviors," he said.

At the hearing, Hawley, who launched an [investigation into Google](#) while he was Missouri attorney general, also challenged Joshua Wright, a former Trump adviser and professor at George Mason University, who wrote academic research [funded indirectly by Google](#) and criticized a Federal Trade Commission probe into Google before joining the agency as a commissioner from 2013 to 2015. "As someone who comes from the conservative or libertarian side of the street, should we be concerned" about cronyism from large companies, Hawley asked. On Tuesday, Hawley cosponsored a [bill](#) to prevent tech companies from collecting data on children. Wright says his views have "attracted like-minded supporters" as the antitrust debate intensifies.

<https://twitter.com/HawleyMO/status/1103070830337146881>

Google is very active in shaping public policy. Last year, the company reported spending [\\$21 million](#) on federal lobbying,

more than any other company in America. Google was also the highest-spending corporate lobbyist in 2017.

Over the past year or so, the network of academics, think tanks, trade organizations, and advocacy groups funded by Google has repeatedly come to its defense at key moments, such as after Warren's broadside, the days after the midterm elections, and the weeks surrounding Google CEO Sundar Pichai's December appearance before Congress. When Trump took office in January 2017, Google listed 141 organizations that receive funding from the company's public policy division. Since then the number has more than doubled, to 349.

Op-eds by antitrust and privacy experts sympathetic to Google's views have appeared on right-wing and cable news sites. In the editorials, the authors frame populist fervor to regulate Big Tech as the work of unserious "hipster antitrust" activists who don't understand the law, and argue that consumers are better off with the status quo.

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wiser at this game
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structure."

Scholars and experts may hold these positions independent of financial incentives from tech companies like Google, but both regulators and the public are sometimes left in the dark about potential conflicts of interest. Larry Downes, project director at the Georgetown Center for Business and Public Policy, coauthored an op-ed in The Washington Post in January about the tech backlash "going askew."

Google's donation to the Georgetown Center was not noted on its transparency page until about 10 days later, according to records from Archive.org. A Google spokesperson said the company updates its page twice a year. Downes did not respond to a request for comment. Georgetown said as a private university it does not disclose donor information.

Warren's post last week brought out some of Google's reliable defenders, like Geoffrey Manne, head of the International Center for Law & Economics, a nonprofit research group that receives money from Google; Wright was previously director of research there, and coauthored some papers with Manne. Manne's conflicts of interest have previously attracted attention, including New York Times articles in 2015 and 2016 that mentioned funding the center received from Comcast during the net neutrality debate.

A rebuttal to Warren, coauthored by Manne, argued that Google might stop investing in improving its products if it is regulated. He said a decline in business dynamism, cited by Warren, could be because entrepreneurs want to sell their startups to big companies, contradicting founders who say they would rather become the next Mark Zuckerberg than sell to him.

Manne's piece was shared approvingly on Twitter by the executive vice president of the Cato Institute and the VP of policy at the Niskanen Center—both of which receive funding from Google—as well as by a senior research fellow at the Koch Institute (a recent Google ally on antitrust) and assorted venture capitalists, and was eventually published by CNBC. Manne did not respond to a request for comment.

Google began stepping up its Washington game around 2011, as the FTC investigated whether the company was improperly exploiting its dominance in search. [The Wall Street Journal](#) reported that FTC staffers found that Google engaged in anticompetitive behavior that harmed rivals and users, but in 2013 the commission decided not to bring charges against Google, which made some voluntary changes. Around this time, Google began [courting conservatives](#) to mitigate concerns over its close ties to the Obama administration.

The company has also excelled in less formal efforts to influence conversation, through donations to academics, think tanks, trade organizations, and advocacy groups, on both the left and the right, that steer debate toward policy positions that benefit Google in conferences, congressional hearings, and editorials that often do not disclose a speaker's financial ties to Google.

A person familiar with Google's strategy for influencing public debate says the company generally doesn't seek to change experts' thinking but, rather, to underwrite their time and encourage them to be more vocal on issues important to Google. Google may pre-vet op-eds and ask that certain statements be made stronger or weaker, which seems small but ends up having a big impact, the person said. Google did not respond to a request for comment on reviewing op-eds.

"Google is much savvier at this game than Comcast or AT&T in that it doesn't pay for strict quid pro quos. Its strategy relies on social capture," one congressional staffer told WIRED. Google finds an organization that seems to share Google's values and then donates money without a specific ask, the staffer said.

But Google's tactics backfired last year, when its employees revolted against the company's sponsorship of the Conservative Political Action Conference, attended by white nationalists and members of the anti-LGBT movement, and where speakers included French nationalist politician Marine Le Pen.

Google did not sponsor this year's conference, held in late February and early March. But Google was still there, indirectly. The company funds at least eight think tanks and nonprofits whose officials spoke or who sponsored events at CPAC, including Americans for Tax Reform, the Heritage Foundation, National Review Institute, and the Federalist Society. Google has been funding the American Conservative Union, the organization behind CPAC, since 2012.

In a statement, Google said, "We have very openly engaged with policymakers and organizations from across the political spectrum for over a decade to advocate for policies that help consumers and our employees, and that keep the internet an engine for innovation and economic opportunity." The company's public policy director, Adam Kovacevich, laid out the team's tactics last year during an employee meeting to explain Google's sponsorship of CPAC, according to an audio recording previously reported by WIRED. "[W]e try to influence policymakers by allying with the people that they listen to, the network of advocacy groups, think tanks, grassroots organizations on both the left and the right," Kovacevich said. "If we want policymakers to help us when we have a bad bill or a regulation pending, we have to build relationships with them ahead of time. And so a big part of our work in the DC office across all of our team is building relationships not only with the people in power but also the people who influence them."

Google's influence is extensive. During a February hearing on [protecting consumer privacy](#) in front of a subcommittee of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, three of the five speakers represented groups that receive money from Google: American Enterprise Institute, Center for Democracy & Technology, and the Interactive Advertising Bureau. A fourth represented the Business Roundtable.

<https://twitter.com/BrandingBrandi/status/110053365142564045>

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Georgetown law professor Marc Rotenberg, president of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, said that when EPIC filed complaints with the FTC to block Google's acquisition of DoubleClick in 2007 and Nest in 2014, Google's response was to pump money into universities, think tanks, and nongovernmental groups. "Money buys silence," Rotenberg says. "Google doesn't need the experts to agree with them. They only need them to look the other way."

Experts who defend tech companies in Washington generally say they are not influenced by Google's donations. Matt Stoller, of the Open Markets Institute, a left-leaning think tank that [favors tough antitrust enforcement](#), finds that curious. "It's funny that economists think that incentives work on everybody but economists," Stoller says.

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