

Creating the framework for government-directed online censorship

House Judiciary Committee begins antitrust inquiry into big tech

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A major US government investigation of the big technology corporations began on Tuesday with a hearing before the antitrust subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee in Washington, DC. The first of many planned hearings, depositions and interviews over the next 18 months, the session was the start of a bipartisan inquiry by Congress and the Justice Department into the practices of Google, Facebook, Amazon and Apple amid increasing demands to “break up” the technology conglomerates.

Under the guise of investigating antitrust violations such as “stifling competition” and “hurting consumers,” the combined forces of the capitalist state are moving rapidly toward one purpose: to control the flow of news and information by means of government-directed censorship of all content on the internet and the mass social media platforms.

The true aim of the House inquiry became clear at Tuesday’s hearing titled “Online Platforms and Market Power, Part 1: The Free and Diverse Press,” which featured representatives from the corporate media industry and others connected with traditional news channels of capitalist political and economic interests.

In his opening statement, subcommittee chairman David Cicilline, a Rhode Island Democrat, emphasized the loss by traditional news publishers of their power and influence to the distribution and advertising dominance of online “gateways” such as Facebook and Google. Cicilline described the corporate news industry as “trustworthy” and presented the growth and expansion of the web and social media platforms as a negative, saying, “it is clear that we must do something in the short term to save trustworthy journalism before it is lost forever.”

Meanwhile, not one word was said about the actual censorship and attack on free speech that has been practiced for more than two years by the tech companies such as Google and Facebook against socialist and oppositional websites and social media publishers. Additionally, the hypocrisy of the entire assemblage was exposed by the numerous references to “freedom of thought and speech” and “political truth” while the illegal persecution, detention and possible extradition to the US of WikiLeaks journalist and publisher Julian Assange was never mentioned.

Cicilline explained in his remarks that he has introduced, along with ranking Republican member Doug Collins of Georgia, the “Journalism Competition and Preservation Act.” The bill would provide big newspaper publishers with a four-year exemption from antitrust laws and enable them to collaborate and dictate how Google, Facebook and Twitter display their news content.

With a companion bill also introduced in the Senate, the passage of such a law would effectively establish a publishing cartel dominated by a few major metropolitan newspapers. The House bill splits the “news content creators” (corporate news organizations) from the “online content distributors” (online services with 1 billion monthly active users or more, i.e., Google, Facebook, Amazon and Apple) and allows the former to negotiate monetary terms and conditions as one group over the distribution of their content by the latter.

Tuesday’s hearing featured the testimony of David Chavern of the News Media Alliance, a publishing association representing 2,000 US newspapers, David Pitofsky, legal counsel from Rupert Murdoch’s News

Corp., which publishes *The Wall Street Journal*, and Kevin Riley, editor of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. All spoke enthusiastically in favor of the need for the legislation.

Much of the demand for a government inquiry into big tech follows the conclusion of the Mueller probe and the incessant and unsubstantiated claims that Russians organized a social media campaign of “fake news” and hacked the Democratic Party email servers in order to help Republican Donald Trump win the 2016 US presidential elections. The Mueller report asserts that Russian businessmen spent \$100,000 in Facebook advertising—compared to a combined \$90 million by the Clinton and Trump campaigns—and does not suggest that this campaign had any impact on the outcome of the elections.

Additionally, many candidates running for the 2020 Democratic Party nomination for US president—including by New Jersey Senator Cory Booker, Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar and Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren—have stepped up their demands for government regulation and break-up of big tech. These candidates are hoping to leverage the “fake news” narrative to build their fraudulent populist campaigns against corporate monopoly and antitrust violations.

At the end of May, several news outlets began reporting that the Justice Department was preparing an antitrust case against Google. Although unconfirmed by the DoJ, the reports said a department task force had been looking into Google’s advertising practices and search engine algorithms. These preparations appeared to be connected to the growing bipartisan demands for the break-up of all of the big technology corporations, especially Facebook.

The campaign against Facebook goes back to the Cambridge Analytica revelations in the early spring of last year, where the social media giant was aggressively attacked in the capitalist media for selling user profile information for the purposes of prediction of how individual Facebook users would vote. Although these practices have been well-known almost since the founding of Facebook, reports emerged in February of this year that the company was in talks with the Justice Department to pay as much as \$5 billion for violations of a consent decree it signed in 2011.

In the early days of this month, reports began to

emerge that a bipartisan arrangement was being worked out for a major anti-monopoly investigation of all four tech giants. On June 3, several news outlets—including the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*—reported that a deal had been worked out between Congress and the Justice Department to launch a major inquiry.

According to the reports, jurisdiction would be divided between a Federal Trade Commission investigation of Amazon and Facebook and a Justice Department investigation of Apple and Google. This was followed by statements from leading Democrats and Republicans, such as Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Lindsay Graham of South Carolina and Connecticut Democratic Senator Richard Blumenthal, supporting a probe into the unregulated power and predatory practices of the big tech firms.

Workers, students and young people must understand that the campaign in Washington, DC against monopoly, violation of privacy rights and the unchecked power of the so-called FANG companies (Facebook, Amazon, Netflix and Google) is so much play-acting, behind which the state is moving toward a regime of outright censorship.

With the expansion of mass struggles by the working class—combined with a growing interest in socialism—and the use of social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp to coordinate and communicate outside the official bourgeois channels, the ruling elite is terrified that these struggles will coalesce into a generalized conflict against the entire capitalist system.

The purpose of the US government inquiry into big tech is to regain control of the flow of news and information content, a task that requires a major assault on the democratic rights of the people and one that will provoke a ferocious and revolutionary reaction from the working class.



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