



Dangerous by Design

How Social Media Companies Are Hurting
Our Kids, National Security, and Democracy —
and What We Can Do About It

Council for Responsible Social Media

A multi-sectoral group of leaders who are focused on finding solutions to the harms social media is causing to our kids, national security, and democracy.

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Executive Summary

Americans of all political persuasions are right to be concerned about unchecked social media. Manipulative social media products are robbing children of their social skills, human relationships, and childhood innocence, and our children’s mental health is at a crisis point. Our adversaries are using the online information environment to fundamentally undermine U.S. national security and attempt to weaken our bedrock principles of freedom and self-determination. Our private data is pervasively monitored, sold, and used to suck us in, keeping our attention fixed on social media platforms for profit. Social media platforms push us deeper and deeper into information silos that are not reflective of reality and divide us — at dinner tables, in the workplace, and on Capitol Hill — making political compromise a near impossibility. No democracy can survive such an assault.

As an industry, social media is largely unregulated, and social media companies are free of any liability for the harms they cause. Moreover, the rise of next generation artificial intelligence (AI) will make everything that's bad about social media worse, offering targeted opportunities for tech companies to profit from our addiction while leaving behind swaths of destruction.

This isn't a future technology crisis. It's happening now. It's clear the initial promises of social media are now outweighed by the harms. But this crisis can be averted. It's time for Congress to act with legislation to tip the scale toward citizens by creating commonsense safeguards for social media companies. As a nation, we need a more responsible social media environment that supports and enhances a healthy democracy and civil society. With responsible design and operations, social media technologies can nourish, rather than erode, our society, our well-being, and our democracy.

Today, it is clear that social media has reneged on its promise.

Broken Promises

Since Facebook (now Meta) was launched in 2004, it has promised to serve as a new platform to “give people the power to build community and bring the world closer.”¹ Within a decade of its creation, Facebook attracted more than a billion users around the world. YouTube, Twitter (now known as X), Instagram (now owned by Meta), TikTok, and others followed, rewarding their investors with trillions of dollars, while promising to unite, inspire, and inform. Today, Meta's market capitalization is valued at \$840 billion, and the market capitalization of Alphabet, the parent company of Google and YouTube, is \$1.7 trillion. Combined, these amounts are larger than the gross domestic product (GDP) of nations such as Australia, Canada, and Russia.

Today, it is clear that social media has reneged on its promise. Driven by opaque algorithm-based delivery, social media has unleashed systems that are designed to reward division and outrage and undermine our trust in others and views of ourselves. In the absence of responsible safeguards, social media companies have consistently made decisions that maximize profits at all costs, leaving users with broken children, divided communities, and weakened democracies.

Our Democracy Is At Risk

Democracy is being undermined by foreign interference and the spread of false information.

Democracy in the United States — and around the world — is being undermined by foreign interference and the spread of false information, including deepfakes generated by bad actors, some of whom use artificial intelligence.

Democracy only works with a high degree of trust in shared facts and good intentions across the aisle. Social media profits by attacking both of those. Today's unchecked social media accelerates polarization, amplifies extremism, and challenges the rule of law. In 2016, social media was exploited and weaponized by Russia to influence our elections, fomenting widespread distrust in election results. In the 2020 elections, social media was again used to exacerbate existing tensions within our society. Those who deny the results of free and fair elections continue to cast a long shadow across our political system. Falsehoods about our electoral system have contributed to threats to poll workers and legislation that has politicized, criminalized, and interfered with elections.² For public servants, harassment and threats have become commonplace. Their workplaces are increasingly dangerous. Content designed to divide and enrage creates toxic wedges within communities, weakening our civic bonds and leading to a generation being raised in a "post-truth" environment. Beyond the United States, social media platforms have fueled conflict resulting in atrocities, including genocide and ethnic cleansing, in Myanmar, Ethiopia, and other corners of the globe. Across the world, democracy is on the decline. Since 2012, when Facebook announced it had reached one billion users, the number of "free" countries that have registered overall declines in political rights and civil liberties has increased, according to the nonprofit research organization Freedom House.³ Social media is lauded for promoting freedom of expression, a hallmark of democracy. But it fails to protect privacy, doesn't give equal weight to all voices, amplifies the most extreme content, and empowers intimidation and harassment. This cycle can fuel violence, as we saw in the United States on January 6, 2021, when insurrectionists attacked the country and overran the Capitol trying to stop the counting of Electoral College votes. Generative artificial intelligence will exacerbate these harms. Earlier this year, for instance, a deepfake of an explosion at the Pentagon went viral and caused the stock market to dip.⁴



“We are in the middle of a national youth mental health crisis, and I am concerned that social media is an important driver of that.”

U.S. Surgeon General
Vivek H. Murthy

Our national security is under attack. Social media platforms are porous, making it easier for bad actors to access private information, track users, and spread lies. Russia has expanded its ability to unleash propaganda around the world, promoting its anti-West views on a global stage.⁵ Its invasion of Ukraine marked an escalation in Russia’s longstanding information operations against open democracies. TikTok, under the influence of the Chinese Communist Party, has access to a vast amount of private data, which can be used in information wars against its adversaries.⁶ Both internal and external bad actors continue to weaponize social media today to weaken democracy in the United States. Some social media companies continue to generate pages for terrorist groups like ISIS to use, while others direct casual social media users to the pages of extremists through their algorithms.⁷ Social media companies’ approach to mitigating these problems is *ad hoc*, at best.

We face a crisis among our young people. Children and teens, addicted to their phones and social media, are experiencing dramatically higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Girls are particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon, triggered by content that celebrates unhealthy social comparisons and eating disorders — content which is served up by social media companies’ profit-driven algorithms. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s 2023 youth risk behavior survey found that nearly three in five teen girls (57%) said they felt “persistently sad or hopeless” — the highest rate in a decade.⁸ And 30% said they had seriously considered suicide, a percentage that’s risen by nearly 60% over the past 10 years.⁹ Today, even one Fortune 500 company, Unilever, the parent company of Dove, is running advertising campaigns to raise awareness of the need for federal legislation to protect children’s mental health.¹⁰ Young peoples’ sense of self and reality, their attention spans, and their social lives are all being hijacked before their brains are fully formed. An overwhelming 91% of young people say they get their news from social media.¹¹ Yet relying on social media for news leaves young people vulnerable to lies, extremist voices, and ideologies that are counter to democracy, most notably state-controlled propaganda. We face the risk that young people will simply burn out and give up on democratic processes, fully embrace extremism, and never learn how to effectively seek compromise —

a necessary skill in governing any community. Further, overexposure to social media has made children vulnerable to cyberbullying, dangerous viral challenges, and predation, all of which have extinguished young lives. Worst of all, these platforms know the harm they are causing. According to leaked materials, Meta has internal research showing that Instagram’s business model and algorithmic feed create “a perfect storm” of eating disorders, body dissatisfaction, and depression in teenage girls.¹² According to a poll conducted for Issue One by Luntz Global, one in three Americans know someone who has been mentally or physically harmed by social media — including nearly two in three Americans between the ages of 18 and 29.¹³



The Addiction Playbook

We didn’t get here by accident. Social media companies’ business models are about maximizing ad revenue at all costs. The technology is modern, but the playbook is not. Social media is following the same track as Big Tobacco and opioid manufacturers. The strategy: Design an addictive product, market it as safe and healthy for everyone (especially children), and turbocharge profits. Use the earnings to fund biased research showing how healthy the product is and suppress the internal research that shows otherwise.¹⁴ When the truth starts to emerge and the public begins to speak up about the damage done, point the finger elsewhere. While opioid manufacturers blamed users,¹⁵ Big Tech companies have said the onus is on parents to protect children from their addictive products.¹⁶ And when all else fails, hire an army of lobbyists and flood the campaign process with money to quash any action.¹⁷

Tech companies have spent tens of millions of dollars funding academic research related to regulatory and ethical issues with their products. Google alone has funded more than 300 research papers on tech regulation.¹⁸ Big Tech is working behind closed doors to influence the rhetoric, tone, and ultimate outcomes of tech research to benefit their financial goals. And in Washington, Facebook’s parent company Meta and Google’s parent company Alphabet spent \$32 million on lobbying last year alone and combined to employ 171 lobbyists — or about one lobbyist for every three members of Congress.¹⁹

Social media can help make our children, communities, and democracy healthier, or it can lead us toward a bleak, fundamentally divided future.

The reality today is that social media does not answer to anyone. The Federal Trade Commission must monitor and enforce consumer protection and antitrust violations across nearly every commercial sector, leaving it overburdened, understaffed, and outgunned relative to Big Tech. Shareholders in the tech companies are increasingly disempowered by dual-class share structures that weaken accountability and give executives the ability to overrule large swaths of shareholders.²⁰ And Section 230, a federal regulation created almost three decades ago, shields social media companies from any liability for damages caused by content.

With virtually no external accountability or oversight and virtually no transparency about internal machinations (including increasingly addictive design features and what content they push to which users), social media companies are free to amplify the addictive aspects of their product, no matter how destructive. All the while, those who have been harmed are left with little recourse, and individuals, families, states and the federal government are left to clean up after the damage is done.

With both the tobacco and opioid industries, decades of hidden research and failures to disclose and manage known risks led to generations of addicts, disease, enormous health care costs, and death. Ultimately, multibillion-dollar settlements, many led by states' attorneys general, led to reform. Social media and artificial intelligence, meanwhile, are far more pervasive and a greater existential threat to our national fabric than any industry we've faced before. We don't have decades to fix this problem.

We are at a tipping point. Social media can help make our children, communities, and democracy healthier, our future brighter, and our national security stronger — or it can lead us toward a bleak, fundamentally divided future, where the values we share have been corroded, citizens have given up on the democratic process, and lies are indistinguishable from the truth online.



Here's how society will look if we don't take action against manipulative social media companies.

We Will Be Doomed if We Do Nothing

History has shown that industries like tobacco and opioids — and now, social media companies — are unwilling to do the right thing, despite rising evidence that their lucrative business models are catastrophic, until they are forced to do so. In the case of social media companies, failure to act will contribute to a system that amplifies destruction — of people, of social fabrics, and of democracy itself.

Let's look into the future, which is not far off, to see how society may look if we continue without taking on unchecked, manipulative social media companies.

Imagine our nation's youth unable to escape this crucible of a hyper-polarized information environment, never learning how to effectively seek compromise with those who have differing beliefs and opinions and being confronted daily with artificial intelligence content so sophisticated it's impossible to tell the difference between truth and lies. Without corrective actions, our children will grow up

Imagine an entire generation civically disengaged and vulnerable to the anti-democratic agendas of our adversaries.

entwined with their devices, as tech companies extract their data for profit, and young lives will be dictated by a blue glow of a screen — a glow that will lead many to darkness. Americans will watch in horror as cyberbullying, eating disorders, dangerous viral challenges, and suicides destroy young lives across the nation, extinguishing the talents of young leaders before they have a chance to blossom and thrive.

Imagine an entire generation, raised on angst, fear, and deepfakes, receiving all of its information from social media, civically disengaged and vulnerable to the anti-democratic agendas of China, Russia, and other adversaries. We know it will only become easier and cheaper to produce dangerous content, as social media companies continue to roll out new products with a full array of artificial intelligence tools that will make everything that's bad about social media worse.

Picture a system so weakened by distrust that Americans simply disengage from civic participation, or worse, actively reject the results of fundamental democratic processes like elections. We're not far off from a reality rife with radicalization and plagued with polarization, where extremism flourishes in our domestic discourse and where Americans fail to recognize any shared values between themselves and their neighbors who do not share a common ancestry, ethnicity, race, religion, or political identity.

Envision global instability, with shifting borders and unstable geopolitical balances, driven by falsehoods, conspiracy theories, and violence. Picture every shred of users' private online lives being accessed by foreign adversaries, with large chunks of supposedly private data being traded away and shared with terrorists and anti-West propagandists to divide countries, communities, and neighbors against each other. And think about fledgling democracies around the world watching, while the nation that has been a shining beacon of freedom and democracy for more than two centuries falters.

Scores of democracies around the world, including the United States, will be holding critical elections in 2024. Within each election, there are risks of interference by bad actors and authoritarian regimes who are trying to use social media to sow discord and division. If the United States and other democracies let their guard down, these



“It should not take grieving parents filing lawsuits on behalf of their dead children to hold this industry accountable for their dangerous and addictive product designs.”

Kristin Bride
Member of the Council for
Responsible Social Media

bad actors will see their influence expand in both the short-term and possibly for generations to come. As autocratic leaders around the globe weaponize our own companies — and values — against us, countries such as China, Russia, Iran, and other adversaries will continue to build their influence around the world in places like Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The American experiment of democracy could eventually be viewed by much of the world as a failure, rather than an aspirational goal, and more nations will fall to authoritarian models.

This is our future if we do nothing. This will be our reality if we allow unbridled private companies to determine the future of humanity based on their narrow self-interests rather than governments taking the lead by establishing responsible safeguards. Without reform, the youth mental health crisis will continue to embed itself in our society, and democracy. With kids losing hope in themselves, and their future, they will turn away from democracy. No election will be considered legitimate, which will make governing nearly impossible. The concept of “truth” will be an arbitrary definition, resulting in widespread distrust and a lack of common facts. Public service will be avoided because it will simply be too dangerous. And further generations of children will also grow up addicted to their high-tech devices and all the harms that go along with them.

As bleak as this outcome is, we can still choose another path. Social media intended to connect us and bring us closer together. It still can. But the social media industry won't reform itself. **We can protect our children, communities, and national security with commonsense, bipartisan solutions that factor in more than the profits of a handful of companies. We can't wait any longer.**

A Tipping Point

Now is the time to step back and see social media for what it is. Social media is an industry, a communications utility we've readily come to rely on. **We've allowed the social media industry to drive the narrative that its growth and unfettered role in society should not be tampered with by any laws or regulations. That narrative is wrong.**

Social media cannot be allowed to continue as is.

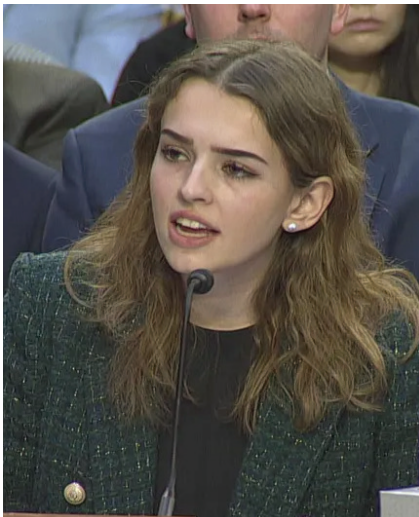
Social media cannot be allowed to continue as is. Our nation cannot let a handful of tech companies dictate the destiny of our democracy, our children, and our national security.

As Americans, we embrace innovation and free markets, and welcome new technologies that make our lives better. Yet there has always been an inflection point when the public demands laws and regulations that protect our health and safety. Planes, trains, automobiles, banking, food, drugs, and telecommunication are all regulated to ensure standards to keep people from harm. If harm occurs, there is legal recourse. Social media also must be regulated to protect our children and our society. It's not too late for lawmakers to implement commonsense safeguards for social media.

Americans want social media reform. A recent national poll conducted by Citizen Data for Issue One and the Council for Responsible Social Media found that an overwhelming majority of Americans support creating guardrails for social media platforms.²¹ Eight out of 10 surveyed — including 84% of Republicans and 83% of Democrats — want to hold social media companies accountable for the harm they are doing, and strongly support federal legislation that increases transparency, ensures privacy, and protects children.

Issue One's poll is not an outlier. Last year, a Pew Research Center survey showed that 64% of Americans believe that social media has been more of a bad thing for democracy.²² 79% say that the internet and social media has made people more divided in their political opinions.²³ 69% feel that that instant connection we found on our screens made people less civil in the way they talk about politics.²⁴ Parents have testified before Congress that social media has devastating effects on their children.²⁵ At least 34 states have introduced legislation to crack down on social media in an effort to protect citizen's privacy and safety.²⁶ Even teens are organizing to fight back against social media, which is becoming an existential threat to their lives.²⁷

Emma Lembke, college student, founder of Design It For Us, and a member of the Council for Responsible Social Media, has called for a more robust strategy to protect kids online: "Social media is designed to get young people hooked and keep them hooked," she told Issue One. "It's robbing us of our time and energy to be kids. While there are many benefits to



Emma Lembke
Member of the Council for
Responsible Social Media and
founder of Design It For Us

an interconnected, online world, the harms are also very real and cannot be ignored. We need social media companies to adopt commonsense safeguards for the designs of their products, and we need those safeguards now.”

Likewise, Council for Responsible Social Media Co-chair Dick Gephardt, a former majority leader in the House of Representatives, told Issue One: “In all my years in Congress, I never saw as much energy and bipartisan agreement as we’re seeing with the push to reduce the harms of unchecked social media to our kids and our communities. Parents across the nation are worried about their kids, and every single member of Congress is seeing social media tear our country apart. Enough! There are solutions with strong bipartisan support. Now is the time for Congress to get a meaningful bill across the finish line to rein in social media.”

Parents across the country are ready for meaningful action against social media companies. As Brittany, a North Carolina mother who participated in a focus group conducted earlier this year by Issue One, said, “They are destroying the next generation for profit, or maybe for more nefarious purposes, but they know what their technology does to children’s brains... Most of the Silicon Valley executives and CEOs know how bad social media is for their kids, so they don’t let their kids use it. But they want all of our kids addicted to it.”²⁸

This fall, 41 states sued Meta, claiming that Instagram and Facebook are addictive and harmful to children. The complaint alleges that Meta engaged in a “scheme to exploit young users for profit” by misleading them about the prevalence of harmful content and safety features, all while violating federal privacy laws.²⁹

This lawsuit is the clearest sign yet that action from Congress to enact responsible safeguards is long overdue. Litigation is no substitute for legislation. Congress also needs to step up with solutions that hold social media companies accountable. It’s time to put our children, our democracy, and our national security before Big Tech profits.

By the Numbers: Why It's Time for Social Media Reform

“Most of the Silicon Valley executives and CEOs know how bad social media is for their kids, so they don't let their kids use it. But they want all of our kids addicted to it.”

Brittany
Mom from North Carolina

80%

of Americans hold social media responsible for bullying, childhood mental health struggles, and the spreading of false information and conspiracy theories.

80%

of Americans are concerned that unchecked advanced AI will make social media more harmful for children.

76%

of Americans agree that social media companies have a responsibility to design their platforms in a way that protects the mental health of children, even if these practices limit corporate profits.

71%

of Americans see social media's impact on children as more negative than positive.

68%

of Americans would support legislation requiring social media platforms to make their products and algorithms available for independent review.

67%

of Americans would support legislation requiring social media platforms to make their products and algorithms available for independent review.

66%

of Americans agree that Congress isn't doing enough to hold Big Tech accountable for the harms caused by their social media platforms.

64%

of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 have been or know someone who has been harmed by social media, as do 33% of all Americans.

58%

of Americans would be more likely to support their elected officials in a reelection if they supported laws to increase requirements on the way that social media platforms collect and use data.³⁰

Congress Must Act

Now is the time to focus on bipartisan federal solutions. Legislation already exists and is advancing to take on this challenge. Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle agree that commonsense safeguards for social media are needed. Their constituents tell them every day that this is a problem that begs to be solved. It's time for action.

State lawmakers have been responding to public demand for change and are demonstrating resolve and leadership to take on social media. But efforts must be at the federal level as well.

We need sweeping legislation guided by these core principles:

- **Our children, our communities, and our national security must come first.** No longer can Big Tech be allowed to design addictive products, harvest user data, and manipulate users to maximize their profits with no regard to the consequences.
- **Americans have a fundamental right to privacy.** Congress must stop social media platforms from collecting our information without permission, and collect only the data they need to operate effectively and in the interest of consumers.
- **Social media products must protect the mental, physical, and developmental health of American children by design and by default.** This includes ending addictive practices like the endless scroll and targeted advertising to minors.
- **We have a right to know how social media technology is controlling the content we see and to understand the impact on our health and well-being.** Parents, policymakers, researchers, and all Americans should be able to easily understand how these platforms are designed and operated.
- **Social media platforms must adopt safeguards to prioritize fact-based information to stop foreign and domestic adversaries from spreading false or misleading information.**
- **Social media companies must be open and transparent.** Social media's secretive nature makes it nearly impossible to design effective, fact-based policies. Laws that require that social media companies make information available to researchers and the public — including statistics about content moderation, data about viral content, and descriptions of recommendation algorithms — would be

an obvious starting point. That would mean regular and complete disclosure of key design, content, and data-collection decisions. This transparency must also include information relating to online advertising and content pushing, including microtargeting, in order to prevent the amplification of harmful content.

- **Social media platforms must no longer be used as tools by foreign and domestic adversaries.** Congress must mitigate the ability for bad actors to use social media to sow distrust in American institutions, recruit and radicalize, and threaten our national security.
- **Social media companies' core business model must be fundamentally changed away from the pervasive monitoring, tracking, and sale of user data.** Comprehensive privacy protections are crucial to restore user ownership of their own data and end social media's extractive, manipulative practices.
- **Social media companies must reverse the tide of self-perpetuating echo chambers on their platforms.** For social media companies to live up to their own missions to "bring the world closer," they must rethink systems that send users to their extreme corners.
- **Social media companies must stop using algorithms to elevate the most extreme content.** Algorithms that amplify inflammatory content, filter users into rabbit holes of questionable content, and recommend joining hate groups must be redesigned.
- **Social media platforms should adopt measures that slow down the speed at which things are shared and cause people to pause and think before sharing harmful or untrue content.** Creating "friction," or pauses, in the system to slow down the spread of material can and should be built into the platforms.
- **Social media companies must build better capacity to ensure veracity.** If a social media company provides its services anywhere, its value of sharing accuracy and facts must be included and built into the platforms, including overseas.

These principles are strong, and represent a significant departure from the current operating procedures of Big Tech. There are clear actions lawmakers can take based on these principles.

Some recommendations are already moving forward. The United Kingdom's Age Appropriate Design Code establishes a powerful legal responsibility for online platforms to design their products and services in the "best interests" of users under the age of 18.³¹ The European Union's Digital Services Act package builds on the EU's world-leading data privacy standards by adding new risk mitigation standards, transparency practices, and oversight regimes, as well as requiring social media platforms to proactively create healthier online spaces for the 450 million citizens of the European Union.³²

Americans have far fewer digital rights and safeguards, and American tech companies are actively working to prevent the same standards here in the United States. However, U.S. lawmakers are advancing a number of strong proposals that would make social media safer and healthier.

The bipartisan Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) follows a similar “safety by design” format and requires social media platforms to affirmatively mitigate key, defined harms, including anxiety, depression, eating disorders, addiction, bullying, sexual exploitation, and the sale of illicit drugs to minors. KOSA would also mandate the strongest safety settings by default and give kids tools to disable addictive product features and opt out of manipulative algorithmic recommendations.³³ These are excellent steps forward.

Another promising legislative solution is last year’s American Data Privacy and Protection Act.³⁴ This would establish requirements for how companies handle personal data, which includes information that identifies or is reasonably linked to a person. As is, social media platforms can easily track data to individual behavior and location. This must end.

Now is the time for Congress to step up and step in. We need the political will to acknowledge that this is the tipping point for our society, between healthy and unhealthy, safe and unsafe, productive and destructive — and move forward on the side of social media that supports and enhances a healthy democracy and civil society.

To quote Council for Responsible Social Media member Frances Haugen, the former lead product manager on Facebook’s civic misinformation team who ultimately decided to blow the whistle on her employer, “We can have social media we enjoy, that connects us, without tearing apart our democracy, putting our children in danger and sowing ethnic violence across the world. We can do better.”³⁵

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About Issue One

Issue One is the leading crosspartisan political reform group in Washington, D.C. We unite Republicans, Democrats, and independents in the movement to fix our broken political system and build a democracy that works for everyone. We educate the public and work to pass legislation on Capitol Hill to increase transparency, strengthen ethics and accountability, reduce the corrosive influence of big money in politics, and bolster U.S. elections.

About the Council for Responsible Social Media

The Council for Responsible Social Media brings together a multi-sectoral group of leaders who are focused on finding solutions to the technological harms to our kids, communities, and national security. This initiative connects Republicans and Democrats, policymakers, impacted communities, national security leaders, and key stakeholders to elevate a bipartisan conversation and advance meaningful, achievable solutions.

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