

Reviews

The Tyranny of Big Tech

Josh Hawley

Washington, DC: Regnery, 2021 (194 pages)

Josh Hawley, Republican US senator from Missouri, and former attorney general of Missouri, entered the Senate just over two years ago, and has since developed a reputation as a major critic of the “power and pretensions” of Big Tech monopolies. In *The Tyranny of Big Tech*, Hawley reminds us that 99 percent of all adults in America who use social media are on Facebook; that Google controls nine out of ten online searches in America; and Amazon, as of 2020, controls at least 40 percent of all online sales in America. Moreover, Big Tech is increasing its control over the nation’s personal and political communication channels and the delivery of our daily news; while also moving into other avenues of commercial trade.

Big Tech’s business model, says Hawley, is “based principally on data collection and advertising, which means devising ways to manipulate individuals to change their behavior—and then selling that opportunity at manipulation to big corporations.” This “addiction” economy, says Hawley, is designed to keep Americans online as much and as long as possible, so as to sell them more goods and services, thus collecting more of their personal information. According to Hawley, Big Tech—Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, and Twitter—not only want to run the American economy but also run the country.

Hawley is an admirer of former President Theodore Roosevelt, who was an ardent enforcer of the Sherman antitrust law against major economic concentrations of power and wealth. As Hawley notes, Roosevelt and the American Republican tradition’s objection to “bigness” was rooted in “elite, aristocratic, concentrations [that] threatened the power of the common man and woman.” And this, in turn, “set the common person at the heart of

self-government.” From Hawley’s perspective, it is insufficient that Americans simply be “left alone” by their government, as many libertarians argue, but that citizens should be actively involved in their running their government as vested in their enumerated rights under the US Constitution.

The rise of “corporate liberalism,” a new ideology espoused by many of the leaders of American industry at the turn of the twentieth century, preached the benefits of industrial “bigness” and concentrations of power in society and government, replacing the republican celebration of the common man and woman. Coincidentally, following the Roosevelt and Taft presidencies, President Woodrow Wilson emerged to provide corporatists with a new theory of “freedom.” Wilson’s vision of liberty, says Hawley, “had no necessary connection to self-rule,” but was about making personal choices and realizing one’s individuality. The people’s liberties would be met by guaranteeing the citizenry material prosperity and the right to pursue their life choices. Wilson promptly secured legislation (the Clayton and Federal Trade Commission (FTC) Acts) to end the federal antimonopoly efforts of his predecessors, while his new FTC would promote “a new cooperative approach, blessing the corporate order in exchange for regulation by new bodies of experts within the federal government.” Wilson’s corporate liberalism, says Hawley, continues with twenty-first century Big Tech.

What has Big Tech wrought on the American psyche and political landscape? Hawley cites evidence of the effect that Big Tech has had on Americans’ obsession with their online media: for example, in 2019, 81 percent of Americans surveyed spent time online “every day,” while 28 percent reported being online “almost constantly”—the latter, continuously feeding Big Tech’s insatiable business model. Furthermore, social media addiction has led American teenagers to sleep deprivation, low self-esteem, increased social isolation, and most dangerously, to more widespread depression and higher suicide rates. Moreover, Hawley warns of the censorship being practiced by Big Tech executives (with industry support provided by an alliance of paid lobbyists, think tanks, media, and academics), providing numerous examples of leftist, anticonservative bias found at Facebook and Google.

While *The Tyranny of Big Tech* paints a dour narrative of the status of this industry and its relationship with American society, Hawley offers remedies. At the personal level, he envisions a world where Big Tech serves the people, rather than the inverse, with people serving as a source of consumer data sold to advertisers. He suggests some commonsense boundaries his family employs on time and access to tech, such as the use of the iPad by children, as well as untethering adults from their smartphones, tablets, and laptops, and creating “social media free” zones focused on nurturing family-oriented, personal interactions. This conscious decision often involves painful withdrawal symptoms—but the familial benefits are rewarding.

Hawley’s public policy prescriptions include increased antitrust enforcement and divestiture by Big Tech and revision of outdated antitrust laws. It is questionable whether further antitrust legislation is needed, or simply whether there is sufficient evidence *and* the bureaucratic will to initiate such federal enforcement actions. However, his recommenda-

tion to legislatively grant the FTC’s broader regulatory enforcement authority over the data privacy domain—where tech companies are violating their own privacy policies—is on target. This is because the independent agency has no general Administrative Procedure Act rulemaking authority and no specific authority to issue general information privacy rules, so it relies on its consent decree practice to fill the regulatory gaps.

In addition, Hawley recommends removing the federal Section 230 preemptive immunity protection (that Big Tech has had since 1995) for engaging in manipulative, behavioral advertising, a controversial recommendation, but one worthy of further consideration for amendment so that these companies would have to abide by standards reflecting First Amendment rights. He has already introduced “Do Not Track” legislation in Congress that would stop consumer data collection at the click of an online button. Hawley’s “Do Not Track” legislation could require a consumer option of choosing different levels of privacy, that is, company data access that correlates inversely (by price) to a subscription rate-based model for consumer service, for example, higher levels of data access and a lower subscription rate.

Hawley’s book is an indictment of the Big Tech industry and a call for a return to American self-government and control to the “average individual.” From this reviewer’s perspective, this unsettling book offers an effective consumer “cost” argument balancing the overemphasized consumer “benefits” accruing from digital technology.

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Liberty for All: Defending Everyone’s Religious Freedom in a Pluralistic Age

Andrew T. Walker

Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2021 (258 pages)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau declares bluntly in the conclusion to his *Social Contract* that it is impossible for people to live at peace with neighbors they believe are damned. To leave them in peace is to oppose the God who demands their allegiance, and Christianity in particular cultivates a divisive spirit that makes a unified nation impossible. Thus Rousseau calls for the creation of a civil religion that will not tolerate the intolerable.

While we are a far cry from Rousseau’s illiberal solution to what he takes as the problem with Christianity and politics, sympathy with his indictment seems to be on the rise. The American political tradition’s commitment to religious liberty, once heralded as the “first freedom,” is no longer as valued by an increasingly secular intelligentsia that can view religion as suspect at best and as a mask for prejudice and even bigotry at worst. And it is not just secular critics of faith. While still very much a minority, there are influential Catholic and Protestant voices who reject the liberal order entirely and call for the church to take a stronger hand in taking and holding the reins of political power.