

Corporations directing our attention online more than we realize | Illinois News Bureau

By Craig Chamberlain

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CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — We know how search engines can favor certain results and how social media might push us into bubbles, but it's still easy to view the internet as a place where we're in control.

A new study, however, argues that notion of personal empowerment is “an illusion.” Corporations are “nudging” the flow of our online attention more than we realize, and often in hidden ways – not unlike radio and TV programmers of the past – said co-authors [Harsh Taneja](#), with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and [Angela Xiao Wu](#), with New York University.

The researchers analyzed clickstream data on a million people over one month of internet use. They also looked at corporate ownership of sites and platforms, how those sites were designed, and the partnerships that connected them.

They found that on the web, “media architectures still shape the flow of public attention. This happens in subtle ways that nudge users in particular directions. It often takes advantage of habitual behaviors and is generally difficult for the users themselves to see or understand.”

Concerns about the power of Big Tech have been growing, with an antitrust case recently filed and executives testifying before Congress, but Taneja and Wu claim their study is one of the few to document Big Tech's power systematically and at scale.

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