FRANKLIN FOER

FRANKLIN FOER (RHYMES WITH "LORE") is a writer long associated with the liberal magazine the *New Republic*, which was founded in 1914 by leaders of the Progressive movement. Impatient with the mainstream media, which these leaders saw as controlled by moneyed interests, they were hoping to create an independent journal of ideas. Since then, the *New Republic* has seen its ups and downs, but the near-collapse of the magazine during Foer's second stint as editor exposes the stubborn persistence of the problem it was founded to address: the survival of independent media in a highly unequal society like ours. In 1914, the elite owed their towering wealth to railroads, coal mines and oil wells; today they control the Internet and the "attention economy."

Foer was a casualty and not the cause of the magazine's decline. After a term as editor, he left to pursue other projects when he was lured back to the editor's post by Chris Hughes, then a boyish 28-year-old lucky enough to have shared a room with Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg when the two were students at Harvard. As part of the original Facebook team, Hughes later sold his interest in the platform for an amount purportedly in excess of 700 million dollars. And that enormous wealth encouraged him to think that he could reshape the nation's cultural life in the ways he thought best. One of his first moves was to buy the *New Republic*, a respected but financially strapped print magazine.

At first, the *New Republic*'s journalists welcomed Hughes as a white knight who had arrived in the nick of time to save them from the problems created by the shift away from print to the Internet. They interpreted the return of Foer as a sign of Hughes' commitment to serious, hard-hitting analysis. But gradually the writers at the magazine realized that their owner had something else in mind, as Sarah Ellison reports in *Vanity Fair*, another mass-market periodical:

> Over time, one of the big flash points that developed between Hughes and his *New Republic* writers was their productivity. What that sometimes meant—despite Hughes's stated contempt for "superficial metrics of online virality"—was productivity measured in Web traffic.... The site's traffic did indeed double, but never got beyond that. "It was not just about traffic," another former staffer told me. "It was really about [Hughes] kind of feeling, 'These writers are taking my money, and they're coasting. They're sitting around in their office, intellectually masturbating, while I'm paying them.'"

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In the editorial offices of the *New Republic*, the older culture of ideas collided with the new culture of information. If ideas are measured by their quality, *information* can be quantified in metrics like "visits," "page views," and "downloads." Determined to increase the flow of traffic to the *New Republic*'s online site, Hughes eventually fired Foer, whose exit inspired two thirds the staff to resign in protest.

Just prior to Hughes' purchase of the magazine, sales had more than doubled, but on his watch, newsstand sales declined by 57% in 2013 and by another 20% in 2014. Today, the magazine limps along, a shadow of its former self. Hughes abandoned it in 2016, after deciding to devote his energies to venture capital.

Franklin Foer continues to write for some of the best magazines in the country, most recently the *Atlantic*. His latest book, *World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech* (2017) tries to come to terms with dangers presented by the cultural clash that all but destroyed his magazine, and, quite possibly, many others in the years to come.

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Mark Zuckerberg's War on Free Will

Silicon valley graduated from the counterculture, but not really. All the values it professes are the values of the sixties. The big tech companies present themselves as platforms for personal liberation, just as Stewart Brand preached. Everyone has the right to speak their mind on social media, to fulfill their intellectual and democratic potential, to express their individuality. Where television had been a passive medium that rendered citizens inert, Facebook is participatory and empowering. It allows users to read widely, think for themselves, and form their own opinions.

We can't entirely dismiss this rhetoric. There are parts of the world, even in the United States, where Facebook emboldens citizens and enables them to organize themselves in opposition to power. But we shouldn't accept Facebook's self-conception as sincere, either. Facebook is a carefully managed top-down system, not a robust public square. It mimics some of the patterns of conversation,