

DAY 1 KEYNOTE REMARKS
“SOCIAL MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY”
SILICON FLATIRONS 2023 FLAGSHIP
CONFERENCE: THE INTERNET’S
MIDLIFE CRISIS*

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Thank you, Dean Inniss, for the kind words, and to Colorado Law for hosting us. I see our Attorney General, Phil Weiser, here today. Colorado is so fortunate to have someone of Phil’s intellect and integrity on our side. And thanks to everyone who traveled to be here, including Tim Wu, Commissioner Wheeler, and Assistant Secretary Davidson—who is managing the biggest investment to deploy high-speed broadband in U.S. history, based on the BRIDGE Act, a bill we wrote right here in Colorado.

I understand the theme for this year’s conference is “The Internet’s Midlife Crisis.” As a fifty-eight-year-old senator, I am highly qualified to address the second half of that idea—not as much the first. Instead, I want to share some broad observations about the Internet’s dominance—and in particular, the dominance of the biggest digital platforms—over our economy, society, and democracy.

It is easy to forget how different the world was only twenty years ago, when Phil Weiser organized the first of these conferences. At the time, General Motors topped the Fortune 500

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** Michael Bennet is a U.S. Senator from the State of Colorado. Bennet delivered these remarks at the Silicon Flatirons Center’s 2023 Flagship Conference, The Internet’s Midlife Crisis on February 5, 2023. A video of this speech can be found under “Conference Video Playlist” at <https://siliconflatirons.org/events/the-internets-midlife-crisis-2023/> [<https://perma.cc/73NX-P7R2>].

list.¹ Apple was 285, and Amazon didn't even make the cut.² Twitter was still an idea in the recesses of Jack Dorsey's head. Mark Zuckerberg wasn't old enough to vote, even though he'd likely already acquired the undeveloped view of the First Amendment he holds to this day. No one on this planet had ever heard of Gmail, or YouTube, or TikTok. That was only twenty years ago, but it might as well have been two hundred.

Today, Americans spend over two hours a day on social media³—more time socializing online than in-person.⁴ The average TikTok user in our country spends over eighty minutes a day on the app—three weeks of every year.⁵ Facebook now hosts 2.7 billion “friends”—half a billion more souls than Christianity.⁶ Twitter has fewer followers, but they include every single politician, journalist, and TV producer in America—withering our political debate to 280-character, effervescent posts.⁷

In just two decades, a few companies have transformed much of humanity's daily life. How we amuse ourselves. How we discover, learn, and shop. How we connect with friends, family, and elected representatives. How we pay attention. How we glimpse our shared reality.

This transformation is a staggering testament to American innovation. And we can all think of a dozen ways these platforms

1. *Fortune* 500, CNN MONEY, https://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500_archive/full/2000/201.html [https://perma.cc/F2TL-KKDM] (in the drop-down menu next to “Fortune 500,” select “1955-2005”; then, in the “View by year” drop-down menu, select “2000”).

2. *Id.*

3. Peter Suci, *Americans Spent on Average More Than 1,300 Hours on Social Media Last Year*, FORBES (June 24, 2021, 3:47 PM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuci/2021/06/24/americans-spent-more-than-1300-hours-on-social-media/> [https://perma.cc/3NRT-763P].

4. Max Fisher, *The Chaos Machine: The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World*, NEXT BIG IDEA CLUB, <https://nextbigideclub.com/magazine/chaos-machine-inside-story-social-media-rewired-minds-world-bookbite/39461/> [https://perma.cc/36JD-6E6G].

5. Stephanie Chan, *Nearly One-Third of TikTok's Installed Base Uses the App Every Day*, SENSOR TOWER, <https://sensortower.com/blog/tiktok-power-user-curve> [https://perma.cc/R5RW-9JYN].

6. Mansoor Iqbal, *Facebook Revenue and Usage Statistics (2023)*, <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/facebook-statistics/> [https://perma.cc/UBV2-X4ZJ].

7. See, e.g., Mark Jurkowitz & Jeffrey Gottfried, *Twitter is the Go-To Social Media Site for U.S. Journalists, But Not for the Public*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (June 27, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/06/27/twitter-is-the-go-to-social-media-site-for-u-s-journalists-but-not-for-the-public/> [https://perma.cc/N6GE-6H3B]; Chris Cillizza, *Analysis: What Would Politics Look Like Without Twitter?*, CNN POL. (Nov. 18, 2022, 10:36 AM), <https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/18/politics/twitter-politics-elon-musk/index.html> [https://perma.cc/ZAP7-3FTK] (discussing the ubiquitous use of Twitter by politicians and heads-of-state).

have improved our lives. I, for one, have been entirely relieved of the stress of sitting in rush hour traffic, wondering if there is a better route. I am now confident that Waze is guiding me—my own personal North Star.

But this dramatic shift from our analogue to our digital human existence has never been guided—or even informed—by the public interest. It has always been dictated by the unforgiving requirements of a few gigantic American enterprises and their commercial self-interest. And what are those interests? To make us better informed citizens? To make us more productive employees? To make us happier people? Of course not. It was to turn a profit and protect that profit through their own economic dominance. And they have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams.

Until their recent battering, the market capitalization of the biggest tech companies equaled 20 percent of the entire stock market, a share for one sector unseen in at least seventy years.⁸ And, through it all, unlike almost any small business in Boulder, these digital platforms have remained almost entirely unregulated—moving fast, breaking things, and leaving the rest of us to glue something of our world back together.

Unlike the brick-and-mortar companies in Boulder—digital platforms aren't burdened by the fixed costs of an analogue world. Beyond the blinking lights of their energy intensive server farms, their business is in the Cloud, a place where no one works and that requires little physical investment. They have no need to use their profits to invest in America by building infrastructure. Unlike their industrial forebears, today's platforms have devised a new, digital barrier to entry to protect their profits and economic dominance—we know that digital barrier as the network effect.

As everyone here knows, the network effect means that platforms become exponentially more valuable as more people join and spend more of their waking moments there—more valuable to users, because their friends and family are on it; more valuable to the platforms, who Hoover up our identities for their profit; more valuable for advertisers who pay the platforms for our identities to barrage us with ads; and so valuable to the markets that the top five tech companies now have a market cap⁹ greater than our entire

8. Rohan Goswami, *Tech's Reality Check: How the Industry Lost \$7.4 Trillion in One Year*, CNBC (Nov. 25, 2022, 5:44 PM), <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/11/25/techs-reality-check-how-the-industry-lost-7point4-trillion-in-one-year.html> [<https://perma.cc/7Y7Q-3FWS>].

9. See *Largest Tech Companies by Market Cap*, COS. MKT. CAP, <https://companiesmarketcap.com/tech/largest-tech-companies-by-market-cap/> (last visited July 5, 2023) [<https://perma.cc/C85U-K3P8>]; *Largest Aerospace Companies by*

aerospace, defense, construction, road, and railway industries combined. In the name of building this barrier to entry—this network effect—they have stolen our identities and our privacy and addicted us to their platforms.

The platforms' imperative to grow big and stay big posed a basic question: how do you get people onto your platform and keep them there? For platforms like Apple and Amazon, it's to sell products people want, offer subscriptions, and if you're lucky, enmesh them in your closed ecosystem. For social media platforms with free services, like Meta, Twitter, and TikTok, the answer is more sinister: harvest as much data on your users as you can, feed that data to your algorithm to serve up whatever content it takes to keep people hooked—so you can keep selling ads. That is their core business model. And although this particular business model has bestowed enormous value on a few companies, it has imposed profound costs on everyone else.

Millions of Americans have surrendered to private companies an endless feed of data on their every movement, interest, communication, and contact, along with their voices, faces, and fingerprints—all for the convenience of being served up self-gratifying political content on YouTube, less traffic, or better movie recommendations. And most Americans have made that trade without really even knowing it. Any suggestion that we made that trade fairly is ludicrous. It mocks consent. The lawyers in this room know contracts of adhesion when they see them.

As a society, we never asked how much of our identity or our privacy we were willing to trade for convenience and entertainment. And until today, those questions have been resolved entirely to the benefit of the platforms' bottom line. I suppose it would be one thing if the only consequence of digital platforms' use of our data were to sell better advertising—even that would be a fairly pathetic concession of our own economic interests. But as every parent knows and every kid suspects, better advertising is not the only consequence.

Market Cap, COS. MKT. CAP, <https://companiesmarketcap.com/aerospace/largest-companies-by-market-cap/> (last visited July 5, 2023) [<https://perma.cc/E6TG-XAXZ>]; *Largest Defense Contractors by Market Cap*, COS. MKT. CAP, <https://companiesmarketcap.com/defense-contractors/largest-companies-by-market-cap/> (last visited July 5, 2023) [<https://perma.cc/E6TG-XAXZ>]; *Largest Construction Companies by Market Cap*, COS. MKT. CAP, <https://companiesmarketcap.com/construction/largest-construction-companies-by-market-cap/> (last visited July 5, 2023) [<https://perma.cc/SGB2-5RC9>]; *Largest Railway Operating Companies by Market Cap*, COS. MKT. CAP, <https://companiesmarketcap.com/railways/largest-railways-companies-by-market-cap/> (last visited July 5, 2023) [<https://perma.cc/ZH5Y-5S6P>].

Over the years, digital platforms have imported features from gaming and gambling—from brightly colored displays to flashing notifications to ‘likes’ to perniciously random and incessant dopamine hits. And they unleashed secret algorithms to reverse engineer our most basic human tendencies to seek out tribe, approval, conformity, and threat to curate an almost irresistible feed of content.

Americans now spend a third of their waking hours on their phones,¹⁰ which we check an average of 344 times a day.¹¹ Speaking as a parent who has raised three daughters in this era, we certainly have not agreed to run a science experiment on our children with machine learning algorithms, the effects of which almost no employees at the social media companies themselves even understand.

And while we are still coming to understand the specific role social media plays in the epidemic of teen mental health, the early evidence gives us plenty of reason to worry. Here’s what we do know: by 2018, half of American adolescents said they were online “almost constantly.”¹² And as social media took off, teen mental health took a nosedive—especially among teenage girls.¹³ Teen anxiety, depression, and self-harm surged, not just in our country, but in Canada and Britain.¹⁴ One in four teens report that social media makes them feel worse about their lives.¹⁵ Girls who use social media heavily are two to three times as likely to say they are

10. Dan Avery, *Americans Spent a Third of Waking Hours on Mobile Devices in 2021, Report Finds*, CNET (Jan. 12, 2022, 3:18 PM), <https://www.cnet.com/tech/services-and-software/americans-spent-a-third-of-waking-hours-on-mobile-devices-in-2021-report-finds/> [https://perma.cc/GBV4-GB9L]; <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/04/social-media-internet-connectivity/> [https://perma.cc/65AT-B3X5].

11. Bernard Marr, *Digital Addiction: Should You Be Worried?*, FORBES (Jan. 11, 2023, 1:58 AM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bernardmarr/2023/01/11/digital-addiction-should-you-be-worried/?sh=347f225359c3> [https://perma.cc/4HK4-HAB8].

12. Monica Anderson & Jingjing Jiang, *Teens, Social Media, and Technology: 2018*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (May 31, 2018), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/> [https://perma.cc/K8MD-KRN9].

13. Jean M. Twenge, *The Sad State of Happiness in the United States and the Role of Digital Media*, in WORLD HAPPINESS REP. 2019 87, 89–93 (John F. Helliwell et al. eds., 2019), <https://s3.amazonaws.com/happiness-report/2019/WHR19.pdf> [https://perma.cc/N5YN-AWFV].

14. Jonathan Haidt, *The Dangerous Experiment on Teen Girls*, ATLANTIC (Nov. 21, 2021), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/facebooks-dangerous-experiment-teen-girls/620767/> [https://perma.cc/JCS4-EGTK].

15. Monica Anderson et al., *Connection, Creativity and Drama: Teen Life on Social Media in 2022*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (Nov. 16, 2022), <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/11/16/connection-creativity-and-drama-teen-life-on-social-media-in-2022/> [https://perma.cc/X32Y-EQ5M].

depressed, compared to those who use it less often, or not at all.¹⁶ In 2018, suicides for kids age ten to twenty-four increased 60 percent, compared to 2007.¹⁷ So did adolescents reporting a “major depressive episode.”

Meta’s own research found that Instagram made “body images worse for one in three teenage girls,”¹⁸ and that teens know social media is bad for their mental health, but feel unable to stop.¹⁹ And as America’s kids spend more time online, they’re getting less sleep, exercise, and in-person interaction. They’re less happy. They’re the most connected generation, but they’re also the loneliest.

The parents I’ve met all over Colorado have deep concerns about what social media has done to their kids. All of my young staff and my two eldest daughters universally say how lucky they were to avoid middle school in the age of social media. Their young siblings haven’t been so lucky. The most poignant expression of this concern were the moms who spoke with me in the Mississippi Delta, where my wife Susan grew up. One after the other told me their kids don’t read anymore, because no book can compete with their phone—even as the Silicon Valley executives who designed those phones send their kids to digital detox camps each summer. These parents work two or three jobs, can’t afford childcare, and have to compete for their child’s attention against algorithmic poison. They never stood a chance.

My constituents are most worried about their kids and their families, but they also worry a lot about our democracy in this era of social media dominance. They have reason to be concerned. When I first joined the Senate in 2009, it was the summer of the so-called “Twitter Revolutions” in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia we then heralded as the Arab Spring. At the time, people in Washington and around the world hailed social media as a powerful tool *for* democracy. It didn’t take long for tyrants to turn it *against* democracy. The dictators who once feared social media soon harnessed it for their purposes—to track opponents, dox critics, and flood the zone with propaganda.

Vladimir Putin understood this. He saw the vast and unregulated power of social media over our democracy, and he

16. Haidt, *supra* note 14.

17. Matt Richtel, *It’s Life or Death: The Mental Health Crisis Among U.S. Teens*, N.Y. TIMES (May 3, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/23/health/mental-health-crisis-teens.html?smid=em-share> [<https://perma.cc/KR9X-N5MP>].

18. Georgia Wells et al., *The Facebook Files: Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show*, WALL ST. J. (Sept. 14, 2021, 7:59 AM), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739> [<https://perma.cc/HD77-X3UM>].

19. *Id.*

exploited it ruthlessly. Ahead of the 2016 elections, Putin flooded our social media with disinformation. According to the Mueller report, the Russians “conducted social media operations...with the goal of sowing discord in the U.S. political system.”²⁰ They sought to fracture America across every conceivable line—race, religion, class, sexuality, politics—playing both sides with over ten million tweets and nearly four thousand fake accounts.²¹ And we let it happen, in large part, because we struggled to distinguish our degraded, online political conversation from Russian propaganda.

I was running for reelection that year, here in the state of Colorado. And when I later joined the Senate Intelligence Committee, I began to realize that this problem extended far beyond our borders. It’s why, three years ago, I wrote to Mark Zuckerberg warning him that Facebook had become authoritarians’ “platform of choice” to suppress their opposition.²² I also warned him that Facebook’s insatiable drive for growth had given the company power over countries they barely understood.²³

The consequences have been horrific. In Myanmar, the United Nations named Facebook a significant factor in stoking communal violence against the Rohingya, after it repeatedly ignored calls to remove hate speech and hire more staff who actually knew the country.²⁴ Around the world, we’ve seen fake stories on these platforms spark violence—in India, Sri Lanka, Kenya, and on January 6, 2021, here in the United States.

In the weeks before January 6, President Trump, our first president who ran his campaign and administration through Twitter, incited a mob to invade our Capitol. I am convinced it would never have happened without social media. Social media is where the Big Lie caught fire. Where platforms gave the Big Lie the ring of truth through sheer repetition. Where algorithms mixed cocktails out of pedophilia rings, Jewish cabals, and QAnon

20. ROBERT S. MUELLER, III, SPECIAL COUNSEL, U.S. DEP’T OF JUST., REPORT ON THE INVESTIGATION INTO RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE IN THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: VOLUME I 14 (2019).

21. Sara Salinas, *Twitter Says It Found More Than 10 Million Posts by ‘Potentially State-Backed’ Iranian and Russian Accounts Dating Back to 2009*, CNBC (Oct. 17, 2018, 9:47 AM), <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/10/17/twitter-found-10-million-posts-by-iran-russia-backed-accounts.html> [https://perma.cc/P36X-VKML].

22. Letter from Senator Michael Bennet to Mark Zuckerberg, CEO, Meta Platforms (Feb. 24, 2020), https://www.bennet.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/b/5/b5036431-7207-4bd0-9704-d16490009434/40085173CF477701601C4AA567851345.02-24-20-bennet-letter-to-fb.pdf [https://perma.cc/D9LC-K38M].

23. *Id.*

24. Tom Miles, *U.N. Investigators Cite Facebook Role in Myanmar Crisis*, REUTERS (Mar. 12, 2018), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-facebook/u-n-investigators-cite-facebook-role-in-myanmar-crisis-idUSKCN1GO2PN> [https://perma.cc/QY8W-7SSP].

rumors—intoxicating dentists and soccer moms with a seditious rage.

I remember sitting in a windowless basement in the Capitol on the 6th. We watched CNN as our fellow citizens invaded the U.S. Capitol with their racist banners and anti-Semitic t-shirts to “save” an election that had not been stolen. While the Senate was in that embarrassing position, unable to certify the election, Moscow and Beijing transformed those images into propaganda—as I knew they would—in their campaign to discredit democracy in the eyes of the world: Beijing claiming the riots were a sign of “internal collapse”²⁵; Moscow observing that “American democracy [was] limping on both feet.”²⁶

In these moments, we cannot bury our heads in our digital feeds. We are called upon to defend democracy and burnish our example at home. And we can help by reining in the vast power of digital platforms and reasserting the interests of the American people—and our public interest. The Americans who came before us would never have known about algorithms and network effects, but they would recognize the challenge we face. And their example should guide our way.

The Founders themselves devised an elegant form of checks and balances to guard against tyranny. After Upton Sinclair exposed ghastly conditions in meatpacking facilities, in 1906, Teddy Roosevelt joined Congress to create the Food and Drug Administration.²⁷ As broadcasting became more central to American life, in 1934, FDR and Congress created the Federal Communications Commission.²⁸ After the 2009 financial crisis, President Obama and Congress established the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.²⁹ In each case, Congress knew it

25. *China State Media Says U.S. Capitol Storm Reflects Leadership Failures*, REUTERS (Jan. 7, 2021, 5:13 PM), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-protests-china/china-state-media-says-u-s-capitol-storm-reflects-leadership-failures-idUSKBN29D00Q> [<https://perma.cc/Z2BU-8RVN>].

26. Yaron Steinbuch, *Russia Official Sees US Democracy ‘Limping’ After Capitol Is Mobbed*, N.Y. POST (Jan. 7, 2021, 9:10 AM), <https://nypost.com/2021/01/07/russians-see-us-democracy-limping-after-capitol-stormed/> [<https://perma.cc/H95J-W8XE>].

27. *Part I: The 1906 Food and Drugs Act and Its Enforcement*, U.S. FOOD & DRUG ADMIN. (Apr. 4, 2019), <https://www.fda.gov/about-fda/changes-science-law-and-regulatory-authorities/part-i-1906-food-and-drugs-act-and-its-enforcement> [<https://perma.cc/34YM-QTEY>].

28. Robert Gobetz, *Communications Act of 1934*, ENCYC. BRITANNICA (May 24, 2018), <https://www.britannica.com/event/Communications-Act-of-1934/additional-info#history> [<https://perma.cc/BAS6-UBZN>].

29. CONSUMER FIN. PROT. BUREAU, BUILDING THE CFPB 8 (2011), https://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/2011/07/Report_BuildingTheCfpb1.pdf [<https://perma.cc/6R58-JNFK>].

lacked the expertise to oversee complex new sectors of the economy, so it created independent bodies to empower the American people.

Today, we have no dedicated entity to protect the public interest and have been powerless as a result. That's why, last year, I proposed to create a Federal Digital Platform Commission.³⁰ It's essentially an FCC for digital platforms—an independent body with five, Senate-confirmed commissioners, empowered to protect consumers, promote competition, and defend the public interest.³¹ The Commission would hold hearings, conduct research, pursue investigations, establish common-sense rules for the sector—and enforce violations with tough penalties.³²

Some may say we don't need it—we already have the Federal Trade Commission and Department of Justice. These agencies are staffed by hard-working public servants, but they don't have the expertise, tools, or time to regulate this brand-new sector.

As we fight to empower the American people, there are other important steps we can take now—from limiting targeted ads to kids, reforming Section 230, pursuing antitrust remedies, establishing a digital bill of rights for parents and kids, and compelling more transparency from platforms to allow policy and research. And in the case of TikTok, Apple and Google should remove it from their app stores today and stop Beijing from hoovering up more data on one hundred million Americans.

Whatever we do, we cannot accept another twenty years of digital platforms transforming American life with no accountability to the American people. We still haven't come to grips with the full cost of our inaction so far. The cost to our privacy and identity. To our time and attention. The trust in our democracy and faith in our fellow citizens. The self-confidence of millions of American teens, and the lives of far too many.

None of the problems I've described today are unique to America, but America bears a unique responsibility to solve them. After all, it was American companies that blazed the trail into the Digital Age and invited all of humanity to follow. We now live in the world they created, with its wonders and conveniences, but also its risks, dangers, and difficult questions.

The same platforms that amplify a protestor's cry for freedom in Iran also equip tyrants around the world to suppress democratic

30. Press Release, Off. Senator Michael Bennet, Bennet Introduces Landmark Legislation to Establish Federal Commission to Oversee Digital Platforms (May 12, 2022), <https://www.bennet.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2022/5/bennet-introduces-landmark-legislation-to-establish-federal-commission-to-oversee-digital-platforms> [<https://perma.cc/AXC3-HCBF>].

31. *Id.*

32. *Id.*

movements. The same technologies that liberated anyone to say anything also unleashed a perpetual cacophony, leaving us all screaming louder to be heard. The dazzling features that brought the world online have also trapped us there—more connected but more alone, more aware but less informed, enthralled to our screens, growing more anxious, angry, and addicted by the day. Overcoming all of this won't be easy. But we can't simply hide under the covers, scroll through TikTok, and hope these problems solve themselves. That's our job. The health and future of our children lie in the decisions we make, or fail to make.

Our objective is not to hold the world back. In Colorado, we have always welcomed innovation. But we also understand that not all change is progress, and that it's our job to harness those changes toward a better world. We are the first generations to steer our democracy in the Digital Age. And it is an open question whether democracy can survive in the world digital platforms created. I may be wrong, but the evidence so far does not fill me with confidence.

It fills me with urgency. Urgency to reassert the public interest. To reclaim our public square and exercise in self-government. To level the playing field for America's teens, parents, teachers, and small businesses, who, for twenty years have battled alone against some of the most powerful companies in human history. Success won't be easy, but it's a fight worth having. It's a fight worth winning. And if we succeed, we may help save democracy—not just in our country, but around the world.