

Should digital giants be broken up?

Level: Intermediate–advanced

Time: 90 minutes +

Summary: This lesson is about digital giants – huge companies that carry out their business via the internet – and whether there should be rules and regulations in place to stop them monopolizing the sectors they are effectively controlling. In this lesson, students will:

1. study one of two texts and participate in an information exchange with another student;
2. discuss and summarize an article;
3. discuss the impact of digital giants on their own lives and consider possible solutions to their monopolizing of the market.

Materials: One copy of the worksheet per student; one copy of the vocabulary record per student

Group size: Any

Note: This lesson plan for both pre-experience and in-work business students is based around an original article first published in *Business Spotlight* issue 2/2015.

Warmer

Hand out the worksheet. Ask students to list between five and ten very large companies that do their business via the internet. Get them to talk about which sectors each company works in, or what their main business consists of, and who the companies' nearest competitors are.

Key words

Split the students into two groups. Students in one group should receive Article A and students in the other group Article B. Students read the definitions for their set of words and match them to the key words. Then, they should read their article, either A or B, find the words and see how they are used in context. Students should not see the other group's article.

Key:

Article A

1. c; 2. k; 3. m; 4. i; 5. d; 6. g; 7. a; 8. f; 9. e; 10. b; 11. j; 12. n; 13. l; 14. h

Article B

1. d; 2. m; 3. e; 4. j; 5. l; 6. k; 7. a; 8. f; 9. b; 10. g; 11. h; 12. c; 13. i

Teaching and learning strategy: information gap activities

'Exchanging information is one of the key functions of language ... It is typically performed by the asking of questions and by answering with statements.' – Scott Thornbury, *An A–Z of ELT*, Macmillan Education

In information gap activities (also called 'information exchange tasks'), the information a student needs to complete the task is in the possession of another student. In order to obtain the information, the students have to communicate with each other – in English!

These types of tasks are the basis of a teaching methodology called Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) or the Communicative Approach.

Summarizing and exchanging information

Stage 1

Once students have read their article, they should discuss it with other students who have the same article.

Stage 2

In their groups, the students should orally summarize their article.

Stage 3

Still working in groups, the students should write six comprehension questions about the article. Every student must write down the questions on their sheet. Explain that these questions will be given, along with the article, to the students who read the other article so the questions should be clear, legible and grammatically correct. The questions should not be too easy – that is, the students from the other group should not just be able to copy the answer straight from the article, word for word.

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Answering comprehension questions

Stage 1

The students should pair up with a student who read the other article. Pairs should exchange articles and the comprehension questions.

Stage 2

Students should read the article and answer the questions about it, making sure to write their answers clearly on the sheet. They can work alone, or in pairs or small groups with students who have the same article.

Stage 3

The students should compare their answers, making any final corrections, before returning the sheet to the students that set the questions.

Stage 4

Students should now read through the answers and decide whether they are correct.

Stage 5

Allow time for corrections, discussion and feedback about the questions and answers.

Expressions

Hand out copies of the articles that students don't yet have whichever article the students don't yet have, either A or B. Students find the expressions in the articles and read them again, in context, to decide what they mean. They should then use them in sentences of their own.

Key:

1. B; *making less progress or being less successful than others who are doing a similar job or activity*
2. B; *at the European Parliament*
3. A; *used for saying that something should be done soon, because it should already have been done*
4. B; *used for emphasizing the importance of a particular aspect of a situation*
5. B; *use a situation or opportunity to get what you want*
6. A; *held and controlled by*
7. A; *used for emphasizing the main point or the most important reason for something*

Discussion

Students discuss the questions, which relate directly to the article.

Vocabulary record

Here, students should be encouraged to record all of the new and useful vocabulary they have learnt during the lesson, not only in the form presented in the article but also in related forms.

Related topics on onestopenglish

The following Business Spotlight lesson is on the related topic of whether consumers are aware of how much they are being spied on and how their digital data is used.

www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/have-marketers-become-spies/553622.article

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2 Key words

Match the words on the left with the meanings on the right.

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| 1. prosperity | a. affect the way that something happens |
| 2. titans | b. If something such as information is here, people in general know about it because it is not secret. |
| 3. unchallenged | c. the situation of being successful and having a lot of money |
| 4. regulators | d. companies that have complete control of the product or service they provide because they are the only ones that provide it |
| 5. monopolies | e. simple, clear and easy to understand; without any secrets |
| 6. governance | f. public services such as gas, water or electricity |
| 7. influence | g. the process of governing or running a country or organization |
| 8. utilities | h. when a company does not have to explain its actions or decisions to anyone else |
| 9. transparent | i. people or organizations whose job is to be certain that companies and systems act fairly and follow rules |
| 10. public domain | j. computer programs that are based on a code that is available for anyone to use |
| 11. open-source | k. very important and successful organizations |
| 12. manipulate | l. the things that happen to someone, especially unpleasant things |
| 13. fate | m. not opposed or stopped from doing anything by anyone |
| 14. unaccountable | n. influence someone or control something |

Should digital giants be broken up? Yes! "They have virtually unchallenged power"

Article A
Robert W McChesney



The internet boom has not led to a golden age of investment and prosperity in today's capitalism, unlike the spread of the automobile and all of its many related industries in the twentieth century. The reason is that the internet has produced monopolistic titans like Google, Apple, Amazon, Facebook, eBay and Microsoft.

These firms take advantage, first and foremost, of network effects, which tend to produce "winner-take-all" markets with almost no middle class of smaller firms.

Together, these giants have virtually unchallenged power in Washington, DC and with regulators. The rare times they face any challenge from regulators is when they are on opposite sides of an issue, as has happened with network neutrality (the principle that internet servers should treat all data equally and not give themselves advantages).

These internet giants are monopolies in the classic sense: they control sufficient market share – usually at least 50 or 60 per cent – to determine both prices and how much competition they have. They therefore pose a direct threat not only to smaller firms but also to democratic governance.

The economist Henry C Simons said that giant monopolistic firms would, in the end, stop capitalism from being democratic because they would use their power to influence regulators. To make sure there was a real free market and democracy, Simons said it was therefore essential to break up monopolistic firms into smaller, competitive parts. If that is impossible – for example, with utilities and railroads – then they should be taken over and directed by the government in a transparent manner.

Simons was right. The "network effect" – that is, the effect of huge numbers of users on the value of a network – makes it nearly impossible to break up the internet giants, especially because they have so much influence with politicians. It is therefore high time to think about how to put internet services that have become monopolies into the public domain, managed transparently and guided by open-source protocol.

One benefit would be that it would undermine the ability of firms to collect every bit of information on users in order to better manipulate them. It would be far easier to have internet standards closer to what was imagined by those who created the internet. Power would be in the hands of the users, who would control their own digital fate, rather than in the hands of giant firms that are mostly unaccountable – except to their investors.

Robert W McChesney is a professor of communication at the University of Illinois and author of *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet against Democracy*.

Should digital giants be broken up?

2 Key words

Match the words on the left with the meanings on the right.

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| 1. radical | a. intended to prevent companies from controlling prices and reducing competition |
| 2. free up | b. refusing to accept someone's authority |
| 3. interest groups | c. serious or difficult responsibilities that you have to deal with |
| 4. blow | d. drastic; extreme; large and important |
| 5. tech sector | e. people who work together to achieve a particular aim, especially by putting pressure on the government |
| 6. dominance | f. a set of plans or actions agreed on by a government, political party, business or other group |
| 7. antitrust | g. be responsible for making certain that something is done according to the rules |
| 8. policy | h. a situation in which there is strict control over money or goods |
| 9. challenging | i. provide a group of people or an area with something useful |
| 10. administer | j. an event that spoils your chances of success |
| 11. the squeeze | k. a situation in which one business has more influence or power than any other |
| 12. burdens | l. the part of business that deals with information technology |
| 13. serve | m. make something available to be used for something else |

Should digital giants be broken up?

No! "So far, Google is providing the best service"

Article B
Jim Harper



The European Parliament's vote to break up Google is a radical step that will do no good for Europe's consumers. Rather, Brussels should free up Europe's tech sector so European businesses can be competitive.

It's easy to understand why the European Parliament might vote to break up Google. European tech

businesses and interest groups are probably pleased at this blow to a US company, not least because the US government has taken advantage of its tech sector for spying purposes.

If such a policy were seriously considered, though, the well-being of the European consumer would have to be brought into the discussion. So far, European internet users have chosen Google as their preferred internet search engine as well as provider of other services. Google has about 90 per cent of the internet search market in Europe, compared to 65 per cent in the US.

Some European and US businesses may suffer because Google's dominance limits their business options. However, antitrust policy does not exist to limit the suffering of other

firms. The focus of antitrust should always be on what serves consumers. And, so far, Google is providing the best service for European consumers.

Rather than lowering the standard of online services in Europe, Brussels should increase consumers' options. A variety of policies prevent the European tech industry from challenging America's giants. For example, the "right to be forgotten," recently discovered by the European Court of Justice, will be nearly impossible to administer. A large company like Google can afford lawyers to fight this regulatory boia constrictor. But smaller firms will not be able to and will suffer more from the squeeze put on them by their own regulators.

There is no reason to think that politicians in Brussels do not mean well with such regulations. But, if they find their own tech sector falling behind, they should lessen the burdens on their own companies rather than burdening online companies based abroad. Breaking up a top service provider to Europe's consumers would not serve Europe well.

Jim Harper is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, DC, which promotes limited government and free markets.

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1 Warmer

Which companies do you consider to be 'digital giants'?

What fields of business are they active in?

3 Summarizing and exchanging information

a. Discuss the article you have just read with other students who read the same article.

b. Summarize the article together.

c. Write six comprehension questions about the article.

4 Answering comprehension questions

Swap pages with a student who read the other article. Read the article and answer their questions about it.

5 Expressions

Decide which article each of these expressions was in. Read them again in the context of the article and explain what they mean. Then use them in sentences of your own.

	expression	article A or B	meaning
1	<i>falling behind</i>		
2	<i>in Brussels</i>		
3	<i>high time</i>		
4	<i>not least</i>		
5	<i>take advantage of</i>		
6	<i>in the hands of</i>		
7	<i>first and foremost</i>		

6 Discussion

- To what extent do these digital giants influence your work?
- Would consumers benefit if digital giants were broken up?
- Is it realistic to try to break up these monopolies?
- Should politicians be allowed to decide what companies may or may not do?
- What can we do to avoid (or minimize the effect of) being manipulated by digital giants?
- How different would your daily life be if these digital giants did not exist?
- What do you think is meant by "the right to be forgotten"? Should people have this right?

