

# The domination of big tech

BY EMILY GREEN  
STAFF WRITER

When Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes purchased the New Republic in 2012, he brought back the magazine's esteemed former editor, Franklin Foer, to help re-create the century-old publication.

What had begun as an electrifying collaboration between Hughes and Foer soon burned out. Foer became disillusioned under Hughes' ownership as he found himself at the mercy of Chartbeat, which provides the sort of tools many newsrooms have come to rely on to track real-time Web traffic. Where journalistic pursuits were once free from readers' whims, those whims now took priority.

When Foer discovered Hughes had hired his replacement, he resigned, prompting a mass exodus from New Republic's newsroom.

To Foer, big tech's remodeling of the media landscape is emblematic of all the ways in which it seeks to guide our thought processes, erode our free will and control our lives – all while existing outside of the rules that have traditionally governed the American marketplace.

He contends against our acceptance of the near-monopoly statuses that companies such as Amazon, Facebook and Google (restructured as Alphabet Inc.) have come to enjoy under the false pretense they are neutral necessities, governed by mathematics and algorithms rather than human biases.

But these behemoths have penetrated our lives, becoming platforms that we can't seem to resist revisiting over and over again.

"I don't mind having a phone that can help me navigate where I want to go," Foer said. "But I feel like we're in a period that's a prelude to much more profound change."

Foer fears that change will cost us faculties that humanity has valued for most of its existence.

But to understand what's at stake, one must first understand the men behind the companies driving us into what Foer sees as a dystopian future.

In his new book, "World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech," Foer lays out the origins of tech giants such as Amazon founder and CEO Jeff Bezos and Google co-founder and CEO Larry Page, revealing the ideologies that drive them and goals that extend far beyond market domination and to a reinvention of the world as we know it.

One lofty goal some hold, he explained,

*Author Franklin Foer warns against a world in which companies such as Google, Amazon and Facebook have eroded our thought processes and command our lives*

stems from their belief in singularity. It's "this idea that they're creating machines that will then become smarter than humans, and that we're going to accelerate into some entire new realm of human existence where our brains are uploaded into the ether and we are able to achieve a state of immortality after we fully merge with machines," Foer said. "There is a profound hubris that haunts these companies. And that's a really unnerving thing to watch given their actual power in the world."

Early on, his book makes bold assertions of how these ideologies are already having a profound effect.

"The tech companies are destroying something precious, which is the possibility of contemplation," Foer argues in his prologue. "They have created a world in which we're constantly watched and always distracted. Through their accumulation of data, they have constructed a portrait of our minds, which they use to invisibly guide mass behavior (and increasingly individual behavior) to further their financial interests."

Foer spoke with Street Roots from Washington, D.C., in advance of his appearance at Powell's City of Books at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 28. He will give a reading, sign books and lead a discussion.

"World Without Mind" begs notice at a time when big tech is rapidly transforming our world, and Foer's gripping narrative reveals just cause for alarm.

One tech giant it delves into is Amazon. Amazon and its founder, Bezos, have amassed a vast business empire that encompasses publishing, film production, manufacturing, grocery stores, a slew of

e-commerce and online platforms, as well as news organizations including The Washington Post, among numerous other endeavors and investments. Now, Amazon is vastly expanding its Oregon footprint.

Amazon recently announced plans to build three Oregon fulfillment centers: one in Salem, with a property tax break of \$3.6 million; one in Troutdale, with a tax break of \$9.6 million; and another in North Portland, which will likely come with a real estate tax waiver for up to five years and an e-commerce tax credit for as much as \$2 million per year, The Oregonian reported.

Foer makes clear that tax avoidance is in large part what makes Amazon competitive. While large corporations aren't known for paying their fair share in taxes, compared with Amazon and Google, even big box stores seem to be paying reasonable sums. Foer points out that while Walmart coughs up 30 percent of its income in taxes and Home Depot 38 percent, Amazon has averaged an effective tax rate of just 13 percent, while Apple and Google paid 16 percent.

"What pisses me off so much about it is you have a company that is already the biggest, and that's already the most powerful in so many different markets, and they are able to leverage that power to further exploit the state, which in turn

gives them even further dominance," Foer said.

But on the plus side, Amazon's fulfillment centers will bring Oregon thousands of jobs.

"The jobs argument is, to me, not the best given the fact that a lot of these jobs are just so low quality. They are so mechanical and robotic," Foer said.

A quick query of current Amazon job openings at its warehouses in Hillsboro and Portland revealed only part-time positions are available, with pay ranging from \$12.25 to \$13.50 per hour. In the Portland metro region, to afford a two-bedroom apartment, a person must work full time, earning at least \$23 an hour, according to the National Low Income

Housing Coalition.

Work requirements listed for Amazon's open positions include an ability to work in sub-32-degree and above-90-degree temperatures; ability to work nights, weekends and holidays; ability to lift up to 49 pounds; ability to stand/walk for up to 12 hours; and willingness to work extra hours as required.

While no health or dental insurance is offered to part-time employees, select positions are eligible for life insurance and accidental death and dismemberment insurance.

However, Amazon has promised

thousands of full-time positions at its new fulfillment centers in Oregon, which would come with full benefits and the company's tuition assistance program, which pays up to \$12,000 in textbooks and tuition costs over four years for students earning degrees in high-demand technical fields.

But just how long all those full-time jobs will last may be a matter of how fast technology advances.

"Amazon wants to replace human beings with robots in these fulfillment centers eventually," Foer said. "And 'eventually' isn't so far off in the future. It could happen relatively quickly. They are making pretty big advances here, and so everybody is laying out in order to try to attract Amazon, but it's a devil's bargain, and it's not going to trickle down to the benefit of the public. It's going to end up ripping off the public."

Foer said the tendency is to view Amazon as a neutral marketplace where anybody can sell their wares, but in his book, he points out: "Companies that manufacture tchotchkes sold on Amazon watch their businesses collapse when Amazon's algorithms detect the profitability of their item, leading the giant to manufacture the goods itself at a lower price."

Last year ProPublica reporters discovered Amazon makes its own products appear as better deals than other similar products sold on its platform.

Google is no different. Foer said that while people often think of Google as a neutral search engine based on math and science, serving as our portal to the world, it also uses its position as an unfair market advantage.

"Once upon a time, if you wanted to go look for a restaurant, you would type it in and a Yelp review would come up first, but then Google realized that Yelp was an awesome business," Foer said. "Now, if you type in a restaurant name, it's the Google review and information that comes up first – and that's the problem. These companies have created a marketplace that everyone can access, but they have enormous ability to pick winners and losers in that marketplace, and if they themselves are competing in it, they have every incentive to make themselves the winner at the expense of other players."

We asked Foer if it was possible that Google is simply trying to make the world a better place – after all, its former, unofficial code of conduct was, "Don't be evil."

"These guys are messing around with really profound things," Foer said. "They want to complete this merger between man and machine. They want to remake and reinvent everything. Sometimes it's good to be a revolutionary, but sometimes revolutions end up exploding things that we hold near and dear, and there's no getting them back. That's really one of my biggest concerns about these companies – that they are trying to rush forward into this glorious future without really thinking hard about what they're doing."

In his book, Foer quotes Mark Zuckerberg as saying, "Having two

identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity." Zuckerberg was talking about how many people have different personas depending on who they are interacting with, either at school, at home or at work. But now we share the same

words and viewpoints with our co-workers, friends and family simultaneously on social media. It's an example of how one man's armchair philosophizing has been exerted onto the masses.

"A lot of the messianic aspirations of these companies are things to be taken seriously, and that part of their ethos is not just that they're trying to gobble up a market; they are sincerely trying to remake the world. And I think that sincere

ambition is part of what makes them so dangerous," Foer said.

"One of the dangers is that if machines become so deeply implanted in our mental activities, there's an extent to which we as humans cease to have control over our own thought processes, and you don't even have to believe in an extreme sci-fi version of this to be freaking right now. I think we can just look at the question of privacy," he said. "Most people, if you ask them, would say they want privacy, they believe in privacy, but I don't think people necessarily understand the core value of privacy and why it's so important. We want to protect certain things from exposure; it's also that we need privacy in order to be thoughtful people. When we're watched, we're not able to really think for

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FRANKLIN FOER



PHOTO BY EVY MAGES

ourselves. We inevitably try to please the person who is watching us – or try not to offend the person who is watching us. In order to be really thoughtful individuals – we're going to have our own opinions about the world – we need spaces where eyes aren't gazing upon us."

Foer warns that we're already manipulated in ways many people might not realize, and with serious consequences.

"That's kind of a lesson from this last election," he said. "Most people who use Facebook have zero idea that information is being organized for them, and there are algorithms that are sorting information, giving priority to certain things over others. It makes people a bit credulous when it comes to reading on Facebook. It's just a system that's open to just a huge amount of manipulation, and the

Russians understood this so they jumped right in. I think that's already happened. More broadly, I feel like we're already a little cyborged. We offload so many mental functions onto our phones."

While there are currently no laws governing data in the United States, Europe has approved the creation of a General Data Protection Regulation. Beginning in May, it will have the authority to fine giant tech companies up to 20 million euros (\$23.9 million).

Although many European countries already have Data Protection Authorities, their fines currently lack the teeth needed to sting companies as large as Google and Amazon. For example, on Sept. 11, Spain's data authority fined Facebook \$1.44 million for the way it uses people's personal data for advertising purposes, saying it violates privacy laws. To a company worth more than \$500 billion, that barely amounts to pocket change.

In "World Without Mind," Foer argues for the need to establish a Data Protection Authority in the United States. He says we need to decide if platforms such as Google and Amazon should be regulated like utilities or broken up. But, Foer said, our existing legal framework doesn't really apply to these new sorts of enterprises.

He points to a paper written by Lina Khan, an associate research scholar at Yale Law School.

Khan argued that because Amazon positioned itself at the center of e-commerce by choosing expansion over profit – it's pricing is notoriously low – it has escaped antitrust scrutiny.

Khan concluded: "Amazon's business strategies and current market dominance

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