

Censorship in the guise of opposition to monopoly control

Co-founder Chris Hughes calls for government break-up of Facebook

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Calls for government regulation of the big technology corporations have escalated in Washington and the corporate media following the *New York Times*' May 9 publication of an op-ed by Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes calling for a breakup of the company. These demands are driven not by opposition to monopolies, but by a desire to more effectively censor left-wing oppositional views on the internet.

Hughes, who is reported to have a personal wealth of \$430 million, founded Facebook along with current company CEO Mark Zuckerberg and several others in 2004, while they were students at Harvard University. Hughes left the company in 2007 to become a volunteer in the presidential campaign of Barack Obama. He has since bought and sold a majority stake in the *New Republic* magazine and is currently co-chairman of the Democratic Party think tanks Economic Security Project and The Roosevelt Institute.

In his comment in the *New York Times*, Hughes argues that his former company “has grown too big and too powerful” and that the US government needs to “break up Facebook’s monopoly and regulate the company.” A new government agency, Hughes writes, must be “empowered by Congress to regulate tech companies”

In the course of describing the development of Facebook’s dominance of social media markets, Hughes blames Mark Zuckerberg for his “unchecked power” and “staggering” influence. Due to the fact that Zuckerberg controls 60 percent of the company’s voting shares, Hughes writes, “Mark alone can decide how to configure Facebook’s algorithms to determine what people see in their News Feeds, what privacy settings they can use and even which messages get delivered.”

After writing that “Mark is a good and kind person,” Hughes says Zuckerberg’s influence is “far beyond that

of anyone else in the private sector or in government,” adding that the Facebook CEO “controls three core communications platforms—Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp—that billions of people use every day.”

A substantial portion of the op-ed deals with the anti-competitive business practices of Facebook over the past decade, tactics used by every monopoly for more than 100 years. According to Hughes, things like duplicating the innovations of competitors and buying startups to kill off ideas that represent potential market threats arose from Mark Zuckerberg’s personal ambition for “domination,” not the objective tendency of capitalism toward market control and absolute dominance.

Hughes also describes the approval by the Federal Trade Commission of Facebook’s 2012 acquisition of WhatsApp and Instagram as a “mistake,” rather than an example of the way powerful financial interests on Wall Street drive government policy. He writes, “The company’s strategy was to beat every competitor in plain view, and regulators and the government tacitly—and at times explicitly—approved,” as though this is a departure from the norm.

Hughes’ advocacy of censorship of left-wing views comes out when he deals directly with the question of speech and political expression. He admits that Facebook has unprecedented control over speech, but his criticism is that the company is a poor censor.

He writes, “In 2016, they [Facebook] enabled the spread of fringe political views and fake news, which made it easier for Russian actors to manipulate the American electorate.” According to Hughes, the presence of left-wing and anti-capitalist political views on Facebook “made it easier” for “Russian meddling” in the 2016 elections. This is a new interpretation of the fabricated and unsubstantiated claims by the Democrats that the

defeat of Hillary Clinton by Donald Trump was the result of Russian election interference, facilitated by social media.

Hughes goes on to say that “Facebook has responded to many of the criticisms of how it manages speech by hiring thousands of contractors to enforce the rules that Mark and senior executives develop.” In other words, responsibility for establishing censorship rules and enforcing them on Facebook cannot be entrusted to the management and staff of Facebook and must be turned over to the government.

One revealing comment made by Hughes is that the new strategy of Facebook for more “private, encrypted messaging” between individuals is aimed at a more “friendly oversight from regulators and other industry executives” rather than genuine concern for the privacy rights of users. “Facebook isn’t afraid of a few more rules. It’s afraid of an antitrust case,” he writes.

In describing an incident that occurred in 2017 during the atrocities against the Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar, Hughes says that Facebook employees intervened to delete “sensational” messages based on on-the-spot directives from Zuckerberg. Hughes writes that “most people would agree with his decision, but it’s deeply troubling that he made it with no accountability to any independent authority or government.”

Hughes’s program is very clear: censorship is best done by the state, not by private enterprise.

Hughes concludes his op-ed with the proposal that Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp be split into three separate companies and that Facebook be banned from future acquisitions “for several years.” The separation of the firms would take the form of a “spin off” of Instagram and WhatsApp into their own publicly traded companies. Current shareholders would continue to own stock in the new businesses, while executives like Zuckerberg would be barred from holding any shares.

Hughes’s 6,000-word essay—released along with a slick *New York Times* five-minute infographic-style video—is part of the campaign by the Democratic Party establishment and sections of the intelligence apparatus that are spearheading the anti-Russian witch hunt and the drive for internet censorship, and consider Facebook to be insufficiently aggressive in carrying out the desired crackdown.

As a social media platform that touches one-third of the world’s population and hosts content that is not completely controlled by big business or the state, Facebook has the potential to become an instrument of

mass political and organizational opposition within the working class. Already a wave of teachers’ strikes in the US, the Yellow Vest protests in France and the *maquiladora* auto parts strikes in Mexico, among other workers’ struggles, have been organized outside of the control of the pro-corporate unions through social media.

Some leading Democratic Party figures such as Virginia Senator Mark Warner, the vice chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee and vice chair of the Senate Democratic Caucus, have been calling for government regulation of the social media monopolies without demanding their break-up. Warner, who is closely tied into the intelligence and military apparatus, does not want to disturb the intimate connections between the internet and tech giants and the Pentagon and CIA. But since October 2018, he has advocated government intervention for the purpose of “combating misinformation,” a euphemism for censoring left-wing and oppositional views on social media.

Corporations such as Facebook, Google, Apple, Netflix and Amazon are monopolies that exercise immense power in the interests of their major shareholders, Wall Street and the capitalist state. They should not only be broken up, they should be transformed into publicly owned utilities democratically controlled by the working population. This is the only way that the revolutionary technological developments in communications can be harnessed to benefit the population of the US and the world, rather than being perverted into new means of surveillance and state propaganda.

This requires a political struggle by the working class against private ownership of the powerful media and information technologies spawned by the internet and the political parties and state institutions that uphold the profit system.



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