

**Politicized Social Imaginaries:
How Partisan ‘Truth-makers’ derailed Google’s 2018
Congressional Hearing**

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Abstract

Our pursuit for a social order is an epistemic and heuristic process and involves making sense of our observations and imaginations. Technologies are a part of our imagined futures but they also have social and political dimensions, and can have negative consequences either from abuse or flaws in design. Using the concept of social imaginaries by Charles Taylor, and sociotechnical imaginaries by Shielia Jasanoff, this study analyses the U.S. House Judiciary Committee hearing of Google's CEO Sundar Pichai from December 2018. The use of specific social imaginaries around Google's technologies and Google as a corporation by members of political parties points towards the role of political intentionality and performativity in manufacturing public consent around governance decisions. Such imaginaries are termed as politicized social imaginaries as they are not employed for cognitive interpretation of technological concepts, but used to drive partisan political narratives.

Keywords: social imaginaries; sociotechnical imaginary; governance of technology; google data collection; data privacy regulation

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

Our pursuit for a social order is an epistemic and heuristic process – it involves making sense of what we can observe and imagining the abstract. The distinction between the observable and the abstract may not necessarily demarcate along a clear line. We make sense of the world around us with complex combinatorics of empiricism, idealism, morality, mythologies, social scripts and practices. Through epistemic relativism, we know that these metrics may vary from individual to individual. But it is also true that many of them are shared within societies and are a product of social, cultural and political factors. The distinction I make between the epistemology employed by the individual and the society is not to place them in contradiction with one another, but to outline that they are processes supplementary to each other. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor coined the term ‘social imaginaries’ to explain ‘how we imagine our societies’ (not necessarily ‘what societies imagine’). (Strauss, 2006; Taylor, 2002). The concept of social imaginaries is a useful one to assess the relationships between how we think about the world, how we understand the world and how we act within the confines of the former two.

Scholars such as Sheila Jasanoff discuss the social imaginaries in the context of Science and Technological Studies (STS) and recognize that imaginaries have an instrumental or transformative role and are not mere representations of fantasy and social imaginations. (Jasanoff, 2015, p.12). Jasanoff coins the term ‘sociotechnical imaginaries’ to capture collectively held and performed visions of desirable futures that are also “animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology” (p.28). She notes the performative dimension of sociotechnical imaginaries in instrumental political action, i.e., to policy as well as politics. While stating that “histories of science and technologies are interwoven with political histories”, she is also cognizant that “mechanics of the interconnections between technoscientific and political practice have not been articulated in detail or systematically” and is one of the major gaps to Science and Technology scholarship. (p.14).

In this research, I recognize the role of social imaginaries as epistemological, discursive and instrumental role in guiding social actions. I acknowledge Jasanoff's concern of the knowledge gap in STS around the interplay between imaginaries and governance of technologies. In this study, I intend to empirically inform the relationship, using a case study of Google CEO Sundar Pichai's hearing at United States House of Representatives Judiciary Committee held in December 2018. This particular case is of importance owing to the fact that hearing was centered around Google's data collection and user data privacy and security concerns, owing the policy gaps around governance of big tech companies within the United States. The news media at the time cited the hearing as a 'missed opportunity' and criticized Congress for their ignorance regarding technologies. I believe that the event needs an analysis that goes beyond calling out the ignorance and outlines the underlying processes that shaped the event. Applying the concept of social imaginaries is one attempt to achieve a fuller understanding.

The objective of the essay is to discern the influence of social imaginaries on governance practice of the U.S. Congress in the context of the said hearing. I begin the essay by reviewing key concepts related social imaginaries, and outline the characteristics of social imaginaries. I then apply discursive analysis to the hearing proceedings in order to trace the invocation of imaginaries and the context for such invocations. The analysis I present points towards the political intentionality and performativity that are linked to the imaginaries by elected leaders from both major political parties in the U.S., given the public broadcast nature of the hearing. I argue that the politicization of social imaginaries is not merely a form of shaping political discourse, but also the political outcomes and identify some pitfalls that result from such politicization. The essay therefore extends the conversation on imaginaries as a way to understand society.

Chapter 2.

Imagining Social Imaginaries

This essay aims to study the influence of social imaginaries in the governance practice of the United States Congress in the context of regulation of big tech companies and their products and services. In order to study this, the public hearing of Google's CEO Sundar Pichai with the U.S. House Judiciary Committee, held on December 11, 2018 is chosen as a case study. Later in the essay, I will explore the reasons for choosing this particular case study and explore why such governance is of importance. But before we can get into that discussion, I believe it is important for us to first have a clear outline of what social imaginaries are, and more importantly, what they are not. In this chapter, I shall explore the concept of social imaginaries and also list essential characteristics of social imaginaries that will be useful in the analysis of our case study.

2.1. What are Social Imaginaries?

In his quest to address how societies (and individuals) envision and inhabit modernity, and what differing forms of modernity coexist within a society, Taylor coins the term 'social imaginaries', which he defines as follows:

“[Social imaginaries are] the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.” (Taylor, 2004, p.23).

Taylor refers here to a collective of ideas and notions but rather what enables it. He claims that social imaginaries are results of an interplay between language, imagination, culture and **practical action**. In subsequent works, Taylor is able to offer a cohesive set of characteristics of social imaginaries, when he compares social imaginaries to social theory:

“(1) Social imaginary is about the way ordinary people imagine their social surroundings, which is often not expressed in theoretical terms but is, instead, carried in images, stories, legends, and so on;

(2) social imaginary is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society,

while theory is often the possession of a small minority; and

(3) social imaginary is the common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy, while theory can circulate only among elites.

Our social imaginary at any given time is complex. It incorporates a sense of the normal expectations that we have of each other, the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life.”

(Taylor, 2007, p.119-20).

This definition offers us a clear understanding of what qualifies as a social imaginary and the scale of **shared epistemic value** derived from them. For Taylor and the political scientist Benedict Anderson (*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 1983), imaginaries were a way in which premodern understandings of social order could be replaced by a modern alternative. One imaginary of social order they engage with is that of a democratic society that claims to serve and protect all individuals, that replaced the earlier order of society where sacred hierarchies (a la monarchy and serfdom) were perhaps considered a natural order of the world. I invoke this example of modernity to disabuse the idea that imaginaries are mere fantasies or illusions. The shift in the imaginary of social order is complemented with a complete shift in the social order itself, which is a result of multiple actions that include policymaking, establishment of governing institutions, revolutions and education.

Social imaginaries serve an important function in creation and sustenance of **meaning**. Claudia Strauss, in *The Imaginary*, claims that imaginaries are not reductive in the sense that they provide meaning and significances to words, symbols or stories. Instead, imaginaries are a result of complex processes of social and psychological cognition by individuals within the society. (Strauss, 2006, p.339). She also clarifies that characterising imaginaries as fantasies or signifiers of meaning can be a reductionist approach to the concept. Here I argue that imaginaries are not imaginations or denotations or connotations themselves, but they are the underlying logics (and emotion) that allow individuals to interpret events, customs and institutions in a particular way. Thus, to pick a simple example, in societies where illnesses are viewed as divine intervention or will of a higher power, individuals may be reluctant to submit to Western

medical institutions, choosing instead to seek cure through wisdom prescribed in their cultures. The imaginary at play is the role and influence of higher power on human lives, which makes the people make sense of the illness and take specific actions towards relief or cure.

2.2. Sheila Jasanoff and the Sociotechnical Imaginaries

While Taylor's and Benedict Anderson's concepts of social imaginaries were devised to explain large contexts such as modernity and nationhood respectively, Sheila Jasanoff argues that imaginaries can operate at smaller scales. (Jasanoff, 2015). She argues that imaginaries can "unite members of a social community in shared perceptions of future that should or should not be realized" (p.12). From a STS perspective, Jasanoff argues that social imaginaries are also a prevailing concept and the futures of technologies are linked to our ability to envision their need, utility and application. She defines 'sociotechnical imaginaries' as:

"Collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology."(Jasanoff, 2015, p.6)

She emphasizes on the word 'desirable' as the imaginations of technologies are linked to both utopian and dystopian outcomes, yet our pursuit of them are linked to positive visions of social progress.

The definition provides us a lot to unpack. We can find a reference to "collective held" ideas in the Taylor's conceptualization. Jasanoff adds two additional characteristics into the mix: the visions of desirable futures are both "institutionally stabilized" and "public performed" – an aspect that was absent to Taylor's characterization of social imaginaries. Whilst referring to the performative dimension, she explains:

"Performances of modern statehood are increasingly tied to demonstrations and to public proofs employing scientific and technological instruments; equally, however, acts of popular resistance, from terrorist attacks to Wikileaks, draw on the same repertoires of technoscientific imagination and instrumental action. That histories of science and technology are interwoven with political histories is not in itself a novel claim; in particular, it will not raise eyebrows among social scientists familiar with science and technology studies." (Jasanoff, 2015, p.14)

The passage above also gives us an insight into the role of institutions in the formation of certain sociotechnical imaginaries. Imaginaries can originate from individuals, private corporations, professional societies etc., and they earn their legitimacy through concerted acts of communication and collaboration. However, when there are competing ideas regarding some technology, it falls upon institutions such as the legislatures, courts, media and other institutions to favour some imagined futures over others, and thereby validate certain imaginaries. (p.6). It is also evident from the definition that these imaginaries are informed by a one-way communication from institutions to the publics - and for any idea to qualify as an imaginary, the acceptance of the broader society (publics) is the key. It is therefore a parallel to Chomsky's ideas in *Manufacturing Consent* (Chomsky & Herman, 2002) in the sense that active communication channels are employed to construct a collective vision of the future.

The concept is of immense value for this study. Jasanoff's conceptualization builds upon Taylor's concept of social imaginaries but adds more specific elements required to assess the collective ideas of future in a STS context. We have an ability to discuss the origins of certain social imaginaries and various institutional factors that play a role in escalating certain ideas to the 'status' of imaginaries, i.e., the point where they are indeed, collectively held ideas about making sense of a technology-driven world and technologically-influenced futures. McNeil et al. point out that while science and technologies have been associated with "facts and artifacts", the sociotechnical imaginaries enable us to associate them with storytelling, imaging and imagining (McNeil et al., 2017, p. 457). Jasanoff is careful to point out that this concept is divorced from the notion of technological determinism, which is also reflected in the performative dimension of imaginaries. The active communicative role performed by institutions is seen as crucial to determine what futures are deemed more likely as a result of certain scientific and technological developments. Sadowski and Bendor specifically point toward the role of corporate actors play a communicative, self-serving role in introducing and weaving the narratives around technologies (Sadowski & Bendor, 2019).

Therefore, the escalation of ideas to the status of imaginaries is a result of conscious decisions undertaken by both the originators and mediators of such ideas. While it is tempting to think of sociotechnical imaginaries as technologically deterministic, the processes underlying their construction as well as sustenance (by

virtue of continued communication of the imaginaries) are proof that the imaginaries are socially constructed.

2.3. Imaginaries and the Performative Action

Finally, before we take up on our case study of the Google hearing, it is important to discuss some practical dimensions of social imaginaries. Although the dimension of performativity was included in both Charles Taylor and Benedict Anderson's explorations, it is in Jasanoff's theorization that we see a detailed and nuanced description. Simply put, we can say that imaginaries are performative because the vision gives the people a reason to take action. She makes clear references to political action in reference to sociotechnical imaginaries – which can take the shape of both policy as well as politics (p.28). The element of performative action is used to distinguish imaginaries from the things that are not.

Jasanoff draws connections between sociotechnical imaginaries and public policy, while also situating discourse as a key element in this relationship. She recalls the concept of master narratives which were previously explored by Taylor, and outlines how these concepts are similar but not exactly the same. She writes:

“Like an imaginary, a master narrative—such as “American exceptionalism”—offers a rationale for a society's long evolutionary course while also constraining that society to performing the imagined lines of the story. But a master narrative implies a more monolithic and unchangeable vision, closely bound to a singular retelling of national and cultural history, and not necessarily welcoming of invention or prescriptive of new goals to be achieved.” (Jasanoff, 2015, p.28-29)

There are also sharp distinctions between imaginaries and other concepts such as discourse, policy, ideologies and public reason. Discourses focus more on the language and less on actions. Ideologies have an imaginative character but they are tied strongly to power and social structure than an intellectual pursuit for possible futures. While policies and plans refer are actions in service of a future, they fail to encapsulate the rationale and justifications provided by the imaginaries (p.29-30).

Public reason is shaped by the institutionalized relations between citizens and political authorities, whereas imaginaries can be born and cultivated outside this strict dynamic. This must not be confused with the use of communication by institutions to garner legitimacy for a particular idea or imaginary (p.31). A clear way to articulate the difference would be that public reason is a stated justification for specific actions taken by the institutions, such as a policy or a program that allows the public to make sense of the given policy or program. Imaginaries remain broader ideas that allow people to make sense of the world, and some futures are advocated for as either more ideal or more likely. Hence, when institutions are involved, there is some epistemic overlap between public reason and the imaginaries, but the two are used in service of very different subjects.

At this point, I find it necessary to address my interchangeable usage of my terms 'imaginaries', 'social imaginaries' and 'sociotechnical imaginaries'. It was important to first use Taylor's concept of imaginaries as it speaks to a broader set of ideas, while Jasanoff's concept is theorized in greater detail although her context is strictly science and technology studies. Since this essay is addressing governance of tech companies, I work with the presumption that imaginaries have a technological component embedded and hence all characteristics of 'sociotechnical imaginaries would apply. This provides me comfort in using the imaginaries or social imaginaries in this context. However, I note that the case study may make references to social imaginaries that are divorced from technologies. In all such cases, it is of great importance to outline this caveat in explicit terms and refer to Taylor's definition for interpretation. But unless it is noted, our theoretical framework discussed here (Taylor + Jasanoff + my own observations noted in this chapter) is applicable.

2.4. Why Imaginaries Matter

Some of the reasons why Imaginaries are an important analytical concept for governance of technologies have been explored in the previous sections. The performative action and ubiquitous origins of imaginaries give the imaginaries a tangible, concrete significance. Imaginaries are born at the interplay of language, culture, epistemology, imaginations and performative actions. Sociotechnical imaginaries illustrate the symmetrical relation of technoscience and society, which results in the co-production of "political orders and

technoscientific projects” (McNeil et al., 2017, p. 449).

Jasanoff points that the concept is best used in interpretive research and analyses that “probe the nature of structure-agency relationships through inquiries of meaning-making” (Jasanoff, 2015, p.35). The argument is in strong agreement with our own case study, where we are trying to probe into the meaning-making of technologies as done by the political class, while their governance decision-making operates within the institutions such as the U.S. Congress and Google (and the power that come with them).

In the study, we try to discern the invocation and use of imaginaries within the discourse of the public hearing. My intention here is justify imaginaries both as an analytical concept but as a methodological one, that can be used to make sense of legislative discourse on policy-making. The interpretive reading of the interrogation between the congresspersons and the Google CEO reveals there are several sociotechnical imaginaries at play, which are invoked in the discourse to enunciate visions of the world and social order in the context of Google’s technologies, products and services. The imaginaries seem to inform the mental and emotional frame through which the legislators of either political parties would approach the discussion with, and how their voting positions are shaped around them. We therefore enter a situation where the sociotechnical imaginaries held by the members of the U.S. Congress could inform their policy-making. The study is validated in the following quote by Jasanoff:

“The languages of power, especially the official discourses of the state, have provided fertile ground for social theorists, but once again the coalescence of the collective imagination with scientific and technological production offers particular stream beds along which to direct the flow of such analysis.” (Jasanoff, 2015, p.37).

Jasanoff further states that “policy documents, no less than judicial opinions, can be mined for insights into the framing of desirable futures [...] as well as for specific verbal tropes and analogies that help identify the elements of the imaginary” (p.39). An analysis of the proceedings of the public hearing fall logically, if not technically, in these possible categories. In terms of methodology, I refer to Isabella and Norman Fairclough’s interpretation of critical discourse analysis that treats imaginaries as semiotic constructs representing both the “actual world” and “non-actual world” (Fairclough et al., 2013, p.103-9). Our analysis is incumbent upon assessing the claims

(statements made by the participants of the hearing) and recognizing the premises of 'goal' (what is materially being achieved through the invocation of imaginaries), 'value' (what moral and ethical dimensions are being referenced in the imaginary) and 'circumstance' (under which conditions and contexts are the imaginaries being invoked). As these premises are recognized, we can assess the performative action associated with the imaginary.

Now that we have explored the definitions of social imaginaries and sociotechnical imaginaries respectively, we have sufficient theoretical framework to analyze and reflect upon the case study.

Chapter 3.

Google faces the Congress

On December 11th, 2018, the United States Congress' House Judiciary Committee held a public hearing for Google's CEO Sundar Pichai. The year 2018 was a turning point for platform governance in many ways. The reports of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections got another kickstart with the exposé of the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal, and several technological platforms coming under scrutiny for a myriad of issues such as misinformation, trolling, bots and filter bubbles (Wong, 2018). The United States Congress began holding a series of hearings for Silicon Valley companies, especially Google, Twitter and Facebook, to question them on several issues, with the key one being possibilities of election interference through the platforms.

The hearing was important for multiple reasons. Firstly, this was the first time Google's CEO agreed to appear before the Congress for a public hearing, despite multiple summons in the past. On one such hearing meant for Google, Facebook and Twitter, Pichai decided to send the Senior Vice-President of Global Affairs to testify in his stead and share the witness table with Facebook's COO and Twitter's CEO. (Wong, 2018, pp.17). When this decision backfired and got the Google representative snubbed from the hearing, Pichai appeared before the Senate Intelligence Committee in a private hearing. Google had undoubtedly made their executives harder to access, making this particular hearing all the more of a spectacle.

The second reason why this hearing was important was due to the fact that Google not only owns a massively popular search engine, but also offers a popular web browser, Google Chrome, its email service, Gmail, the mobile device operating system Android, a class of telecommunication and smart devices, entertainment services through Google Play and its subsidiary YouTube, an online advertising platform comprising of Google AdWords and AdSense, and also a Cloud-based platform for web services. In addition to these ventures, Google also provides several services such as Google Drive, Google Docs, Google Translate and Google Maps, which are also popular and offers services. It is needless to say that there many more applications, products,

services and companies under Google than listed here. We can also take into account Google's parent company Alphabet, which houses other major projects such as Sidewalk (urban innovation), Verily (healthcare and disease prevention research), Waymo (self-driving cars), X (secret research lab) and DeepMind (Artificial intelligence lab), only to name a few. The reason why I outline such a massive list is to illustrate one point: Google is multidimensional and the data it collects oils many different engines, and have the potential to touch human lives in many ways at once. This characteristic puts Google in a slightly different box than the social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which were also being interrogated by the Congress.

The third reason has to do with the glaring concerns over data collection, privacy and security. This hearing presented an opportunity to ask Google specifics on the range, extent and nature of user data collection, and inquire how such user data collection does or does not have the potential to negatively impact consumer lives. The events such as Cambridge Analytica exposé communicated to the broader public that even outside of seemingly frequent events such as hacking and data leaks, the consumer data was not necessarily safe with the big tech companies. And so, the hearing was an important one for the U.S. Congress to get right.

Before we get into the analysis of the hearing itself, it is necessary to look at why governance of technologies, especially in the context of user data privacy and security is important for our scholarship.

3.1. The Question of Governance of Technologies

James Moor argues that without clear ethics, we are confronted with 'policy vacuums' that fail to address the undesirable consequences of the technologies. (Moor, 2008). It can be said that governance and regulation of technologies can ensure that conformity to the different ethical considerations that may apply to a given technology. The arrival of new technologies have been followed by society's efforts to adapt adequate ethical frameworks around them.

The rise of the Web 2.0 and platform capitalism bring with them a whole array of issues and vulnerabilities. Various data breaches that have affected Internet companies is just one example where privacy of consumer data has been put at risk. Furthermore,

other developments such as Microsoft's reported attempts to sell their facial recognition technology to U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration in 2020 speak to the changing nature of privacy of individuals (Business Insider, 2020). We must also recognize a growing market for deepfakes and hackers for hire that demonstrates that data privacy of individuals is an area of increasing concern for consumers. The policy vacuum around lack of privacy here signifies that, pending self-regulation, not only are the private companies not obligated to address privacy breaches that occur on their servers, but also that they can engage in privacy breaches. Given these circumstances, the consumers who may be most in need of fair information practices are least likely to have the resources to actually demand and secure their data. (Pasquale, 2012).

Data is argued to be precious resource under contemporary capitalism. In Platform Capitalism, Nick Srnicek (2017) argues that the twenty-first century capitalism is centered around extraction and usage of data, which he argues is comparable to raw material in an economic sense. He distinguishes data (information that something happened) from knowledge (information about why something happened). He argues that there are ways to compute the vast amount of data collected to infer social and behavioural patterns of individuals. Some of the important takeaways from Srnicek are the definition of platforms – “platforms are digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact.”, with groups comprising of customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers etc. He explains that the platforms often come with series of tools that enable “build their own products, services, and marketplaces.” Therefore, platform capitalism is a form of capitalism where the value is generated from data collected and used by platforms, and value of the platform rises when more data, which by extension means more users, are present on the platform.

Shoshana Zuboff in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* further characterizes this form of capitalism as ‘surveillance capitalism’, which she defines as “A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales”. (p.1.) This definition is not drastically different from Srnicek's, except that Zuboff makes that specific link between data and the human beings that create it. And she problematizes the human element in this form of capitalism by asserting that human beings are in a constant state of surveillance. She further describes the attitude of the major platforms towards data collection. user data is considered free for the taking by the platform companies, and indicates that the

contracts such as privacy policies are employed to claim possession of the data from the users. While this data is claimed to be used to improve the platforms and provide users with “better experience” on the platforms, the policy vacuum and lack of systematic governance is a cause of concern – simply because there is no guaranteeing that there are no other uses to the collected data.

Pasquale argues that if a company or a firm bases its business model on extensive data collection, it ought to be subject to extensive monitoring (Pasquale, 2012). He also states that user data does generate labour and value for the platform companies and users are not compensated for it, nor are they guaranteed protections against abuse of that data. The lack of transparency in how user data is managed by the companies implies a power imbalance between the companies and the users, and must be a normative focus of antitrust and privacy law.

In early 2018, the Cambridge Analytica scandal exposed that the user data with a massive Internet platform, Facebook, was due to the company’s own lack of oversight. (Ur Rehman, 2019). The data was harvested on Facebook via a quiz app titled #thisisyourdigitallife, and generated psychological profiles of over 87 million users. This confirms the concerns raised by Zuboff and Srnicek regarding the massive surveillance that occurs on the platforms and how platforms benefit from such behavior.

Upon Zuckerberg’s hearing, a great many media publications pointed out that the political class was out of touch with evolving technology and is very likely inept in making appropriate laws governing them. In an opinion piece in *The Washington Post*, Catherine Rampell (2018) highlighted the inability of U.S. Congresspersons to interrogate Zuckerberg on the many controversies that surrounded Facebook at the time (8). Facebook would not be the only major company to appear before the U.S. Congress that year. The reaction to Pichai’s hearing wasn’t much different, with Issie Lapowsky of *Wired* magazine calling the hearing “a missed opportunity”, and illustrating the bizarre nature of the questions posed to the CEO using specific colourful anecdotes. (Lapowsky, 2018). The news media in both situations resorted to calling most Congresspersons to be old in age and leave the conversation there. They tended to gloss over the fact that even with the more competent and informed interrogators, both Zuckerberg and Pichai failed to provide concrete answers, and the policy gap with regards to privacy regulation was barely addressed.

3.2. Setting the Stage: Commencement of the Hearing

In anticipation of the hearing, media outlets such as *BBC* and *The Washington Post* had begun listing the areas of questioning that Pichai would be subjected to (Copestake, 2018; Inzaurre, 2018). On the day, the Hearing Room at Rayburn House, Capitol Hill was swarming with reporters as members of the committee took their seats. The event was being livestreamed by multiple outlets, while many others would be reporting live from the location (C-SPAN3, 2018).

The members of the Judiciary Committee began taking their seats very soon. This was going to be one of the last hearings for the outgoing Republican-majority 115th Congress, as the Democratic-majority 116th Congress would begin their session in a month's time. The Committee was split 18:13 between Republican and Democratic members. Each member would be allowed 5 minutes of time to interact with Pichai, who sat at the witness table. The 5-minute rule is a rigid one and its breach is ordinarily never tolerated. The Committee was chaired by Representative Bob Goodlatte [R-Virginia], while the Ranking Member of the Democratic contingent was Representative Jerrold Nadler [D-New York]. The hearing would start with opening statements from Representatives Goodlatte, Nadler and GOP Majority Leader Rep. Kevin McCarthy [R-California]. After their opening statements, the members would be allowed their questioning time.

The hearing began with four opening statements, representing different voices in the room. The Republican leadership made two statements, one coming from the House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy [R-California] and one from the Committee Chair Bob Goodlatte [R-Virginia]. Their opening statements established the purpose of the meeting as well as key Republican Party positions on the matter. The statement from the Ranking Member from the Democratic Party Jerrold Nadler [D-New York] and the statement from Pichai also established respective positions. But the opening statements served a greater role: the one of invoking sociotechnical imaginaries of Google as an Internet-based service and as a company. As I will demonstrate shortly, the three parties in the room (two political parties and one corporation) entered a contestation of painting a picture of the mysterious, opaque entity named Google.

The opening statement by Rep McCarthy began with the following:

“Google is one of the most valuable companies in America, because of what it does. Google’s search engine organizes the entire Internet—and by extension, almost all the information in the world. That is hardly an exaggeration. Here is a statistic you will hear a lot today, but it bears repeating: According to the Wall Street Journal, 90 percent of all Internet searches go through Google. That is power. And it comes with responsibility.

Mr. Pichai, it was necessary to convene this hearing because of the widening gap of distrust between Silicon Valley and the American People.

For our country and economy to grow stronger, the American people must have trust in the great companies of the 21st Century.

We can alleviate some of their concerns today, with transparency and candour. I hope we can begin to restore trust in the technology companies that shape our world.

But we need answers.” – Rep. Kevin McCarthy [R-California] (C-SPAN3, 2018)

It is evident right from the beginning that Google was being positioned, by the Republican side, to be a company with tremendous power over the lives of Americans, and thereby warranting oversight and regulation. By also mentioning that Google is subject of “widening gap of distrust”, Congress further claims the moral high ground, and a prerogative to interrogate Google for their activities because they represent the ‘true interests of the American people’.

He then poses the three broad questions to Google:

“We need to know, first, that Google is committed to the free-market ideals of competition and entrepreneurship that lifted its revolutionary products to begin with.

Second, we need to be sure that any political bias within Google’s workforce does not creep into its search products.

Third, we need to know that Google is living up to America’s belief in free expression and human rights when it deals with foreign governments.” – Rep. Kevin McCarthy [R-California]

The framing of the second question is of great significance. The GOP Majority Leader claims that Google’s workforce is politically biased, not as an accusation but as an establishing fact – and the concern is to ensure that the products are not affected due

to this. The veiled accusation would ensure that Google would have to spend majority of the time defending that their workforce is not politically biased, and the only consolation would come from a singular individual in the room.

The final question pertains to Google's Project Dragonfly, which was reportedly about its plan to enter the Chinese market by devising a censored search engine with the consent of the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party. The concern over Google's supposed relationship with the American adversary in China is evoked in the same vein as the red scare, with a spectre of cold war imaginaries.

To sum it up, McCarthy points that anti-competitive behavior, political bias and censorship were the three key themes of the hearing. The three questions make excellent reflections of the Republican Party's political talking points, which are aimed at mobilizing their electoral support. Free market ideals and American nationalism are important social imaginaries invoked in Republican discourse. The perceived political bias against the conservative voices is also an important social imaginary for the Republican side. It is clear that even though the questions themselves are of legislative significance (the answers would facilitate the policymaking process), they have embedded in them the ideals of society Republicans claim they want to achieve. These social imaginaries have a political undertone and conservative morality attached to them.

We only learn more about this vision in McCarthy's quote on technologies, wherein he says:

““Are America's technology companies serving as instruments of freedom—or instruments of control? Are they fulfilling the promises of the Digital Age? Are they advancing the cause of self-government? Or are they serving as instruments of manipulation, used by powerful interests and foreign governments to rob the people of their power, agency, and dignity?”
– Rep. Kevin McCarthy [R-California]

Recalling Jasanoff's conceptualization of sociotechnical imaginaries, McCarthy's statement is a testimony to a Republican vision of society. The tech companies (and their technologies) are seen as direct instruments that would yield them a world where America is *numero uno*, defined by its commitment to freedom and agency. Therefore, if these technologies does not yield an ideal society, a strict regulatory action against them is a justifiable performative action. The question gives Google a moral and civilizational obligation to uphold the American values of freedom and nationhood. It reminds Google

that its allegiance to American people (more bluntly put, the American federal government) is a moral question with real-world regulatory consequences.

McCarthy's statement was powerful in the sense that it set the tone for rest of the Republican half of the hearing, with very strong images of an 'ideal world' built in for their audience. How Google will be governed would ultimately depend upon how Google positions itself vis-à-vis this imagined ideal future. This would become clearer as the Committee Chair made his statement. Unlike the broad strokes of images in McCarthy's statement, Chairman Goodlatte's statement was complete with specific facts and arguments that positioned Google as giant private corporation with the abilities of social and cultural control. This is in service of another social imaginary where the utopian outcome comes from taming Google and bending its will to serve the American (Republican) agenda, and the dystopian outcome comes from leaving Google to its own devices.

Goodlatte mentions that Google collects "exact location, temperature, barometric pressure, and speed of movement of every phone that runs on the android operating system" while also pointing out that Americans have "no idea the sheer volume of detailed information that is collected". He claimed that Google was able to perform mass surveillance to the scale that would exceed the abilities of the National Security Agency (NSA). As Chairman Goodlatte reads his prepared statement, he further problematizes Google's biased search results by pointing towards the process of algorithmic screening:

"Algorithmic screening is the means by which google sorts data and information. Google's search algorithm, for example, calculates what is presented to a user based on the variables the user inputs into the search bar. At its best, Google's algorithm reaches the best answer in the least amount of time while providing choices to the user by ranking pages most relevant to the search inquiry. Of course, by ranking pages, Google's search favours one page over another. This kind of bias appears harmless. After all, the point of a search is to discriminate among multiple relevant sources to find the best answer. This process, however, turns much more sinister with allegations that google manipulates its algorithm to favour the political party it likes, the ideas that it likes or the products that it likes. There are numerous allegations in the news that google employees have thought about doing this, talked about doing this, and have done it." – Rep. Bob Goodlatte [R-Virginia]

Goodlatte further discusses the passive data sharing by Android devices while making references to media reports, a segment on Good Morning America and a 2018

study by Vanderbilt University, all of which pointed towards the kind of data collected by Google, while emphasizing that Google had sophisticated geolocation data that could accurately tell where a user is and who is with them. This characterization would prove to be crucial in how Google is presented in all of the interrogation rounds by GOP lawmakers in the hearing. Goodlatte's statement was carefully worded and balanced, trying to point fingers without being aggressive with the accusations. When he states that Google is "one of the largest data collectors that mankind has ever seen", he lays groundwork to challenge Google for its potential for abuse. He states, "Google's practice of reinforcing its dominance in light of self-serving allegations of bias creates little choice for consumers across the spectrum of Internet-based products or services. Given that Google's ads show up on non-google websites and Google's search engine is being used as the default search tool on other products such as the Apple phone, it is almost impossible to avoid Google altogether." He definitely tries to invoke a sense of paranoia around surveillance, which threatens the right to privacy of all Americans.

He does however end his statement with a praise for Google for being an example of the American success story, and recounts that Google was started by two individuals in a garage, only to become a global giant. Referring to this social imaginary, he reminds Google that it is American first. He makes Google capable of redemption, but only if it chooses to comply – almost as if it were a human being. It also eases the sense of confrontation that dominated his opening statement.

The next opening statement came from Democratic Party Ranking Member Jerrold Nadler [D-New York]. Right in the beginning of the statement, Nadler agrees that Google's position and power has associated risks regarding the content moderation practices as well as user data privacy, thereby legitimizing the problem and need for regulation. He however soon shifts his entire focus and energy to the issue of the alleged political bias against the conservatives a la members of the Republican party. He claims that time and resources of the Committee will be wasted on this baseless allegation and many Republican lawmakers will recall anecdotes but provide no concrete evidence to prove the "conspiracy theory". The imaginaries invoked by the Republican leaders thereby end up getting more screen time. Nadler's choice to point to the Republican colleagues for allegedly crying wolf over anti-conservative bias sits well with the fact that he is after all, an opposition party leader. But in doing so, he ends up confirming the Republican talking points of 'liberals being against the best interests of

America' and further adds weight to the invoked imaginary of the dystopian future caused by untamed Google and liberal obstructionism – while it is also being projected very clearly that Google also has been infiltrated by the liberals. The imaginaries at play for the Republican audience are further animated by the Democratic leader's performance.

Under Pichai finally made his opening statements to establish his painfully vague, evasive and equivocal stances on the questions posed to him. Naturally as a CEO of a multifaceted platform surveillance corporation, his objective for the day would be to deny allegations, preserve the opacity Google is infamous for, and prevent accidental admittances that would incriminate his company (and not to forget his job).

He starts off by banking on the story of the American Dream, where he aspired to make something of himself, and his life in the U.S. as an immigrant helped him achieve it. He positions himself as a hardworking person who was allowed to pursue his dreams in America, and therefore has a personal moral allegiance to it. He carefully selects his next words as he says that he is a "technological optimist", not only because he believes in technology, but also because he believes in people who use the technology. This places the onus of consequences of the use of Google and its services on its users, and shifts the responsibility away from the company. He falls back to a 'deterministic fallacy' of Google's technology, where the technology is absolved of all responsibility and will do what it does (Sheila Jasanoff, 2016, p.14). The ultimate picture he tries to paint is that Google has robust internal regulatory framework, which the employees are capable to oversee but not overturn. While at the same time, he wants us to believe that Google's technology is exceptionally complex and any external attempts to regulate it might not work. He invokes the 'myth of technocracy' which presumes that only specialists of technology can truly rise to the task of regulating Google (Jasanoff, 2016, p.19).

3.3. The Interrogation

Once the opening statements were concluded and the questioning began, it was observed that the questions lacked the careful, strategic argumentation of the opening statements. It was also hard to assess what valuable information could possibly be mined from some questions. There were exceptions to this rule, with some lawmakers

determined to make Pichai declare a stance and be unable to dodge the questions with vague platitudes.

Right from the first round by Chairman Goodlatte, the questions amounted to: “Is Google collecting such vast amounts of data?” and “Does Google ensure the users read the privacy policy and terms of service?”, answers to which translate to “it depends” and “we try our best” respectively. Some representatives, such as Zoe Lofgren [D-California] and Ted Lieu [D-California] asked Pichai to explain how the search process worked, primarily to disprove the Republican allegation of anti-conservative bias in results.

Political bias within Google’s workforce as well as products was a major concern for many on the conservative side. While it was understood that search results are organized on various factors, Lamar Smith [R-Texas] outlined that the conservative pro-Donald Trump voices were being intentionally muted by Google. While Rep. Smith attributed the censorship of conservative voices to the senior management at Google, this responsibility was eventually assigned to rogue employees at Google, who supposedly had liberal views. Darrell Issa [R-California] and Steve Chabot [R-Ohio] projected that there were employees at Google who put their “thumbs on the scales” to ensure conservative content did not show up in the search results. Matt Gaetz [R-Florida] alleged that these employees were part of a conspiratorial ‘Resist Trump’ group. To specific accusations like Gaetz’s, Pichai’s measured response would be “We will look into the matter”, and for other questions he would fall upon the alleged neutrality of the algorithm for his defence.

Democratic members spent a significant portion of their time trying to rebut the allegations of anti-conservative bias at Google. Rep. Ted Lieu defended the algorithm-based search results and instructed his colleagues: “If you want positive search results, do positive things. If you don't want negative search result, don't do negative things.”

To summarize these sets of questions, it can be said that interrogation was heavily influenced by the partisan composition of the Committee, and many statements were made simply to bash the other side. The animated nature of the hearing made it akin to a theatrical performance. But these performances were not always around the rivalry of Republican and Democrats.

In some cases, they were about Google vs. the American people. The questioning by Rep. Ted Poe [R-Texas] and (what turned out to be) a monologue by Rep. Louie Gohmert Jr. [R-Texas] were aimed at creating a sense of paranoia due to the internal biases and malice by Google's employees that seeps into its technologies, especially ones linked to "surveillance". Geolocation as a means to identify individuals and track their activities and interactions were outlined in multiple rounds of questioning. In a colourful display, Rep. Ted Poe [R-Texas] asked:

"If I moved from here to there and sit with my Democratic colleagues, will my phone that runs Google, know with whom I am talking to?" – Rep. Ted Poe [R-Texas]

Geolocation however was not the only recognized personal identifier data point. Rep. Ted Deutch [D-Florida] raised questions on other personal identifiers such as name, email addresses and billing information which are ways to track individuals and pose potential risks of privacy breach. Rep. Doug Collins [R-Georgia] asked Pichai how Google treats different kinds of data and who can access it from within the company, such as device identifiers (IMEI and I.P. Addresses), connections (Bluetooth, WiFi, GPS), voice recognition through Google voice products and contents of Google Docs.

It was clear from these interactions that surveillance and associated concerns with user data collection and privacy was being propped up as one of the major vices of Google. The underlying imagination being created was the one of paranoia born out of a 24/7 surveillance that transgresses locations and comfort offered by private spaces. And it is pervasive to the point that Google's intentions for the surveillance themselves become a secondary concern. Its audacity for surveillance data is primary.

Data privacy and security were also addressed in several rounds. Ranking Member Nadler and Rep. Hank Johnson Jr. questioned Pichai on the Google Plus data breaches of 2018, with Nadler also asking Pichai what legal obligations does Google have to report such breaches of private data. Rep. Val Demnings [D-Florida] asked how Google "dealt with vulnerabilities" without articulating the problem any further. In these sets of questioning, the areas and natures of vulnerabilities of data servers were not addressed and the questions remained at the surface level. The level of ambiguity in articulation of the technology rises to the level that it is mysterious enough to be a threat and complicated enough to devise a proper intervention.

Many spoke to constantly updating privacy policies and terms of service, that make it inconvenient and impractical for users to keep track of the changes. It was also noted that most users do not read these policies and lack the technical and legal jargon to fully comprehend them, while there are also many who lack the technical know-how to check/update their privacy settings. Rep. Darrell Issa [R-California] recommended that Google ought to teach its users about data privacy, while Steve Cohen [D-Tennessee] said Google needs to offer a tech support through telephone hotline, because “devices are complicated”. The point being made here is that technocrats at Google ensure that the privacy policies are complicated, disabling the common man from fully comprehending what they are giving up in exchange of the services from Google. The “devil is in the details” imagination props up again when they subtly imply malice through frequent updates in policy texts, once again creating a sense of paranoia. It also creates a sense of helplessness against the powerful force like Google that seems to be hellbent on finding ways to trick people into giving up their power. These become grounds for legitimizing policy action against Google, that override Pichai’s platitudinous responses that are aimed at communicating no specific images.

What would be the next step for the government in order to contain a giant such as Google? Rep. Eric Swalwell [D-California] and Ted Poe [R-Texas] asked if the U.S. needed a law such as the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Poe was also upset that the U.S., traditionally a world leader, was “playing second fiddle to the Europeans”. While Pichai openly supported any legislation, many kept offering regulation as an optional case. Some lawmakers such as Mike Johnson [R-Louisiana] and Louie Gohmert Jr. [R-Texas] maintained that big government’s intervention in the functioning of a private corporation is not ideal, but regulation will definitely take place if Google did not stop censoring conservative voices and addressed their problem of rogue liberals, in essence suggesting a quid pro quo incentive to support conservative content through their platform.

Project Dragonfly was the third theme of the hearing. Many Democratic and Republican lawmakers questioned Pichai on Google’s plans to reportedly launch a search engine in China, which complies with the surveillance and censorship standards of the Chinese government. In every mention of this, China was described as an authoritarian regime with a track record of human rights abuses, in nearly the same light as Soviet regime during the Cold war era. In contrast, America was described as the

land of free speech, and therefore it was Google's prerogative as an American company to protect the free speech and expression of all individuals. Pichai's standard response to these questions was that Google has no search product in China. The nature of the questions barely changed and practically the same question was posed by several congressmen, until Rep. Keith J. Rothfus [R-Pennsylvania] strategized his questions. Only then did Pichai reveal that Google indeed had a project with approximately 400 people working on the exploratory project before it was shelved.

More questioning explored how Google would treat demands of American data by foreign governments, especially the adversarial ones such as Russia and China. Russia's election interference in 2016 and 2018 elections was also raised by Democratic lawmakers, but the questioning was limited to Google's knowledge of such campaigns. The emphasis on Google's moral obligation for allegiance to American interests was key here. The specifics of policies that would address election interference via the platforms was not touched upon, and while there exist many technological dimensions to address disinformation, they remained absent from the discourse. The focus instead became Google as a private corporation with vested interests.

Having reviewed the contents of the hearing, there are more specific observations on the role of imaginaries. They are not limited to the discourse in the room. The construction and invocations of these imaginaries are tied to intentionality of actors involved and how they point towards future actions.

Chapter 4.

Imaginaries and Politics

Over the course of the hearing, it was evident that the lack of technical understanding of Google's platform and technology was subsided by an apparent understanding of how Google exists as a private corporation within the political landscape of America. The hearing was riddled with vague questions that were rarely designed to extract any meaningful insights on Google's technologies. Whenever a specific question arose, Pichai responded with a promise to "follow up on the matter". This only resulted in the Chair of the committee posing important questions in a post-hearing private letter for Pichai, to which Pichai was expected to give written responses to. All specific information of concrete governance significance was enveloped in that private correspondence.

4.1. Imaginary Intent

Coming back to remainder of the hearing, the Congress seemed motivated to work on regulating big tech companies and their Internet platforms. But their approach was centred on imaginaries of technologies and corporations, rather than the finer details of their design and mechanisms. By this, I mean they referred to technologies against the stories and images known to them, that would have either a utopian or a dystopian end. Issue like privacy, surveillance and foreign interference were immediately given a moral dimension. This hearing could have explored technical dimensions of Google's data collection and privacy processes that could inform the policymaking process. Instead, we get discussions centred solely around an imagined future where too much or too little power in the hands of Google and other companies shapes the life and freedoms of individuals. The hearing manages to address the moral question of whether regulation is warranted, but reveals too little about how to regulate.

The presence of imaginaries was evident in the discourses as well as the kind of policy action implied by the Congresspersons. Some Republican members of the Congress only wanted to regulate Google if it did not conform to "protecting" conservative voices, and also stressing on the fact that 'free market ideals' are upheld. A

simpler translation for this is a demand for Google's compliance with the Republican Party and its supporters in exchange of no interference from the government via policy and other interventions.

The first imaginary is born out of Google's characterization as a success story of the American dream, that Google had a moral obligation to side with American interests and therefore, the American government. The stories of two young visionaries developing a ground-breaking technology from their garage is all too familiar a fable that gets told about technological platforms. This was a story both the Congresspersons and Pichai used to claim their stances. While the Congresspersons used to this remind Google where its loyalties ought to lie, Pichai used it to claim that Google really is committed to the best interests of the U.S. His rendition communicated to the hearing's audience that Google is not a global company, but an American company with global influence. It yields more public sympathy for him. It also makes it harder for the Congress to imply that Google is complicit in the influence of foreign powers in elections, and in matters of data security. More specifically, it makes the claims regarding Project Dragonfly somewhat ineffective.

Google's story and vision are not divorced from the stories and vision of the Internet. Right in the opening statement by GOP Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, Google was asked if it was ready to fulfil the utopian promise of free and open Internet. The philosophical question asked to Google was if it was "an instrument of freedom or an instrument of control". The idea of free and open Internet was once again encapsulated in McCarthy's phrase "the promise of the digital age" and David N. Cicilline's reference to Tim Berners-Lee, which bring with them earlier imaginaries of the Internet as a democratic utopia. The "free and open Internet" idea was proposed in relation to Google's attempts to monopolize the internet space and expanding itself to include several technological products. While the phrase appears in the hearing multiple times, the questions specifically addressing the anti-competitive behaviour were exceptionally rare. This leaves one territory of governance virtually unexplored.

In different rounds of questioning, there are contradictions in terms of how Google is characterised. Some members speak of Google as a force for good, that needs accountability to the people. On the other hand, when being bestowed with unlimited power and access to unquantifiable amounts of user data, Google was a

private corporation hellbent on being profitable at the cost of its customers. When asked about interactions with foreign governments, the very American Google was placed under the suspicion of doing backdoor trade with foreign powers, almost as if it would turn into a spy for these governments (especially Russia and China), and trade American data in exchange of access to their own markets. Here, Google is spoken as no longer an 'American company with a global influence', it became a 'global company putting profits above American interests' - a vessel with no morals or consideration for human rights and free speech. But are these competing characterizations with no purpose?

Invocation of these competing imaginaries are used to achieve different goals. The actors in the hearing are conscious of the role of performatives in sociotechnical imaginaries in generating consent for certain decisions, even if they might or might not be aware of the exact theory.

When Google's surveillance was discussed. Lawmakers such as Ted Poe [R-Texas] and Louie Gohmert Jr. [R-Texas] consistently portrayed Google as a surveillance machine that was not only capable of tracking the locations of the individuals, but also identify them and track their social interactions and conversations. Google was now an "all-seeing eye" (an active feeding ground of Illuminati conspiracy theories) and a panopticon where one is being observed all the time. When imagined in the context of a dystopian future, the sense of paranoia and fear this imaginary can create is enough to consent for aggressive regulation. It is also notable that when Reps. Poe and Gohmert invoke this, they have already spoken of the alleged censorship of conservative voices on Google in their rounds. References to Google's artificial intelligence attempt to make it sound like a human with agency and morality, which can use its mounds of surveillance data to identify and target individuals. We see the replications of Jasanoff's interpretation of technological determinism, where the technology has believed to have evolved to the point that it is inevitable and is capable of escaping human control. When seen in combination, these imaginaries point towards a darker imagined future and hence, heighten the sense of fear and paranoia for the conservative audience. Therefore, the audiences are motivated to distrust Google even further.

When presenting Google as a massive corporation with enormous influence on society and culture, the intention is to justify the need to regulate it to avoid it getting too

powerful and out of control. The idea is not very different in premise that the imaginaries of Google's technology described above. But there is one key difference. As a corporation, Google is ultimately controlled by its team of human decisionmakers. Hence all of the imaginaries about Google are centred around its corporate executives and employees. Hence when Google is accused of political bias or abuse of user data, Congresspersons create the myth of rogue employees who are able to manipulate the algorithms and extract data on specific individuals they dislike. This insistence on political bias by the Republican contingent is a way to panhandle to its audiences' familiarity of the talking points. The imagination is, therefore, believable to certain Republican audiences who are constantly told of "vengeful liberals" actively trying to silence and attack conservatives. For Democratic committee members, who find it necessary to prevent the Republican narratives from normalizing, are forced to respond to them. They are, hence, left with little to no time to ask specific questions linked to the technology behind Google's data collection, privacy and anti-trust behaviour.

Pichai's responses to the questions also parallel Jasanoff's interpretation of 'myth of technocracy'. We can see that some Congresspersons are made to believe that only the technological experts can control Google. And are loaded with narratives of assurances that all processes and outcome are under control, and the abuse is impossible. He reminds the Congress that any and all accidents are merely unintended consequences of technology and not a part of Google's design. For many accusations, he is also able to place the blame on the algorithm and bypass accountability without providing concrete answers.

4.2. Politicization of Imaginaries

In the preceding discussion, we see that imaginaries were invoked by Congresspersons as well as Pichai to portray Google in different lights. Based on who invoked the imaginaries, Google was either linked to a dystopian future through its pervasive surveillance and censorship of conservative content, or it was a neutral force that was apolitical and detached from the socio-political landscapes. We also see that Google was tied to the imaginary of American dream as well as American values of freedom and agency, in order to address Google's work on Project Dragonfly.

Both usage and countless repetitions of these imaginaries are interesting in the context of a televised proceeding. The presence of an audience seemed to be an important cause for the invocation of social imaginaries and use of common talking points used by the Republicans, Democrats and Google. The repetition and animated nature of questioning while assuming the authority in the room, allows the Congresspersons and Pichai to embody the performative of power, as understood by Judith Butler (Butler, 2013). I argue that the performative use of social imaginaries in order to authoritatively project dystopian and utopian imagined futures are driven by the intention to spark emotional responses within the audiences.

One such example is the sense of paranoia inspired from Google's surveillance-style data collection. This emotional 'affect' and its impact on how Google is interpreted is akin to Zizi Papacharissi's concept of 'affective publics' (Papacharissi, 2016). There is also a sense of urgency implied here, with some social imaginaries point towards a dystopian world where technology has run amock. The Congresspersons use these stories to portray that policy action on Google is needed very soon. Boin et al. state that seek to 'exploit' the disruption of 'governance as usual' that emergencies and disturbances entail: to defend and strengthen their positions and authority, to attract or deflect public attention, to get rid of old policies or sow the seeds of new ones (Boin et al. 2009, Keeler 1993).

When I ask myself, why is this cycle of invocations and repetitions of imaginaries even necessary in a hearing such as this one, I am reminded of Oliver Todt's essay on the role of public acceptance in the governance of science and technology. Todt emphasizes that there has been a shift in governance approaches to science and technologies, which is ultimately a product of public consensus, and the manner in which his information is gathered and interpreted (Todt, 2011). In order to speak to a public that does not have time to get into minor details of how technologies work or what specific policies mean, 'framing' approaches are common in discourses around governance of technologies. The use of simple heuristics is used to understand the complex nature of technologies (Lachapelle et al., 2014). This is where the familiarity of social imaginaries proves advantageous in communication of complex ideas. But we must be careful not to equate use of social imaginaries in discourse with framing. Framing approaches have a very specific purpose of explaining in simpler terms, the complex concepts of individual policies and technologies (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016).

Social imaginaries speak to larger imaginations and are used to bank on the diverse imaginations and beliefs people hold to aid their cognition.

Going by the patterns in which the imaginaries were invoked, it was evident that some came more frequently from a particular political party. The narratives of political bias and personal identifiers were exclusive to the Republican members, while issues like election interference by Russia were more common amongst Democrats. The political affiliations tend to flow into the kinds of social imaginaries invoked and defended. Butler points that the political leanings of the affective publics influence the performatives (and their 'convictions') in such political settings such as these (Butler, 2013, p.74). It is clear that political affiliation determined which imaginaries were invoked – and the reason is simple. The imaginaries become proxies for other grievances and emotional investments experienced by the different political groups. Tileagă points that

“Political identity is relationally shaped, and achieving political identity means searching for (and drawing upon) a narratable past. It is too often (or too hastily) assumed that it is only natural for individuals and groups to have (an) identity(ies) or memory(ies), and too often forgotten that it is through constructing, negotiating or resisting identities that individuals are able to acquire, make sense of and recall their memories. For both individuals and communities collective memory is the ‘active past that forms our identities’. This idea applies more stringently to researching the collective memories of nations. Nations have to create their own histories and interpretations of themselves – they are not only ‘imagined’ but also ‘interpretive communities’. (Tileagă, 2013, p.112)

As members of both political parties focused the discussion around the social imaginaries associated with Google (either as technological platform, or as a private corporation), the discussions on the finer details of data collection and privacy could not happen. We essentially do not learn anything about how Google’s technologies are geared to collect data – we learn that Google does collect data. We do not learn what measures Google takes to ensure the data is protected in order to assess if these are sufficient. But we do learn that Google has some measures in place to ensure data protection. At the end of the hearing, Google continues to be an opaque corporation and Congress remained under-equipped to be able to devise its own policy action. And at least part of the blame can attributed to heavy use of social imaginaries to drive the discussion. Due to the intention to cater to the audiences of either political parties, it can

be said that different social imaginaries were invoked to claim consensus of policy action (even though what this policy action would be, is never made clear).

I propose that the discursive usage of social imaginaries to drive political communication transforms the imagined social futures of some groups into conduits of gaining consensus on politically motivated performative actions. The purpose of these imaginaries is not to ultimately invoke a collective social consciousness, but to invoke a political consciousness. The image is not used to interpret the image itself, but a different vision altogether. I call these invocations 'politicized social imaginaries'. In the hearing, we saw imaginaries being politicized to allow members of either party to push their regular talking points and rile up their electoral bases. The two parties also tried to create two competing images of Google – one that is determined to lead us into a dystopian future, the other image shows Google to be neutral and apolitical at best.

In this case study, we find highly politicized social imaginaries are work, which have the following characteristics:

1. They are centred around identification of affective publics.
2. They extensively use popular cultural notions such as other social imaginaries, master narratives, references to pop culture, literature and tropes due to their familiarity.
3. Their intention is to affect the political consensus by constructing or maintaining images that motivate the public to either take an action or offer their consent for an action taken by someone else.
4. They are very likely to use utopian and dystopian imagined futures born from compounding different social imaginaries before, to gain such consensus.
5. They use imagined futures (from different social imaginaries) to make the society move towards an intended future (from political motivations behind invocations).
6. The action that they expect the affected publics to take (OR) the action they expect to gain public consensus on do not necessarily have to be outlined,

The concept of politicized social imaginaries is only nascent and will have to be further refined from other case studies and theorization.

In reflection, the hearing did not have reveal much about the governance of technology by the U.S. Congress, but it did reveal that its functioning is highly partisan. The partisanship may often override the purpose of significant events such the Sundar Pichai hearing. We learn that the Congress is definitely interested in some form of regulation, but it failed to engage in meaningful dialogue which let them achieve just that.

Chapter 5.

Conclusion

In this paper, we are introduced to the concept of politicized social imaginaries that contextualize the discursive usage of social imaginaries to achieve political ends. We see from the theorization of social imaginaries proposed by Charles Taylor, and subsequently by Sheila Jasanoff (with sociotechnical imaginaries), that both collectively imagined futures and performative action are key components of the imaginaries. We assessed the hearing in terms of these social imaginaries and found that intentionality behind such invocations allow us to assess the political nature of the questioning. Between fearmongering and aggressiveness of the Republican Party, active rebuttal exercise employed by the Democratic Party and careful verbal dodges employed by Pichai, we understand the power of discourse in shaping power relations in society.

In the case study, it was seen that imagined futures of social groups are tied to their social and political beliefs, even if these imagined futures are centered around technologies. The technologies therefore cannot be apolitical, simply on the basis of their social construction and interpretations. I refer back to Jasanoff's statement mentioned earlier in the essay where she points at the gaps in scholarship on the mechanics of interconnections between technoscientific futures and political practice. We find that the two intertwined by virtue of their discourses and the intentionalities underlying them. The technoscientific futures are influenced by political decisions on the performativity and discourses, while political actions can also be in service to intended imagined futures by the political class. The discursive role of politicized imaginaries is visible when the affective publics or audiences are taken into consideration. The imaginaries may not have direct measurable influences on governance actions, but they have a significant presence in the governance process.

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