

US Senate hearing uses child sexual exploitation as pretext for state control of social media content

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The Senate Judiciary Committee hosted a widely publicized hearing on Wednesday titled, “Big Tech and the Online Child Sexual Exploitation Crisis.”

The four-hour proceeding, held in the Dirksen Senate Office Building across the street from the US Capitol, was a demonstration of the demagogic posturing and brazen dishonesty that is a central feature of the American political system and its lurch to the right as a whole.

Democrats and Republicans on the committee came together in the hearing to thank and congratulate each other for pretending to defend of the families of children who have been abused or died from child sexual exploitation (CSE) being practiced online.

The real purpose of the hearing was to push a bipartisan agenda of censorship and control of content online, especially as it relates to the social media platforms that are being used by hundreds of millions of young people and workers in the US and around the world. These platforms are also being used to organize and coordinate the growing wave of strikes by workers and mass protests internationally against the imperialist-backed Zionist genocide in Gaza.

The following executives of some of the wealthiest tech companies in the world gave testimony and were questioned at the hearing: Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Meta (parent of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp); Linda Yaccarino, CEO of X (formerly Twitter); Evan Spiegel, CEO of Snap (parent of Snap Chat and Bitmoji); Shou Zi Chew, CEO of TikTok; and Jason Citron, CEO of Discord.

In his opening comments, Senator Dick Durbin, Democrat from Illinois and chairman of the committee, said the growth of CSE “is driven by one thing:

changes in technology.” He then went on to get to the substance of the congressional hearing. Durbin denounced the Section 230 provision of the Communications Decency Act of 1996, which provides immunity to online service providers from liability for content posted by users.

He said, “For the past 30 years, Section 230 has remained largely unchanged, allowing big tech to grow into the most profitable industry in the history of capitalism without fear of liability for unsafe practices. That has to change.”

Section 230 is widely recognized as a provision that protects free speech on line. According to the Electronic Freedom Foundation, “Section 230 provides websites, blogs, and social networks that host speech with protection against a range of laws that might otherwise hold them legally responsible for what their users say and do. Section 230 is a fundamental shield that allows Yelp to host reviews, Craigslist to host classified ads, and Facebook and Twitter to host users’ posts. Without it, websites and Internet Service Providers would be more expensive, operate with less efficiency, and be motivated to censor.”

Nothing in the hearing was more revolting than the comments of Lindsey Graham, far-right Republican senator from South Carolina: “Social media companies as they are currently designed and operate are dangerous products. They are destroying lives, threatening democracy itself. These companies must be reined in or the worst is yet to come.”

Graham turned to Mark Zuckerberg and said, “You and the companies before us, I know you don’t mean it to be so, but you have blood on your hands. You have a product that’s killing people.”

This statement is the most grotesque hypocrisy, coming from a US senator who said the US should place “no limit” on the murder of civilians by the Israeli government in Gaza. Moreover, the “products” used to kill tens of thousands in Gaza, bombs, missiles and other weapons, are being supplied by the US arms industry with the approval of the US government.

After he explicitly called for a repeal of Section 230, Graham then got to a major purpose of the hearing, demonizing China. “TikTok is being used in a way to basically destroy the Jewish state,” he claimed. “I worry that in 2024, our democracy will be attacked again through these platforms by foreign actors.”

Other senators—such as Democrat Amy Klobuchar from Minnesota and fascist Republican Josh Hawley from Missouri—spoke with a similar degree of hysteria. In a stage-managed exchange, Hawley repeatedly questioned Mark Zuckerberg, interrupted him and then demanded that the Meta CEO apologize to the families of children harmed by online sexual abuse, some of whom were sitting behind him in the audience at the hearing.

Hawley then went into an anticommunist and anti-Chinese tirade against TikTok’s Chew, accusing him of being an agent of a foreign hostile government and calling for the banning of the app in the United States. Hawley’s charges against TikTok are based on continuing unproven claims that user data on the platform is being queried, analyzed and used to spy on the American public by the Chinese Communist Party.

How data on the music and video preferences of teenagers and pre-teens would aid the Chinese government in a global conflict with the United States is never explained by the authors of such charges.

Hawley’s anticommunist diatribe was outdone by another fascist Republican Tom Cotton of Arkansas, who repeatedly attacked Chew, a Singaporean by birth, and attempted to present him and TikTok as tools the Chinese Communist Party.

These claims, which were supported by every member of the Judiciary Committee, were being made just as a recent reports have shown that the US intelligence and law enforcement agencies are purchasing and scanning through information from commercial data brokers related to the domestic internet activity of American citizens, without a warrant to do so. These violations of the fundamental

democratic rights of the public by the *American* government were not a subject of the hearing.

While many of those who attended the hearing were the relatives of victims of online child sexual exploitation or bullying, these aggrieved family members were being used as a political pawns in the despicable right-wing show put on by both the Democrats and Republicans.

Any legitimate exposure of and struggle against online child sexual exploitation would necessarily begin with a critical discussion of the roots of such exploitation in the social crisis produced by decaying capitalism. That is the last thing that the capitalist politicians who paraded before television cameras Wednesday had in mind.



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