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.

Co-chair Dick Gephardt
Fmr. Congressman (D-MO) and Majority Leader

Co-chair Kerry Healey
Fmr. Lieutenant Governor (R) of Massachusetts

Imran Ahmed
Founder and CEO of the Center for Countering Digital Hate

Danielle Allen
Professor at Harvard University and Director of the Democracy Renovation Lab

Nora Benavidez
Senior Counsel and Director, Digital Justice and Civil Rights at Free Press

Sophie Beren
Founder and CEO of The Conversationalist

Joel Bervell
TikTok disinformation specialist, member of White House Healthcare Leaders in Social Media Roundtable

Kristin Bride
Social media reform advocate

John Bridgeland
Co-chair and CEO of More Perfect and fmr. Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council

Cheri Bustos
Fmr. U.S. Congresswoman (D-IL)

Susan Coppedge
Fmr. U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons and Executive Director of the Georgia Legal Services Program

Jiore Craig
Head of Digital Integrity at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue

Timothy Dalrymple
President and CEO of Christianity Today

Renée DiResta
Technical Research Manager at Stanford Internet Observatory

Linda Douglass
Fmr. Global Head of Communications for Bloomberg, Senior Vice President at Atlantic Media, and Communications Director in the White House's Office of Health Reform

R.P. Eddy
CEO of Ergo and fmr. Director of the White House National Security Council

Laura Edelson
Assistant Professor of Computer Science at Northeastern University, Co-director of Cybersecurity for Democracy, and fmr. chief technologist at the Department of Justice's Antitrust Division

Yaël Eisenstat
Vice President of the Center for Technology & Society at the Anti-Defamation League

Craig Forman
Fmr. CEO and President of McClatchy, Executive Chairman of the Center for News, Technology & Innovation

Mary Anne Franks
Professor of Intellectual Property, Technology, and Civil Rights Law at the GW Law School; President and Policy Director of the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative

Dan Glickman
Fmr. Secretary of Agriculture and Congressman (D-KS)

Nancy Gibbs
Fmr. Editor of TIME and Director of the Harvard Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy

Josh Golin
Executive Director of Fairplay

Porter Goss
Fmr. Director of the CIA and Congressman (R-FL)

Jonathan Haidt
Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University Stern School of Business, social psychologist, and best-selling author

Chuck Hagel
Fmr. Secretary of Defense and U.S. Senator (R-NE)

Tristan Harris
Co-founder and Executive Director of the Center for Humane Technology

Frances Haugen
Facebook whistleblower and tech expert;
Founder of Beyond the Screen

Steve Israel
Fmr. Congressman (D-NY), Director of the Institute of Politics and Global Affairs at Cornell University

Emma Lembke
Founder of LOGOFF and Co-founder of Design It For Us

Herb Lin
Senior research scholar for cyber policy and security at Stanford University

Nathaniel Lubin
Fmr. Director of the Office of Digital Strategy at the White House

Mary Mazzio
Documentary filmmaker

Claire McCaskill
Fmr. U.S. Senator (D-MO)

Sean McGarvey
President of North America's Building Trades Unions

Manu Meel
CEO of BridgeUSA

Bill Owens
Fmr. Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and U.S. Navy Admiral

Farah Pandith
Fmr. Member of the Homeland Security Advisory Council, State Department Special Representative to Muslim Communities

Leon Panetta
Fmr. Secretary of Defense, Director of the CIA, White House Chief of Staff, and Congressman (D-CA)

Zamaan Qureshi
Head of Digital Strategy at the Real Facebook Oversight Board and Co-founder of Design It For Us

Anjana Rajan
Fmr. Chief Technology Officer of Polaris

Maria Ressa
Recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, Founder and CEO of Rappler

Reid Ribble
Fmr. Congressman (R-WI)

Denver Riggleman
Fmr. Congressman (R-VA) and Senior Technical Advisor to the U.S House Select Committee on the January 6 Attack on the U.S. Capitol

Michael Rogers
Fmr. Director of the NSA and U.S. Navy Admiral

Vivian Schiller
Executive Director of Aspen Digital, fmr. President and CEO of NPR, Global Chair of News at Twitter, and General Manager of NYTimes.com

Chris Shays
Fmr. U.S. Congressman (R-CT)

Craig Spencer
Associate Professor of the Practice of Health Services, Policy, and Practice at Brown University

Jamie Susskind
Best-selling author and barrister

Jason Thacker
Chair of Research in Technology Ethics at the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission

Tommy Thompson
Fmr. Governor of Wisconsin (R) and Secretary of Health and Human Services

Nicole Tisdale
Fmr. Director for the National Security Council

Danny Weiss
Chief Advocacy Officer at Common Sense Media

Tom Wheeler
Fmr. Chair of the Federal Communications Commission

Isabelle Frances Wright
Head of Technology and Society at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and fmr. Global Election Integrity Policy Lead at TikTok

Layla Zaidane
President and CEO of Future Caucus

Contents

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]

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 —

"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

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

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

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

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.**

"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

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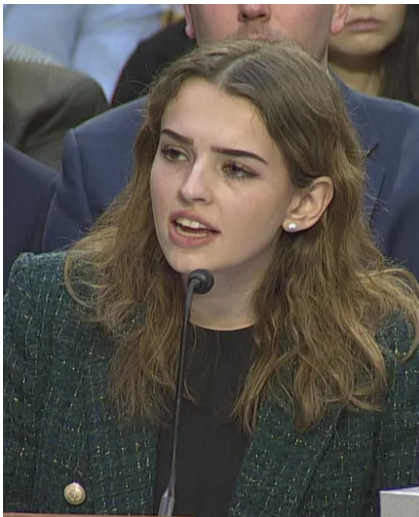
Emma Lembke
Member of the Council for
Responsible Social Media and
founder of Design It For Us

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]

PART I

How Social Media Works Against Us

Social media platforms run on the pervasive and largely imperceptible extraction, manipulation, and sale of users' behavioral data. Every moment online is aggregated into a profile that is used not just to sell us shoes, but to maximize the efficiency of the model itself — keeping our attention longer with inflammatory content and steering us into information silos. All of this is done to maximize profit. Today, Meta's market capitalization is valued at $840 billion, and Alphabet's is $1.7 trillion. Combined, these amounts are larger than the GDP of nations such as Australia, Canada, and Russia.

Anyone who downloads a social media app today and creates an account forfeits any right to privacy for any data they provide. Social media companies, meanwhile, offer almost no transparency as to how they use the data, and they have no liability to address damages caused by content posted on their platforms. To reform social media, it's important to understand how it works — what drives the industry that has changed our lives and is shaping the next generation of American citizens from their earliest years.

Social Media Platforms Are Engineered to Be Addictive

Addictive platforms allow social media companies to maximize profits.

The content we receive on our social media "feeds" is by design, driven by algorithms that filter and organize every social media application. Each of these algorithms are unique and based on each social media company's direction, and can evolve and change. Algorithms are largely developed by humans, but once they're completed, automation takes over, and increasingly, this automation is governed by artificial intelligence. They are engineered for engagement, connectivity, virality, and, most importantly, profit.

One major problem is that algorithms are secret and not shared with users or researchers. Social media companies are in the driver's seat, but they haven't shared the destination, route, or speed. Users are just along for the ride. That ride often leads users into informational bubbles and down rabbit holes of content that is not factual. Yet across every product, **the No. 1 goal is to keep users engaged on addictive platforms, which allows social media companies to serve ad after ad to maximize their profits.**

The Data Harvested Is Abundant — and Lucrative

The data that social media companies collect from users is extremely valuable.

How pervasive is this data collection? Let's use TikTok as an example. TikTok collects data that includes information about the device being used, its location, IP address, search history, the content of messages, what was viewed, and for how long.[36] It also collects device identifiers to track

interactions with advertisers. In the United States, TikTok can collect biometric information including face and voiceprints.[37] Then, using a combination of other collected behavioral data, TikTok "infers" factors such as the user's age range, gender, and interests.

TikTok is not unique. Twitter,[38] YouTube,[39] Snapchat,[40] and Meta[41] — which owns both Facebook and Instagram — all collect similar data. Users provide more information by posting about where they work, life events, surveys, "likes," and searches. This data is continuously harvested, even when users aren't using their apps, with tracking cookies.

How social media platforms create their algorithms remains stunningly opaque.

All the while, how social media platforms create their algorithms or share and use their data remains stunningly opaque. Efforts to collect data to study or analyze information tightly held by the social media companies are often thwarted or skirted, while internal transparency efforts are underfunded or marginalized. Even congressional testimony and reports from companies to their own boards of directors have proven to be vague, incomplete, and outdated.

Testifying before Congress, Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen said the company's leadership "keeps vital information from the public, the U.S. government, its shareholders, and governments around the world."[42] Similarly, Twitter whistleblower Peiter "Mudge" Zatko told Congress that the company's executives "misled its board of directors, regulators, and the public," adding that "Twitter's security failures threaten national security [and] compromise the privacy and security of users."[43]

The data and its use by the algorithm-driven industry is what separates social media from any other mass media. Social media can efficiently deliver content, even if it's false, dangerous, or inciteful, at lightning speed to millions, with incredibly calibrated microtargeting to reach specific demographics. No other media can do that as swiftly, precisely, or potentially catastrophically as social media.

How Paid Ads — and Targeting Children — Make Social Media Platforms Money

Ad spending on social media platforms is projected to reach $207 billion in 2023.

Paid advertising is where the money is for social media platforms. **In 2023, ad spending globally on social media platforms is projected to reach $207 billion.**[44] For Meta, advertising accounted for 97% of the company's overall revenue in the fourth quarter of 2022.[45] Advertising is really the business of social media; everything else is a sideshow.

Effective microtargeting and enormous reach are what drives social media advertising sales. Those capabilities are possible because of the persistent and extensive harvesting and analysis of users' behavioral data and the addictive pull of social media.

To keep this money train running, social media companies think long term. That's why attracting and addicting children to social media is a top priority. As Chris Griswold, policy director at American Compass, has said: "When it comes to social media's economic imperatives, nothing could be a more vital strategic priority than recruiting and retaining the youngest users."[46]

About one-third of parents of kids aged 7 to 9 say their children use social media.

Social media's effort to design products that are addictive to kids is paying off. **In 2021, about 50% of parents of children aged 10 to 12 reported that their children used social media, as did about 32% of parents of children aged 7 to 9.**[47] These kids are providing data about themselves to profit-driven companies while being exposed to a world of dangerous and manipulative content. Meanwhile, cracking down on hazardous content geared toward kids has consistently been too little too late, or not at all, by social media companies. As Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen has said: "I saw that Facebook repeatedly encountered conflicts between its own profits and our safety. Facebook consistently resolved those conflicts in favor of its own profits."[48]

Social Media Amplifies Outrage

The most powerful emotion social media uses to boost content is outrage.

To maximize their profits, social media platforms need to increase the number of people who see and react to the content. **Emotions are at the heart of this engagement model. They drive why some posts prompt greater likes, retweets, shares, or views than others. And the most powerful emotion social media uses to boost content is outrage.**

Researchers have found that social media posts on polarizing issues (such as gun control, marriage equality, and climate change) that used "moral-emotional language" spread more quickly to more users.[49] **Adding a word of moral outrage to a tweet increased the rate of retweets by 17%.**[50]

Further, posts about the "out-group" were shared or retweeted about twice as often as posts about the "in-group," researchers have found. **Every term referring to "the others" increased the odds of a social media post being shared by 67%.**[51]

Outrage also boosts information that is simply false. MIT researchers found that **falsehoods are 70% more likely to be retweeted on Twitter than the truth and reach an audience six times faster.**[52] Research at Yale University showed that on Twitter, "moral outrage expressions" are "significantly associated with increased engagement with misinformation." Yale Assistant Professor Molly Crockett summarized the findings this way: "If moral outrage is a fire, social media is like gasoline."[53]

There's a substantial overlap between outrage and hate speech, meaning that **engagement-based algorithms may facilitate the spread of hate speech online.**[54]

"There's a market for reasoned debate out there, but there seems to be a bigger market for really outrageous or extreme claims," said Jonathan Nagler, a co-director of New York University's Center for Social Media and Politics.[55]

According to a *Wall Street Journal* report, an internal Facebook research team told the company in 2018 that "algorithms exploit the human brain's attraction to divisiveness." Left unchecked, Facebook would show users "more and more divisive content in an effort to gain user

attention and increase time on the platform."[56] When this team brought proposed changes to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, he reportedly rejected them because he was worried they would hurt what he saw as the most important priority: engagement. This is a quintessential example of a social media executive not caring about any of the harmful consequences of their products. And this entire process happened behind closed doors.

Social Media Boosts Extremism

That outrage-driven social dynamic also fuels extremism. While social media companies have moved away from their original mission to connect users to their friends and family, these platforms still have an immense ability to steer users to other like-minded users and build coalitions on a global scale.

Facebook has long been aware of its platform's aggravated polarization and "tribal behavior," and it initially explored ways to address this problem.[57] In 2016, an internal Facebook investigation found that **"64% of all extremist group joins are due to [Facebook] recommendation tools"** — meaning that Facebook's own recommendation system was fueling the recruiting efforts of extremist groups.[58] But the company abandoned its own efforts to curb polarization and extremism, with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, in 2019, saying, "You can't impose tolerance top-down."[59]

In the United States, the rising number of mass shootings has been linked time and time again to the social media platforms on indirect and direct levels. Platforms have been used by perpetrators of mass shootings and hate crimes on more than one occasion to ideate violence, communicate with like-minded individuals, and, in the case of the Buffalo grocery store shooter in 2022, even streaming the shooting live.[60]

As Global Leadership Institute President Anthony Silard once told *Forbes*: "Social media has compounded a growing racial, cultural, and gender divide in America and the world."[61]

While social media platforms may prefer not to "impose tolerance," they can turn down the volume on inflammatory content and modify their algorithms to steer users away from extremist groups, rather than towards them. Often, they choose not to.

64% of all extremist group joins on Facebook are due to Facebook's own recommendation tools.

Social Media Platforms Operate Without Any Accountability

Social media companies face no consequences for dangerous design features of their products — like the boosting of toxic content and addicting children. In short, there are no accountability or responsible safeguards for the entire industry.

In May, the U.S. Supreme Court handed social media companies a major victory in *Twitter, Inc. v. Taamneh*, a case in which the family of an American victim of a terrorist attack unsuccessfully tried to hold Twitter accountable for failing to act against pro-terrorist content on its platform.[62]

Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, passed in 1996, essentially passes on the liability of harmful speech from a social media platform to the original author of an online post.

All the while, no government agency has been established to oversee social media platforms, and no major federal legislation has passed to regulate their behavior since 1998, when the internet was in its infancy.

Social media companies face no consequences for dangerous design features of their products.

Artificial intelligence has the potential to make everything bad about social media worse.

The Threat of Artificial Intelligence

Fast-spreading fake or inflammatory information being amplified by social media platforms is bad enough. **Artificial intelligence has the potential to make everything bad about social media worse.**

AI is not new. It's used to drive customer-service chat boxes and suggest new music or news items to users of certain apps. But "generative AI" or "advanced AI" is different. Using machine-learning techniques, generative AI can generate new, original content that mimics actual people's faces, bodies, or voices quickly and easily. This latest generation of AI will make it easy and inexpensive to create and disseminate completely fake — yet credible — content that looks or sounds like anyone. It's already being used to deceive and manipulate people across the globe.

Earlier this year, the mayor of a city in Australia threatened a defamation lawsuit against ChatGPT, a chatbot that uses advanced AI, after it falsely asserted that he was imprisoned for bribery while working for a subsidiary of Australia's national bank.[63] And in June, a mother in Arizona testified before Congress describing a terrifying call from what sounded like her daughter, begging for help.[64] Another man joined the call and threatened the mother: "Listen here. I have your daughter. You call anybody, you call the police… You'll never see your daughter again.'"[65] He demanded $1 million in ransom. It turned out that the call was a kidnapping spoof using AI.[66] Imagine what China, Russia, or some other adversary could do with this technology.

As AI becomes more sophisticated and accessible — which is happening now — **it will become nearly impossible to tell the difference between what digital content is fake and what's real.**

Tech companies are betting on AI as the next best thing, rushing to beat each other to market without any regard to the consequences of these tools.

The images to the left were created within seconds online for free.

PART II
Threats to Kids

Children are the future of our society and our democracy. Yet social media is hijacking their sense of self, ability to think critically, attention spans, and social lives before their brains are even fully formed. Kids today get most of their news and information from social media and are bombarded daily by content that tells them they aren't good enough, polarizes them, and makes them feel isolated from their friends and families. Untruths, bullying, harassment, and violence are microtargeted to them, shaping their views of the world — and the biochemistry of their minds.

The next generations are digital natives. They've been surrounded by smart phones, computers, and the internet their entire lives. Tech companies promised that this

exposure to "the world" through screens would provide kids with an enormous advantage. Kids would be able to communicate with their peers and far-away family members, boost social interactions, and feel connected, and learn more from a universe of content. Yet, according to experts like psychologist Jean Twenge, **"there is compelling evidence that the devices we've placed in young people's hands are having profound effects on their lives — and making them seriously unhappy."**[67]

Our kids' mental health and well-being are under attack. A majority feel "addicted" to social media platforms. Children are being plunged into content far before they're able to handle it. Thanks to social media, where "engagement" is more valuable than veracity, **we're raising a generation that is mentally broken and ill-equipped for governance and the challenges of democracy.**

Social Media Is Addictive and Rewires Children's Brains

Social media is used by up to 95% of young people aged 13 to 17.[68] Roughly 67% of America's teenagers use TikTok, 62% use Instagram, 59% use Snapchat, 32% use Facebook, and 46% report being online "almost constantly" — nearly double the amount who said the same thing seven years ago.[69]

Studies have shown that social media has a powerful, addicting effect on the brain and that **more than 50% of teens who use social media report at least one symptom of addiction.**[70] As Nancy DeAngelis, director of behavioral health at Philadelphia's Jefferson Health - Abington has said: "Social media platforms drive surges of dopamine to the brain to keep consumers coming back over and over again. The shares, likes, and comments on these platforms trigger the brain's reward center, resulting in a high similar to the one people feel when gambling or using drugs."[71]

For kids, the addictive nature of social media is particularly problematic. According to the American Psychological Association, neuroscientists see two critical periods in a child's brain development. The first is in the first year of life. The second begins at puberty and lasts to early adulthood.[72] During this second period is when children begin accessing electronic devices and using social media.

"They're so distracted. They can't keep focused. It's like everyone has ADHD now."

Carol
Mom from Colorado

In puberty, children crave visibility, attention, and positive feedback from their peers. Their brains have not fully developed the ability to resist temptation. That happens later in life. As Dr. Mitch Prinstein, chief science officer of the American Psychological Association, has said: "When it comes to youths' cravings for social attention, they are 'all gas pedal and no brakes.'"[73]

Social Media Is Damaging Kids' Health

"A National Youth Mental Health Breakdown"

"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 crisis — one that we must urgently address," U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy has warned.[74]

Studies and datasets have shown surges in rates of anxiety, depression, and self-harm among American teens that started in the early 2010s.[75] According to Dr. Jonathan Haidt, an author, professor of ethical leadership at New York University's Stern School of Business, and member of the Council for Responsible Social Media, "there is now a great deal of evidence that social media is a substantial cause, not just a tiny correlate, of depression and anxiety, and therefore of behaviors related to depression and anxiety, including self-harm and suicide."[76]

Facebook's own research showed that a group of teenagers who'd experienced mental or emotional health challenges felt that their problem started when they were "on Instagram." After using the app and participating in Facebook's research, 42% of U.S. teens reported their feelings of "not having enough money." 41% felt "not being attractive." 39% felt pressure to "have to create a perfect image." 24% felt "not being good enough." 10% linked their depression to Instagram, while 9% felt the desire to harm themselves, and 6% expressed the desire to kill themselves.[77]

> Studies have shown surges in rates of anxiety, depression, and self-harm among American teens.

Both mental and physical health is at risk from sleep deprivation, which is often traced to social media use.

The Link Between Social Media and Physical Health

Using social media not only affects children's mental health. It also affects their physical health.

Both mental and physical health is at risk from sleep deprivation, which is often traced to social media use. Sleep deprivation is linked to compromised thinking and reasoning as well as increased susceptibility to illness, weight gain, and high blood pressure.[78] Those who don't sleep enough are also more prone to depression and anxiety.[79] Research also suggests that a lack of sleep is associated with poor performance in school, difficulties with attention and stress regulation, and an increased risk for car accidents.[80]

Parents know their kids' physical health is taking a toll because of social media addictions.

Raina, a mother from Illinois who participated in the Issue One focus group earlier this year, said her child has a tendency, when he's sitting around on his phone, to be "snacking," "partaking in unhealthy beverages," and "not moving around."[81]

Another mother in Issue One's focus group reported that her son, at a recent physical checkup, "actually had an undetectable vitamin D level because he was never seeing sunshine," adding that he "would just go to school" and then go "to his room or to the dark basement" when he got home.[82]

Rather than addressing the addictive design of their products, removing underage users, or refraining from illegally serving advertisements to teens, companies like Meta put the onus on parents like Raina and Carol through insufficient parental controls.[83] At the same time, the social media platforms are fighting tooth and nail against the systemic and design-level changes that would give parents the help they need to protect their children. This is why parents cannot confront this problem alone and need help from lawmakers in Washington.

32% of American girls felt that Instagram made them feel worse about their bodies.

Social Media Is Particularly Harmful for Girls

For teen girls, the magnetic draw to social media appears to be even more dangerous, a threat that social media companies themselves enable every time they recommend harmful content to teenage girls.

The death of Molly Russell in 2017, according to a London coroner, was linked directly to "an act of self-harm while suffering from depression and 'the negative effects of online content.'"[84] An inquest after her death showed 2,100 Instagram posts related to suicide, self-harm, and depression were saved, liked, or shared from her account during the six months prior to her death.[85]

In 2021, leaked Meta documents revealed that **21% of American girls felt that Instagram made them feel worse about themselves, and 32% said the platform made them feel worse about their bodies.**[86]

Moreover, according to a CDC report released earlier this year, **57% of teen girls "felt consistently sad or hopeless" in 2021, a 60% increase and the highest level reported in the past decade. And nearly 30% of teen girls in 2021 were "seriously considering attempting suicide."**[87]

"The toxicity comes from the very nature of a platform that girls use to post photographs of themselves and await the public judgment of others," Dr. Jonathan Haidt, the author and NYU professor, has said.[88]

Nearly 30% of teen girls in 2021 said they were "seriously considering attempting suicide."

As leaked internal Meta documents put it: Instagram's monetization of teens' faces and bodies, the pressure to look a certain way, and an algorithmic feed that encourages constant engagement "exacerbate each other to create a perfect storm."[89]

Social media is also a strong contributing factor to eating disorders.[90] Online communities exist on virtually all social media platforms that discuss eating disorders and varied approaches to lose weight or appear thinner, including YouTube videos sharing low-calorie diets and Instagram posts of emaciated models. While the social media platforms have attempted to quash obvious pro-eating disorder content, users and influencers can avoid having their content taken down by using hashtags to attract attention. At least one website provides hashtags to "grow your Instagram using the most popular anorexia hashtags."[91]

None of this is a secret. Dove, a subsidiary of Fortune 500 company Unilever, launched a comprehensive campaign that started in 2004 to battle the unrealistic beauty standards that damage girls as a counteroffensive against the most pervasive, damaging messages delivered daily by social media.[92] Earlier this year, these ads also began calling for federal legislation to protect children's mental health.[93]

Percentage of Americans 12-17 who had at least one major depressive episode in the past year, 2004–2021.
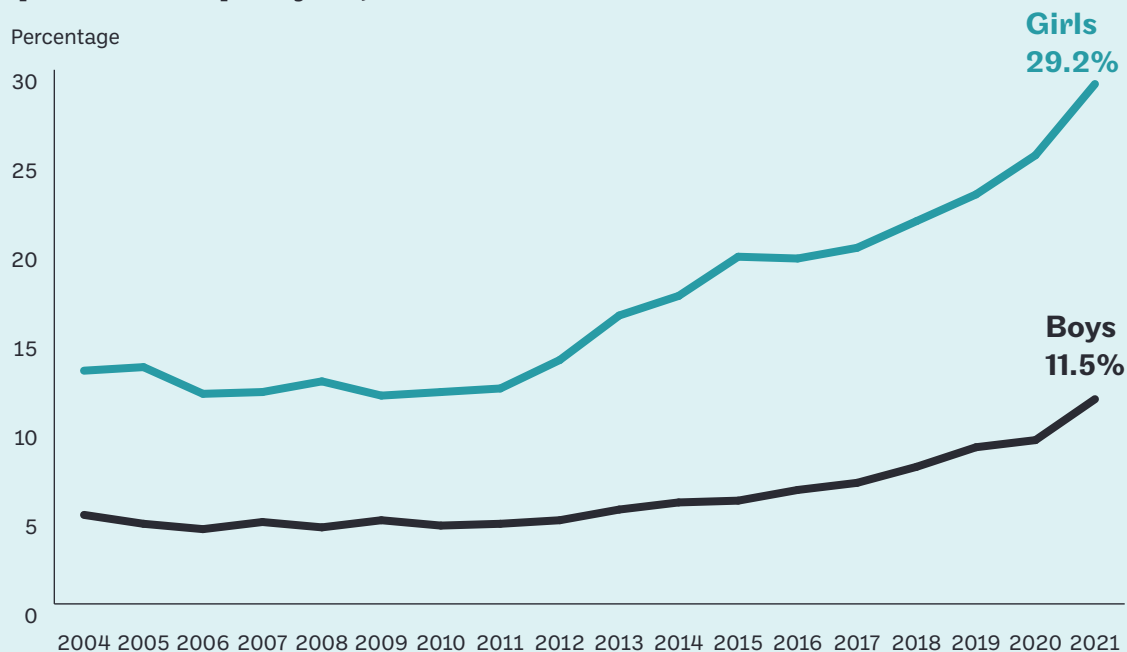
Source: U.S. National Survey on Drug Use and Health

Social Media Amplifies Bullying

Social media platforms, texts, messaging, online forums, and email are common places where cyberbullying occurs.[94] **The Pew Research Center found that 46% of U.S. teens aged 13-17 had experienced cyberbullying.[95] And research suggests that children who have been cyberbullied are three times more likely to contemplate suicide than their peers.[96]**

Among those cyberbullied was Carson Bride.[97] Carson did not have his first cell phone until he was in the 8th grade; his parents did not allow him on social media platforms until he was a freshman in high school. In June 2020, just after starting his first job, Carson committed suicide. His parents soon discovered that Carson had been cyberbullied extensively for months by anonymous users on Snapchat. His attempts to learn who was sending him negative, harassing, sexually explicit, and humiliating messages failed.

Kristin Bride, Carson's mother and a member of the Council for Responsible Social Media, sued Snapchat and other messaging apps for being negligent in safeguarding against cyberbullying. In February 2023, she appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee, along with other parent-survivors who had lost their children to social media harms. "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," Bride told the committee.[98]

Social Media Promotes Deadly Challenges

The "blackout challenge" went viral on TikTok starting in 2021. In it, users — usually children — are challenged to restrict breathing for a set duration of time. Choking games are not new, but with social media, the game was delivered with swift efficiency to kids too young to realize the danger of the challenge.[99]

By the end of 2022, **at least 15 deaths of children under the age of 12 were linked to the blackout challenge.[100]** While TikTok requires its users to be at least 13 years old, experts agree there are no effective mechanisms to block underage users from using the social media platform.[101] In

> Children who have been cyberbullied are three times more likely to contemplate suicide than their peers.

At least 15 deaths of children under the age of 12 were linked to the "blackout challenge."

Nearly one in three teen girls have been approached by adults asking for nude photographs.

fact, internal documents from TikTok showed that a third of TikTok users in the United States in 2020 may have been 14 or younger.[102]

The blackout challenge isn't the only dangerous "game." A Benadryl challenge that started in 2020 killed a 13-year-old boy in Ohio and a 15-year-old girl in Oklahoma.[103] Challenges to swallow spoonfuls of cinnamon, eat Tide PODS, and walk blindfolded into traffic (all captured on video and posted) have also gone viral on social media platforms.[104]

Social Media Links Kids to Predators

Social media has become a playground for abusers who share child pornography. Predators use social media platforms to stalk, harass, and trade images of underage children. They prey on vulnerable children to commercialize sexual exploitation, or child sex trafficking. This can include soliciting images, sexual acts, or "relationships" from the most vulnerable.[105]

According to Thorn, a nonprofit dedicated to battling online child sexual abuse, research shows that **one in four children surveyed have had online sexual encounters with adults via social media.** Nearly one in three teen girls have been approached by adults asking for nude photographs, while one in six girls aged 9-12 years have interacted sexually with an adult on these platforms.[106]

Social media platforms help connect and promote a vast network of accounts openly devoted to the commission and purchase of under-age sexual content.

For instance, as the *Wall Street Journal* reported, Instagram enabled users to search explicit hashtags like #preteensex and connected them to accounts that used the terms to advertise child-sex material for sale.[107] Researchers were able to get recommendations quickly and easily from the platform that were "enough to flood a test account with content that sexualizes children."[108]

Meanwhile, message boards like Snapchat and Discord offer "closed group" features that have been used "for grooming

and even selling or advertising people for sex trafficking," according to Haley McNamara, director of the International Centre on Sexual Exploitation.[109]

Current and former Meta employees who have worked on Instagram child-safety initiatives estimate that **the number of accounts that exist primarily to follow child-sex content is in the high hundreds of thousands, if not millions,** the *Wall Street Journal* reported earlier this year.[110]

Social Media Erodes Support for Democracy Among the Next Generation of Citizens

Social media has become young people's primary resource for information — and that information can be deeply flawed. Aside from potentially damaging young social media users as individuals, this endless barrage of algorithm-driven content has led the next generation to mistrust most information sources — something that threatens the future of our democratic society.

77% of American teenagers get their news from social media, according to a survey in 2020 of more than 800 teens by the nonprofit Common Sense. Yet only 28% trust local news organizations — and even fewer trust traditional newspapers, traditional TV news networks, and news aggregators. Rather, about 39% get their news from celebrities, influencers, and personalities.[111]

In the past, the nightly news and printed newspapers were largely considered credible sources, and there were humans in the publishing process who would decide what to report, what was important enough to lead the news, and what was true. With social media, that editorial voice is gone, replaced with algorithms and amplification. If the most important value is engagement, then veracity, credibility, and facts are out the window — with that, goes trust.

Earlier this year, the Center for Countering Digital Hate found that nearly 5 in 10 Americans (49%) — and nearly 7 in 10 American teenagers who use social media for at least four hours a day (69%) — agreed with at least four conspiracy theories that were polled.[112] The researchers concluded that

Young people have markedly less trust in our democratic values than previous generations.

social media is exposing people — including teenagers — to higher levels of propaganda, including antisemitic and white supremacist propaganda.

"Conspiracy theories have real traction among American teenagers, particularly those who use any single social media platform for four or more hours per day," warns Center for Countering Digital Hate CEO Imran Ahmed, a member of the Council for Responsible Social Media. "This is a crisis of conspiracism that is infecting our children with potentially dangerous lies and nonsense."

Young people also have markedly less trust in our democratic values than previous generations. They are less likely to believe that the American people will do what they can to help those in need; less likely to have confidence that we can work together to solve community problems; and less likely to be willing to accept election results no matter who wins.[113]

Our democracy requires a certain amount of trust — in institutions, in individuals, and in each other. It also requires participation in elections and the civic process, whether it's voting or running for office. We can all agree to disagree on any topic, or like or dislike any candidate. But we need to agree that we can sort our differences out in a non-violent way.

What happens if the next generation trusts no information and are incapable of distinguishing what's real and what's fake? Will they be capable of self-governing, or supporting democratic principles that have upheld our nation for nearly 250 years?

There are larger issues at stake here. Russia is actively seeking to destabilize America. China believes the United States is in decline and is chipping away at the existing international order. Both of these countries, as well as other adversaries, see social media as a powerful tool to advance their agendas. In these psychological operations, our kids are on the frontline.

"This is a crisis of conspiracism that is infecting our children with potentially dangerous lies and nonsense."

Imran Ahmed
CEO of Center for Countering Digital Hate

PART III
Threats to National Security

Social media is the tool of choice for our adversaries to influence minds and ultimately shift geopolitical power, in part because of the speed at which false information can travel and become perceived as the truth. A 2018 MIT study found that on Twitter, "it took the truth about six times as long as falsehood to reach 1,500 people."[114] While social media companies rapidly advance new products — most notably artificial intelligence tools — they are plowing forward with virtually no guardrails to incorporate these national security concerns into the system. At the same time, by relying on outrage and division as tools

of engagement, which drives profitability, social media platforms divide Americans and destroy our trust in each other and our institutions. This division is making us less capable of addressing collective challenges, which ultimately undermines U.S. national security.

Social media is used by nearly five billion people around the world and is expected to increase by another billion by 2027.[115] Social media provides quick access to information and other people, and it serves as the primary source of information for many. Facebook alone has nearly three billion users and fast-growing TikTok claims about 1.6 billion users.[116] While social media is benefiting billions of users, it's also serving as a tool to do harm. **Attracting and connecting bad actors, spreading untruths, and sharing highly sensitive data with astonishing speed and extraordinary reach is part and parcel of the design built into social media.**

Authoriarian states see democracy as a direct threat to their own power.

Adversaries Want to Take Down Democracy

When a nation meddles with America's national security, they're really aiming at democracy.

Our adversaries fundamentally disagree with America's founding principle of freedom, our tradition of open and fair elections, and our support for democracy around the world. They do this for the oldest reason of all: Power. China, Russia, and authoritarian states see democracy — and its global reach — as a direct threat to their own power. And these autocrats are deeply concerned about any semblance of democracy forming within their own borders.

Right now, Russia, China, and other adversaries are seeking to reshape the geopolitical map. They're using social media to flood our feeds with propaganda and gathering copious amounts of data about us. They take advantage and exploit our tradition of free speech and openness by highlighting and amplifying tensions within our own country.

By magnifying every disagreement in the United States by every digital means possible — from troll farms to "news" items that are not true to the weaponization of artificial intelligence — our adversaries are chipping away at our unity. By collecting and analyzing our data, they're learning

Facebook says it bans U.S.-designated terrorist groups, but as recently as February 2023, it would "auto-generate" landing pages for them.

all about us and what makes us vulnerable, from where we live to how we react to the content that arrives in our social media feeds. They are capable of manipulating an entire generation that receives almost all their information from social media.

Social Media Is a Tool for Bad Actors

Facebook says it bans U.S.-designated terrorist groups, but as recently as February 2023, it would "auto-generate" landing pages for terrorist groups, including ISIS and al-Qaida. These pages were automatically created by Facebook when a user listed a terrorist group in their profile, according to an investigation by the Tech Transparency Project. The pages allowed users to network, tag friends, and send messages to one another. Similarly, Vice News was able to replicate the Tech Transparency Project's results by creating a profile that was quickly able to link to ISIS as an employer in Raqqa, Syria.[117, 118]

"Despite repeated warnings and questioning from multiple lawmakers, Facebook has continued to create business pages for designated terrorist groups that thrive on digital propaganda — and it's been knowingly doing so since 2019," said Katie Paul, the researcher and author of the investigation.[119]

While this could be shrugged off as a "quirk" in the system, the fact is that social media platforms can — and are — being used as weapons by state-sponsored bad actors.

In an especially horrific development this fall, Hamas terrorists hijacked the social media accounts of Israeli hostages to livestream attacks and issue death threats. Thomas Rid, a professor of strategic studies at Johns Hopkins University, told *The New York Times* that this "weaponizes social media in a way I don't think we've seen before," adding "we are not psychologically prepared for this."[120]

Social Media Increases Radicalization

All media — including newspapers, radio, and television — can be used to encourage radicalization, the process of causing a person to adopt extreme positions on political or social issues. Yet the internet, and social media especially, is a particularly strong accelerant of radicalization at home and abroad.

Radicalization can result in violent actions, including terrorism. Radicalization was at the heart of the September 11, 2001, attack on the United States as well as the January 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol — meaning social media companies' own algorithms and content amplification processes are a national security problem that cannot be ignored.

UNESCO, in a 2017 research report on the role of the internet and social media in the development of radicalization among youth, identified social media as a "facilitating environment" for violent radicalization.[121] And according to PIRUS, a detailed database of people in the United States who have been radicalized, **social media played a role in the radicalization process of only 27% of those radicalized between 2005 and 2010. But, predictably and unfortunately, between 2011 and 2016, that increased to 73%.**[122]

Radicalization also extends beyond just the youth. Another vein of citizens that has been targeted for radicalization is our military. Of the hundreds of people who have been charged for their role in the January 6 attack on the Capitol, dozens were veterans and at least half a dozen were active duty members of the military.[123]

Likewise, just seven months earlier, Ethan Melzer, a U.S. Army private, was arrested for plotting an attack against his own unit. He was a white supremacist who allegedly released classified troop movements to a neo-Nazi group, hoping to help facilitate an al-Qaida attack on his unit.[124]

Cases like Melzer's emphasize the clear counterintelligence and national security threats of radicalized current and former members of the military. With extremist propaganda proliferating on social media, the threat of far-right extremism in the military only continues to grow.

UNESCO has identified social media as a "facilitating environment" for violent radicalization.

Why Dictators and Autocrats Are Drawn to Social Media

Across the globe, dictators are using social media to clamp down on dissent. At home, they aren't letting their own people access any of the benefits of openness and connectivity promised by social media. Instead, they use social media as a weapon against their own populations.[125]

Russia, in particular, uses social media to spread false information wherever it seeks to cause trouble. And China is increasingly deploying these tactics as well, while steadily gathering private data using TikTok that can be used to weaken the United States.

Why are dictators and autocrats drawn to social media? **Social media can break down democracies in a way that is far more subversive and inexpensive than actual military action. Social media can disrupt and foment anger and violence by exploiting weaknesses within societies and amplifying them.** Conflict can start locally and spread rapidly to surrounding regions. It can help to reshape not only values, but borders.

Let's examine further how Russia has fully embraced the use of social media to advance its anti-West narrative around the world.

> Social media can break down democracies in a way that is far more subversive and inexpensive than actual military action.

Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia has added cyberwarfare on social media to its disinformation playbook.

How Russia Uses Its Social Media Manipulation Playbook Around the World

Russia has always been adept at influence campaigns to sow division and confusion in its adversaries. **Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia has "revived the Cold War dezinformatsia (disinformation) playbook with a modern twist: extensive cyber domain and modern technological influences,"** according to researchers at Georgetown University.[126] When Putin rose to power in 2000, he promptly took control of Russian television networks and sought to synthesize "Soviet control with Western entertainment." Russian television became its internal propaganda machine.[127] From there, Russia extended its efforts to social media as the industry grew.

Tactics and enablers of Russian propaganda are numerous, including state-funded global messaging, proxies, and front groups, advertisements on social media, artificial grassroots campaigns, bot networks, deep fakes, malware, and memes.[128] And Russia is using this playbook around the world.

For instance, when Russia invaded Crimea in 2014, it used a state-owned network of paid internet trolls and fake personas that appeared to be locals disillusioned with Ukrainian opposition to Russia to spread false information.[129] Russia applied its anti-truth approach prior to its invasion of Georgia in 2008 by justifying its slow military build-up in the region as an effort to "protect" Georgians.[130] Social media has also been a tool for Russia to amplify dictators in Africa, including in Sudan in 2019.[131]

In the United States, Russian trolls tried to influence our domestic debate over NFL players kneeling during the singing of the national anthem at professional football games,[132] and according to federal prosecutors, a leading advocate for the secession movement in California got funding and direction from Russian intelligence agents.[133]

And Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine marked "an escalation in Russia's longstanding information operations against Ukraine and open democracies."[134]

Social Media and Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Russia's narrative leading up to its 2022 invasion of Ukraine was that Russia was a victim of ongoing provocation by the West and was entering Ukraine on a peacekeeping mission.

On the day of the invasion, Putin addressed the Russian people and falsely claimed that Ukraine was being governed by Nazis, which required Russia to launch military action with a goal to "denazify" Ukraine. This narrative — which came to be denoted by the "Z" symbol — was amplified around the world through social media, and became "the rallying symbol of the Russian war machine and an effective weapon in the information war," according to Ben Scott, a former State Department official who is now the executive director of Reset, which focuses on tackling digital threats to democracy.[135] At the same time, the Russian government clamped down on independent media outlets within Russia and forbade the use of the word "war" in the context of Ukraine.[136]

Facebook has failed to remove or label 91% of posts containing content from Russian state media outlets.

Social media helps spread false information rapidly among Russian troops, Ukrainians, and its global audience. As Scott has noted, the Russian "Z" campaign could be found throughout social media during the outset of the war, from schoolchildren posing on Instagram with colored Z drawings to Kremlin-aligned accounts posting highly produced Z propaganda.[137] These lies expand false narratives that can weaken critical support for Ukraine among its allies. They also contribute to chaos and confusion among Russian troops, who have been told they would be welcomed as heroes for liberating Ukraine from Nazi and Western backers. In fact, recordings show that Russian soldiers were shocked at the violence of war and orders from their commanders to kill civilians.[138] Said one Russian officer, referring to his military superiors: "Frankly speaking, they tricked us. Everything we were told was a fake."[139]

Prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Meta successfully identified and disabled one of Russia's propaganda networks of more than a thousand fake social media accounts before they could gain large audiences.[140] As the war has raged on, Meta has claimed to continue to take down overt Russian state-controlled media on its platforms. Yet Meta admits that covert activity has risen sharply, and the company reports that efforts are "aggressive and persistent, constantly probing for weak spots across the internet, including setting up hundreds of new spoof news organization domains."[141] In fact, research by the Center for Countering Digital Hate found that Facebook has failed to remove or label 91% of posts containing content from Russian state media outlets identified by the U.S. State Department as "Kremlin-funded media" and Russia's propaganda "ecosystem."[142] Without external verification and transparency, we can't fully understand the scope of the problem, which could be much worse than Meta, and other platforms, say it is.

Against all odds, Ukraine has stunned the world by its resilience and military strength on the ground. It depends heavily on the United States and its allies for support. Should public support wane, support in the way of arms, training, and humanitarian aid could recede — which is why Russia has not ceased in promoting propaganda campaigns on social media. Should Ukraine fall to Russia, democracies throughout Eastern Europe will be more vulnerable to Russian interference.

Russia and Other Foreign Adversaries Attempt to Influence U.S. Elections

In every national U.S. election since 2016, Russia, China, and Iran have weighed in about candidates and the credibility of the American election system.

By 2016, 62% of adults were getting their news from social media[143] and rapidly spreading content that would arrive on their Facebook feeds — the more inflammatory, the better. That summer, both political parties were nominating their presidential candidates. On the second day of the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, WikiLeaks began to publish thousands of emails stolen from the Democratic National Committee that exposed divisions within the party. The leaks continued into the fall.[144]

While the founder of WikiLeaks Julian Assange took credit for the leaks, American intelligence agencies found that the Russian government was actually behind the theft. An intelligence assessment stated: "We assess Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the U.S. presidential election. Russia's goals were to undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process." This finding was affirmed by the 2019 Mueller Report and a bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee investigation.[145]

Russia had used email leaks, propaganda, and social media to stoke societal divisions and in an attempt to undermine the integrity of democratic elections in the United States.[146]

Foreign interference didn't stop there. **Indeed, every national election in the United States since 2016 has been pummeled from the outside.** Russia, China, and Iran have weighed in about candidates, ideological divisions of American citizens, the credibility of the American election system, and democracy itself with tweets, videos, memes, and fake news.

In 2020, Russia again sought to influence the U.S. presidential election. An intelligence report stated that again, Putin authorized an influence operation designed to undermine public confidence in the electoral process and exacerbated "sociopolitical divisions in the United States."[147]

Similarly, Iran, in 2020, undertook a "multi-pronged covert influence campaign" designed to "undermine public confidence in the electoral process and U.S. institutions and sow division and exacerbate societal tensions in the United States," according to an analysis released in 2021 by the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence.[148]

And in 2022, Chinese government-affiliated cyberactors sought to discourage Americans from voting, discredit the election process, and sow further divisions among voters.[149] At the same time, TikTok accounts associated with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) accumulated millions of followers and tens of millions of views while editorializing about U.S. politics in the lead-up to the 2022 midterms. The accounts were run by MediaLinks TV, a D.C.-based, registered foreign agent of the Chinese Communist Party's television outlet. In 60 days in 2022, MediaLinks videos gained 8.3 million views, while fewer than 58,000 users bothered to check the profiles to see where the videos originated.[150]

TikTok, it seems, is part of China's efforts to have more influence over social discourse.

The Problem With TikTok

TikTok is wildly popular. The free app, originally created in China under the name A.me, announced, in 2021, that it had one billion users globally.[151] **Introduced in the United States in 2017, TikTok claims that 150 million Americans use the app.[152] 59% of TikTok users in the United States are under 24,[153] with 60% of Gen Z adults saying they use the app daily.[154]**

But TikTok, it seems, is part of China's efforts to have more influence over global discourse. There are two major national security risks posed by TikTok that are distinct

> TikTok's data can be weaponized in a number of ways, from prosecuting political enemies to sharing sensitive information.

from other social media platforms: The mass collection of American user data, which the Chinese Communist Party could have access to and exploit, and the ability of the CCP to force ByteDance (TikTok's owner) to use the app to move public opinion in the United States in a way that is counter to U.S. interests and favors China.

TikTok is a subsidiary of a Chinese company, ByteDance, which can be legally required by the Chinese Communist government to demand data from its companies about users for intelligence-gathering operations. **TikTok's data can be weaponized in a number of ways, from prosecuting political enemies to sharing sensitive information.**

Gen. Paul Nakasone, the head of the National Security Agency, told the Senate Armed Services Committee this year that he worried TikTok could censor videos to shape public opinion in a way that threatens U.S. national security interests.[155] Additionally, FBI Director Christopher Wray warned the Senate Intelligence Committee this year that China could use TikTok to control data on millions of users to shape public opinion should China invade Taiwan.[156] Wray agreed with a question from a senator who asked if it was plausible that the Chinese Communist Party, ahead of a hypothetical invasion of Taiwan, could use TikTok to ensure Americans saw videos asserting that Taiwan belonged to China and why the United States should not intervene. Wray stressed that there may not be many outward signs if such a propaganda campaign was launched.

Then-President Donald Trump attempted to ban TikTok in 2020.[157] India has already banned the app,[158] and more than two-thirds of U.S. states have prohibited people from downloading TikTok on government devices,[159] as has the Canadian federal government and a majority of Canadian provinces.[160] And earlier this year, the Biden administration called for TikTok's Chinese ownership to sell the app or face a possible ban to address growing national security concerns.[161]

At a five-hour hearing before the House Energy and Commerce Committee in March, lawmakers on both sides of the aisle expressed deep concern over TikTok's links to China and the Chinese Communist Party.[162] TikTok's CEO Shou Chew insisted that ByteDance was a private company that was "not owned or controlled by the Chinese government."

TikTok provides another platform for Chinese propaganda to reach Western audiences, all while collecting sensitive information about TikTok users.

Yet within hours, his comments were quickly overshadowed by statements from China's Commerce Ministry that said a sale or divestiture of TikTok would involve exporting technology and had to be approved by the Chinese government. "If the news is true, China will firmly oppose it," said a ministry spokesperson.[163]

In the past five years, China has increased its use of propaganda campaigns in the United States with an effort to build a greater mainstream audience. Those campaigns include thousands of fake accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, and the manipulation of events within China, such as pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, U.S. relations with Taiwan, and the COVID pandemic.[164] State-run media publishers in China have a long track record of using social media advertising to promote pro-China narratives in the West,[165] and pro-China narratives continue to be promulgated through online advertising, according to examinations of the Meta and Google ad libraries.[166] TikTok provides yet another platform for Chinese propaganda to reach Western audiences, all while also collecting sensitive information about TikTok users in the United States and other democratic countries.
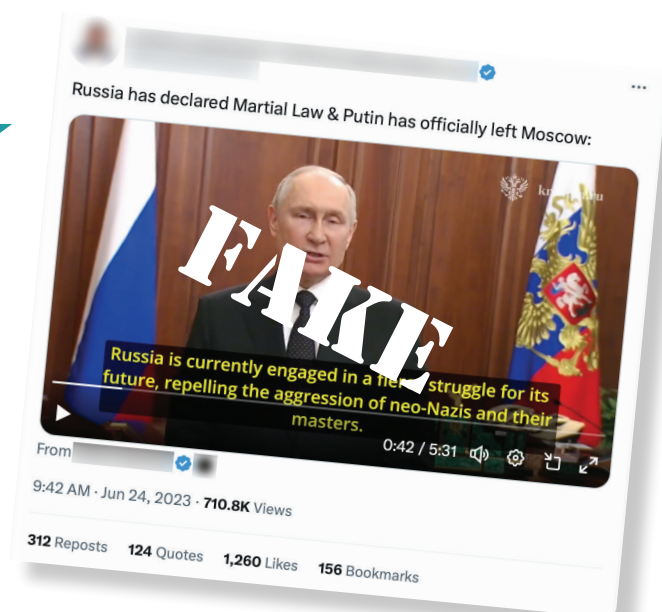
Deepfakes

The next weapons in the arsenal of propaganda operations are deepfakes. Video and picture editing software on social media platforms can quickly alter the audio or text on a picture to dramatically change the context. The next evolution — advanced or generative artificial intelligence — makes it easy to produce convincing fake audio files and videos that look and sound like a person or an event. A proliferation of fake videos, images, and audio clips are poised to reshape our view of reality and alter our trust in all of the digital content that we see.
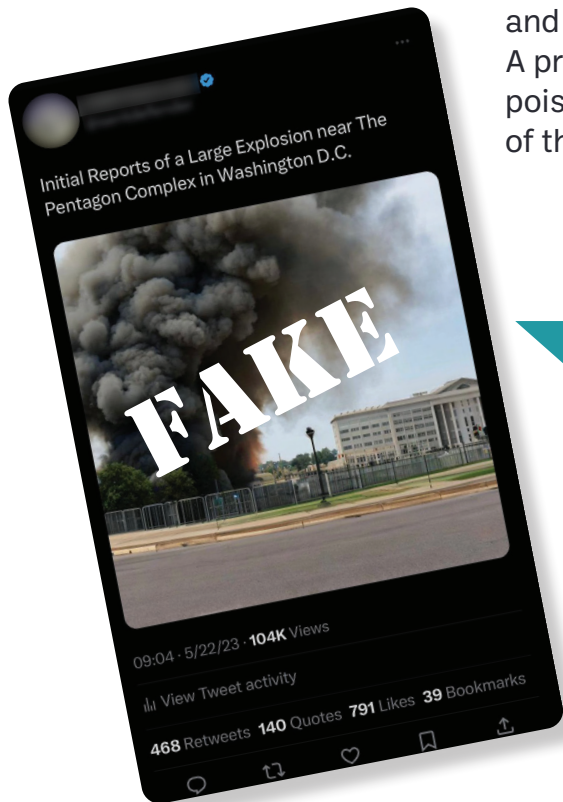
A false report of an explosion at the Pentagon, accompanied by an apparently AI-generated image, spread on Twitter this year, sparking a brief dip in the stock market.[167] The fake image to the left circulating on Twitter showed a black cloud of smoke near a building. The accounts posting it claimed it depicted the Pentagon.

The screenshot to the right shows a deepfake of Russian President Vladimir Putin declaring martial law following false reports of an invasion of Russia by Ukraine. The deepfake was broadcasted on Russian TV and radio. According to the Kremlin, this was the work of hackers.[168]

Talk Obama To Me

i'll say what you type

Artificial intelligence can create audio deepfakes. This one allows users to create fake audio files of former President Barack Obama.[169]

> "Fake posts purporting to come from real figures are an increasing risk in an AI-influenced world... They can be very convincing."[170]

Col. Philip Ingram
Former British military intelligence officer and NATO planner

Imagine a deepfake of an autocrat announcing a nuclear attack on the United States, broadcast on every social media platform. Right now, there is nothing to stop this scenario from happening.

Lorem
@lpsum

San Diego Under Attack!
#nuclearwar #chaos #saveus

FAKE

11 May 2024

Not Doing Enough

What is social media doing to mitigate the threat of adversarial actors? The short answer is it depends.

Today, there are no requirements that social media platforms uphold the national security of the United States, or any nation. Social media companies can make their own decisions as to how they manage their data and content, regardless of how damaging their actions may be. In this vacuum, social media companies make their own decisions based on their own goals.

For instance, Meta publishes a quarterly report describing its efforts to disrupt what it calls "coordinated inauthentic behavior" to crack down on "covert influence operations." At the end of 2022, Meta reported that it had disrupted about 200 global networks originating in 68 countries since 2017, with the United States being the most targeted country.[171]

Other social media platforms also disrupt suspicious activity, but there is no requirement for them to publicly share their enforcement actions. In 2019, Twitter reported that it found and removed 418 accounts linked to Russia in a two-month period in 2018, and that it had previously removed nearly 4,000 accounts linked to the Russian-government-associated troll farm called the Internet Research Agency.[172] But when Elon Musk took over Twitter in 2022, the company loosened its enforcement policies.[173]

Voluntary efforts certainly sound good, but without any meaningful transparency, policymakers and the American public are left to take social media companies at their word. Twitter's removal of 4,000 Russian-linked accounts is ultimately empty without any sense of the reach or engagement with those accounts, and any analysis of the content they promoted.

Today, there are no requirements that social media platforms uphold the national security of the United States.

If left unchecked, social media could lead to fundamental changes in geopolitics and a reshaping of the post-World War II global order.

This Cannot Be Left Unchecked

It's clear that we need some guardrails when it comes to the weaponization of data and online psychological operations that threaten our national security.

Our democratic system — the ability to vote for leaders to represent us and resolve our differences within a framework of shared norms and traditions — is under attack. If left unchecked, social media could lead to fundamental changes in geopolitics and a reshaping of the post-World War II global order, tilting the scales in favor of China.

If the United States and other democracies become more divided and average citizens lose their grips on what is real and what is a lie, it will be harder to stay united in the face of Chinese aggression towards Taiwan or other allies. It will be more difficult to maintain a coherent bipartisan national security strategy. And over time, American power will wane. China or another adversary could take our place and drive global politics and economics in a way that is counter to U.S. interests, and undermines democracy around the globe.

PART IV
Threats to Democracy

According to its original intent, social media was supposed to bring people together. But what was meant to be a high-tech public square has evolved into a free-for-all filled with false information and algorithms that boost extremist content. Social media's design makes it easy to manipulate users and polarize both the right and the left, while the platforms profit.

Lies about the 2020 presidential election, spread by social media, led to insurrectionists overrunning the Capitol on January 6, 2021, in an effort to disrupt the peaceful transfer of power. Our constitutional structure was designed to avoid mob rule; yet social media elevates it.

An existential battle pitting neighbor against neighbor is playing out every day in communities nationwide. Public meetings are disrupted, public servants are threatened, and the next generation of Americans are becoming disengaged from our civic systems. **Fledgling democracies around the world are watching** as the American experiment falters, threatening support for the principles of democracy beyond our borders. **Now is the time to reform social media to do what it was supposed to do in the first place: Bring us together.**

Social Media Fosters Disengagement

64% of Americans believe that social media has been more of a bad thing for democracy.

In a focus group earlier this year, Renee told Issue One about a time her eighth-grade son was riding home on the school bus and watching TikTok, as he always did. On this day, he was watching videos about voting.

"What's the sense in us voting anyhow?" he told his mom when he arrived home. "It doesn't matter." His view was that as soon as one side was losing, the other side could "cheat" and "change the votes."[174]

It's difficult to know exactly what Renee's son was watching on TikTok, but it's clear that the 14-year-old suspected our electoral system is corrupt and participation might not be worth his time when he gains the ability to vote.

Renee's son isn't the only child whose views have been influenced by content on social media.

Social media platforms were not designed to tell the truth or bring people together. They were designed to provide engaging content that keeps you coming back, even when it makes you unhappy and unhealthy. These platforms have a built-in financial incentive to keep the cultural and political battles going. Those battles are pushing us away from each other, fracturing every aspect of our civic lives.

Americans are aware that this is a problem. Pew Research Center's Spring 2022 Global Attitudes Survey showed that **64% of Americans believe that social media has been more of a bad thing for democracy. 69% feel that instant connection we found on our screens made people less civil**

in the way they talk about politics. And 79% say that the internet and social media has made people more divided in their political opinions — the highest percentage among all 19 countries polled by Pew.[175]

Social Media Creates Toxic Wedges in Society

Few times in American history have we been as polarized as we are now. The information silos driven by social media algorithms keep us from hearing the other side of any topic. Content on social media continually demonizes the other side and helps create an us-versus-them mentality.

Social media has fueled the flame of distrust by rewarding polarization. As author and NYU professor Dr. Jonathan Haidt has noted, "When citizens lose trust in elected leaders, health authorities, the courts, the police, universities, and the integrity of elections, then every decision becomes contested; every election becomes a life-and-death struggle to save the country from the other side."[176]

Thanks in large part to social media, hostility and cruel behavior are polluting our civil interactions. The ability to post lies, share half-baked conspiracies, and threaten one another fuels anger and violence. More importantly, these posts spread at a disproportionate rate because the algorithms created by the platforms are geared towards engagement and boosting extreme content.

Sorting out our disagreements requires hearing one another, debating, and reaching compromises. Now, social media is turning civil interactions into an invitation to fight.

Thanks in large part to social media, hostility and cruel behavior are polluting our civil interactions.

As George Washington University Law School Professor and National Constitution Center President and CEO Jeffrey Rosen has said: "Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms have accelerated public discourse to warp speed, creating virtual versions of the mob. Inflammatory posts based on passion travel farther and faster than arguments based on reason. Rather than encouraging deliberation, mass media undermine by creating bubbles and echo chambers in which citizens see only those opinions they already embrace."[177]

Social Media Enables Threats Against Public Servants

For many public servants, whose jobs are to keep our communities running, the workplace is much more dangerous. Local officials — including city council members, health officers, election officials, and school board members — are far too frequently experiencing threats and harassment.

A study by the Bridging Divides Initiative at Princeton University found that elected officials from across a broad range of locations, demographics, and ideologies are facing "hostile behavior and abuse intended to cause fear and/or emotional damage." Municipal officials interviewed for the study noted that threats and harassment were not in response to any one issue or political party, but part of an "emboldened" climate with a "new level of permission to be publicly vile." Almost all local officials attributed this hostile environment to social media and the possibility of anonymity.[178]

In the wake of the 2020 election, false information targeting election workers have led to over a thousand reported cases of threats and violence against them.[179]

Poll workers have faced racially charged insults, calls for their families to be killed or attacked, and sexist harassment. They've been accused of treason and threatened with prosecution. Harassers have even shown up at elected officials' homes. Doxxing, or making private information such addresses and contact information available on social media, creates an enormous vulnerability for election workers and public servants. Al Schmidt, a Republican who served as a city commissioner in Philadelphia in 2020,

Elected officials are facing "hostile behavior and abuse intended to cause fear and/or emotional damage."

received death threats via email that demanded he "tell the truth, or your three kids… will be fatally shot."[180] The most common venue for releasing the private information of election officials and threatening their families is social media.

Since the 2020 election, at least 10 people have been charged by the Justice Department for threatening election workers, including a case in which a Texan threatened multiple election officials in Georgia and another that made a bomb threat to the Arizona Secretary of State.[181] Ten states have increased penalties for those convicted of making threats or harassing election workers.

All of this results in fewer citizens who want to serve the public. If doing a job, from serving on a school board to being a poll worker, includes being doxxed, having an inbox overflow with hate-filled rants, or having your kid harassed, many qualified, committed people who wish to serve the public are simply saying no thanks. A survey by the Brennan Center for Justice found that 45% of election officials are concerned about their own safety and that of their colleagues in their public role — and 11% said they are very or somewhat likely to vacate their positions before the 2024 elections.[182]

"My work as an election official helps ensure everyone has their voices heard," Tonya Wichman, director of elections at the Defiance County, Ohio, board of elections, told Issue One. "That's what keeps me in this job year after year. But now, I am worried about my own safety as well as the safety of everyone working in elections across the country. All it would take is one angry, unhinged person with an online account to dox, threaten, or come after any of us."

Added Ken Hamm, a part-time poll worker in Nevada: "It's like good people were convinced to go after other good people."[183]

Concerningly, despite the threats election officials and election workers face on social media, the platforms have gutted their election protection teams at the very time they should be building them up.[184] Massive layoffs have occurred this year at Alphabet, Meta, and Twitter, leading several senators to raise concerns that these cuts will jeopardize the 2024 election.[185]

"All it would take is one angry, unhinged person with an online account to dox, threaten, or come after any of us."

Tonya Wichman
Director of Elections in
Defiance County, Ohio

Social Media Weakens Our Institutions

All of this — foreign interference in our elections, a "post-truth" environment where untrue information travels fast, and the easy ability to harass or threaten anyone with a public presence — is weakening our institutions. Congress is in near-perpetual gridlock, making it virtually impossible to advance commonsense, bipartisan legislation, including social media reform proposals, measures to strengthen the penalties against those who harass election workers, and bills to protect election officials from doxxing.

Americans' confidence in all major institutions is at its lowest point in decades. The percentage of Americans expressing a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in nearly every institution in U.S. society has fallen in the past year and is at its lowest since Gallup's survey began in 1979.[186]

Trends in Americans' Confidence in Institutions 2012-2023

% Great deal/Quite a lot

	2012 % Time of Facebook initial public offering	2023 %	
The military	75	60	-15
The police	56	43	-13
The medical system	41	34	-12
The church or organized religion	44	32	-12
The U.S. Supreme Court	37	27	-10
Banks	21	26	-5
The public schools	29	26	-3
The presidency	37	26	-11
Newspapers	25	18	-7
The criminal justice system	29	17	-12
Television news	21	14	-7
Big business	21	14	-7
Congress	13	8	-5

Source: GALLUP

Social Media Threatens Democracy Worldwide

Social media is accelerating the deterioration of the health of democracy.

As democracy in the United States falters, the rest of the world watches. The aspiration of a government represented by the people and for the people is the north star for pro-democracy nations around the world. Now, they see that many Americans don't have faith in their own electoral systems and clash with one another as racial and social tensions boil over. The speculation is that democracy is failing.

Nobel Peace Prize winner and Council for Responsible Social Media member Maria Ressa sees social media as a systemic threat to democracy. "Social media prioritizes the spread of lies over facts," she told *The Atlantic* earlier this year. "Our information ecosystem, it's corrupted right now. If your information ecosystem is corrupted, then that leads to the corruption of your institutions. And when you don't have working institutions, you don't have checks and balances. We're electing illiberal leaders democratically, and they're corrupting the institutions from within. And when the institutions are corrupted, when that happens, you lose your freedom."[187]

An Arsenal of Tactics for Digital Election Interference

Ahead of and during electoral periods, many political leaders increased their control over the information space in a bid to sway balloting in their favor.

Ahead of **Cambodia's** July 2023 elections, authorities blocked access to the websites of independent news outlets as part of a broader effort to control the online media landscape.

Ahead of **Thailand's** May 2023 elections, efforts to discredit opposition parties on social media were linked to the military, which employs thousands of people to manipulate online narratives.

Turkish authorities ordered news outlets to remove unfavorable articles about a political party after it announced support for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the May 2023 election. Meta and X were also ordered to restrict election-related posts.

Independent media outlets in **Kazakhstan** faced a string of severe cyberattacks ahead of the November 2022 presidential election, disrupting access to information about the balloting.

Before **Zimbabwe's** general elections in August 2023, a new law known as the "Patriotic Bill" broadly criminalized speech that injures the country's sovereignty or national interests.

During **Cuba's** one-party parliamentary elections in March 2023, a journalist for the news site CubaNet was forced to stay home and threatened with arrest by a state security officer, in an apparent effort to limit his reporting on the vote.

WEBSITE BLOCKS · DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS · TECHNICAL ATTACKS · ARRESTS FOR ONLINE SPEECH · NEW REPRESSIVE LAWS · FORCED CONTENT REMOVAL

Source: Freedom House on the Net 2023

The number of "free" countries that have seen declines in political rights and civil liberties has trended upward over the past decade, according to the nonprofit research organization Freedom House. This year alone, Freedom House found a decline in the democracy score of 11 out of the 29 countries it surveyed in its 2023 report.[188] Deterioration of indicators of the health of democracy — most notably, national and local governance and electoral processes — are accelerated by social media.

Spend an hour on Chinese-owned TikTok (or any social media platform, really) and it won't take long to see a video about the many things that are wrong with America. Just as our Founding Fathers tried to design governance mechanisms to cool down the passions of the mob, social media platforms have been designed to ramp them up, with new tools developed regularly that add gasoline onto an already blazing fire.

Social Media-Fueled Atrocities in Myanmar and Ethiopia: Case Studies

Providing billions of people with a free product that was designed to connect people should be a good thing for democracy around the world. Yet, it hasn't turned out that way. Social media executives came to realize that conflict — fueled by fiery extremism and measured by engagement — would lead them to the largest profits.

Two examples of such decision-making gone disastrously wrong include Myanmar, in southeast Asia, and Ethiopia, in eastern Africa.

The Myanmar military was trained by Russia in spreading propaganda and used Facebook to incite violence against the mostly Muslim Rohingya minority group. The result: A genocide that killed more 25,000 people and displaced more than 700,000 Rohingya from Myanmar.[189]

Facebook provided Myanmar citizens with free internet service as part of the company's efforts to grow.[190] More than half of Myanmar's population used Facebook, and for many, it was their only connection to the internet as well as

their primary source of news.[191] Facebook wasn't making money from Myanmar and chose not to invest in moderators or monitors on the ground.[192]

In 2021, Myanmar's military seized power in a coup. That February, Facebook banned the armed forces from its platforms. Nonetheless, a month later, **"as soldiers massacred hundreds of unarmed civilians in the streets... Facebook's own page recommendation algorithm was amplifying content that violated many of its own policies,"** Global Witness reported.[193]

That failure of self-regulation was replayed in Ethiopia earlier this decade.

In Ethiopia's Tigray region, both sides of the violence fought online through inflammatory information campaigns to dispute the other's narrative of events while promoting their own. Allegations of propaganda, false information, hate speech, "platform manipulation," and more against both parties followed, which exacerbated tensions further and ultimately drew attention away from the violence on the ground. Rather than spreading awareness, social media was used as a weapon of information warfare in a battle over what both parties argued was the "truth," leading to heightened tensions, an opaque information environment, and increased violence.[194]

"As soldiers massacred hundreds of unarmed civilians in the streets... Facebook's own page recommendation algorithm was amplifying content that violated many of its own policies."

Social Media Threats Can Be Tackled

We can protect our children, communities, and national security with commonsense, bipartisan solutions.

Today, social media platforms push us deeper and deeper into information silos that are not reflective of reality and divide us. Our national security is under attack, and social media platforms make it far too easy for bad actors to spread lies and access our private information. Our democracy is challenged, the mental health of our children is deteriorating, and foreign nations are influencing our elections and civil discourse. We face the risk that young people will simply burn out and give up on democratic processes, or fully embrace extremism and never learn how to govern their own communities effectively. **If the American experiment of democracy becomes viewed as a failure, rather than an aspirational goal, more nations will fall to authoritarian models. We cannot let this happen.**

It's not too late to take another direction. Social media intended to connect us and bring us closer together. It still can. But the social media industry won't reform itself; history has proven that again and again. **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 Call to Action:
It's Time to Create a Healthier Online Ecosystem by Default and by Design

Social media promised to build a more interconnected, informed world. But more than a decade after the proliferation of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, we can see clearly that the harms of social media have overwhelmed its promise. **We have reached a tipping point** — from a nationwide crisis among our children to the end of our privacy online, from conspiracy theories going mainstream to communities torn apart by polarization. We need to act now.

Members of Congress across both parties have woken up to the challenges posed by Big Tech. Dozens of hearings have examined these threats and hundreds of bills have been introduced that offer solutions. But for all the talk, Congress has not passed meaningful tech reform legislation since 1998, when the internet was in its infancy. Deep divisions remain over key priorities, technical approaches, and the right order of operations. **This issue is too urgent for lawmakers to be divided by which solution should come first, and too urgent for a piecemeal approach to be sufficient.**

The Council for Responsible Social Media, a project of Issue One, is the most comprehensive, bipartisan initiative created to advance reform of the largest online platforms. We unite policymakers, technologists, and impacted communities in this shared effort. Now, **we call on members of Congress to come together to pass a comprehensive legislation package that will finally bring accountability, transparency, and responsibility to social media companies and their powerful technologies**, in a way that protects the well-being of all users.

Creating a safer, healthier, and more responsible online world, for both children and adults, will require a dramatic shift away from the current attention-for-profit model. There are several principles that policymakers should seek to apply in order to help their favored solutions be most impactful and stand up to scrutiny and legal challenges.

Social media reform legislation must be guided by these principles:

1. **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.

2. **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.

3. **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.

4. **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.

5. **Social media platforms must adopt safeguards to prioritize fact-based information to stop foreign and domestic adversaries from spreading false or misleading information.**

Moreover, legislation to create commonsense safeguards for social media companies must achieve the following:

> **Social media platforms must protect the mental, physical, and developmental health of American children. This includes reducing and restricting material that is detrimental to a minor's health and well-being, limiting or restricting the use of a minor's personal data, and enhancing default privacy and user settings for minors.**

> **Social media companies must be legally required to be open and transparent.** The public should have a better sense of how social media platforms operate, including how their data is shared and used from origination to delivery.

> **Social media platforms must be better protected from foreign and domestic bad actors.** National security vulnerabilities, including the sharing of data with adversaries and open platforms for terrorists to recruit and radicalize, both abroad and domestic, must be mitigated.

> **Social media companies must change their core business model 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 stop using algorithms to elevate the most extreme content.** Algorithms that amplify inflammatory content and filters users into rabbit holes or questionable content or opportunities to join radical groups must be redesigned.

> **Social media platforms must adopt measures that slow down the speed at which things are shared and cause people to pause and think before sharing harmful content, propaganda, or lies.** Creating "friction," or pauses, in the system to slow down the spread of certain 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 and in languages other than English.

Too often, the conversation about social media reform focuses solely on content — what types of content are harmful, how should these posts be taken down, and who gets to make these decisions. This is a politically charged debate, one that implicates both Section 230 and the First Amendment. This framing is also a distraction.

As discussed in this report, many of social media's harms stem from the design of these platforms — algorithmically engineered feeds and endless scroll features designed to addict users, recommendation models that send users down extremist rabbit holes, dark patterns intended to point you toward certain features. Recalibrating these features will alter the content that users see automatically on their feed and how they engage with this content, but these changes don't prevent any user from searching for or posting content, and therefore doesn't limit any user's freedom of expression. **Ensuring safety and privacy by design is both the most impactful and the most politically feasible path forward for social media reform.**

Additionally, Big Tech companies should implement, or be required to implement, the strongest possible safety and privacy changes by default. Too often, the social media platforms respond to criticism by creating a new "tool," that can be used to protect your privacy, limit your exposure to harmful content, or mitigate an addictive feature of the website. But these tools are often hard to find, difficult to implement, and require a threshold of tech expertise. When this happens, the implicit message remains the same: It is always someone else's job to prevent a user of social media from becoming addicted to or harmed by their addictive and harmful products — a parent, an educator, a user themself, rather than the social media company. Defaulting to the strongest possible safety and privacy settings would change this calculus.

We have to move toward a system where users must opt out, rather than opt in, of the strongest safety and privacy settings. This approach still gives users the freedom to modify or curate their experiences on social media, but it also ensures that the onus is not on users to pull themselves out of an addictive or harmful spiral created by Big Tech. When it comes to protecting minors, features like targeted advertisements, endless scrolling, and curated feeds should be off by default.

And when it comes to privacy, social media platforms must limit data collection, processing, and transfers to what is strictly necessary to provide the service requested by users, and that settings like geo-tracking and public sharing of content are turned off automatically.

Lastly, it is crucial that policymakers take a holistic view of social media reform. Because Congress has not passed any major tech reform laws in nearly three decades, it is tempting to see new legislation as a one-shot proposition. But this approach pits important reform

priorities against each other. **Ensuring a safer and healthier version of social media will require a series of reforms — comprehensive privacy protections for all Americans, additional safeguards for minors, and a transparency regime to ensure greater oversight of these platforms. These priorities aren't mutually exclusive or in opposition. They work in tandem, forming three pillars that will lift up a better online ecosystem for our kids, our communities, and our democracy.**

We cannot wait any longer. The social media crisis is here, and it is only getting worse. For our children, for our communities, and for our democracy, we need a national solution now. The Council for Responsible Social Media is committed to ensuring a safe and healthy online ecosystem. We hope Congress will join us in this fight.

Endnotes

1   Meta, **Company Information, Culture, and Principles | About Meta**, 2023.

2   Evan Ottenfeld, Issue One, **Faces of Democracy: How Our Elections Work and the Challenges Ahead**, September 2022.

3   Yana Gorokhovskaia, Adrian Shahbaz, and Amy Slipowitz, Freedom House, **Freedom in the World 2023**, March 2023.

4   Shannon Bond, NPR, **Fake viral images of an explosion at the Pentagon were probably created by AI**, May 22, 2023.

5   Massimo Calabresi, Time, **Inside Russia's Social Media War on America**, May 18, 2017.

6   Brian Fung, CNN, **TikTok collects a lot of data. But that's not the main reason officials say it's a security risk**, March 24, 2023.

7   Tech Transparency Project. **Meta Creates Pages for ISIS, Undermining Anti-Terrorism Efforts**, February 16, 2023.

8   Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, **Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Data Summary and Trends Report**, February 13, 2023.

9   Ibid.

10   Chris Kelly, Marketing Dive, **Dove pushes for legislation to protect kids' self-esteem from social media**, April 12, 2023.

11   Samar Marwan, Fast Company, **Gen Z and millennials get their news from the paper, and Nextdoor**, August 31, 2022.

12   Wall Street Journal, **Facebook internal document, Teen Mental Health Deep Dive**, September 29, 2021.

13   Cory Combs, Issue One, **Issue One and Frank Luntz partner to conduct public opinion research on the impact of social media and AI,** July 25, 2023.

14   Matthew Frank, Stanford Politics, **Big Tech, Big Checks: The Role of Tech Giant in Shaping Academic Research**, October 26, 2020.

15   Patrick Radden Keefe, **Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty**, April 13, 2021.

16   Barbara Ortutay, Associated Press, **Instagram and Facebook are adding more parental controls. Critics say they aren't enough**, June 27, 2023.

17   Steven Pearlstein, The Washington Post, **Here's the inside story of how Congress failed to rein in Big Tech,** July 6, 2023.

18   Daniel Stevens, Campaign for Accountability, **New Report Reveals Google's Extensive Financial Support for Academia,** July 11, 2017.

19   OpenSecrets.org, **Client Profile: Alphabet Inc., 2022;** OpenSecrets.org, Client Profile: **Meta, 2022**.

20   Marcus Lu, Visual Capitalist, **More U.S. Tech Companies are Adopting Unequal Dual-Class Voting Structures**, April 15, 2023.

21 Cory Combs, Issue One, **New poll from Issue One's Council for Responsible Social Media shows overwhelming bipartisan support for social media reforms**, April 13, 2023.

22 Richard Wike, Laura Silver, Janell Fetterolf, Christine Huang, Sarah Austin, Laura Clancy, and Sneha Gubbala, Pew Research Center, **Social Media Seen as Mostly Good for Democracy Across Many Nations, But U.S. is a Major Outlier**, December 6, 2022.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Senate Judiciary Committee, **Time Change: Protecting Our Children Online**, February 14, 2023.

26 Rebecca Kern, Politico, **Push to rein in social media sweeps the states**, July 1, 2022.

27 Emma Lembke, Founder and Executive Director of the LOG OFF Movement, **Testimony before the United States Senate Judiciary Committee**, February 14, 2023.

28 Issue One Focus Group, April 28. 2023.

29 Cristiano Lima and Naomi Nix, The Washington Post, **41 states sue Meta, claiming Instagram, Facebook are addictive, harm kids**, October 24, 2023.

30 Polls commissioned by Issue One and conducted in 2023 by **Citizen Data** and **FIL, Inc.**

31 Information Commissioner's Office, **Age appropriate design: a code of practice for online services**.

32 European Commission, **The Digital Services Act: ensuring a safe and accountable online environment**.

33 Marsha Blackburn, U.S. Senate, Blackburn, **Blumenthal Introduce Bipartisan Kids Online Safety Act**, May 2, 2023.

34 Congressional Research Service, **Overview of the American Data Privacy and Protection Act, H.R. 8152**, August 31, 2022.

35 Frances Haugen, Testimony before the United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security, Protecting Kids Online: **Testimony from a Facebook Whistleblower**, October 5, 2021.

36 TikTok, **Privacy Policy**, May 22, 2023.

37 Kate O'Flaherty, Wired, **All the ways TikTok tracks you and how to stop it**, October 23, 2021.

38 X, **Additional information about data processing**, 2023.

39 Youtube, **Understanding the basics of privacy on YouTube apps**, 2023.

40 Snap Inc. **Privacy Policy**, August 15, 2023.

41 Meta, **Privacy Policy: What is the Privacy Policy and what does it cover?**, June 15, 2023.

42 Frances Haugen, **Testimony before the United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security**, October 4, 2021.

43 Peiter "Mudge" Zatko, **Testimony before the United States Senate Committee on Judiciary**, September 13, 2022.

44 Statista Research Department, Statista, **Social Media Advertising - Worldwide, March 2023**.

45 Nicole Farley, Search Engine Land, **Meta blames weak advertising demand, rivals for Q4 2022 revenue decline,** February 2, 2023.

46 Chris Griswold, National Affairs, **Protecting Children from Social Media,** Spring 2022, referring to Monica Anderson and Jingjing Jiang, Pew Research Center, Teens, Social Media and Technology 2018, May 31, 2018.

47 Kristen Rogers, CNN, **Children under 10 are using social media. Parents can help them stay safe online,** October 18, 2021.

48 Frances Haugen, **Testimony before the United States Senate committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Securi**ty, October 4, 2021.

49 New York University, **Messages with Moral-Emotional Words Are More Likely to go Viral on Social Media,** June 26, 2017.

50 William J. Brady, Julian A. Wills, John T. Jost, Joshua A. Tucker, Jay J. Van Bavel, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), **Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralized content in social networks,** June 26, 2017.

51 Steve Rathje, Jay J. Van Bavel, Sander van der Linden, PNAS, **Out-group animosity drives engagement on social media,** June 23, 2021.

52 Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, Science, **The spread of true and false news online**, March 9, 2018.

53 Molly Crockett, YouTube, Emory Center for Mind, Brain and Culture (CMBC) Lecture, **"Digital Outrage: Mechanisms and Consequences,"** April 12, 2022.

54 Zachary Laub, Council on Foreign Relations, **Hate Speech on Social Media: Global Comparisons,** June 7, 2019.

55 Charlotte Hu, **Social media really is making us more morally outraged,** Popular Science, August 13, 2021.

56 Jeff Horwitz and Deepa Seetharaman, Wall Street Journal, **Facebook Executives Shut Down Efforts to Make the Site Less Divisive,** May 26, 2020.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Peter Suciu, Forbes, **Social Media Increasingly Linked With Mass Shootings,** May 25, 2022.

61 Ibid.

62 United States Supreme Court, **Twitter Inc. v. Taamneh,** May 18, 2023.

63 Tom Gerken, BBC News. **ChatGPT: Mayor starts legal bid over false bribery claim**, April 6, 2023.

64 Jennifer DeStefano, **Testimony of Jennifer DeStefano Abuses of Artificial Intelligence before the United States Senate,** June 13, 2023.

65 Ibid.

66 Justin Lum, Fox 10 Phoenix, **AI kidnapping scam targets Arizona mother: 'You'll never see your daughter again',** June 13, 2023.

67 Jean M. Twenge, The Atlantic, **Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?,** September 2017.

68 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, **Surgeon General Issues New Advisory About Effects Social Media Use has on Youth Mental Health,** May 23, 2023.

69 Emily A. Vogels, Risa Glles-Watnick, and Navid Massarat, Pew Research Center, **Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022,** August 10, 2022.

70 Dr. Mitch Prinstein, American Psychological Association Chief Science Officer, **Testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee,** February 14, 2023.

71 Sarah Miller, Jefferson Health, **The Addictiveness of Social Media: How Teens Get Hooked,** June 2, 2022.

72 Dr. Mitch Prinstein, American Psychological Association Chief Science Officer, **Testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee,** February 14, 2023.

73 Ibid.

74 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, **Surgeon General Issues New Advisory About Effects Social Media Use Has on Youth Mental Health,** May 23, 2023.

75 Jean M. Twenge, Psychiatric Research and Clinical Practice, **Increases in Depression, Self-Harm, and Suicide Among U.S. Adolescents After 2012 and Links to Technology Use: Possible Mechanisms,** September 2020.

76 Jonathan Haidt, **After Babel, Social Media is a Major Cause of the Mental Illness Epidemic in Teen Girls. Here's the Evidence,** February 22, 2023.

77 Georgia Wells, Jeff Horwitz, and Deepa Seetharaman, Wall Street Journal, **Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show,** September 14, 2021.

78 National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institute of Health, **What Are Sleep Deprivation and Deficiency?,** March 24, 2022.

79 Jean M. Twenge, Psychiatric Research and Clinical Practice, **Increases in Depression, Self-Harm, and Suicide Among U.S. Adolescents After 2012 and Links to Technology Use: Possible Mechanisms,** September 2020.

80 National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institute of Health, **What Are Sleep Deprivation and Deficiency?,** March 24, 2022.

81 Issue One, Focus Group, April 28, 2023.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.

85 Natasha Singer, The New York Times, **TikTok Is Fined $15.9 Million Over Misusing Kids' Data in Britain,** April 4, 2023; Natasha Lomas, Tech Crunch, **Instagram fined €405M in EU over children's privacy,** September 5, 2022; Meta, **Family Center: Support for teens. Peace of mind for you**; Adam Satariano, The New York Times, **Meta's Ad Practices Ruled Illegal Under E.U. Law,** January 4, 2023.

85 Dan Milmo, The Guardian, **'The bleakest of worlds': how Molly Russell fell into a vortex of despair on social media,** September 30, 2022.

86   Wall Street Journal, Facebook internal document, **Teen Mental Health Deep Dive**, September 29, 2021; Georgia Wells, Jeff Horwitz, and Deepa Seetharaman, Wall Street Journal, **Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show,** September 14, 2021.

87   Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, **U.S. Teen Girls Experiencing Increased Sadness and Violence,** February 13, 2023.

88   Jonathan Haidt, The Atlantic, **The Dangerous Experiment on Teen Girls,** November 21, 2021.

89   Damien Gayle, The Guardian, **Facebook aware of Instagram's harmful effect on teenage girls, leak reveals,** September 14, 2021.

90   Kate Conger, Kellen Browning, and Erin Woo, The New York Times, **Eating Disorders and Social Media Prove Difficult to Untangle**, Oct. 22, 2021.

91   Damien Gayle, The Guardian, **Facebook aware of Instagram's harmful effects on teenage girls, leak reveals**, September 14, 2021.

92   Unilever, **Announcing the Dove Real Beauty Pledge**, March 6, 2017.

93   Chris Kelly, Marketing Dive, **Dove pushes for legislation to protect kids' self-esteem from social media,** April 12, 2023.

94   Stopbullying.gov, **What is Cyberbullyin**g, November 5, 2021.

95   Emily A. Vogels, Pew Research Center, **Teens and Cyberbullying 2022**, December 15, 2022.

96   Mitch van Geel, Paul Vedder, Jenny Tanilon, JAMA Pediatrics, **Relationship Between Peer Victimization, Cyberbullying, and Suicide in Children and Adolescents**, May 2014.

97   Kristin Bride, survivor parent and social media reform advocate, **Testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee,** February 14, 2023.

98   Ibid.

99   Olivia Carville, Bloomberg, **TikTok's Viral Challenges Keep Luring Young Kids to Their Deaths,** November 30, 2022.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.

102 Raymond Zhong and Sheera Frenkel, The New York Times, **A Third of TikTok's U.S. Users May be 14 or Under, Raising Safety Concerns**, August 14, 2020.

103 Alyana Gomez, ABC7 Eyewitness News, **Experts warn parents, children of lethal "Benadryl Challenge" on TikTok that killed Ohio teen**, April 19, 2023.

104 Brett Cruz and Gabe Turner, Security.org, **Top 10 Most Dangerous Online Challenges**, August 22, 2023.

105 Thorn, **Child sex trafficking is a cycle of abuse**, 2023.

106 Thorn in partnership with Benenson Strategy Group, **Responding to Online Threats: Minors' Perspectives on Disclosing, Reporting, and Blocking**, 2021.

107 Jeff Horwitz and Katherine Blunt, Wall Street Journal, **Instagram Connects Vast Pedophile Network,** June 7, 2023.

108 Ibid.

109 Alexandra S. Levine, Forbes, **These TikTok Accounts Are Hiding Child Sexual Abuse Material In Plain Sight,** Forbes, November 14, 2022.

110 Jeff Horwitz and Katherine Blunt, Wall Street Journal, **Instagram Connects Vast Pedophile Network,** June 7, 2023.

111 Common Sense, **Teens and the News, 2020: The Influencers, Celebrities, and Platforms They Say Matter Most,** 2020.

112 Center for Countering Digital Hate, **Public Support for Social Media Reform,** August 16, 2023.

113 John Gramlich, Pew Research Center, **Young Americans are less trusting of other people – and key institutions – than their elders,** August 6, 2019.

114 Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, Science, **The spread of true and false news online,** March 9, 2018.

115 Belle Wong, Forbes Advisor, **Top Social Media Statistics and Trends of 2023,** May 18, 2023.

116 Rohit Shewale, DemandSage, **Social Media Users 2023 – (Global Demographics),** September 12, 2023.

117 Tech Transparency Project, **Meta Creates Pages for ISIS, Undermining Anti-Terrorism Efforts,** February 16, 2023.

118 Ben Makuch, Vice News, **Facebook Auto-Created Pages for ISIS and Al-Qaeda: Study,** February 16, 2023.

119 Ibid.

120 Sheera Frenkel and Talya Minsberg, **Hamas Hijacked Victims' Social Media Accounts to Spread Terror,** Oct. 17, 2023.

121 Seraphin Alava, Divina Frau-Meigs, and Ghayda Hassan, UNESCO, **Youth and Violent Extremism Social Media: Mapping the Research,** 2017.

122 John Letzing and Andrew Berkley, World Economic Forum, **Is the internet really more effective at radicalizing people than older media?,** July 13, 2021.

123 George Washington University, **Capitol Hill Siege,** 2023.

124 U.S. Department of Justice, **U.S. Army Soldier Charged with Terrorism Offenses for Planning Deadly Ambush on Service Members in His Unit,** June 22, 2020.

125 Eda Keremoğlu and Nils B. Weidmann, Comparative Political Studies, Vol 53, Issue 10-11, **How Dictators Control the Internet: A Review Essay,** March 23, 2020.

126 Georgetown Security Studies Review, **On Russian Disinformation: The Answers Are Already in Front of Us,** February 3, 2021.

127 Peter Pomerantsev, **Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia,** PublicAffairs, November 11, 2014.

128 Georgetown Security Studies Review, **On Russian Disinformation: The Answers Are Already in Front of Us,** February 3, 2021.

129 Ellen Nakashima, The Washington Post, **Inside a Russian disinformation campaign in Ukraine in 2014,** December 25, 2017.

130 Cameron Fraser, Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, **How Russia disinformation tactics were utilized in the context of the 2008 5-day war**, November 3, 2022.

131 Cayley Clifford, South African Institute of International Affairs, **Russia's media playbook in Ukraine and Africa – let the great world spin**, March 25, 2022.

132 Scott Simon, NPR Weekend Edition, **Russian Trolls Tried To Influence Debate Over NFL Players Kneeling During Anthem**, October 27, 2018.

133 Charles R. Davis, Insider, **A leading California secession advocate got funding and direction from Russian intelligence agents, US government allege**s, August 2, 2022.

134 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, **Disinformation and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine**, November 3, 2022.

135 Ben Scott, The Washington Post, **Big Tech needs to pull the plug on Russia's biggest propaganda campaign,** March 24, 2022.

136 Hensoldt Analytics, **Russian Propaganda Narratives about Ukraine: Russian Sacrifices, Western Lies, and Heavy Censorship of the Russian Media,** September 16, 2022.

137 МБОУ "Ш-И поселка Эгвекинот" (@schoolozerny), Instagram profile, accessed August 24, 2023; CNN, **How the letter 'Z' became Russia's pro-war symbol**, March 8, 2022.

138 Erika Kinetz, Associated Press, **'Never saw such hell': Russian soldiers in Ukraine call home,** February 24, 2023.

139 Luke Harding, The Guardian, **Demoralised Russian soldiers tell of anger at being 'duped' into war**, March 4, 2022.

140 David Klepper, Associated Press, **Meta disables Russian propaganda network targeting Europe,** September 27, 2022.

141 Nick Clegg, Meta, **Protecting Public Debate During the War in Ukraine and Protests in Iran,** February 23, 2023.

142 Press release, Center for Countering Digital Hate, **Facebook failing to label 91% of posts containing Russian propaganda about Ukraine,** February 26, 2022.

143 Jeffrey Gottfried and Elisa Shearer, Pew Research Center, **News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2016,** May 26, 2016.

144 Alana Abramson and Shushannah Walshe, ABC News, **The 4 Most Damaging Emails From the DNC WikiLeaks Dump,** July 25, 2016.

145 Glenn Kessler, The Washington Post, **The truth about Russia, Trump and the 2016 election,** May 17, 2023.

146 Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller, III, U.S. Department of Justice, **Report on the Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election**, March 2019.

147 National Intelligence Council Intelligence Community Assessment, **Foreign Threats to the 2020 U.S. Federal Elections,** March 10, 2021.

148 Brian Bennett, Time, **Exclusive: Iran Steps Up Efforts to Sow Discord Inside the U.S.,** June 9, 2021.

149 Craig Singleton, Foreign Policy, **Chinese Election Meddling Hits the Midterms,** November 4, 2022.

150 Emily Baker-White and Iain Martin, Forbes, **On TikTok, Chinese State Media Pushes Divisive Videos About U.S. Politicians,** December 1, 2022.

151 TikTok, Press release, **Thanks a billion!,** September 27, 2021.

152 Ivan Mehta, TechCrunch, **TikTok CEO takes to the app to announce company's more than 150M active users in the US,** March 21, 2023.

153 Tanya Dua, Insider, **Never-before-seen TikTok stats from leaked sales presentations show how it's trying to lure advertisers to the platform,** April 13, 2021.

154 Grace Mayer, Insider, **The average TikTok user in the US is an adult 'well past college age,' CEO says,** March 22, 2023.

155 Sean Lyngaas, CNN, **NSA chief warns TikTok could censor videos as part of Chinese influence operations,** March 7, 2023.

156 Reuters, **FBI chief says TikTok 'screams' of US national security concerns,** March 9, 2023.

157 Bobby Allyn, NPR, **U.S. Judge Halts Trump's TikTok Ban, The 2nd Court To Fully Block The Action,** December 7, 2020.

158 Alexandra S. Levine, Forbes, **India Banned TikTok In 2020. TikTok Still Has Access To Years Of Indians' Data,** March 21, 2023.

159 Mike Allen, ABC News, **Nevada bans TikTok on government devices,** March 29, 2023; Kanishka Singh, Reuters, **New York City bans TikTok on government-owned devices over security concerns,** August 17, 2023.

160 Michael Woods, CTV News, **'This may be a 1st step': Canada bans TikTok from federal government devices,** February 28, 2023; Emily Blake, The Canadian Press, **Territories join Ottawa, most provinces in banning TikTok on government devices,** March 8, 2023.

161 David E. Sanger, David McCabe, and Sapna Maheshwari, The New York Times, **Pulling the Plug on TikTok Will Be Harder Than It Looks,** March 21, 2023.

162 Lauren Feiner, CNBC, **TikTok CEO got grilled by lawmakers from both parties on whether the Chinese-owned app can protect American privacy,** March 23, 2023.

163 Raffaele Huang, Wall Street Journal, **China Says It Opposes Forced Sale of TikTok,** March 23, 2023.

164 Freedom House, **Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022,** 2022.

165 Emily Baker-White and Iain Martin, Forbes, **On TikTok, Chinese State Media Pushes Divisive Videos About U.S. Politicians,** December 1, 2022.

166 Meta, **Meta Ad Library,** August 2023; Google, **Google Ads Transparency Center**.

167 Shannon Bond, NPR, **Fake viral images of an explosion at the Pentagon were probably created by AI,** May 22, 2023.

168 Gabriel Gavin, Politico, **'Fake Putin' announces Russia under attack as Ukraine goes on offensive,** June 5, 2023.

169 **Talk Obama to Me**.

170 Gabriel Gavin, Politico, **'Fake Putin' announces Russia under attack as Ukraine foes on offensive,** June 5, 2023.

171 Ben Nimmo and David Agranovich, Meta, **Recapping Our 2022 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Enforcements**, December 15, 2022.

172 Sheera Frenkel, Kate Conger, and Kevin Roose, The New York Times, **Russia's Playbook for Social Media Disinformation Has Gone Global**, January 31, 2019.

173 Ivan Mehta, TechCrunch, **Twitter is now resurfacing official Russian accounts in search results**, April 10, 2023.

174 Issue One, Focus Group, April 28, 2023.

175 Richard Wike, Laura Silver, Janell Fetterolf, Christine Huang, Sarah Austin, Laura Clancy, and Sneha Gubbala, Pew Research Center, **Social Media Seen as Mostly Good for Democracy Across Many Nations, But U.S. is a Major Outlier**, December 6, 2022.

176 Jonathan Haidt, The Atlantic, **Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid**, April 11, 2022.

177 Jeffrey Rosen, The Atlantic, **America is Living James Madison's Nightmare**, October 2018.

178 Bridging Divides Initiative, **Understanding Threats and Harassment to Local Officials**, May 2023.

179 Shawnza Mizelle, CNN, **Election workers reported more than 1,000 'hostile' contacts in past year**, August 1, 2022.

180 Evan Ottenfield, Issue One, **Faces of Democracy: How Our Elections Work and the Challenges Ahead**, September 2022.

181 Rich Holder, New York Post, **Texas man pleads not guilty to threatening George election officials**, February 5, 2022, and Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, **Massachusetts Man Arrested for Making Bomb Threat to Arizona State Election Official**, July 29, 2022.

182 Ruby Edlin and Lawrence Norden, **Brennan Center for Justice, Poll of Election Officials Shows High Turnover Amid Safety Threats and Political Interference**, April 25, 2023.

183 Evan Ottenfeld, Issue One, **Faces of Democracy: How Our Elections Work and the Challenges Ahead**, September 2022.

184 Sevana Wenn, Politifact, **How Meta, TikTok, Twitter and YouTube plan to address 2024 election misinformation**, July 6, 2023.

185 Brian Fund, CNN, **First on CNN: Senators press Google, Meta and Twitter on whether their layoffs could imperil 2024 election**, June 22, 2023.

186 Lydia Saad, Gallup, **Historically Low Faith in U.S. Institutions Continues**, July 6, 2022.

187 Adrienne LaFrance, The Atlantic, **The Energizer Bunny of Nobel Laureates**, January 19, 2023.

188 Mike Smeltzer and Alexandra Karppi, Freedom House, **Nations in Transit 2023**, 2023; Freedom House, **Nations in Transit Methodology**, 2023.

189 Hannah Ellis-Petersen, The Guardian, **Myanmar's military accused of genocide in damning UN report**, August 27, 2018; Paul Mozur, The New York Times, **A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts from Myanmar's Military**, October 15, 2018.

190 Taylor Hatmaker, Tech Crunch, **Facebook's Free Basics program ended quietly in Myanmar last year**, May 1, 2018.

191 Emmanuel Akinwotu, The Guardian, **Facebook's role in Myanmar and Ethiopia under new scrutiny**, Oct. 7, 2021.

192 The X-Ray with Fernando Espuelas, March 30, 2023.

193 Global Witness, **Algorithm of harm: Facebook amplified Myanmar military propaganda following coup**, June 23, 2021.

194 Liam Scott, Voice of America, **How Social Media Became a Battleground in the Tigray Conflict**, October 17, 2021.

Acknowledgments

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.

issueone.org | 🔗 | 𝕏 | 🟦 | 🟥 | ▶️ |

Media Contact

Cory Combs
ccombs@issueone.org | (202) 204-8553

issueone.org

A Project of Issue One