



Office of Commissioner
Mark R. Meador

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
Federal Trade Commission
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20580

Keynote Remarks of Commissioner Mark R. Meador

**The Attention Economy:
How Big Tech Firms Exploit Children and Hurt Families**

June 4, 2025

Good afternoon, and thank you very much for having me today. And thank you to Senators Blackburn and Britt for your thoughtful comments and leadership on these issues, as well as to Chairman Ferguson for putting together today's event and Commissioner Holyoak for her insightful remarks. As always, my comments are mine alone and do not represent the views of the Federal Trade Commission or any other Commissioner.

It's a pleasure to be here for the very important conversations we've been having.

And as we bring this workshop to a close, I want to underscore that they need to keep happening. That Congress and the executive branch and families across this country need to move forward, together.

And here's why.

If you've been around D.C. for a while, in policy circles, then you've probably heard a lot of arguments defending a particular economic sector.

Those arguments often amount to some combination of the following:

We must support American industry and innovation.

This is a matter of fundamental liberties. It's about freedom.

If we don't support our homegrown industry, foreign competitors will overtake us.

Parents, not the government, have the responsibility for their own kids.

The research isn't settled.

We can't trust the government. If they get involved, they'll take away the rest of our freedoms next.

Sound familiar? I hope so.

Now, you might be wondering what I'm talking about here. What industry, exactly, is being defended.

And given the subject of this workshop, you might think I'm talking about social media.

But I'm *actually* talking about Big Tobacco.

That's right. Those were the slogans then, too.

Probably all of us in this room have heard all these talking points that get brought out, every time any lawmaker or policymaker starts talking about tech policy.

And I'm here to tell you that there's nothing new under the sun.

Of course, innovation and liberty and parents' rights are important. We take that very seriously.

But much of the time, these talking points are efforts to *obscure* the facts. Not illuminate.

These talking points are simply justifications for taking no action to keep American children safe.

We've heard these arguments before, just in a different context.¹ In the context of an industry that was actively doing harm.

Today, we take for granted that cigarette smoking causes cancer and that kids shouldn't be lighting up.

But that wasn't always the case.

Not all that long ago, there was a powerful, well-funded, tremendously influential campaign to bury this truth.

Fortunately, the American people didn't buy it. The truth won.

Our kids today are living in a safer and healthier world as a result. Smoking isn't cool anymore. It's not the default, the thing that *everyone else is doing*.

And as we stand here today in June of 2025, I don't think the American people are still buying this line in the social media context, either.

The talking points are wearing thin because reality keeps hitting us in the face.

¹ See Sarah Milov, *The Cigarette: A Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 78–117.

Today, American parents and policymakers alike are increasingly aware that the battle over the “attention economy” echoes the fight against Big Tobacco.

The corporate moves are the same. The old playbook is still in effect.

And the need for action is the same, too.

* * *

If you step outside this building and walk around downtown DC, and look at the advertisements posted on billboards and bus stops, you’ll start to notice an interesting theme.

You’ll start noticing all the ads from social media companies. And they’re a very specific *kind* of ad.

They’re not about how cool or sophisticated the new apps are.

Instead, the companies are bending over backwards to explain *how their products are safe for kids*.

Once you notice it, you can’t unsee it. These ads are *everywhere*.

And they say all kinds of appealing things. How the apps have time limits, parental controls, limitations on who can message whom.

And I do mean *companies*, plural.

It’s not just one firm. It’s several of them.

And this industry-wide campaign is in full swing because, just like Big Tobacco, *these companies stand to benefit if kids use their products*.

Early on, the tobacco companies realized they couldn’t rest on their laurels. They couldn’t assume the public would buy their products forever.

So they needed to win the next generation. That’s how we got Joe Camel. Remember him?

It’s the same way with social media. Technology moves fast. So social media companies have powerful incentives to keep kids hooked for the long haul.

And that means, above all else, making sure their parents still give them access. Making sure nobody ever logs off.

Because a lot of concerning evidence has been rolling in lately.

More and more, parents are reading books like Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation* and wondering whether these platforms are really all that safe. Whether these companies can be trusted.

Congress seems like it's getting closer and closer to passing substantive tech regulation.

And that's why we're seeing this new company-driven push for safety, supposedly in support of parents' rights.

The social media companies are circling the wagons, to try to calm everyone's fears.

Now, in the abstract, building in safeguards is all well and good. As a parent, I support it.

But these giant companies aren't doing it out of the goodness of their hearts.

They're doing it to protect their ability to harvest data from kids. To keep making money off them.

So we should take all that language about *parents* and *families* and *safety* with a very, very large grain of salt.

I'm reminded of a remarkable quote from tobacco lobbyist Nick Naylor, in the film *Thank You for Smoking*. (If any of you haven't watched it, you should):

*"[I]t's called education. It doesn't come off the side of a cigarette carton. it comes from our teachers, and more importantly our parents. It is the job of every parent to warn their children of all the dangers of the world, including cigarettes, so that one day when they get older they can choose for themselves."*²

Of course, that all sounds nice. Who could disagree?

But it's a coded message. Remember, he's a tobacco lobbyist.

His argument is that *the government has no business helping parents at all*. That it's all a matter of individual choices. *What could be wrong with smoking, if it's what the children want?*

Individual choice is, ironically, invoked as the justification for ever-greater corporate power.

And it's precisely the same where social media is concerned.

For today's social media giants, the point is to get the kids on the apps and keep them there. To get them hooked and call it freedom.

* * *

² <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0427944/quotes/?item=qt3108038>

But what's the *real* harm, though?

After all, you can see lung damage on an X-ray. But maybe it's a bit trickier in the social media context.

To be sure, it's hard to isolate social media or smartphones as single variables in a longitudinal study. Human lives are complex.

But that being said, the data paints an alarming picture.

Let's just take a few statistics.

Since 2010, the rate of major depression among boys has increased by 161%. For girls, by 145%.

Since 2010, the rate of anxiety among college students has increased by 134%.

For children ages 10–14—*young children*—suicide rates increased by 91% among boys and by 167% among girls since 2010.

These are staggering statistics.³ And we don't have to blind ourselves about the timing.

These spikes are occurring alongside the rise of the smartphone and, especially, social media.

It's not all that hard to ascertain that there's a relationship between smoking and lung disease. This isn't rocket science.

And it's not all that hard to figure out that there's a connection between anxiety and depression and a widespread shift to life online.

Just think about how the technology itself functions.

For one thing, social media platforms rely on social comparison—and supercharge it on a global scale.

I'll let one of Jonathan Haidt's research subjects speak for herself:

*"I can't stop comparing myself. It came to a point where I wanna kill myself cause you don't want to look like this and no matter what I try I'm still ugly/feel ugly. I constantly cry about this. It probably started when I was 10, I'm now 13."*⁴

Imagine young people experiencing this over and over again, in households and classrooms across the world.

³ Statistics from Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin, 2024), 24, 25, 31.

⁴ Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, 157.

That's the sort of harm we're facing.

And it increasingly looks like some of the platforms themselves are know this.

In late 2021, the *Wall Street Journal* published a series of leaked documents from inside Meta discussing internal research on their platform's effect on young people.

According to the internal researchers, "[t]eens told us that they don't like the amount of time they spend on the app but feel like they have to be present. They often feel 'addicted' and know that what they're seeing is bad for their mental health but feel unable to stop themselves."

What's more, the researchers admitted, quote, "[w]e make body image issues worse for one in three teen girls."⁵

That's bad enough. But it gets worse.

The evidence is piling up that these platforms invite young people into communities devoted to eating disorders, self-harm, drug use, and sexual exploitation.

None of us would allow our kids to wander alone through red-light districts. And yet, that's effectively what many of them are doing on the open internet, every single day.

This is not passive exposure, either.

It's certainly not what Congress contemplated when Section 230 was passed in 1996.

That's the law that shields internet platforms for liability for user-generated content. That is, the companies aren't liable for what third-party users post on them.

We're a long way from that.

Today, many platforms themselves use algorithms that *amplify* user exposure to extreme and incendiary and predatory content.

Last week, evidence emerged that Instagram's recommendation engine connected underage users with groomers targeting children on the platform.

Lots of you probably use Instagram yourselves. You know that feature on the app that shows you accounts you may want to follow? To connect with?

Well, the evidence indicated more than *one in four* of the recommendations provided to potential predators were recommendations of children's accounts.⁶

⁵ Georgia Wells, Jeff Horwitz, and Deepa Seetharaman, "Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Documents Show," *Wall Street Journal* (Sept. 14, 2021), <https://www.wsj.com/tech/personal-tech/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739>.

⁶ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-05-06/instagram-urged-groomers-to-connect-with-minors-ftc-says>

It's not just that young users log on and go looking for trouble. Rather, the trouble finds *them*.

Too many platforms are already addictive and harmful—just like tobacco. And they're growing *ever more addictive and harmful* with time.

That's how they work. How they're *designed*.

Like Big Tobacco, the business model of Big Social Media depends on keeping customers addicted.

Just craving the next fix, the next puff, the next notification.

Perhaps it's bad for the customer. Perhaps there's some predatory behavior going on.

But there'll always be more customers. Or so the theory runs.

To be clear: American consumers were never supposed to *know* that any of this was going on. For years, the public was in the dark.

That's why it's taken a long string of whistleblowers to make so much of this information public.

Those internal studies about social media platforms making depression and addiction and body image issues worse? The American public wasn't supposed to see those.

The American public wasn't supposed to see those because they were likely part of a business strategy.

Another Meta whistleblower, a separate whistleblower, recently alleged that the company offered advertisers, quote, the “opportunity to target thirteen-to-seventeen-year-olds across its platforms . . . during moments of psychological vulnerability when they feel ‘worthless,’ ‘insecure,’ ‘stressed,’ ‘defeated,’ ‘anxious,’ ‘stupid,’ ‘useless,’ and ‘like a failure.’”⁷

The company allegedly made pitch decks for advertisers, allowing them to micro-target teen audiences for product sales related to the moods of the teens in question.

In other words: when it seems like you're feeling a certain way, you get an ad that's deliberately tailored to your state of mind.

How exactly did it work in practice?

Well, the company could allegedly track, quote, “when thirteen-to-seventeen-year-old girls delete selfies, so it can serve a beauty ad to them at that moment.”

⁷ Sarah Wynn-Williams, *Careless People* (2025).

In other words: *knowing* when young girls are feeling down. *Hitting* them when they're feeling down. Sounds like quite a business model.

That, we're learning, is the sort of threat America's families are up against. That is what lies behind the curtain.

Is that unfair and deceptive? I'll let you decide.

* * *

We need to be frank about the scale of this problem.

America's children and families are up against some of the most powerful, well-funded, influential corporations ever to exist.

They have billions upon billions of dollars to pour into public-relations efforts, ideological counterprogramming, and attempts to discredit the researchers bringing the truth to light.

And, as many of us in this room know, they're not shy about using all that capital.

Big Tobacco did exactly the same thing.

As late as 1993, the tobacco industry was putting out a handbook called "Bad Science" that accused researchers of, quote, "adjusting science to support preconceived public policy prescriptions."⁸

As Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway put it, this was a strategy to, quote, "pretend that you wanted sound science when really you wanted no science at all—or at least no science that got in your way."⁹

Sounds pretty familiar. Sounds like what parents and children are up against right now.

We need only look beyond the smokescreens.

We need only look at our families and lives and communities to glimpse the wreckage our digital age is leaving behind.

And we need only be honest that sometimes, products themselves can be harmful.

Big Tobacco certainly was.

And there was a powerful and well-funded campaign to keep anybody from finding out just how harmful.

⁸ Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 144–45.

⁹ Oreskes and Conway, *Merchants of Doubt*, 148.

But today, we are choosing to live in truth.

We choose to insist that accountability matters.

Today, we take our first steps towards a different future.

A better future, because it is a future grounded in reality.

Today, we choose to stand for the welfare of the American people, and American families—not merely American corporations.

And that's a future worth fighting for.

I'd like to thank you all for joining us today at this workshop. And for joining us in this battle.