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Remarks
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Thanks so much to the panelists for being here, and to the Chairman and the Commission staff who've helped make this event possible. It's an honor to be here with you all for this very important conversation.

Whenever I read about the different generations in the mix—millennials, Gen Z, now Generation Alpha—I'm struck by a curious phrase that keeps coming up. It's the phrase "digital natives." And what's so interesting about that phrase is what it implies—about much of the world of high technology we've made.

Talking about a generation of "digital natives" implies that we live in a world transformed by impersonal historical forces, that a whole generation of young people happen to be growing up within. The world just *changed*, almost by itself. It wasn't that the world *was* changed—that someone might've been responsible for why things turned out this way.

But, of course, someone is responsible. The online world in which my children, and many of your children, are growing up is a world profoundly shaped by the decisions of powerful people in high places.

For the last two decades or so, these same people have been running an elaborate set of economic, psychometric, and socio-emotional experiments on America's young people. Those experiments are meant to ferret out information. What they're anxious about. What they're hoping for. What keeps them hooked on their phones. What will make them customers for life as they grow up and enter the workforce.

All of this has been carried out on the same population that we euphemistically describe as "digital natives." So we might equally as well—and perhaps more accurately—describe them as "digital subjects."

Earlier this month, I gave a talk in Palo Alto on the limits, and possibilities, of the idea of innovation. And I mentioned there something that's kept coming to mind for me lately—just how much of a gap there is today between the tech future we hoped for in the 1990s, when I was coming of age, and what we actually got. We thought we'd connect with each other, we'd create new things, we'd learn to talk across our differences. Mass monetization of America's children is not

the future we hoped for. Nor are the predation and extremism that seem increasingly to define our encounters online.

Overwhelmingly, the costs of these failures aren't born by the adults responsible. They're born by the children and teenagers subjected to them. Let's look at the figures since 2010. Suicide rates have spiked—increasing by 91% for adolescent boys and 167% for adolescent girls. Emergency room visits for self-harm among adolescent girls have increased by 188%. Depression rates have surged. And things don't look like they get better with age. Anxiety among individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 is up by 139%.

Now, correlation isn't causation, of course. But this is a pretty suggestive pattern. And what it suggests is that the more we've been connected, digitally, the worse off we've become. A bitter irony. The age of the smartphone and social media is, for too many children, an age of suffering.

Now, the fact that we're here today having this conversation is a big change—a positive change—from even just a few years ago. We've recently seen a state- and national-level movement to take smartphones out of schools. Not because we hate smartphones, but because we realize there's a time and a place for them. And middle school classrooms are definitely the wrong place for Snapchat and TikTok.

In some quarters you're starting to see a backlash to the backlash. Folks arguing that everything is fine. That we're simply living through a new era of kids connecting with each other, through new media.

If you walk just a few blocks over to the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, they've got a special exhibit up, on the second floor, called "Cellphone." Funny, I thought the point of this museum was natural history, like dinosaur bones and gems. But in any event, there's a display in that exhibit that essentially claims that concern over smartphones is just a moral panic. That people raised hell about the invention of writing, the telegraph, the TV, and so on. So of course, that's what's happening today. Everyone just needs to stop worrying and get with the times.

But again—this is the same logic of inevitability that lets us speak of "digital natives" rather than "digital subjects." It is a logic that denies that, as a society, we have a moral responsibility to keep young people safe from harm. We don't accept this in other contexts.

For one thing, we don't treat other addictive or potentially dangerous goods this way. A twelve-year-old can't walk into 7-11 and buy a pack of cigarettes. A sixteen-year-old can't stroll into a liquor store and buy a fifth of bourbon. And it wasn't just physical, consumable substances that had restrictions. It was content, too. When I was growing up, GameStop wouldn't sell M-rated video games to preteens. In fact, I talked to the head of the ESRB last week, and they still don't. AMC wouldn't let thirteen-year-olds buy tickets to R-rated movies. And so on it goes.

Now, you might've noticed that I haven't used the phrase "age verification" at all yet. And that's because, while "age verification" is something of a hot new topic in the digital world, the

basic principle behind it is nothing new at all. For decades—even centuries—we have had community standards around certain kinds of products, because we recognize that giving young people unrestricted access is a bad idea.

This is not authoritarianism. It is not a violation of anybody's free speech rights. It is an acknowledgement of the lived reality of life, maturation, and growth. Anyone who actually has children, rather than just having opinions about them, grasps this intuitively.

Now, over the years, whenever the topic of age verification comes up, we tend to hear a certain cluster of criticisms. Some of these criticisms, in my view, are made in bad faith. Here's the biggest one: "just parent better." Moms and dads out there, if you were really doing your jobs, we wouldn't need age verification technologies. So the argument goes.

But here's the thing. We don't accept this argument in other contexts. We don't get rid of the requirement that you show your ID at the liquor store on the grounds that parents should "just parent better." No. We acknowledge that, as important as it is that parents parent well, there are social backstops that still matter. It's not about usurping the role of parents; it's about making their lives easier.

There's another criticism that often turns up. Age verification, we're told, will make the lives of adults harder. We hear that we won't be able to download basic apps, like calculators, without having to submit to an onerous age check.

There's no reason this process needs to be cumbersome and messy, or invasive. Earlier this month, in Palo Alto, I spoke about how—when we think about innovation—all innovations aren't the same. There are bad innovations, like dark patterns, that addict and deceive. But that doesn't mean innovation as such isn't worth supporting. And when I look at the landscape of age verification technologies today, I have to say—I'm incredibly impressed with what entrepreneurs are coming up with.

Just as policymakers have grown more interested in these measures as ways to keep kids safer online, the market has responded to do what it does at its best—meet the needs of the moment in efficient and sophisticated ways. With the new age verification systems that are emerging, you don't need to hand over your personal data, or your child's personal data, to a company you might not trust. Instead, these systems rely on third-party providers who keep that data secure. Third parties who can contract with social media companies, or other online service providers, to simply verify whether a user is old enough to access a product, without turning over any raw personal data. This is elegant. It is efficient. It is secure. And it is the future.

But there are other possible futures, too. Behavioral age verification—that is, ascertaining a user's age by the way they interact with an online platform or system—has always been a major challenge. And this strikes me as one of the best use cases for artificial intelligence. Machine learning can help detect patterns in browsing and usage behavior that consistently indicate whether a user is too young to be on the platform. American companies can help lead the world in pioneering this. That is what real leadership will look like in the years to come.

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Now, one of the watchwords of this Administration, and something I'm personally committed to fighting for, is affordability. As I see it, American families have enough on their minds right now. The last thing they need is to have their kids' data harvested and monetized by multibillion-dollar tech giants. Or watch their kids suffer from premature exposure to the worst the internet has to offer.

Age verification offers a better way. It offers a way to unleash American innovation without compromising the health and well-being of America's most important resource: its children. It is grounded in practices of responsibility and stewardship that extend across our entire history. It is a tool that empowers, rather than replaces, America's parents. Really: I don't know that we can afford to forgo it.

Thank you.