

**HIDDEN HARMS: EXAMINING WHISTLEBLOWER  
ALLEGATIONS THAT META  
BURIED CHILD SAFETY RESEARCH**

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**HEARING**

BEFORE THE

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON PRIVACY,  
TECHNOLOGY, AND THE LAW**

OF THE

**COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY  
UNITED STATES SENATE**

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TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2025

UNITED STATES SENATE,  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON PRIVACY, TECHNOLOGY,  
AND THE LAW,  
COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY,  
*Washington, DC.*

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice at 2:36 p.m., in Room 226, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Marsha Blackburn, Chair of the Subcommittee, presiding.

Present: Senators Blackburn [presiding], Grassley, Hawley, Moody, Klobuchar, Durbin, Coons, Blumenthal, Padilla, and Schiff.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. MARSHA BLACKBURN,  
A U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF TENNESSEE**

Chair BLACKBURN. The Subcommittee will come to order. Senator Klobuchar is on her way, but I am going to go ahead and begin with my opening statement. As you all are aware, we have a vote series that is taking place, but I do want to say thank you so much for our witnesses being here, and for each of you being here today.

We will hear from Dr. Jason Sattizahn and Ms. Cayce Savage. They are two brave whistleblowers who have come forward to detail shocking allegations about Meta's coverup of deeply disturbing child safety research. They were hired to purportedly make the platform safer for children, but what they found was a company that knew their products were unsafe and they just did not care.

Nearly 4 years ago, I held my first hearing with a Meta whistleblower who detailed how Meta exploits our children online simply to maximize user engagement and boost their profits. Since then, we've seen a national movement of parents, legislators, whistleblowers, and children that have said enough is enough.

Our children are more precious than the interest of depraved Big Tech CEOs, and that Congress must pass the bipartisan Kids Online Safety Act. After all these years, Meta continues to knowingly, knowingly, allow sexual exploitation and harms to children on their platforms. I'm incredibly grateful that individuals are still willing to come forward and shine a light on Meta's disturbing, willful, and intentional actions.

Mark Zuckerberg has promised that, and I'm quoting him, "In the Metaverse, you'll be able to do almost anything you can imag-

ine.” And for once, Mr. Zuckerberg’s statement rings true. That is for predators, for pedophiles, for groomers, for traffickers, and all kinds of disgusting bad actors.

As these whistleblowers will explain, the Metaverse has become the Wild West for criminals who prey on our children. As our witnesses will tell us today, virtual reality can be incredibly dangerous for children, specifically because of the immersive nature of the technology.

Children have a much harder time processing the difference between violence and abuse in the physical and virtual spaces. In other words, when their avatar on Meta’s virtual reality platform is raped or harassed, children experience that trauma as if it is actually happening to them.

Let’s be clear, virtual reality is reality. These harms are real, and this abuse happens every single day, every day on Meta’s reality platforms. One employee stated on an internal message board in 2017, and again, I quote, “We have a child problem, and it’s probably time to talk about it.” That was 2017, one of their employees stating, “We have a child problem.”

But years later, Meta’s C–Suite has zero interest in these findings. According to these whistleblowers, Meta executives decided they didn’t want to see research detailing how harmful their products are to children, so they unleashed their attack dogs within Meta legal on the research teams intent on creating a rosy picture of their products, Meta legal, manipulated research methods, and buried negative data.

Meta instructed researchers to avoid asking teen survey participants questions, which might lead them to discuss harms they’ve experienced because of Meta’s design. And when their suppression didn’t work, they just simply deleted the evidence. They erased it so no one would know.

In one user review, Meta’s Horizon Worlds was dubbed and I quote, “The pedophile kingdom.” This makes clear what we have known for years that Meta profits from the sexualization and abuse of children. If you need another example, look at the recent report that Meta’s own internal guidelines allowed AI chat bots to engage in central conversations with children, their refusal to protect children and to instead profit at the expense of kids’ safety. This is revolting. It is heinous conduct.

Again, I want to thank the two whistleblowers that are here with us today, and the other whistleblowers who have come forward who are not here. I know that this was not an easy decision for either of you, but what you’re doing brings us one step closer, one step closer, to holding these Big Tech platforms accountable.

We have parents in the room today. Parents all across the Nation are speaking out, and we thank you. And to Maureen, Brian, Mia, Christine, those parents that have lost their children to social media harms, we are grateful that you’re here, and grateful for your passion to make sure that no parent ever has to experience the trauma that you have experienced. With your help, we will get the Kids Online Safety Act passed, and we will get it to the President’s desk, and we will hold Big Tech accountable.

Now, I turn to Senator Klobuchar.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. AMY KLOBUCHAR,  
A U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF MINNESOTA**

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Well, thank you very much, Chair Blackburn, and thank you for your long-time leadership of this as well as the very important bill that you and Senator Blumenthal have been proud to support it and be co-sponsor are pushing through and I've already passed the Senate once, so we're close.

I have worked in this area for a long time myself, and I've known the frustration of no matter what you seem to do, you get lobbied against and millions of dollars against you. And I just think we're reaching a moment where the time is up, and there are too many families and too many parents that are affected by this. I want to thank our two whistleblowers that are here. I'm sure you never in your wildest dreams imagined that you were going to be in front of a Senate panel in this way. But I want to thank you for doing the right thing.

For too long these companies have worked to attract kids to their platforms. They do so knowing that their platforms use algorithms that increase the risk of sexual exploitation, push harmful content, facilitate bullying, and provide venues, sadly, for dealers to sell deadly drugs like fentanyl.

Meta cannot continue to turn a blind eye to these harms. It was in this very room with this very Committee—maybe it was in a different room, but the same Committee—where Mark Zuckerberg actually turned to some families who had lost children to drugs who said, “I'm sorry, I'm sorry this happened.” Well, sorry, is not enough anymore, and we need to put in some rules of the road to stop this from happening.

This is not the first time whistleblowers from Meta have come forward. In 2021, another whistleblower, Frances Haugen, testified that Meta knew that its products took a significant psychological toll on users. In that case, it was eating disorders. That testimony should have been a wakeup call for Meta, a chance to right the ship.

Meta did make changes after her testimony, but not to protect kids. Instead, the company took steps to establish plausible deniability. Meta blocked, manipulated, hid, and deleted research that showed that its virtual reality products were frequently used by underage kids who were exposed to real and significant harm.

I want to underscore that the entire appeal of the Metaverse is that it's supposed to feel like real life and that can be fun. It's communication, it's entertainment. There's bells and whistles. But the problem is that the virtual reality platform, as it has been created, also allows adults to form relationships with unwitting children that can be exploited, as The Washington Post pointed out in their lengthy investigative piece yesterday.

A 25-year-old man was convicted of kidnapping a 13-year-old after interacting with her through Meta's virtual reality products. Despite this, Meta forged ahead pushing new features to attract younger users and allowing younger and younger kids onto its virtual reality platforms without safety testing.

One employee from Meta estimated that more than 80 percent of users were underage in one of the virtual rooms. Adult users frequently complained virtual reality spaces were overrun by children.

I don't know what else you need to hear to know there's a problem—gleaning their presence by the sound of their voices.

Yet, Meta, using the code name “Project Salsa” because allegedly they knew it would be a spicy topic, moved to lower the official age minimum for its virtual reality head sites from 13-to-10. In Meta's ongoing tradition of moving fast and breaking things, it broke its repeated promise to parents in Congress to protect kids on their platforms.

That's why a bipartisan coalition of 42 State attorney generals, with wildly different political views on a number of things, decided to take this on. And that included my attorney general in Minnesota, Keith Ellison.

But Meta has continued to prioritize user engagement. It does that because the more time people, no matter how young, spend on their platforms, the more money it makes. We know the profits on kids' data. According to a recent study, social media platforms generated \$11 billion in revenue in 2022 from advertising directed at kids and teens, including nearly \$2 billion in ad profits derived from users age 12 and under.

And while today's whistleblowers left the company before its current push to catch up in the generative AI space race, their testimony raises serious questions about whether Meta is ignoring child safety issues related to AI products, in especially in light of the recent reports that Meta allowed its chatbots to engage children into romantic or sensual conversations.

That's why we must come together, Democrats, Republicans, to set up common-sense rules. We have worked on both the Judiciary and Commerce Committees to do this. Senator Cruz and I, basically through a lot of hard work over many years, passed our TAKE IT DOWN Act when the President signed it into law that would hold platforms accountable for taking down pornographic images of kids or adults that are either the actual images or AI created within 48 hours.

We must pass Senator Blackburn and Blumenthal's Kids Online Safety Act to ensure that platforms design their products to prevent and mitigate harm to kids. We also know that other industries do not enjoy this similar level of protection. If they have an appliance that blows up or they have a tire that blows up on the road, there's accountability. They get sued and that's a major incentive to fix it.

We don't have that with these social media platforms, and that is why I have long supported repealing Section 230, which was basically set up while these were little companies in the garage. That's not true anymore. They're the biggest companies the world has ever known.

To end with this, one parent once told me that her trying to get her young kids, 6 and 8, off of these platforms, she'd have to resort to relying on her 12-year-old, 15-year-old to try to get it down. They couldn't figure out how to do it. They'd find another platform. It's just endless. Despite all her best efforts to be a mom, she said it was like a sink overflowing with a faucet she couldn't turn off and she was just sitting out there with a mop. These parents need more than mops. They need us to pass this bill.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Chair BLACKBURN. Senator Grassley, you're recognized.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. CHARLES E. GRASSLEY,  
A U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF IOWA**

Chairman GRASSLEY. And like Senator Klobuchar said, I want to compliment you on your leadership. Ever since you've been in the Senate, you've been fighting to protect children from social media abuse.

During my time in the Senate, I've always fought for whistleblowers, both in the government as well as in the private sector. I've offered updates to the False Claims Act, the IRS Whistleblower Program, and other whistleblower laws. And just this year I've helped almost 20 government whistleblowers get their jobs back. Whistleblowers are key to rooting out fraud, waste, and abuse. That includes the private sector, not just the government.

On September 13, 2022, Ranking Member of the Judiciary Committee and I, along with Senator Durbin, held a hearing on these very issues. A Twitter whistleblower at that time testified disclosing to this Committee that Twitter potentially exposed user data to foreign intelligence agencies, including the government of China. His disclosures made public that the FBI notified Twitter of at least one Chinese Government agent at the company.

This month, I, along with Senators Blackburn and Hawley, sent a letter to Meta about the company's use of targeted ads against teenagers. Our letter highlighted concerns that Meta's potentially violating the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act. It's been alleged that Meta collected personal information from children under 13 years of age without parental consent.

My oversight has also shown that these tech companies look to silence whistleblowers. Last year I wrote to OpenAI about my concerns that they tried to silence whistleblowers, and I raised the same concerns this year with Meta. To address this, I've introduced bipartisan legislation to implement whistleblower protections in the artificial intelligence industry.

Now, it's been alleged that another Meta whistleblower, Jason Sattizahn, has suffered retaliation. For example, in March 2023, he received a performance review stating he, "Exceeds expectation." Then in October, 2023, he raised concerns to his leadership that Meta had been violating the Child Children's Online Privacy Protection Act. So, what did Meta do after spending 6 years at Meta with promotions and positive performance? They fired him 6 months after his disclosure.

Ms. Savage also raised concerns about Meta's compliance with the law. Instead of addressing her concerns, Meta's lawyers reportedly told Ms. Savage to make sure that her work did not put the company "at risk".

I often say that whistleblowers are treated like skunks at a picnic. It appears our witnesses as well as other whistleblowers who've approached me have unfortunately been treated like those skunks. Last year—we've been working on this for a long time, I should say, not just last year. So, I thank you, folks, for your courage and bravery in coming forward to Congress. I and my colleagues will continue our investigations.

Chair BLACKBURN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Senator Blumenthal.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. RICHARD BLUMENTHAL,  
A U.S. SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF CONNECTICUT**

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you, Madam Chair. And I want to begin by thanking you, Senator Blackburn, for holding this hearing, but even more important, for your extraordinarily dedicated, tireless, relentless work on the Kids Online Safety Act, which has been, for me, the opportunity of lifetime to champion.

And I have come to know some of the bravest, strongest people who are with us today, parents of children who have been lost as a result of the toxic content driven by Big Tech at children purposefully and knowingly.

And I want to thank the parents who are in attendance today as well as many, many others who couldn't be with us and say to you, we are going to continue to fight for the Kids Online Safety Act, and we will win this fight.

The whistleblowers who are with us today are part of this battle. You are the truth tellers and you are part of a long line, I wish there were more, of people of conscience and conviction who have chosen to speak truth to power.

And Senator Grassley is absolutely right that we need you because wrongdoing in government and in private industry is exposed as a result of people having the courage to come forward as you have done and you deserve more protection. I hope that Senator Grassley may join me in a bill that would provide more protection to whistleblowers.

Four years ago, another whistleblower, Frances Haugen came forward to reveal how Meta knew it was fueling and aggravating a teenage health crisis, a mental health crisis that continues today even more widespread and exacerbated. Meta's own researchers described Instagram as a "perfect storm" that "exacerbates downward spirals," of addiction, eating disorders and depression. They found that Instagram makes body image issues worse for one in three girls.

Two years later, another whistleblower came forward, Arturo Béjar. He testified before this Committee that teens had dangerous, harmful experiences on Instagram at an alarming rate. And again, that Meta knew about it at the very top levels of leadership.

We worked on a solution to this problem; the Kid's Online Safety Act. Meta promised it would work on solution, but it did the opposite. It worked to suppress research and tools to give parents better ways to protect their children. It purposely, in effect, obstructed and blocked critical fact finding that you both sought to do.

I will never forget Mark Zuckerberg testifying before our Judiciary Committee and turning to the parents in the audience saying he apologized and Meta would do better. Not only did he betray that promise, he knew it was false when he made it because at that very moment, Meta was in fact suppressing research and fact finding.

According to documents provided to our offices, Meta straight-jacketed its staff under a social issues protocol that restricts research on key types of harm, including suicide, eating disorders, bullying, and child trafficking by designating them "sensitive". Yes, they were sensitive because they would've undermined business and the reputation of the company. What that meant in practice

is Meta installed monitors from their legal department who routinely altered, blocked, and shut down work on teen safety.

In one research study, those monitors even demanded the destruction of data on underage children being solicited for sex acts. Mark Zuckerberg and other Meta executives wanted to make sure that government regulators, parents, and teens never heard anything more about the dangers of their products that are caused to young people.

And as your disclosures show, they did so because Meta's attitude simply hasn't changed. It prioritizes profits over the well-being of children and teens. For example, Meta executives canceled proposals to more accurately identify children on its virtual reality platform and to provide them safeguards against abuse.

These disclosures show why Meta has hired armies of lawyers and lobbyists, spent millions of dollars to kill the Kids Online Safety Act. It's dangerous for their business model, even if their practices are dangerous to kids. They don't want a duty of care. They don't want transparency. They don't want tools for parents. They want the Wild West, which continues now.

And you know, Big Tech has been compared to Big Tobacco. I sued Big Tobacco as attorney general of the State of Connecticut. I led my fellow attorneys general ensuing Big Tobacco, and you know what gained us a victory, ultimately a settlement worth a lot of money, which is still coming to the states and a change in practices. The industry's own documents showed they were lying.

The parallel is indisputable. We had whistleblower there. We have whistleblowers here who are speaking truth to power and revealing that this industry knows how its business model of driving toxic content to kids and even destroying lives is known to them.

So, I take from your testimony that Meta has no shame, no conscience. It's waged an all-out war against Kids Online Safety. It spent millions to stop that bill in the House even though it passed overwhelmingly 91-to-3 in the Senate. The majority of American people, the vast majority, 91-to-3, bipartisan want this measure. We're here to demand it, and we're going to keep fighting until we get it done. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Chair BLACKBURN. Senator Durbin, do you have a statement?

Senator DURBIN. No.

Chair BLACKBURN. We skip it. Okay. I will skip you for now.

At this point, I want to introduce our witnesses. Dr. Jason Sattizahn is a researcher with over 15 years of academic social media and video game development experience. Most recently, he was a staff user experience researcher at Meta where he worked for over 6 years until 2024, leading research on Marketplace integrity, virtual reality, ranking algorithms, and emotional and physical harm to vulnerable populations.

Prior to his role at Meta, he earned his PhD in integrative neuroscience from the University of Chicago, where he was also a graduate researcher before developing video games and accessibility features at Sony PlayStation.

Ms. Cayce Savage is a user experience researcher with 12 years of experience in academic virtual reality and social media research. After earning her master's degree in positive organizational psychology and program evaluation from Claremont Graduate Univer-

sity, Ms. Savage worked as a user experience researcher for a startup in T-Mobile before joining Meta in 2019.

During her 4 years at Meta, she worked on Facebook Marketplace, Facebook Jobs, Facebook Groups, and Virtual Reality. She specifically focused her research within reality labs on users under the age of 18, an immersive emotional, social, and physical harm to minors. She now serves as the lead user experience researcher for eBay Live. We welcome each of you.

At this time, I would like for you to rise and raise your right hand.

[Witnesses are sworn in.]

Chair BLACKBURN. Thank you. You may be seated. Both witnesses answered in the affirmative. You each have 5 minutes for your opening. Dr. Sattizahn, you're recognized.

**STATEMENT OF DR. JASON SATTIZAHN,  
FORMER META RESEARCHER, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Chairman Blackburn, Ranking Member Klobuchar. Senator Grassley, Senator Durbin, Senator Blumenthal, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for having me here.

I'm here to discuss Meta's manipulation of research to cover up dangers facing billions across Meta's products and of particular concern the millions of children using Meta's virtual reality products. I also want to recognize and thank the five past and current Meta employees, all researchers like me, who have worked directly on creating Meta's products, who made the brave decision to be a part of this disclosure that brings us all here.

My name's Jason Sattizahn. Growing up in the 1990's and in the middle of Missouri, I saw both the value and the problems that advances in technology brought the world. After a PhD in integrative neuroscience, I wanted to use my research experience to make these technologies and products better for the people that use them.

Most recently, I spent 6 years as a researcher at Meta working in some of their most sensitive spaces and tasked with understanding users, their needs, and using this to try and make their products safer. I am here today because it is evident that Meta consistently chooses profit over safety. I'm not the first to discuss this as repeated whistleblowers have shared Meta's reckless disregard for users. However, in the wake of past whistleblowers, Meta has chosen to ignore the problems they created and bury evidence of users' negative experiences.

I worked at Meta from 2018 to 2024. During these 6 years, I witnessed data scandals, multiple whistleblower disclosures about Meta's disregard for users and mounting public pressure for Meta to address these issues, I saw the company respond to these pressures by deliberately compromising internal processes, policies, and research to protect company profits over their users.

During my first role at Meta, I led integrity research for Facebook Marketplace and the data was clear; Marketplace causes suffering for users including financial loss, stolen and counterfeit items and personal safety issues ranging from being sexually propositioned by strangers to physical assaults and attempted kidnapping.

My time on Marketplace was my first exposure to help Facebook deprioritize safety for boosting user engagement. Simple safety investments such as not allowing people to message strangers with a single click were flatly rejected because product teams were afraid to do anything that could decrease engagement, the metric determining success and bonuses.

It was around this time I also first saw Facebook make false statements to Congress, particularly about their inability to estimate stolen goods on Marketplace. Their statements directly contradict my own internal research, which I've submitted with this whistleblower disclosure.

In the fall of 2021, Frances Haugen disclosed to Congress how Meta's products fuel mental health issues for teens, including body dysmorphia, and self-harm. Meta's immediate response for to congressional concern was not to do the right thing, but rather roll out new processes and policies to manipulate control and erase data.

We, researchers, were directed how to write reports to limit risk to Meta internal work groups were locked down, making it nearly impossible to share data and coordinate between teams to keep users safe. Mark Zuckerberg disparaged whistleblowers claiming past disclosures were, "used to construct a false narrative."

Despite Meta's attempts to prevent researchers from collecting necessary insights, the research we were able to do continued to show the dangers of Meta's products on users. This only highlights the sheer scale, severity, and prevalence of harm on these Meta products.

In early 2022, I moved to Meta's Reality Labs to lead integrity research and help improve those using Meta's VR headsets. Virtual reality allows someone to wear a headset and experience an alternate reality to play games, watch movies, socialize with others. For Meta, VR is designed to push socialization above all as Meta saw this as a path to unbridled engagement and profit. The company invested billions, integrated social media like Instagram into headsets, and even rebranded as, "Meta to align with the future of the company."

From my first days in Reality Labs, Meta leadership, and legal teams were in complete control of the research I was conducting. This was crucial research because this was a largely untested technology, but I soon learned that Meta had no interest in VR safety unless it could drive interaction and thus profit.

After Meta VR sales were banned in Germany for 2 years over concerns about how Meta treats user data, in 2022, Germany allowed sales to resume. When I was asked to perform research in Germany, I understood that Meta was trying to show that their VR headsets were safe for German users.

However, when our research uncovered that underage children using Meta VR in Germany were subject to demands for sex acts, nude photos, and other acts that no child should ever be exposed to, Meta demanded that we erase any evidence of such dangers that we saw.

Despite Meta's attempts to hide these sensitive findings, my research still revealed emotional and psychological damage, particularly to women who were sexually solicited, molested, or worse. In

response, Meta demanded I change my research in the future to not gather this data on emotional and psychological harm.

When my colleagues' research showed the emotional impact of children being threatened by physical harm by strangers online, Meta not only restricted internal sharing, but manipulated reports to obscure any emotional damage during my time working.

Chair BLACKBURN. Your time's expired, so let's wrap up.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Of course. If I had one thing to say, I would just want to make it very clear that Meta is incapable of change without being forced by Congress. Whether it's engagement or profits at any cost, they have frankly had unearned opportunities in order to correct their behavior and they have not.

So, with that, I'll say thank you again for the opportunity to be with you all today, and for your commitment to stop the deliberate harm for millions of Americans. So, thank you.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Sattizahn appears as a submission for the record.]

Chair BLACKBURN. Well, thank you. Ms. Savage, you're recognized for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF CAYCE SAVAGE,  
FORMER META RESEARCHER, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

Ms. SAVAGE. Good afternoon, Subcommittee Chair Blackburn, Ranking Member Klobuchar, Senator Blumenthal, Senator Durbin, and Senator Padilla.

I'm a user experience researcher. It is my job to listen to and advocate for users. I have a graduate degree in experimental psychology and 12 years of experience working as a researcher. I do this work because fundamentally I care about people.

I worked at Meta from 2019 to 2023. In those 4 years, and most especially as I led research on youth safety and virtual reality, it became clear to me that Meta is uninterested and unwilling to listen to their users or prioritize their safety.

While I speak about virtual reality, it is important to understand that the way Meta has approached safety for VR is emblematic of its negligent approach to safety for all of its products. The research is clear on what we must do to ensure that new technology is safe for children.

Yet, across social media, messaging apps, and now wearable technology, Meta has failed to prioritize child safety until they are scrutinized by outside regulators. Then, they scramble to develop features they know are insufficient and largely unused, and advertise this as proof of their responsibility.

Meta is aware that its VR platform is full of underage children. Meta purposely turns a blind eye to this knowledge, despite it being obvious to anyone using their products. If Meta were to acknowledge the presence of underage users, they would be required to kick off those users from their platform in order to remain COPPA compliant. This isn't happening because it would decrease the number of active users Meta is reporting to shareholders.

At Meta, engagement is the priority above everything else. Because VR is immersive and embodied. Negative experiences cause greater psychological harm than similar experiences on an iPad or an Xbox. In VR, someone can stand behind your child and whisper

in their ear and your child will feel their presence as though it is real.

VR is tracking a user's real-life movements. So, assault in VR requires those movements to happen in real life. What happens in virtual reality is reality. Most importantly, Meta is aware that children are being harmed in VR.

I quickly became aware that it is not uncommon for children in VR to experience bullying, sexual assault, to be solicited for nude photographs and sexual acts by pedophiles, and to be regularly exposed to mature content like gambling and violence, and to participate in adult experiences like strip clubs and watching pornography with strangers.

I wish I could tell you the percentage of children in VR experiencing these harms, but Meta would not allow me to conduct this research. I personally saw these things happening in VR, consistently heard reports from teens and parents in research, and read countless accounts from concerned parents online.

It's easy to learn that children are not safe using Meta's VR products just by reading public reviews like this one, "Thanks, Meta, for making this the pedophile kingdom. They have made it so easy for us to meet and exchange information with children here."

Meta first acquired Oculus, its VR technology, in 2014. I was the first and for a time the only researcher dedicated to understanding whether its VR software experiences were safe for children. And I wasn't hired until 2022. So, for 8 years, as tens of millions of headsets were sold, Meta did not think about the safety of the children it relied on to achieve global market dominance.

Throughout my time on Meta's VR Youth Team, child safety issues regularly went unresearched despite the frequency and severity of the harm. I was given a legal counterpart to scrutinize everything that I did, to tell me what research I could and could not conduct, and to ensure my research reports would not create risk to Meta should they be publicly disclosed.

I was told not to investigate the kinds of harm children were experiencing in VR, and made to feel I was risking my job if I pressed the matter. Instead of amplifying the voices of our users, my work began being used to silence them so that Meta could claim deniability. I know a number of my colleagues were put in similar positions.

Meta cannot be trusted to tell the truth about the safety or use of its products. Meta says it doesn't have a record of a large number of underage children using VR. This is because it has purposefully avoided gathering that data despite members of Meta's own leadership indicating that even they are unaware of or don't understand the importance of the minimum age of use. Despite this, research proposed to address this idea was not allowed.

I deliberated for a long time about whether to come forward. Meta responded to Frances Haugen's disclosure in 2021 by cracking down on research internally. Researchers across the company were subjected to sudden censorship, and were told it was for our own protection so we wouldn't be part of any future leaks.

Candidly, I am worried that speaking to you today will put my former colleagues as well as the field of user research within Meta

at risk. To my former colleagues who continue to advocate internally for child safety, I would like to express the greatest gratitude and admiration.

Previous whistleblowers have come before this body to publicly testify to the suffering adults and children experience using Meta's products. Meta has promised it would change. I'm here to tell you today that Meta has changed, but for the worst. Meta has spent the time and money it could have spent making its products safer, shielding itself. Instead, all the while developing emerging technologies which pose even greater risk to children than Instagram.

Meta consistently demonstrates that it cares more about the bottom line than the emotional or physical safety of the children who use its products every single day. How can Meta care for the safety of children when it doesn't acknowledge that they exist?

Senators thank you again for your time and for your support regarding this matter.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Savage appears as a submission for the record.]

Chair BLACKBURN. Thank you, Ms. Savage. We'll begin our questioning now, and Ms. Savage, let me start with you. You talk about Meta's refusal to acknowledge the harms, but I think many people who are watching this hearing today don't know what those harms would be. So, just very quickly, let's talk about if you were an 8-year-old girl and what you would experience in an unsafe situation in the Metaverse.

Ms. SAVAGE. Yes, thank you. I think it's important to start by describing briefly what it's like to use VR especially because a lot of parents haven't. So, you know, you're wearing a headset on your head, it's strapped to your face, and it completely obscures your vision and your hearing. So, you can no longer see the real world around you, which can also feel very vulnerable because you know, people can come up behind you in real life. And this means that some of the experiences in VR can feel heightened because you're already feeling vulnerable.

VR is designed to be immersive and embodied. That's its appeal. And so, when you experience things in VR, they feel meaningfully more real, psychologically, more real than if you were to experience that same thing on a television. You also have an avatar that you are embodying, and which research shows us you identify with. So, if something happens to your avatar, it feels like it's happening to you.

It's also important to note that this is a social space. So, there are other users with bodies that can corner you, that can surround you, that can touch you. And folks can also speak to you.

Chair BLACKBURN. And let me add in there users who are not known to you.

Ms. SAVAGE. Yes. That's a very good point. It's most common for you to be interacting with people you don't know in real life. And a lot of parents in my research indicated that they weren't aware that their children were interacting with strangers.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Just to be very explicit because it's not something that I think a lot of people have exposure with, when we talk about, you know, harms for children and for adults in VR, and we

talk about things that are said, the audio that's transmitted isn't just solicitation or speech.

There will also be instances that we have seen of where you can hear people sexually pleasuring themselves transmitted over audio in a spatial sense as you are being surrounded and being harassed. So, it's not just simple statements, it's actually the transmission of the motion and the audio of sex acts itself.

Chair BLACKBURN. And so, that is what causes children to have the physiological and psychological response as if it were happening to them in the real world.

Ms. SAVAGE. Yes, exactly. Visually and auditorily. It feels real.

Chair BLACKBURN. Okay, Dr. Sattizahn, I want to come to you. Senator Blumenthal and I wrote to Meta back in April, really sounding the alarm on some of their policies that with AI chatbots entering into sensual conversations with children and these policies went so far as to allow chatbots to tell a shirtless boy, and I'll quote this, "Every inch of you is a masterpiece, a treasure I cherish deeply." So, you've been through this process at Meta dealing with them.

Does it surprise you that they would allow their chatbots to engage in these conversations with children?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. No, not at all. One thing that I'd like to just, you know, sort of caveat this is I never directly worked on the Meta AI chatbot team, but I did work directly on Facebook ranking. And to not get in the tech weeds with this Facebook ranking, ranking in general is sort of a sibling to artificial intelligence. It's actually something that's included with AI algorithms.

And when I worked on the Facebook ranking team, I was working on how algorithms could be used to, you know, keep people safer. Whenever they see things that are shown to them in Marketplace, they see sexual content, we take it away, et cetera. Ranking is something that uses, generally speaking, more structured data that is easier to control for safety. And even when I was working on ranking, that was something that when I would try to work on the teams to improve safety, they were unable to do.

Chair BLACKBURN. Okay. Let me ask you this. Talking about algorithms, I know Meta has said TikTok is their main competitor. So, is Meta intentionally intensifying their algorithms in order to be able to compete more closely with TikTok?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. It's so much sillier than that. When I attempted to look at things called coefficients or variables to make these algorithms safer, the engineers themselves told me that they didn't actually look at them. Because if the algorithm predicted it and engagement went up, then it must be good.

So, to answer your original question, no, this doesn't surprise me at all because in the context of something like ranking, if they can't figure it out, I have no idea why they would ever be able to figure it out with an AI as well.

Chair BLACKBURN. Got it. Senator Klobuchar, you're recognized.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Thank you for your testimony. Mr. Sattizahn, we talked about Frances Haugen. And her testimony in 2021, I asked whether the work of Meta's internal researchers, people like yourselves, is thorough and reliable. She said then that Meta had a top-ranked re-

search program, and that its researchers were some of the biggest heroes inside the company in answer to my question, because they were willing to boldly ask real questions, which I truly appreciate. I believe that for many of them that was true.

Could you tell me how did Meta's top-ranked research program, which you were a part of, change after she exposed that Meta's platforms frequently caused significant harm to young users? And be somewhat brief, but thank you.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Of course. So, from after 2021, after the, the Frances Haugen disclosure, there was essentially what I always refer to as a funnel manipulation put on research. What I mean by that is every stage of research before, during, and after its creation was locked down, monitored by either legal teams or management themselves.

I'll be very brief to summarize this one my colleague brought up is legal surveillance. That's having a lawyer constantly look over things and possibly edit them. That is limiting the topics, the questions, the methods that you can use before you even collect data. It's the monitoring of research.

So, you might have legal actually watching the data you collect and you are told to erase it proactively if they believe it is too sensitive. And it's even going as far to once reports are written, legal will go in and directly alter the findings themselves, or demand that you take them out before publishing them.

Generally speaking, there was this increase after 2021 to also silo the research into sort of closed off areas. And so, my ability to go to my colleagues and talk about safety and say, "Hey, here's some data that you need on Facebook Groups," et cetera, went away.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. Let me just do some—that was very helpful—some quick yes or no questions because one of the things that I think really bothers these parents who've lost children, or have children who are just simply addicted to these platforms is that it appears and there's good proof that they are more interested, the company, in their bottom line than protecting these kids.

Just yes or no, did Meta stop research projects into child safety, do you believe, because it didn't want to know the result.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Yes.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. And did Meta restrict the information researchers could collect about child safety to preserve plausible deniability?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Yes.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. And did Meta alter research designs to avoid collecting certain information?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Yes.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. And did Meta modify research reports and results?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Yes.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. And did Meta require researchers to delete data that showed harm to kids that was occurring on its platforms?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Yes.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. I think that says it all. Thank you. Ms. Savage, while at Meta you proposed research to better understand the age of children using virtual reality. So, now, we're phas-

ing into our current State, this project called Project Horton, right? Horton. Who it was named after Dr. Seuss.

Ms. SAVAGE. Yes.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Because these kids are that young, was initially approved by Meta's chief technology officer and funded for more than \$1 million. Is that right?

Ms. SAVAGE. That's correct.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. So, what happened to that research project?

Ms. SAVAGE. It was canceled with no explanation, which at Meta is very unusual.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. And given that the research was approved by the company's chief technology officer, who at Meta could have overruled that decision and shut the project down,

Ms. SAVAGE. To my knowledge, the only have the person is Mark Zuckerberg.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Why do you think Meta's top leadership canceled the research?

Ms. SAVAGE. If Meta were to improve the quality of its ability to identify the true age of its users, it would be required to shut down such a large number of accounts that it would meaningfully drop their engagement metrics.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. How does turning a blind eye to the actual age of a young user in virtual reality put young users at risk?

Ms. SAVAGE. In so many ways. Part of development is that children are still developing the ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy. So, particularly for very young children that are in VR, things that happen may have more significant psychological effect.

The research on this is still ongoing. So, we don't know the full extent of this. But of course, the most egregious harm that we're aware of currently is that VR is very social. And it's typical that that social interaction is happening between a child and a stranger. And avatars all look the same age. So, whether that other person's a child or an adult, we don't know.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. So, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act requires parental consent for the collection of personal data of users under 13. Yet, we have heard testimony today that Meta new users under 13 were on its virtual reality platforms.

Instead of addressing the issue, Meta, we believe, suppressed research that could have confirmed the presence of young users. How prevalent in your mind were users under the age of 13 on Meta's virtual reality platform and was Meta aware of the problem?

Ms. SAVAGE. It's such an issue that every single time I have used VR personally, the majority of individuals that I have observed or interacted with have been audibly under the age of 13. It is something that is the top complaint, to my knowledge, publicly for any other user that uses VR. It's something that our own, or Meta's own, you know, leadership would frequently post and be like, "Hey, here's a video of my 6-year-old."

Senator KLOBUCHAR. And was Meta's leadership aware of the presence of kids under 13 then?

Ms. SAVAGE. Yes.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Did Meta take any steps to ensure it was not collecting data from these young users without parental consent?

Ms. SAVAGE. It didn't have the ability to identify which users were under 13, so it wouldn't have had that ability.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. Last question, back to you and very briefly, Mr. Sattizahn. Last month, I sent a letter with Senator Britt, Schatz and seven other Senators to Meta raising significant concerns about its internal policies that allow its generative AI chatbots to have romantic or sensual conversations with kids.

Given your experience, do you think Meta was aware of the potential harms to kids that could occur by letting its chatbots engage in such conversations with kids?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Yes. Meta has direct and global initiatives, for years now, to target youth across all of their products.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Do you have any reason to believe that Meta is doing more to protect kids in its AI work than its virtual reality work?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. To my knowledge, no.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you.

Chair BLACKBURN. Senator Hawley.

Senator HAWLEY. Ms. Savage, let me just pick up where Senator Klobuchar just left off. You said that in your experience, a majority of VR users are under the age of 13.

Ms. SAVAGE. That's correct.

Senator HAWLEY. And that this is apparent to Meta leadership, you said?

Ms. SAVAGE. Yes. It's apparent to anyone who uses the product.

Senator HAWLEY. Who in particular in Meta leadership.

Ms. SAVAGE. I'm curious if you remember any particular posts, but I know it's apparent to at least C-Suite.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Correct. There were legal directors, for instance, who would consistently monitor employees who would post under-age videos of their own children using VR. So, this was directly visible to leadership who were posting these videos and having it removed internally.

Senator HAWLEY. Mark Zuckerberg is aware of this, yes or no?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. He would have to be.

Senator HAWLEY. I bet it's a yes. Ms. Savage?

Ms. SAVAGE. The only way that he would not be aware is if he had never used his own headset.

Senator HAWLEY. Well, that's extraordinary. And it's particularly extraordinary because let's take a look at actually Mark Zuckerberg's testimony. Mark Zuckerberg has testified before this Committee as recently as just last year, January 31, 2024. Let's put it up so we can see it. He says, this is Zuckerberg testifying, "We don't allow people under the age of 13 on our service. So, if anyone who's under the age of 13, if we find them, we remove them from our service."

[Poster is displayed.]

And then in response to another question, he says, "We don't want users under the age of 13." We don't want users under the age of 13. Ms. Savage, is this true?

Ms. SAVAGE. That's an interesting quote. I mean, it would require the user to be honest about their age, in which case Meta would kick them off. But from research, even before Meta acquired the Oculus technology, we know that children are usually not using an account that accurately reflects their age for several reasons. The want part is interesting to me. I don't think their behavior matches that sentiment.

Senator HAWLEY. Dr. Sattizahn, is it true that Meta does not want users under the age of 13 on the platform in any of their services?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. I'd like to go back to the point that you made in response to this; that if they did, their value, their engagement, their profits would go through the floor. In this quote, if is doing a lot of work because they have taken no substantive efforts to make sure that their understanding that there are kids under 13. It's a lie by avoidance and Meta knows it.

Senator HAWLEY. It's a lie by avoidance. So, in other words, Mark Zuckerberg, when he testified this last year, I want to emphasize, so isn't 10 years ago, this is barely 10 months ago. This was just last year when Mark Zuckerberg says, we don't want people who are under age 13, they're not on our platform. And your testimony here today is, in fact, they're rampant on the platform, and Meta is specifically targeting them. Isn't that your testimony?

Ms. SAVAGE. Yes, that's correct.

Senator HAWLEY. So, Mark Zuckerberg has once again, deliberately misled and lied to the American people. I mean, this is really, really extraordinary.

Let me just make sure that I understand the full import of what you're testifying to. Dr. Sattizahn, if I could just come back to you. You have testified that Meta erases evidence of sexual abuse on its VR platform. Is that correct?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Correct.

Senator HAWLEY. That Meta changes research to not gather data on emotional and sexual harm once it became aware that it was rampant. Is that correct?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. That is correct.

Senator HAWLEY. That Meta manipulates results of data to obscure any harm or other damage, shall we say, to users. Is that correct?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. That's correct.

Senator HAWLEY. Why do the research at all?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. That's a great question. You have to do research. Actually, going back to my earlier point. The, the siloing of research helps explain this. When you put the most sensitive research into sort of bucket where no one else sees it, all of the other research that's done is phenomenal. And other researchers of the company are great at their job. They help make the product look better, play better, and experience better, but they're not thinking about safety or integrity because they're told not to.

Senator HAWLEY. Well, my question is why do any research at all on harms? You've testified that you were doing research on harms, other people did research on harms, but Meta and its various entities, legal, et cetera, the C-Suite, would intervene and say,

not that, change this, scrub that. Why do any of it to begin with then?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. It comes down to the facts that some research is necessary to create a paper trail in order to show that you are doing it.

Senator HAWLEY. Yes, exactly.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. For instance, privacy work, you have to show that you are abiding by some sort of general data privacy, whether you're in one country or another, and you have to have that on record. But there are some things that are too sensitive to be done, et cetera,

Senator HAWLEY. Isn't it precisely so that you can come before bodies like this one and go before the public and go before your shareholders and say, we're doing research on harm. We're doing gobs of research on harm. What they don't tell you is they're altering the research on harm.

The whole point of doing it is so you can lie about it and create the impression that, in fact, as Zuckerberg testified to this Committee, oh, we're tracking it closely, when in fact, they're lying about it through their teeth. I mean, isn't that in fact what's going on?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. If I may?

Senator HAWLEY. Please.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Yesterday Andy Stone spokesperson from Meta actually used this exact same excuse, a tweet about 12 hours ago, where his response to The Washington Post article, which is we predicted a year ago, was, we have done over 180 studies, including topics such as youth harm, et cetera.

That response, again, is a lie by avoidance because it's pointing out some number that means nothing. The whole point of this testimony is that the research they're doing is being pruned and manipulated. Yet, now they're going before yourself, a government body, the public, and saying, "But look, we did some research."

Senator HAWLEY. Why is having children under the age of 13, why is it so important to Meta? You both testified to this, your declarations testified to it. Why is it so important to Meta? Go ahead, Ms. Savage.

Ms. SAVAGE. Children drive product adoption in the household, and VR is a gaming device.

Senator HAWLEY. So, they drive product adoption, which means what for Meta, just cash it out for us?

Ms. SAVAGE. That means the reason that families buy VR headsets is for kids.

Senator HAWLEY. Which means more money for Meta.

Ms. SAVAGE. Yes.

Senator HAWLEY. So, this is about profits at the end of the day?

Ms. SAVAGE. Yes.

Senator HAWLEY. Let's just be really clear. Meta's number one, bottom line is money. It is profits bar nothing. That's it. And what you're testifying to is they will do anything, anything, including exposing our children to the most vile sexual abuse if it means more profits for Meta. Have I got that right?

Ms. SAVAGE. Yes. If I may?

Senator HAWLEY. Please.

Ms. SAVAGE. When I was doing research to identify the harms that children were facing in VR, which I had to be sneaky about because legal wouldn't actually let me do it, I identified that Roblox, the app in VR was being used by coordinated pedophile rings. They set up strip clubs and they pay children to strip, and that Robux can be converted into real money.

So, and I flagged this to Meta. I said, under no circumstances should we host the app Roblox on their headset. You can now download it in their app store.

Senator HAWLEY. I'm going to turn my this back over to the Chairwoman because my time has expired. I just want to end by saying this; it is abundantly clear to me that it is time to allow parents and victims to sue this company. They have got to be able to get into court, and to get in front of a jury, and hold this company accountable. And that begins with Mark Zuckerberg. There has to be accountability. We need to open the courtroom doors and allow victims to have their day in court. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. SAVAGE. Senator Padilla, you're recognized.

Senator PADILLA. Thank you, Madam Chair. And thank you to the witnesses for being here. Mr. Sattizahn in your written testimony, you shared that in January 2023, you launched a survey of Meta virtual reality users, including minors and adults. That survey revealed that nearly half of Meta's VR users experienced harm, and 1 in 10 users experienced severe harm such as racism or sexual inappropriateness. These aren't isolated incidents. They reflect a systematic problem across the platform. Correct me if you disagree.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Not at all.

Senator PADILLA. Okay. So, your survey also showed that Meta users, including minors, didn't know enough about the tools that exists intended to keep them safe. And yet, after your study revealed this, Meta denied multiple requests to invest in user education. Is that your understanding?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. This is correct.

Senator PADILLA. Okay. Like I asked, not just as a Senator, but as a parent, to think that Meta would have resources available to better keep kids safe but not implement them is beyond troubling. Just as we don't allow car companies to sell vehicles without seat belts anymore, or drug companies to market medicines without clear safety labels medicines, VR system should be no different.

So, my first question to you is; what resources would have been helpful? Who denied these requests and why?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. The resourcing that would be helpful is staffing is money. You know, I mentioned in my disclosure over my 6 years at Meta, I was always in this exact space; integrity and safety. One constant over my 6 years was not having enough money to build for safety. Our engineering staff was always understaffed. Research staff was always understaffed. You might have noticed, but I was the only researcher for integrity across virtual reality software.

That still gives me goosebumps when I think about it because I think I'm a good researcher. No researcher's good enough to cover that whole space by themselves. The thing that would've helped is taking the resourcing from chasing the next shiny object just to boost, you know, user engagement and given some of those re-

sources that time, that money to our teams trying to build for safer products.

Senator PADILLA. Thank you. Now, I also recall a hearing that we had in the last Congress in this Committee when CEOs of the five social media companies, including Meta testified to. There was a full Committee, not the Subcommittee. And I recall asking each of them to share data with us about not just the tools available for minors and for parents, but what the adoption rates were for those tools.

Surprise, surprise, they didn't share a whole ton of information, and what limited data we did receive suggested that the adoption rates were very low. So, as a followup question, in your testimony wrote through your survey research that virtually no one used parental supervision controls in Meta VR. Why are adoption rates so low, and what can be done, should be done to improve those adoption rates?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Yes, so both my colleague and I have worked in this space so long that we've known at Meta internally that these types of parental controls were not sufficient to keep individuals safe. I'd have to go back, and I'm happy to followup on this, I believe the earliest report that I saw was from 2018, an Instagram report showing that these types of parental controls that I believe Mr. Zuckerberg was referring to, in this case, were not sufficient for parents to keep children safe.

And so, when we look into my research and we see somewhere between, I believe it was 2 to 10 percent of adoption rates, it didn't surprise me because not even the children who are experiencing VR in this case even see these things as valuable because from the onset, they weren't actually built to be valuable for those people using them. I don't know if you have anything to add because you also work in this space.

Senator PADILLA. Ms. Savage, please.

Ms. SAVAGE. If I may, I mean, certainly the parental supervision tools are not sufficient, in large part, because there's no parent education. And particularly, when we're talking about VR, we know that usually the kids are the ones using the headsets and the parents are not using VR, and it's fundamentally a different world.

So, parents don't understand the risks that children face. They don't understand the ways that they should be supervising. And this is something that I flagged to Meta leadership that we needed to make a priority. And it has not been meaningfully actioned on, so.

Senator PADILLA. Okay. Well, I thank you both for your testimony, and may followup with questions for the record after the hearing today. Thank you.

Chair BLACKBURN. Senator Moody, you're recognized.

Senator MOODY. Good afternoon. Thank you for joining us. It's heartbreaking that we have to have this hearing. I'm one of the newest U.S. Senators here in Washington, and when I was in Florida, I was the attorney general. And one of the hardest things for me as attorney general was balancing being a mother with a school-aged child and also being the attorney general on behalf of the State, protecting the all of the children in Florida.

And as difficult as that was, of being the first mom on our cabinet of the school-aged child, I thought it brought to me a perspective and almost an urgency in focusing on some of these issues, whether that meant vaping going on in our elementary schools or predators getting to our children online.

And I think what you're saying today is something that I have been trying to tell everyone. We really are the first generation of parents having to raise kids in this age of social media, and VR, and online platforms when Congress has done nothing to keep up with the evolution of technology. And they're basically saying, figure it out yourselves. It's the Wild, Wild West.

And you are saying today that they knew not only that parents really didn't know how to use it, but they weren't using parental controls. Is that correct? Yes or no?

Ms. SAVAGE. That's correct.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. That's correct.

Senator MOODY. So, I would consider myself pretty knowledgeable in this area, considering I was one of the first attorney generals to sue Meta in court for damaging and harming our children. And yet, it doesn't surprise you that someone like me who has all of this knowledge had to go to my own child and say, "How do I find the parental controls?"

Ms. SAVAGE. Not at all.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Not at all.

Senator MOODY. And you believe that Meta knew this?

Ms. SAVAGE. Yes.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Yes.

Senator MOODY. One of the other things that is shocking, what I've tried to tell other parents, and they're finding this out slowly at surely because if their children haven't been harmed, their friends have been harmed. And we used to say, had of rules that we all knew as parents, don't go to that van, don't take that candy, don't do this, don't talk to that stranger. Stranger danger. Stranger danger now exists in our children's bedrooms. Is that correct?

Ms. SAVAGE. That's correct.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Correct.

Senator MOODY. And did you find in your research, and is there documentation at Meta, and do employees know that children under 13, or let's say children under 18, are being propositioned and harmed by predators?

Ms. SAVAGE. Yes.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Yes.

Senator MOODY. And you're saying that Meta knew this, and a way to deal with that is they brought in a team of lawyers to tell their researchers what language to use in reports so that it could qualify as attorney client privilege?

Ms. SAVAGE. Yes.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Correct.

Senator MOODY. So, if there was a warehouse, and someone knew that children were inside that warehouse being harmed by adults, do you think it would be sufficient to have a lawyer work with the people outside to make it conducive, or allow for or cover up what was happening to the children in the warehouse?

Ms. SAVAGE. Of course not.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Not at all.

Senator MOODY. But because it's on an online space, we're expected to all just take it because they brought in a team of lawyers and taught them what language to use

Ms. SAVAGE. And they think parents don't know about the warehouse.

Senator MOODY. And I believe there was a report that said Meta proposed two ways that researchers could limit the risk of conducting sensitive research. One suggestion was to loop lawyers into their research, protecting their communications from "adverse parties." And I'm using quotes there. I'm assuming the adverse parties mean parents and kids. Due to attorney-client privilege. Researchers could also write about their findings more vaguely avoiding terms like noncompliant or illegal. Is that correct?

Ms. SAVAGE. Yes.

Senator MOODY. Is that correct?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. It is correct.

Senator MOODY. I've been a lawyer. I've been a judge. I don't know if attorney-client privilege covers lawyers that are complicit and help with facilitating an ongoing violation of law, especially when it relates to harming children. But yet, you as researchers, were instructed to use different language and include lawyers so that this could all be shielded.

Ms. SAVAGE. Yes.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. May I add something to this?

Senator MOODY. Please.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. We were also threatened by lawyers. I want to make that clear. It wasn't a suggestion. It wasn't research guidance. Meta has already claimed that in The Washington Post. It wasn't legal being able to make the research better. We, both of us, had met with legal and they threatened our own jobs if we did not do this. One of the quotes they said was, "You wouldn't want to have to testify publicly if this research was to get out, would you?" And we're here. So, clearly, we didn't mind that.

Senator MOODY. Well, aside from ethical obligations of lawyers, I'm pretty sure attorney-client privilege doesn't cover the cooperation, and planning, and enabling of the continued violation of laws. And I appreciate you, Madam Chairman, for being here today and conducting this hearing.

Chair BLACKBURN. Absolutely. And before I turn to Senator Coons. I want to followup on what you were saying. Here's the Oculus headset box. And we know that only 2 percent of parents use the parental controls. So, when I got this, I went through looking for where are the parental controls.

I have two grandsons. I know that they enjoy this. And right here on the bottom of the box is one tiny QR code, one SKU right here, one code. And that is what a parent would have to go to after they put their glasses on [laughter] to try to find this thing, and then find that that is something that they can scan and then pull this up.

I would just be curious; do we have any of the lobbyist for the social media platforms in the room today? I haven't seen anyone, I think. I think they probably don't have enough courage to come

and face these parents that are here today. And again, we thank you. Senator Coons, you're recognized.

Senator COONS. Thank you so much, Senator Blackburn, Senator Klobuchar, for convening this important hearing today, and to our two witnesses for your courage, your determination to make sure that the truth gets out, protecting our children from harm. It's the highest obligation all of us have.

And it must have been so difficult for you to work for a company that in some ways does admirable things, delivers great services, but that as you serve there longer and longer, you began to realize was knowingly, and willingly, willfully blinding themselves to the harm that their products and services cause children. And then taking aggressive action to prevent you from studying or understanding the harm being caused to children, and then try to prevent you from communicating about that to anyone.

So, here you are today testifying in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee to a bipartisan panel that includes seasoned prosecutors and seasoned Senators and parents and grandparents. And frankly, your testimony has been alarming, even jaw dropping.

To summarize, Meta prioritized engagement over safety for billions. And when you tried to inform them of demonstrable harm and risk to children, they first turned a blind eye, and then tried to handcuff or blind you and others charged with research and promoting integrity. So, whether it's artificial intelligence or social media or virtual reality, we are in a very difficult period for parents.

As Senator Blackburn just demonstrated, many of us lack the focus, skill, and ability to navigate the exact path toward parental controls on systems our kids are employing. And so, a very small percentage of parents are effectively protecting their children. They would expect that businesses that provide these services would test whether they're safe and would build them to be safe for children.

Yet, your testimony proves otherwise. This ends up happening because there's a huge imbalance in power between Big Tech platforms who have all the data and all the power to understand the impact of their products, and engineer them to favor safety of the children and families, the policymakers, and the advocacy groups who have no way to get that insight.

Addressing this imbalance of power is a fundamental and essential component of ensuring we're protecting our kids online. I want to talk briefly about three bills that I've introduced or am developing that are designed to help address this. The first, with Senator Cassidy, is the Platform Accountability and Transparency Act. It creates mechanisms for independent researchers to study what's happening on social media platforms, how their algorithms drive engagement over safety.

Second, with Senator Grassley, a bill to protect whistleblowers, particularly in the space of artificial intelligence who come forward to disclose serious safety violations or vulnerabilities. And then last, a bill I'm developing to create similar mechanisms for independent research and transparency in artificial intelligence platforms.

If we don't move forward bills like these and some of the bills my colleagues have championed, we are continuing to allow Big

Tech to grade their own homework, to build their own platforms, and to continue to cruise forward toward profitability through engagement, blinded or uncaring about the harm to our children.

So, Mr. Sattizahn, if I might, your testimony about all the ways that Meta buried or hindered internal research is just stunning. Given what you saw on the inside, could you just say a few words about the value and importance of ensuring there's mechanisms for independent researchers to actually study what's happening, whether it's in virtual reality, social media platforms, or AI?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Yes, thank you so much for going over those three different initiatives as well.

Senator COONS. Thank you.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. I'd say, you know, over the last 6 years, it was very clear to me that they will not change from the inside out. Meta will not change from the inside out. And during my long tenure there, the only things that actually led to professionalism or doing the right thing was Meta's fear of losing control; whether that was losing control over their own finances or losing control from some regulation or oversight coming in from the outside.

So, all I have to say is, I love that phrase, they cannot grade their own homework because the only thing that will change the company is initiatives like that vying for independence, because as I've also testified, is if we rely on their own research, it will just be altered, changed, or even just erased. I don't know if you had anything to add.

Senator COONS. Dr. Sattizahn and Ms. Savage, if you would, what's most important for us to get right in legislation that ensures access for independent researchers?

Ms. SAVAGE. I think, I mean, partially starting at collection, starting with the methods that are being used to gather the data the populations that we're looking at, et cetera, but also having access to the data before it's analyzed. That's very critical.

Senator COONS. Ms. Savage, could you talk about the ways Meta specifically discouraged employees from coming forward as whistleblowers, and what more robust whistleblower protections might be important in order to ensure that, we, policymakers, the public, parents, know about the risks their kids are facing?

Ms. SAVAGE. Absolutely. I think the most powerful weapon that Meta had internally was narrative. After Frances Haugen's disclosure, Meta referred to the incident as a leak and frequently said, "Oh, this this was so harmful to the researchers whose reports were shared. This has really been harmful for our ability to do good research and actually investigate harms to users."

In terms of actual whistleblower protections. I think part of it is the folks who are actually whistleblowing, but also the folks who remain at the company who do the investigation. I'm curious if you have anything to add there.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. I think it was phenomenal.

Senator COONS. And my sense is that, in closing, that good research is independent, unbiased, repeatable, and through legal action can lead to improvements in product safety. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Chair BLACKBURN. Senator Schiff, you're recognized.

Senator SCHIFF. Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you and Senator Klobuchar for organizing this hearing today. And thank you both for your courage in coming forward and speaking out. I can only imagine how difficult that has been, but so vitally necessary if there's ever going to be any change not just with respect to Meta, but with respect to the whole ecosystem.

I wanted to ask you in some of your prepared remarks or things you said in the past, you identified information essentially that Meta's legal department or others willfully erased, removed. Can you tell us specifically what you're referring to there?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Sure. So, I would like to contextualize this with an example. I was running a survey, for instance, that I discussed a little bit in my disclosure where we found explicit information showing that women were being emotionally and psychologically harmed.

After that survey was released, legal came to me, a legal team came to me and said this survey will not run in the future no matter what, unless you take those questions out. That would be something along the funnel that they are preventing any additional data from being collected around that topic.

In other instances where I saw emotional or psychological harm as one example, and I had already written the report, legal actually opened the report with me and said, "You have to take out these slides. You have to take out these lines."

And for context, in research, all data on the backend needs to be deleted in 90 days. So, if legal is going into a report and taking out lines or slides, they're effectively simply erasing the data anyway because it's our ethical duty as researchers to erase everyone's other private data before we analyze it as well.

So, those are just a couple examples of things, ways that they would remove that information.

Senator SCHIFF. And what kind of justification, if any, did they give you for deleting that data or instructing you not to ask those questions? How overt were they the about concerns that this would expand their exposure, or these were answers they didn't want to know, or they just wanted to purge the record of anything that didn't reflect well? I mean, what's the point of doing research if you're going to so bias the result? But what did they articulate as a justification?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Legal's repeated, explicit statements to me was that we did not want this data because it was too risky for us to have, because if there was an outside audit, it would be discovered that Meta knew about these harms. That was said to me dozens of times by my direct legal partners that I was forced to work with from Meta.

Senator SCHIFF. And was there any pushback to that idea within Meta that is, were there others at Meta who were saying we're seeing real harms here and whether you minimize your legal exposure or not, the harms are taking place, something has to be done about this. Was there any kind of pushback like that?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. There was. I know myself I went to both management and leadership over years with this, and it was entirely denigrated and pushed aside. Other researchers that I knew who shared similar concerns, either left the company, or were in direct

fear of losing their role and decided to stop speaking up about it out of, you know, retaliation and losing their job.

Senator SCHIFF. And the management that rejected these concerns out of hand, how did they reject them? What was their argument?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. In one instance, my direct manager stated that she agreed with me and that I might very well be right, but that we needed to listen to legal anyway because that was the instruction.

Senator SCHIFF. And did that kind of instruction, in your view, reflect the top leadership at the company essentially was legal following what they believed to be the culture of the very top leadership at Meta?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. When this entire change after Haugen happened, leading to what we're discussing now, it went as high as Meta CTO, Andrew Bosworth, arguing with people one-on-one in comment sections about researchers speaking out about these problems. The CTO of the company was arguing with researchers like us who were speaking up saying that this lockdown on research was inappropriate.

Senator SCHIFF. And do you have any sense from your colleagues who are or were within similar positions in other of the tech companies, whether what you were experiencing was an anomaly, or whether what you're experiencing is really the rule within the industry that is see no evil here, no evil don't have to address any evil or any ill result no matter how dire might be on young people?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Yes. After working at Sony PlayStation, at Meta, and working directly with individuals who worked at Google, et cetera, I can say that this is pure Meta.

Senator SCHIFF. So, this is. So, you think this particular culture is unique to Meta?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Correct. Every tech company has issues with schedules and the fast pace leading to certain tradeoffs, but this culture of kowtowing to legal blindly, I have not heard of it anywhere else.

Senator SCHIFF. Thank you, Madam Chair,

Chair BLACKBURN. Thank you so much. I think there's interest in a second round of questions, and if you all don't mind, we will proceed to that.

I want to stay right with this funnel of manipulation and look at that. I know that Frances Haugen had talked about the risk Meta became paranoid and then they talked about not the risk to kids and to people that were on their platform, but the risk to their bottom line. Is that accurate? Okay, y'all are nodding. Yes.

Ms. SAVAGE. That's correct.

Chair BLACKBURN. Okay. So, in order to get legal protection, so they couldn't be hauled into court, they went to third-party vendors, correct, and Dr. Sattizahn, you want to talk about that for a moment?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Correct. So, one part of this funnel of manipulation was that legal's consistent guidance across nearly every study I ran, and I know my colleague, Ms. Savage, ran as well, was that we were required to have third-party vendors collect data for us.

Just for the record, third-party vendors are individuals who are not Meta employees, but are paid via contract to collect data for Meta.

The explicit expressed reason that legal was telling us to have third-party vendors collect the data was so that the data could be erased if they found anything that was “too sensitive”.

Chair BLACKBURN. So, therefore, they would have some protection.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Correct.

Chair BLACKBURN. And some distance and would not have that liability.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Correct.

Chair BLACKBURN. Okay. Did you find it odd you worked at PlayStation, and PlayStation has recommended ages for PlayStation?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. That’s correct.

Chair BLACKBURN. Movies have age recommendations and ratings. Video games, likewise. Did you find it odd that Oculus did not have an age rating, that they had escaped?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. That I did. I found it very odd indeed.

Chair BLACKBURN. Did you raise that with Meta?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. I did, mainly through attempting to correct our age data so that we even knew what types of experiences would be exposed to different individuals.

Chair BLACKBURN. Okay. Ms. Savage, I want to talk with you about the content of the research that Meta was fearful of. And much of this we think you know is because they were looking for some way to escape liability.

But the documents that I’ve reviewed, and I thank you all for submitting documents to us, I think have some really great insight into the pervasive abuse occurring on these VR products. And one example, Ms. Savage, that you gave us raised questions about how children were sidestepping age requirements and that Meta didn’t care about that. So, talk to me about the research that you presented to Meta on that and how they pushed back.

Ms. SAVAGE. The first study that I did for the VR youth space was on parental supervision of VR, and that research very clearly showed that parents were most involved during the setup of the headset. And then after that, really it was just the child using it.

So, firstly, we saw that parents were often making accounts under their own information on behalf of the child. Partially because they thought that that would give them supervisory access, but also partially because they didn’t want Meta to have their child’s data. So, of course, then the child is using an adult-aged account because Meta has not educated parents about the importance of children using appropriately aged accounts.

But also, we saw that children are the ones who are driving headset buying in the household. Children are the ones using it. So, often, children are making their own accounts because they want access to restricted games. They want access to adult content and things like that. That’s part of development. Children seek mature experiences and parents are often not aware that children are doing this because, again, Meta hasn’t educated them.

Chair BLACKBURN. Okay. And let’s talk briefly about the *Germany* case. I want to get that on the record, and you have talked about that when we visited. And I think that that incident really,

there's a lot of that resistance that coalesces in this. So, outline the *Germany* case for us.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Yes. So, after when VR headsets were going back to being sold in Germany around, I believe, November 2022, we were asked as a team to research basically what the safety was like in Germany itself. Despite asking management and leadership, we were never actually explicitly told why we were doing research in Germany. And it was to my understanding that it was because they wanted a paper trail, a research study, to show that it was safe to do research in Germany to release again in Germany and have this headset sold to children.

When we went to a German family's house to have an interview with his family, a young mother, one of her children we were interviewing about how they use these headsets and her son began discussing how another member of their family, an underaged, I believe he was around 8 or 9 years old, his younger brother was sexually propositioned, was asked for nude photos, had all sorts of sexual harm occur to him when he was using the headset privately.

And the mother was horrified, in fact, actively even when Meta tried to, in real time, shut down the questioning by the moderator because they didn't like the data they were collecting, the mom kept asking for the son to talk about it. She was giving explicit consent in order to understand what is going on with my family in this case. Despite that fact, afterwards we were asked to delete all of our notes and recordings of it happening, and we did not discuss it again after that.

Chair BLACKBURN. Okay. Let me ask you this, and my time has expired, but has Meta been sued by the EU for any privacy violations? You can submit that so that I can get that on the record.

Chair BLACKBURN. Senator Klobuchar, you're recognized.

Senator KLOBUCHAR [off mic]. I think Senator Blumenthal.

Chair BLACKBURN. Okay. Senator Blumenthal.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. I apologize. We have another hearing going on, as frequently happens in this place, and votes, and so forth. So, I really am sorry that I haven't been here, and I especially apologize if I'm retreading some of what you've already talked about.

But I think that the issue of shifting responsibility, offloading the burden of caring for kids as Meta has done, is especially important here. Because to the parents of America, I want to say, you are not alone here. You need help. And I say that as one who has received some help from my four children and still regard myself as learning about how to protect children. But what really offends me is that Meta knew that, as you have said, Ms. Savage, and I'm quoting, "Parents were neither prepared to meaningful meaningfully use the VR parental controls, nor likely to use them often, and that the controls alone were insufficient to keep teens safe."

In all your disclosures, you indicate that Meta was all too happy to pass the responsibility for protecting their own children onto parents or other companies anyone but themselves. And I want to invite you to expand on that point that you've made, Ms. Savage.

Ms. SAVAGE. I appreciate it. I think the most egregious delineation of this is on the bottom of the box, it says, "Not all children are ready for Meta VR." The implication there to me is, you know,

if something goes wrong in VR, it is the child's fault because they're not mature enough to handle the experience.

Part of the reason that parental supervision tools are not sufficient is because of the lack of education about what it means to be ready for VR, what it means to use VR but also the fact that VR is social and usually entails interacting with strangers and what that means parents are often shocked. Parents whose children use VR headsets are often shocked when I describe to them what the experience of using VR actually is, and what the experience of being sexually harassed in VR actually is like.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. And that is the reason why in our legislation, the Kids Online Safety Act, we impose a duty of care to provide parents with help, but impose a responsibility on Big Tech companies to provide that help, not just as a matter of their goodwill, but their responsibility when they know that there is a danger to children and to take action to help prevent that harm. What is your experience with age verification?

Ms. SAVAGE. Oh, yes. I proposed a research study called Age Assurance, which encompasses age prediction, stated age, and age verification. Because the quality of Meta's age data is very poor, as we can see, Meta claims, if we know that there's a 13-year-old kick off of the platform, and yet their platform remains full of children under 13.

And so, clearly, I knew additional research was needed, particularly research because VR is a new kind of technology, which encompasses new ways of gathering data to understand someone's age. And that was the research that was mysteriously shut down.

Part of verification, though, is the user needs to perceive some value, and they need to be willing to provide the company with information, either their birthday or their ID. And Meta has something that internally is called a "brand tax", which means that users don't trust Meta with their data and so are less willing to provide things like ID, and that's part of the reason why users often don't accurately represent their age.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. And I want to just ask you, finally, have you heard from Meta's leadership or their executives about your testimony here today?

Ms. SAVAGE. Not directly.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Not at all.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. When you say, "Not directly"?

Ms. SAVAGE. They have—did respond to The Washington Post.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. In other words, you've read what their responses are in published sources, but they haven't contacted you directly.

Ms. SAVAGE. Correct.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Not at all, no.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. Thanks, Madam Chair,

Chair BLACKBURN. Senator Hawley.

Senator HAWLEY. Ms. Savage, you testified earlier that a majority, in your view, a majority of Meta's VR users are under the age of 13. I'm just curious what percentage, if you had to guess, or maybe you know the exact number, maybe you do, Doctor, but what proportion of Meta's VR users, the children, the minors, are

exposed to explicit content, sexual propositioning, sexual abuse of some kind on the VR platform?

Ms. SAVAGE. The prevalence of it is extremely high because it's very difficult to monitor that content in VR. It's difficult to monitor it on Instagram much less VR. So, I would estimate that any child that is in a social space in VR will come in contact with or directly expose something very inappropriate.

Senator HAWLEY. I'm sorry, did you say any child?

Ms. SAVAGE. Yes.

Senator HAWLEY. So, you mean every user?

Ms. SAVAGE. Yes.

Senator HAWLEY. Every user will be exposed. Every minor, every child will be exposed to sexually explicit content of some sort. Is what you're saying?

Ms. SAVAGE. I see it every time I use the headset.

Senator HAWLEY. That's remarkable. That's just remarkable. You also said, Ms. Savage, that negligence in VR platform is emblematic of negligence across Meta's platforms when it comes to child safety. Let me just ask you about chatbots. This has come up before. I'm sure that you're aware of the recent reporting that Meta allowed its AI chatbots to engage in explicit content, romantic and sensual, I think, conversations with children.

Let's just take a look actually at what the internal document brought forward by a whistleblower said. It's right here in this middle portion. This is a Meta document. "It is acceptable to engage a child in conversations that are romantic or sensual." Let me say that again. "It is acceptable to engage a child in conversations that are romantic or sensual. It is acceptable to describe a child in terms that evidence their attractiveness."

Again, this is Meta's own internal—these are their own internal guidelines. Does this surprise you at all?

[Poster is displayed.]

Ms. SAVAGE. Unfortunately, no.

Senator HAWLEY. Doctor, does this surprise you?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Not at all.

Senator HAWLEY. When Meta says, as they have said, following the disclosure of these guidelines, that they will redouble their efforts to make sure that children are safe on their platforms, including with chatbots, does that give you any comfort? Do you think that we should take them at their word?

Ms. SAVAGE. Oh, no.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. In no way, shape, or form. No.

Senator HAWLEY. In no way, shape, or form. Let me just ask you one other thing. You've been with—you were with Meta. How long, Ms. Savage, approximately?

Ms. SAVAGE. Four years.

Senator HAWLEY. Four years. Dr. Sattizahn, what about you?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Six years. And I do want to say for context, that's about longer than 90 percent of employees will ever work at the company because the turnover is so quickly. I believe it would've been about 80 for you.

Ms. SAVAGE. They calculate it for us on our profiles, so we know that that's correct.

Senator HAWLEY. Wow. Four years and 6 years, respectively. As you look back on it, if you knew then what you know now, would you've gone to work for Meta, Ms. Savage?

Ms. SAVAGE. I think I knew that about the company going into it. I hoped to make it better.

Senator HAWLEY. Doctor?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. I would've, and I would've taken even better documentation.

[Laughter.]

Senator HAWLEY. Let me just end with this. Do you think, based on what you know now in your time at the company, do you think that Meta is a force for good in this country and in the world?

Ms. SAVAGE. I don't see how they can be.

Senator HAWLEY. Dr. Sattizahn?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. No. It is aggressively ambivalent to people.

Senator HAWLEY. Aggressively ambivalent to people. And yet, this is a company all about people, their attention, their interests, their data, their lives. This company has lost its way, profoundly lost its way, and they are harming our children as a result. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Chair BLACKBURN. Senator Klobuchar.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Oh, thank you very much, Senator Blackburn, and thank you, Senator Hawley, Senator Blumenthal, and I will remember forever the aggressively ambivalent, which I think is one of the many ways we can describe what's going on here.

So, Mr. Sattizahn, Meta is the global leader in virtual reality and mixed reality devices, with reported 73 percent market share. When the dominant player, and I think this is key—as you may know, I do a lot of work on antitrust. And so, when the dominant player in virtual reality suppresses, alters, and deletes research into youth safety, how does that hinder the broader industry from implementing and improving safety standards for young users? Not that it would be good if anyone did it, but in my mind, it makes a difference. Could you explain your view of that?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. There's no incentive for the company to change at this point. There were workings internally at the company, there were consistent discussions about this, that we were too big to fail in this space. My own data that I've shared with you all have, has shown the sheer number of individuals that are focused only on Oculus platforms for VR.

And one of the thing that I do want to say that you would only understand if you work inside of these companies is that when you have a such a major player that is sucking up all engagement and commercialization of this thing, you end up taking a lot of the engineers and the people that build for it, that then have to abide by the rules, these unethical rules that they're forcing everyone to follow. And it creates this vacuum effect where then nothing can change.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. So, it's harder for the other companies to access that. And then, as well as they create almost this completely already to me unfair advantage, by being so big. And then, they also make it harder for the little ones to do it, because then they wouldn't even be competing on this. In this very sad playing field

where a lot of the goal has been to bring in these kids to get more advertising research. Not the only goal by far, but one of the goals.

Dr. SATTIZAHN. If I may. I also want to add that the advent of Meta's VR is so unique because the integration of billions of data points of content from social media has never existed. Meta is social first in VR, and so not only are they taking the entire gaming space, it's that now they're integrating Instagram content and Facebook content, which no other platform has. And it creates this system of virtual reality that it's not just gaming, it's everything, and no one understands the rules.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Yes. Mr. Sattizahn, you provided research results to the Subcommittee that showed that 36 percent of users reported unwanted sexual advances either every time or often in virtual reality. Is it true that Meta stopped tracking information about unwanted sexual advances rather than enact safeguards against sexual harassment?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. It is true. And I also want to mention that they also obscured findings from study to study to limit that data being collected as well.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. And can you talk about the prevalence of sexual harassment on Meta's virtual reality platforms, and whether Meta did enough to stop it?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. No. I would've to go back and look at statistics. I happily do a followup for this. To my memory, to my recollection, it was about 10 to 20 percent of individuals across the board were experiencing sexual molestation, groping solicitation, and it was significantly higher for women.

This was something that I repeatedly went to management and leadership about, and I was repeatedly told that we were underfunded. We could not develop the sort of safety tools or even basic education so that people would know that this just might be something they'd see. Education itself is very powerful, because even if someone just knows that this is a possibility, you might have some sort of remediations or tools even insufficient in order to handle the problem.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. You want to add something, then I had a question for you, Ms. Savage.

Ms. SAVAGE. Oh, Meta is worth almost \$2 trillion, are they not?

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Yes, that's right. So, Ms. Savage, Meta's virtual reality platform can be used, as we discussed in my opening, by child predators to mingle with kids online while concealing their age and identity. And the consequences can of course be devastating.

In 2022, two separate kidnapping incidences were connected to the virtual products. Adult men convinced teenage girls in the unreal world to meet them in the real world where they were able to kidnap and move them across State lines. Luckily, both girls were found by police, returned home safely.

Can you talk more about how seemingly innocent relationships fostered in virtual reality can lead to harms in the real world?

Ms. SAVAGE. That's a very good question. And my own research showed that while parents have rules about interacting with strangers for children, it takes only a few interactions before they

consider someone a friend online. Trust is built very quickly. That's part of the development process.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Right, especially with kids.

Ms. SAVAGE. Exactly. And so, particularly, when you don't know what someone looks like in real life, if they tell you they're your age, you'll likely believe them. So, it's very easy to build trust. And of course, there are playbooks that individuals who are groomers use for this.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Right. Why is it uniquely challenging for parents in law enforcement to detect harm in virtual reality environments?

Ms. SAVAGE. Part of it is because there's no log of it, and the child is—they have something strapped to their face that you often can't see. So, parents, it may be happening in the living room and parents may not be able to see what's happening, but also because children consider, unfortunately, sexual solicitation and things like this to be pretty normal. And so, they may not tell their parents that this is happening. Also, part of development is that children are learning what is and is not. So, it may be happening and the child may think nothing is wrong.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. So, last question here. In addition to the bill that my colleagues have long worked on and got through the U.S. Senate on kids and the standard of care, and things that we need to do to update our laws.

One other idea, of course, is to make changes to Section 230 in every other business sector. Parents who believe a company contributed harm to their kids have a right to have their case heard in court. But social media companies argue that parents have no such rights because Section 230 immunizes them regardless of the content that they push to users, all while making billions in profits off of tracking and marketing tickets.

I often think if we had put in place this ability decades ago, a decade ago, 5 years ago, we would never be where we are now with fentanyl being sold and pornography. And finally, we're starting to do something. But all that time passed, all those kids' lives were damaged or lost forever.

And do you believe that victims—I'll ask each, I'll ask you first, Mr. Sattizahn—victims of harm that occur on Meta's platform should have the ability to sue Meta for its roles in these harms? And do you think Meta will change its behavior and take child safety online seriously without opening the courtroom doors to victims?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. To your first question, I believe it is necessary. As I mentioned before, only outside regulation and financial punishment is something that will actually create change inside the company. So, to answer your question, that would essentially be necessary for the company to learn or at least change its behavior in the future.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Ms. Savage.

Ms. SAVAGE. I agree. And I would also say harm that happens online is harm. Full stop. And so, parents should be able to respond accordingly.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Okay. Thank you.

Chair BLACKBURN. Senator Blumenthal.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you, Chair. I know we've been at this for a while. I just have a few questions to conclude. You know, I asked you before whether Meta had contacted you directly, you said not, but you have read their responses in The Washington Post.

And I'll just put it bluntly. In effect, they're calling you liars. They say that, "Your testimony is based on a few examples stitched together to fit a predetermined and false narrative." And their spokesperson says, "We stand by our research team's excellent work, and are dismayed by these mischaracterizations of the team's efforts."

Let me just say, if Meta wants to come forward and answer questions, I'm sure that my colleagues and I would be glad to hear from them sitting at this table. And in fact, in the meantime, we are going to be writing them a letter. Senator Blackburn and I have been working on it. And once again, I thank her for her leadership demanding that Meta produce its research, and its research policies, and its practices concerning kids' safety. And if you are wrong, that is welcome to show us their evidence.

In the meantime, The Washington Post article is, in my view, a searing indictment. And I know it's long, but I hope folks will read to the end of it, to the very end of it where Meta is quoted on its use of age verification with an ID card or credit card. And the way it uses that tool, if it suspects people are lying and about their age, and to help with another tool to help third party VR developers understand their users' ages.

In 2023, apparently parents were surveyed and they said, in effect, this tool isn't working. And they were advised by Meta, a Meta lawyer, apparently, "Maybe I can take a look and help you strategize a way to frame it so as to avoid these types of responses."

She advised they couldn't destroy the responses they'd already collected, but they could reduce or end these kinds of responses going forward. In other words, see no evil hear no evil. They don't know any evil because they're not going to ask the questions in a way that would elicit information.

And the lawyer advised on another occasion, "I would just phrase it in a way to ensure that participants do not volunteer information about users under 13." The article says the lawyer also checked with the researcher to see whether he had directly asked adults whether their children used Meta VR devices. The researcher said he had not. "Okay. That's great," the lawyer replied.

You know, when Meta denies that your testimony is accurate and correct, and then we have these kinds of direct evidence, it's hard to give any credit to what they say. And so, I invite them to respond to our letter, to give us the research, to show us the policies, to in effect, reveal what they've suppressed and how they have discouraged asking the questions that would show them the truth.

And so, I want to thank both of you for coming forward to tell us the truth. And thank you, Madam Chair.

Chair BLACKBURN. Thank you, Senator Blumenthal. I wanted to ask you; you mentioned that bonuses were given on user engagement. Correct?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. Correct.

Chair BLACKBURN. Were bonuses ever given for creating safety protocols?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. To answer that question, I was instructed over years for my safety and integrity work leading to protocols to be tied solely to engagement. So, in my professional opinion, engagement is not the best measure of if people are safe. It's if people are safe. Yet, from management and leadership, we were told repeatedly that safety initiatives had to be tied to user engagement.

Chair BLACKBURN. There you go. And did you get the sense that Mr. Zuckerberg was intimately involved in decisionmaking around the suppression of child safety research?

Ms. SAVAGE. Would it be helpful to describe what the company used to be like before 2021?

Dr. SATTIZAHN. I believe so. So, when I joined the company in 2018, we used to do things called Zuck reviews. This is when Mark Zuckerberg would come to us or to a team and say, "Hey, I'd like you to do a presentation on Marketplace safety, Facebook dating," et cetera.

When I joined in 2018, I would be in those reviews. I would make a slide. I was asked to contribute to those reviews. And magically, after Frances Haugen's disclosure in 2021, those Zuck reviews went away. Management and leadership still told us that they would have reviews with him about sensitive topics, but it was never directly stated if he saw your work.

The reason that we were told from management and leadership was because they didn't want to have a trail of knowing that he was reviewing sensitive information. But because we were reviewed and our performance was reviewed, if higher ups had seen this stuff, management would look at the two of us and say, hey, it's going up to the higher ups. If it was the CTO, if it was the VP, or anybody else, they would use their name. And if it went up to Mark Zuckerberg, they'd say, hey, it went up the chain to leadership. But I don't know if you had another example for that.

Ms. SAVAGE. After 2021, that's the only thing that changed, is only the absence of Zuck or Mr. Zuckerberg's name.

Chair BLACKBURN. So, in essence, what they did was change the culture to insulate themselves so they would not be sued by parents or by others. They suppressed the research. They used third-party vendors to put up a wall. And again, what we have seen them do is to put profit over children. And they have used children as a profit center when those children are online, regardless of the harms.

I want to thank you all. You've been excellent witnesses, and we are very grateful. We would invite—I joined Senator Blumenthal, if someone from Meta, and I'm sure they are all watching this and they're texting one another back and forth, or signaling so they don't get caught. If they want to challenge what they've heard today, I would encourage them to come forward.

I think that they see there is truly bipartisan anger, not only with Meta, but with these other social media platforms, and virtual reality platforms, and chatbots that are intentionally knowingly harming our children. And this has got to stop. Enough is enough. We are intent on passing the Kids Online Safety Act. I think today has really laid out more of the reason for doing that.

We will continue to submit questions to you for the Committee that will go through Tuesday, September 16 at 5 p.m. We would ask that you respond in a timely manner within a week to those questions.

Chair BLACKBURN. We're grateful to you all. We are grateful to the parents, and this hearing—

Senator KLOBUCHAR. I just—

Chair BLACKBURN. Yes, you go right ahead.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Thank you. I just want to thank you, Madam Chair, and our witnesses. And just to reiterate that the company can come before this Subcommittee. They can provide us answers, but the best way to resolve this is to get this bill passed. To realize there's more and more Senators that are interested in going even farther, and that this is a reality on this Committee right now, including with the Chair and Ranking Member of the entire Judiciary Committee, and that they need to start taking this seriously.

If not for us, and whatever power we have, the fact that we were able to get some bills passed over the last few years, not nearly as much as we want, that they have to understand that we are very serious about this, and that this hearing and your willingness to come forward, the family's willingness to come forward can make change.

It's just a question if they want to have any input in it, or if they just want to make anonymous or spokesperson' comments about it without actually willing to come forward. And so, we're ready to talk to them, but mostly, we want to get something done. We're tired of the talk.

Chair BLACKBURN. Hearing adjourned. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 4:34 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

[Additional material submitted for the record follows.]



**Senate Judiciary Committee  
Subcommittee on Privacy, Technology and the Law**

**Written Statement of Jason Sattizahn  
September 9, 2025**

Chairman Blackburn, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and Members of the Subcommittee.

Thank you for having me here. I am here to discuss Meta's manipulation of research to cover up dangers facing billions across Meta's products, and of particular concern, the millions of children using Meta's virtual reality products.

I also want to recognize and thank the five other past **and current** Meta employees – all researchers like me who worked directly on creating Meta's products – who made the brave decision to be a part of the disclosure that brought us here.

My name is Jason Sattizahn. Growing up in the nineties in the middle of Missouri, I saw both the value and problems that fast advances in technology brought the world. After earning a PhD in Integrative Neuroscience, I realized I wanted to use my research experience to make these technologies and products better for people that use them. Most recently, I spent six years as a researcher at Meta. I worked in some of Meta's most sensitive spaces, tasked with understanding users, their needs, and using this to try and make their products safer.

I am here today because it is evident that Meta consistently chooses profit over safety for its users. I am not the first to discuss this, as repeated whistleblowers have shared Meta's reckless disregard for users. However, in the wake of past whistleblowers, Meta has chosen to ignore the problems **they created** and **bury evidence** of users' negative experiences, rather than build safer experiences.

I worked at Meta from 2018 to 2024. During these six years, I witnessed data scandals, multiple disclosures about Meta's disregard for user safety and children's mental health, and mounting public pressure against Meta. I saw the company respond to these pressures by deliberately compromising internal processes, policies, and research to protect company profits over users.



### Written Statement of Jason Sattizahn (Continued)

During my first role at Meta, I led integrity research for Facebook Marketplace. The data was clear - Marketplace causes suffering for users, including financial loss from stolen or counterfeit items, and personal safety issues ranging from being sexually propositioned **by strangers** to physical assaults and attempted kidnapping.

My time on Marketplace was my first exposure to how Facebook de-prioritized safety to boost user engagement. Simple safety investments such as not allowing people to message strangers with a single click were flatly rejected because product teams were afraid to do anything that could possibly decrease engagement - the metric largely determining success and bonuses. It was around this time I first saw Facebook make false statements to Congress. Contrary to Mark Zuckerberg's previous testimony before Congress, my research enables the company to estimate the overall rates of various types of harm occurring to Facebook Marketplace users. For instance, we can pair just one of the many studies I lead on this topic, estimating the extent of various harm based on estimates of Facebook's ~1 billion active Marketplace shoppers. For example:

- 9% of Marketplace users reported at least one negative experience in the past month (est. 90 million Facebook users per month).
- 0.5% of Marketplace users reported scams/counterfeit goods per month (est. 5 million reports of scams/counterfeit goods per month).
- 0.44% of Marketplace users reported harassment per month (est. 4.4 million reports of harassment per month).
- 0.3% of Marketplace users reported seeing drugs/alcohol per month (est. 3 million reports of seeing drugs/alcohol per month).
- 0.2% of Marketplace users reported stolen goods per month (est. 2 million reports of stolen goods per month)
- 0.16% of Marketplace users reported physical threats/assault per month (est. 1.6 million reports of physical threats/assault per month)
- 0.4% of Marketplace users reported seeing inappropriate images in Marketplace posts (est. 4 million reports of inappropriate photos per month)

When Facebook launched "Faith" efforts to connect religious communities during the Covid lockdown era, I joined because I was scared that Facebook's pattern of disregard for safety would surface in this already fraught context. Sure enough, my research on the use of Facebook for Faith showed large numbers of harms to Facebook users, including:



### Written Statement of Jason Sattizahn (Continued)

- Facebook's own systems for detecting and removing inappropriate content online were faulty, often detecting religious content as "bad" and removing it; this caused multiple faith-groups to see Facebook as religiously persecutorial
- Facebook users' religious spaces would contain harassing, distracting, or otherwise distressing individuals in ways that harm faith-related experiences; this distressing behavior was at times intentional, and other times related to users not having common understanding of proper behavior in these spaces
- Other Facebook Faith users experienced severe physical safety risks, including being lured into public and harassed/assaulted based on their faith

Regardless, recommendations that I made such as creating well-understood community standards and expectations for behaviors in these spaces, and for the company to improve training we give operations teams to detect harm were shut down. Facebook instead focused on features to boost engagement, like an ability to respond to posts with a prayer hands emoji. The explicit reason given for my team focusing on new features rather than safety was because our team was expected to launch something to increase user engagement for the company rather than any other projects. This expectation was so strong that teammates I worked with on the faith team shared a deep fear that if they were not able to quickly build something to increase engagement, they could lose their jobs.

In the Fall of 2021, Frances Haugen disclosed to Congress how Meta's products fuel mental health issues for teens, including body dysmorphia and self-harm. Meta's immediate response to Congressional concern was **not to do the right thing**, but rather, roll out new processes and policies to manipulate, control, and erase data. Researchers were directed how to write reports so that risk to Meta was limited, and internal workplace groups were locked down, making it nearly impossible to share data and coordinate between teams to keep users safe. Mark Zuckerberg disparaged whistleblowers, claiming past disclosures were "...used to construct a false narrative." Meta CTO Andrew Bosworth began arguing 1:1 with researchers that dared question the new restrictions placed on research. Despite Meta's attempts to prevent researchers from collecting necessary insights, the research we were able to do continued to show the dangers of Meta's products on users. This only highlights the sheer scale, severity, and prevalence of harm occurring to those using Meta's products.



### Written Statement of Jason Sattizahn (Continued)

What Meta had in effect created was a funnel of manipulation, the ability to review, control, and have retroactive power over all stages of research at the company. This enabled them to prevent, manipulate, or erase any research that could potentially reflect negatively on Meta or its products. This control included:

- **Surveillance by the legal team.** Researchers in sensitive spaces (i.e. integrity, safety, Youth) were given a legal partner they were required to consistently share research plans, data, and reports with for approval at all stages of work
- **Restricting data collection.**
  - Meta controlled topics researched, specific questions asked, and even types of research methods allowed, all to avoid negative findings
  - Meta monitored research when performed, in order to enact stop work orders and halt research if it was seen as too risky or sensitive
  - Meta demanded third-party contactors be used to house reports of user harm so Meta could claim ignorance to “knowing” these findings
- **Whitewashing research findings.** Meta would retroactively review reports to soften statements, edit evidence-backed claims by researchers, or erase findings entirely from reports
- **Research destruction.** Meta would have evidence entirely destroyed (i.e. recordings, notes, etc.) so that the only evidence that really existed of sensitive problems was the knowledge living within researchers' themselves
- **Research isolation.** Meta would silo or segregate research they felt was too “risky” or sensitive, effectively limiting or disabling the ability for researchers to share their knowledge with others in the company

In early 2022, I moved to Meta's Reality Labs to lead integrity research and to help improve the product so people were safe while they used Meta's VR headsets. Generally, virtual reality allows someone to wear a headset and experience an alternate reality where they play games, watch movies, and socialize with others. For Meta, VR is designed to push socialization above all, as Meta saw this as a path to unbridled increases in user engagement and profit. The company invested billions, integrated social media like Instagram into headsets, and even rebranded as “Meta” to align with the future of the company.

From my first days in Reality Labs, Meta leadership and legal teams were in complete control of the research I was conducting. The research was crucial since this was a largely untested technology, but I soon learned that Meta had no interest in VR safety unless it could drive interactions, and thus, profit. Despite their efforts to control



### Written Statement of Jason Sattizahn (Continued)

research, my first studies showed strong evidence of the harm happening to users of Meta Virtual Reality:

- Just shy of half of all VR users (44%) reported harm in the past three weeks when using their virtual reality headset
- These harms ranged from things like rudeness (39% of VR users) and entering others' personal space (19% of VR users) to racism (17%) and physical sexual advances (14%)
- Of people reporting harm in VR, an overwhelming 70% reported that it occurred in VR experiences meant for socializing – the same apps that Meta is actively and excessively promoting to people using their headsets

In this same research, I discovered that certain harms were worse for women using Meta VR, particularly sexual harms such as harassment, molestation, or worse:

- 26% of women reported experiencing sexism – compared to 14% of men – when using virtual reality
- 23% of women reported experiencing verbal sexual advances (e.g. sexual solicitation) – compared to 9% of men – when using virtual reality
- 17% of women reported experiencing other sexually inappropriate behaviors (e.g. broadcasting audio of pornography, broadcasting audio of actual sexual acts) – compared to 7% of men – when using virtual reality

For these women, this harm they faced in Meta VR also caused worse emotional and psychological harm, as well:

- Harm in VR caused negative anxiety or stress for 47% for women, compared to only 23% of men
- Harm in VR caused negative embarrassment for 39% for women, compared to only 17% of men

When I discovered these disturbing findings of what VR users were facing, Meta demanded that I not write any reports that showed that the harm was specific to Meta or Meta Virtual Reality, despite the data showing that was true. Rather, all reports were to show that this was industry-wide harm and not specify Meta. It was also after these studies that Meta made changes to my research, completely removing questions about psychological or emotional harm to their users. Their reasoning? They didn't "want" the data, as they decided it was too "risky" for them to



### **Written Statement of Jason Sattizahn (Continued)**

know. Effectively, Meta had hard evidence that VR was causing their users – and women – psychological harm, but doctored research to prevent gathering that information in the future.

After Meta's VR sales were banned in Germany for two years over concerns about how Meta treats user data, in 2022, Germany allowed sales to resume. When I was asked to perform research in Germany, I understood that Meta was trying to show that their VR headsets were safe for German users. However, when our research uncovered that underage children using Meta VR in Germany were subject to demands for sex acts, nude photos, and other acts that no child should be exposed to, Meta demanded I erase any evidence of such dangers.

During my time working on Virtual Reality, I repeatedly saw leadership decide to invest resources on boosting social engagement at the direct expense of safety investments. At one point, Meta decided to allow children and people across devices, like phones or computers, to play together in their flagship VR app – Horizon Worlds. Meta had performed no research on how to make this experience safe for children or adults in this new space. As I pushed back and insisted on due diligence to prevent bad actors from hurting people, leadership explicitly told me that Meta had decided to launch without any safety research to "boost user engagement" in Horizon Worlds.

Meta's corruption of research for their own protection isn't limited to a certain product like VR, but rather, it is what defines the past, present, and future of Meta's products. In my work at Meta, I collaborated across multiple areas and saw how Meta had the same purposeful avoidance in addressing user safety across all their future-facing technologies. For example, my discussions with Meta's wearable tech (glasses, wrist technologies) teams showed me they were avoiding investments to proactively address user safety. Even Meta's own law enforcement team admitted internally that they investigated cases such as the use of Meta's Ray-Ban glasses in the 2025 New Years terrorist attack in New Orleans, but that due to internal restrictions, the team was not allowed to share information with product teams that would help Meta build this future hardware safely.

Despite Mark Zuckerberg's bold-faced lie to Congress that teams are not instructed to focus on engagement, that is exactly how the company operates. The pursuit of user engagement was the value that permeated Meta's every decision. For years, our work force was told that the directive to prioritize growth and engagement came from Mark Zuckerberg himself.



### **Written Statement of Jason Sattizahn (Continued)**

Given how zealously Meta undermines reality, they will do their best to publicly undermine our disclosures with a counter narrative reflecting their unique version of "truth". They'll offer statistics without context or scale to prop up meager safety efforts. As they have done repeatedly, they may just lie to the government. They'll clutch their pearls, claiming the whistleblowers are "taking research out of context". Ironically, in coming forward to protect Meta's users, I'm still doing the job that Meta originally hired me for. Unfortunately, my own experience and those of current Meta employees part of this disclosure show that Meta's focus on engagement over safety continues to this day, driving their vision for their future products, such as AI, wearables, and the focus on miniaturizing new technologies to integrate with people's everyday lives.

#### **Meta is incapable of change without being forced by Congress.**

Meta's leadership will not willingly change their mindset and insatiable appetite for profits and growth at all costs. We are here because when Meta has been given repeated and frankly unearned opportunities to improve their product and take responsibility for suffering they have created, they have chosen to double down, deflect and deceive. To hide evidence. To punish those doing the right thing. To disregard and disrespect government bodies like yours instead of working with you to make positive change.

I believe that Congress can use what I and many others have disclosed to enact legislation and take action to compel Meta's leadership to create the safe and accessible technology we all deserve.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be with you today and for your commitment to stop the **deliberate** harm for the millions of Americans who use this technology.



**Senate Judiciary Committee  
Subcommittee on Privacy, Technology and the Law**

**Statement of Cayce Savage  
September 6, 2025**

To: Chair Blackburn, Ranking Member Klobuchar and Members of the Subcommittee.

I am a user experience researcher. It is my job to listen to and advocate for users. I have a graduate degree in experimental psychology and twelve years of experience working as a researcher, eight of which have been in my capacity as a user experience researcher. I do this work because, fundamentally, I care about people.

I worked at Meta from 2019 to 2023. In those four years, and most especially as I led research on youth safety in Virtual Reality, it became clear to me that Meta is uninterested in listening to their users or in prioritizing their safety.

While I write here about virtual reality, it is important to understand that the way Meta has approached safety for VR is emblematic of its negligent approach to safety for all of its products. The research on what we must do to ensure new technology is safe for children is very clear. Yet, across social media, messaging apps, and now wearable technology Meta has failed to prioritize child safety until they are scrutinized by outside regulators. Then, they scramble to develop features they know are insufficient and largely unused, and advertise this as proof of their responsibility.

For example, research, both within and outside of Meta, has well established that parent awareness and education of what occurs within social media is critical to ensuring the safety of young users. Despite this, parent education has only become a priority for Instagram within the past few years, following Frances Haugen's disclosure in 2021.

This knowledge from the social media space should have been used to identify child safety priorities early in Meta's VR development process. Meta should have conducted research on parent awareness of their children's VR experiences. Yet again, child safety as an area of inquiry and investment failed to be a priority for Meta until regulatory pressure began. If any digital experience were to merit particular investment in safety, it would be the hardware children are wearing on their bodies which poses heightened and unique psychological, social, and even physical danger. And yet, Meta pushed to move fast and drive engagement, instead of ensuring the experience was safe.



**Written Statement of Cayce Savage (Continued)**

Child safety is a necessary priority for Meta's VR devices. Meta cannot claim ignorance of this. Research both within and outside of Meta clearly shows us that children drive the adoption of new technology within the home; this is even more so the case for technology, like VR, which is associated with being social and with playing games. Meta's focus on the social and gaming aspects of VR is so blatant that the VR app Meta invested millions in developing as a "big bet" - Horizon Worlds - is primarily a social app in which users can *also* choose to play games. During the 2024 holiday season, Meta focused its VR marketing efforts on promoting its Batman: Arkham VR game, which it sold as a bundle with its headsets. Meta is advertising its VR headsets as something it knows will be attractive to children.

Meta is aware that its VR platform is full of children- it is common knowledge inside the company. Meta purposefully turns a blind eye to this knowledge, despite it being obvious to anyone using their products. Users regularly write Meta feedback like this, **"I love Horizon Worlds! I hate that it's an adult only space that's been inundated by unsupervised kids though. More needs to be done to keep children out of this app."**

The reality is that if Meta were to acknowledge the presence of underage users, they would be required to kick those users off of their platform in order to remain COPPA compliant. This isn't happening because it would decrease the number of active users Meta is reporting to shareholders, as well as its engagement metrics. It is more profitable to pretend to have no way of better identifying the real ages of their users. At Meta, engagement is the priority above everything else.

Because VR is immersive and embodied, negative experiences cause greater psychological harm than similar experiences on an iPad or Xbox. To use VR, you must place a piece of hardware on your head which obscures your vision and hearing. From this point forward, all you can see and hear is the virtual world. I personally find that the process of putting on the headset feels especially vulnerable, because I always realize I can no longer see or hear what's happening around me in the real world.

On the platform you have a virtual body. Academic research establishes that embodying a virtual avatar in an immersive context like this heightens the degree to which you identify with your virtual self. If someone corners you and gropes you in the virtual world, it will feel much more personal and emotionally disturbing than if this were to happen to you in a game on your phone. All you can see or hear is what's happening in VR, and it's a 360° experience. It's the difference between watching a scary movie and being inside a haunted house.

Unlike most adults, who are cognitively able to understand the difference between reality and fantasy, children in early development experience *everything* as real. For a child using VR, then,



**Written Statement of Cayce Savage (Continued)**

the degree of immersion is heightened, making the effect of negative experiences even more severe and disturbing.

Experientially, VR is more like being in Disney World than like playing a game on an iPad. In VR, your child is going to a three dimensional world which, for those few hours, will feel real. In the majority of cases, your child is going into this world without you, because VR is expensive and most families only purchase one headset. Unlike Disney World, though, your child is entering this virtual world in the body of an adult because Meta refused to develop age-specific avatars.

Most of the other people in this virtual world are other children without adults - and a lot of adults who didn't come with kids. It is normal to talk to strangers here, despite household rules about stranger danger. My research showed that it only takes a few interactions before children consider someone they met online as a friend.

Unlike Disney World, this is a place where there are no guards, no nice people in costumes, no security cameras.

There are some age-restricted experiences, but these restrictions will likely be ineffective because the likelihood of your child using an adult-aged account is high (as VR users everywhere will observe). Across Meta's products, data shows that users (and especially young users) consistently misrepresent their age as being over 18. My own research on VR parental supervision showed that, due to the lack of parental education, parents often don't see a need for their children to use an accurately aged account. Research also clearly shows that children prefer to use adult aged accounts across products, as part of development is the desire to seek increasingly mature experiences.

In the virtual world, then, your child likely represents themselves as over 18. Who is going to know otherwise? Just like every other avatar in Meta's virtual world, they look like an adult.

Everything that happens in this world will be real. The relationships, the things that are said and done, the emotions, all of it will be real. Other users - almost always, people your child doesn't know in real life - can physically corner or surround them. Their hearing is spatial, so users can come up behind them and whisper in their ear. And remember, VR is tracking a user's real life movements. So, assault in VR requires the movements to happen in real life.

Your child, especially if they are young, may not remember later whether what happened occurred in the real world or in the virtual one. And you will have no way of knowing what they experienced. Even if your child casts their headset to the TV, it isn't real for you. It's a flat image



### Written Statement of Cayce Savage (Continued)

on a TV that you can walk away from. But your child is experiencing it as if it is real. And you aren't there.

When your child returns from this place, you might ask, "How was your time in the Metaverse?" and most of your children will say that it was fun. An eight year old doesn't know what grooming is. A twelve year old who's being sexually propositioned may not want to tell you because she doesn't think it's a big deal and she wants to keep using the headset.

The research on virtual reality and the way it affects our children is still in its infancy. We are still understanding the effects of embodying a virtual avatar that moves when you move. We are still understanding the effects of sexual assault in a virtual space where your visual and auditory experience is immersive. There are so many things for us still to learn. We do know that some users experience "phantom sense," a phenomenon in which they physically feel what's happening to their virtual avatar on their body in the real world. What happens in virtual reality is very real indeed.

Most importantly, Meta is aware that these children are being harmed in VR. In my time on the team, I quickly became aware that it was not uncommon for children in VR to experience bullying, sexual assault, to be solicited for nude photographs and sexual acts by pedophiles, to be regularly exposed to mature content like gambling and violence, and to participate in adult experiences like strip clubs and watching pornography with strangers.

I wish I could tell you what percentage of children using VR experience these harms, but Meta would not allow me to conduct this research.

I personally saw these things happening in VR, consistently heard reports from teens and parents in research, and read countless accounts from concerned parents online. It is easy to learn that children are not safe using Meta's VR products, just by reading public app reviews. One in particular haunts me – It reads, **"Thanks Meta for making this the pedophile kingdom. They have made it so easy for us to meet and exchange information with children here."**

Meta first acquired Oculus, its VR technology, in 2014. I was the first, and for a time, the only researcher dedicated to understanding whether its VR software experiences were safe for children - and I wasn't hired until 2022. So, for eight years, as tens of millions of headsets were sold, Meta did not think about the safety of the children it relied on to achieve global market dominance. Meta, a company valued at almost two trillion dollars, is putting minimum effort into ensuring its products are safe.



**Written Statement of Cayce Savage (Continued)**

When Meta did invest in parental supervision features for VR - the very basics of child safety - it did so only in response to external regulatory pressure. After eight years of total inaction, Meta leadership demanded these safety features be developed in less than a year, a timeframe which didn't allow for appropriate due diligence. Research across the digital world is very clear that parental awareness and use of supervision features is a significant challenge which *must* be addressed through parental education, *particularly* for new technology like VR. Yet, development of these features was so rushed that work to this end was not prioritized. Despite knowing this, Meta shamelessly announced that it believed its VR supervision features were a meaningful step towards child safety. Unfortunately, this lack of appropriate resourcing and due diligence is common when Meta builds safety features.

Throughout my time on Meta's VR Youth team, child safety issues regularly went unresearched and unaddressed, despite the frequency and severity of the harm. I was given a legal counterpart to scrutinize everything that I did, to tell me what research I could and couldn't do, and to ensure my research reports would not create "risk" for Meta should they be publicly disclosed. I was told not to investigate the kinds of harm children were experiencing in VR, and made to feel I was risking my job if I pressed the matter. This scrutiny became increasingly severe during my time on the team, such that I do not believe I would have been able to publish my reports from the first half of 2022 even in 2023.

Instead of amplifying the voices of our users, my work began being used to silence them so that Meta could claim deniability. I know a number of my colleagues were put in similar positions.

Meta cannot be trusted to tell the truth about the safety or use of its products. For example, in 2023 Meta said it didn't have a record of the large number of underaged children using its VR headsets. This was because it had purposefully avoided gathering that data, despite a number of Meta's leadership sharing that their children use VR, indicating that even Meta's staff were unaware of the minimum age of use, or chose to ignore it. Despite this, research proposed to address this issue was disallowed.

I deliberated for a long time about whether to come forward. Meta responded to Frances Haugen's disclosure in 2021 by cracking down on research internally. Researchers across the company were subjected to sudden censorship, and told it was for our own protection so we wouldn't be part of any future "leaks." Candidly, I am worried that speaking to you today will put my former colleagues, as well as the field of user research within Meta at risk. To my former colleagues who continue to advocate internally for child safety, I would like to express the greatest gratitude and admiration.



**Written Statement of Cayce Savage (Continued)**

Previous whistleblowers have come before this body to publicly testify to the suffering adults and children experience using Meta's products. Meta has promised it would change. I am here to tell you that Meta has changed, and that these changes have been for the worse. Meta has spent the time and money it could've spent making its products safer shielding itself instead, all the while developing emerging technologies which pose even greater risk to children than Instagram.

Meta consistently demonstrates that it cares more about the bottom line than the emotional or physical safety of the children who use its products every day.

How can Meta care for the safety of children, when it doesn't acknowledge that they exist?

Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing  
“Hidden Harms: Examining Whistleblower Allegations  
that Meta Buried Child Safety Research”

**Questions for the Record for Jason Sattizahn**

QUESTIONS FROM SENATOR BLACKBURN

**1. Was Meta truthful in its responses to the Washington Post story about Meta’s child safety practices in its virtual reality (VR) devices?**

No. Meta’s responses to the Washington Post story about Meta’s child safety practices were dishonest, at best. Meta’s responses unsurprisingly follow a PR playbook I previously witnessed Meta use many times in the more than six years I worked at the company.

In the [Washington Post article](#), Meta spokesperson Dani Lever responded to our whistleblower disclosure claims that Meta had erased data on child grooming and sexual harm by invoking COPPA and GDPR, asserting, “Global privacy regulations make clear that if information from minors under 13 years of age is collected without verifiable parental or guardian consent, it has to be deleted.” This is an effort to misdirect attention. Meta claims to comply with COPPA and GDPR. If so, then Meta knows that COPPA and GDPR data regulations *only* apply if a researcher (i) collects data directly from children under 13, or (ii) if personally identifiable information (PII) is collected about someone under the age of 13. Neither apply to the research at issue. Our interviews were carefully planned and implemented to learn about sexual harm to someone under 13 without interviewing them directly, without gathering PII, and without gathering any additional information that could triangulate the identity of the child. Thus, it is not a violation of either COPPA or GDPR to keep the data of harm gathered and learn from it. Meta erased it, because - in their words - it was “too risky.” Even if COPPA or GDPR had applied in this case – which again it did not – the child’s mother gave informed, active, and verifiable consent in the interview to discuss this with our research team.

As cited in the Washington Post, Dani Lever’s statement also claimed that, “...the company has had no blanket prohibition on research about people under 13. Meta has produced research on youth safety in virtual reality...”. This, again, is an attempt to misdirect and mislead by omission. We six whistleblowers never claimed there was a “blanket” prohibition on research, but rather, research on safety, youth safety, and particularly those under the age of 13 are subject to inappropriate and misleading manipulation, misleading revisions and data deletion to cover up Meta’s knowledge of the harms to its users.

It’s also important to note that Meta spokesperson Dani Lever’s statements include her baseless conjecture that the whistleblower disclosure we brought forward was “...stitched together to fit a predetermined and false narrative.” Our disclosure brought forward with sworn declarations from six researchers who (i) were past and current Meta employees, (ii) had worked across all corners of Meta’s hardware and software products, and (iii) had first hand experiences from researchers showing a clear pattern of Meta’s behavior over nearly a decade. Moreover, we six

whistleblowers provided thousands of pages of documentary evidence that illustrate the claims of our disclosure. Calling this whistleblower disclosure either predetermined or false defies credulity, but it is consistent with how Meta regularly attempts to recast reality.

**a. A Meta spokesperson stated that Meta added more protections for young people on its VR devices. Are you aware of any protections that Meta added?**

The Meta spokesperson (Dani Lever) is again making public statements which are misleading in its omissions.

When Meta makes these vague and sweeping assertions, they are careful to omit context essential for the assertion to have value. There is no way to verify Meta's claims because there is no way for the audience to know *when* Meta "added more protections...". There is no way to quantify the addition of protections without any time frame to know if Meta protections are *more or less* than a prior timeframe. There is no mention at all of whether these protections have been implemented, whether these protections have been adopted or whether these protections are even effective.

To my knowledge, I am not aware of investments Meta made in developing or implementing *effective* or *meaningful* protections for young people in VR, including the research-backed protections myself and other researchers attempted to launch.

However, Meta Spokesperson Dani Lever cited one *specific* protection for young people as an example to validate Meta's claim of investments for child safety: parental supervision/controls and default teen settings. In my original declaration (Alpha Declaration, p.87), I review in detail how not only did Meta's own data show that people in VR overwhelmingly don't use parental supervision tools, but that for years, Meta knew that their parental supervision tools were insufficient for protecting teens. This is despite Meta, Mark Zuckerberg, and their spokespeople frequently touting parental supervision/controls and default teen settings publicly as alleged proof they are properly prioritizing child safety. Similarly, Meta's claims that default teen settings protect young people sidesteps the fact that default teen settings are only effective *if Meta has accurate age data for account holders and users*. As I reviewed in my original declaration (Alpha Declaration, p.141) and my supplemental declaration (p.12), Meta does not have reliable age data. Therefore, public statements using any efforts that are triggered by age as proof of Meta's care for child safety are a red herring and are knowingly misleading.

**b. Meta disputed your assertion that lawyers were able to approve or reject research projects, and they said that lawyers never edit results.**

- i. Is this statement consistent with your experience at Meta?**
- ii. Would a company lawyer being involved in child safety research interfere with such research?**

[b.i] This statement is not consistent with my experience at Meta, and nor is it consistent with the experiences of other researchers I worked with directly at Meta. In short, this is a falsehood. In spaces Meta deemed as "sensitive" (including child harm and emotional damage), Meta's lawyers reviewed all research at every stage of development, implementation, analysis, and the

sharing of findings to those who need the information. In fact, when Meta’s lawyers reviewed my own work at Meta, I was often told that:

- Entire studies or methods could not be performed because it would be “risky” for Meta to have knowledge of the data collected;
- Research studies could not continue until changes to the study were made to collect less incriminating data about Meta’s products;
- Data could not be analyzed in specific ways, as it ran the risk of producing results that could make Meta’s products look harmful to users
- How reports and analyses needed to be written, framed, or otherwise presented internally, all to limit risk to Meta; and
- To whom reports and findings could be shared to internally;

With rare exceptions, every research report I published at Meta after the 2021 Frances Haugen whistleblower disclosures was reviewed and had results *edited* by Meta’s lawyers.

It is important that in repeated instances where researchers – myself and others – objected to Meta Legal’s inappropriate manipulation of research, we were threatened with retaliation from Meta’s lawyers. Specifically, Meta’s lawyers told researchers that the only way to avoid “*negative outcomes*” for the researcher was to follow Meta Legal’s advice. In one instance of this, I was told that if I didn’t follow Legal’s advice, I may have to answer publicly about the negative aspects of Meta’s products that Legal revealed and that this would be undesirable. I understood that to mean that my public testimony would be undesirable for Meta and therefore I would not desire the consequences for resistance to Legal’s *direction*.

[b.ii] Yes - the result of Meta’s lawyers being involved in child safety research didn’t just add interference to researchers’ work, but it actively harmed our efforts to keep users and children safe. The interference of Meta’s lawyers meant that entire studies that were necessary to keep people safe were not approved. The legal interference meant that instead of using data we collected to learn how to make Meta’s platforms safer, the data was either distorted or erased, meaning that researchers often lacked the explicit evidence they needed to push for building Meta’s products to be safer (e.g. safety features, etc.). The dangerous consequence of this is that Meta does not collect *honest* data about the harm occurring to adults and children across Meta’s products. We researchers understood that Legal’s instructions served the purpose of giving Meta deniability about having knowledge of the harms their products expose users to, because after all, if no data and no truthful research findings survive, the truth only survives in the memory of the researchers.

**c. Andy Stone, Meta Spokesperson, stated that Meta approved almost 180 studies on safety and well-being on its virtual reality platforms since 2022. How would you respond to this assertion?**

This is yet another example of Meta misrepresenting the facts and misleading by omission. We have not asserted a complete absence of such research. In fact, many of the studies referenced by Andy Stone’s statement were performed by us six whistleblowers (despite the restrictions we

were forced to operate within). Much of this research has been included in our whistleblower disclosure and submitted as exhibits in support of our sworn declarations.

Rather, *our explicit and evidence-supported claim* is that when Meta researchers are able to conduct research deemed “sensitive”, the Legal staff assigned to direct and approve our work manipulate, distort, and maliciously prune data in order for Meta to avoid accountability for the harm their products do. Following a tactic from Meta’s familiar PR playbook, Stone’s comments misstate the claims of our disclosure and offer disingenuous achievements about Meta’s actions that are meaningless in their vagueness.

It is irrelevant how many user safety research projects Meta researchers manage to execute if they are deliberately designed to avoid data on actual harms experienced and are manipulated to give misleading findings.

## **2. What is the relationship between Meta’s Reality Labs and Instagram?**

To the public, Meta has insisted that its products (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, Reality Labs, and WhatsApp) are independent from one another, and Meta has relied on that argument to sidestep congressional inquiry. However, this defensive characterization is a misrepresentation of the reality inside Meta. Internally at Meta, there are no hard divisions between Reality Labs and Instagram (as well as Meta’s other products). While each major Meta product can be framed as a part of Meta’s “Product-Based Divisions”, Meta generally operates like one single integrated company. These divisions share resources, systems, and a top-down strategy employed by Meta. Moreover, every employee at Meta, whether they spend the bulk of their time working on Facebook or Virtual Reality products, all receive a paycheck from Meta. The result is that employees constantly work across Meta’s products, for a number of reasons.

First, employees (and especially researchers) who are assigned to work on product-specific teams frequently work between product areas such as Reality Lab’s Virtual Reality and Instagram. This was the case with myself and my Virtual Reality team at Meta, as we worked directly with Instagram on multiple projects. In fact, employees are repeatedly encouraged and rewarded by Meta for collaboration, as Meta leadership sees this as advanced work.

Second, many teams at Meta are not product-specific, but rather are “horizontal.” The work of employees on a horizontal team inherently impacts multiple products at the same time. For example, employees working on Meta’s Avatars (i.e. digital representations of one’s own body) implement these avatars across Meta’s products. This means that if a VR team like mine collaborated with the Avatars team to change how Avatars function, it will largely impact both Instagram and Virtual Reality at the same time.

Finally, and of even greater concern, Meta is actively combining the experiences between products such as Virtual Reality and Instagram by integrating content from Instagram (e.g. Videos, Photos, Influencer content, etc.) into the Reality Lab’s Virtual Reality experience. This push is Meta’s efforts to have more content for users to engage with while experiencing immersive living in the virtual world. In this context, the experience of Instagram and Virtual Reality are essentially synonymous with one another.

Bottom line: Meta's Reality Labs and Instagram are closely intertwined. (1) Employees work intimately across both spaces, and (2) Meta is purposefully mixing the two together so that users can experience one (i.e. Instagram) within the other (i.e. Virtual Reality).

### **3. What implications are there for user safety when Instagram or other social media content is integrated into VR?**

Meta's integration of Instagram, social media, and other content into Virtual Reality creates opportunity for these unexplored and untested experiences to impact users. Unfortunately, this impact includes safety risks for Meta's users, many of which I saw intentionally overlooked during my time at Meta.

Expectations of Meta's users. Any human experience carries with it an expectation of how that experience will work (e.g. when you go to the grocery store, we understand expectations of how we use carts or baskets), and when everyone shares a common expectation of how things work, things run smoothly (e.g. you return your cart after shopping so someone else can use it). Instagram and Virtual Reality experiences are different from each other and their respective users have different user expectations of what behaviors are appropriate. When Meta simply blends the two together, they're creating an environment where users have mismatching expectations, and it's this type of environment that is rife with risk, safety issues, and real world harm.

For instance, having been led to believe what is okay on one product is okay on the other, users may record content that is allowed in VR (i.e. content from adult spaces), but then share it on Instagram where it is inappropriate. Further to this point, users may not understand how to control their experience or stay safe when using Instagram in VR compared to a mobile phone (e.g. reporting others, using safety features), given that expectations of either experience separately is inherently different than when together.

Enforcement. When you blend Instagram (or any social media feed) into Virtual Reality, efficiently removing violating, offensive, or otherwise unsafe content for adults and children becomes even more complicated and potentially ineffective. For instance, Meta *already* has well-documented problems effectively reviewing and removing harmful content posted on their social media platforms. By enabling yet another surface (Virtual Reality) to distribute their social media content (Instagram), appropriately identifying, reviewing, and removing harmful content becomes more difficult. Another concern in blanket integration of Instagram into VR is that the mix of the two may create new or under-researched content that moderators will need to be able to identify, review and if harmful, remove. Reliance on existing enforcement systems or AI is not sufficient for keeping users safe.

Content & Ranking. Meta's products rely on algorithms called "ranking" to determine what content is appropriate and valuable to show people using their products. When Instagram content is surfaced in a new environment (Virtual Reality), it changes Meta's ability to effectively use ranking to determine if the content they show users is harmful or not. This requires Meta to proactively invest in altering their ranking algorithms to ensure harmful content isn't shown to either children and adults. Based on my experience working inside the company for six years, I

have no knowledge that this due diligence has occurred, nor do I have faith that Meta has done what is needed in this regard. Notably, Meta leadership's response to me raising this concern was, "Horizon Feed [Virtual Reality] content is going to use the same ranking from Instagram."

- 4. Meta has said publicly that its VR headsets are intended for children aged 10 and older. But based on the internal documents you shared, as many as 80 to 90 percent of users in some virtual rooms were under ten years old.**
- a. How are underage users able to access Meta VR?**

Underage users can easily access Meta's headsets a number of ways:

- Sharing a headset and/or an account with someone who is an older age; again, I saw a long history of this behavior while working on VR, and evidence has been submitted to Congress showing Meta's explicit knowledge of headset and account sharing (SEE: Charlie\_27, Charlie\_90, Delta\_7)
- Misrepresenting or lying about age; this occurs either directly or by linking their VR account to a pre-existing adult account to which they have access; I saw a long history of age misrepresentation across Meta's products and VR in my time there.

- b. Why is this problem still ongoing?**

Meta would prefer to limit their knowledge of underage users, these users' use of VR, or the strategies they employ for continued use. If Meta removed underage children, engagement in Virtual Reality would plummet, and Meta would be responsible to shareholders.

There are clear paths for Meta to limit the use of VR by underage users (and for that matter, across their products), which Meta simply does not do. For example, Meta could explicitly require verification of any adult account, which is not done at the moment. This would at least address verification at the stage of creating a VR account. This is just one place an intervention could help address the problem.

Verifying adult accounts doesn't stop adults from sharing their headset (and account) with an underage child. To address headset sharing, Meta could use a user's biometric data (e.g. facial layout, expressions, gait, etc.) to validate the user and to determine age. This is unlikely to happen at Meta voluntarily. The crux of the problem of age determination is that Meta would have to value a privacy-first approach to their products and adhere to strict data regulations to follow the law regarding handling sensitive data (rather than consistently trying to skirt triggering those regulations). During my time at Meta, this data was completely off limits for two reasons: (1) Meta wasn't confident in their ability to handle this data while respecting data regulations and (2) Meta knew that the public didn't trust them with sensitive, biometric data.

These are just a couple of examples of many that Meta *could* use to limit underage users' access to VR, if Meta had the will to address the problem. However Meta has demonstrated again and again that user engagement is their north star and handling user data responsibly is simply less important. At the end of the day, solutions require time, money, and effort that Meta doesn't want to spend.

### 5. What can Meta do to make VR safer? Why isn't Meta implementing these measures?

There is quite a lot Meta could be doing to make VR – and generally, all their products – safer. I'll separate these into two general categories: (i) company direction, (ii) product-specific investments

Company direction. Much of the lack of safety in VR is a symptom of how Meta has consciously decided to operate in order to solely focus on growth at all costs (e.g. user acquisition, user engagement, and achieving market dominance). For instance, one powerful thing Meta could do to make VR safer is simply investing more money into their safety teams. It is that simple. Meta will of course respond by citing the total amount of money they spend on safety and integrity efforts, but to be clear, they are not spending nearly enough to be even minimally effective. Over my six years at Meta, our product teams and operations teams were consistently under-funded, which directly led to important safety investments simply being ignored. With more money, safety teams could have built appropriate and effective tools, had more reliable and accurate moderation of VR spaces, and more. Meta simply does not increase these investments.

Another company direction that could change to increase VR safety is for Meta to simply listen and act on the safety guidance given to them by external experts. As I later outline in detail (see: the answer to question #7), Meta has purposefully ignored recommendations from experts on what Meta should do in order to make their products safer. However, if Meta was to take experts' advice, it would likely slow down product launches or alter products in such a way that limits the growth and engagement Meta desires.

Lastly, there needs to be a strong change in Meta's product culture, specifically in how Meta measures product success and the timescale at which they do so. Meta continues to operate with a "start-up" mentality, meaning that they generally dichotomize every product decision into incredibly small pieces, measure how those pieces change over a small timeframe, and make product decisions to quickly, incrementally boost product engagement metrics. The issue is that Meta's products are complex, nuanced and the experience (and safety) of their products is far from a simple sum of their parts. In order to build products that are safe for users, safety and integrity personnel can't be required to work on a short timeline or have the success of their work related to user engagement metrics. Again, these efforts would require Meta to allow at least some teams to slow down the relentless pursuit of growth, thus hurting their bottom line.

Product-specific investments. One of the most powerful investments Meta could make for safety in VR is collecting accurate age data. I review the importance of this in my original declaration (Alpha Declaration, p.141) and my supplemental declaration (p.12), but accurate age data is a necessary component to making so many safety features effective. Meta does not invest more in collecting accurate age data because if Meta had better age data, Meta would likely have to remove a large number of their accounts (and thus, user engagement would go down). Research Director Tim Loving made this point to me, explicitly.

Other effective safety tools (such as audio tools for users to stop harmful audio in real time) were not invested in, despite being effectively utilized by other tech companies, because Meta claimed

that the investment was “too difficult.” In the example of universal audio controls (like many other examples), Meta would have less difficulty building such features if they had built their products from day 1 with safety in mind. It is only “too difficult” now for Meta to develop and deploy audio controls because they don’t want to invest the necessary time and resources. Safety investments adversely impact product launch timelines and thus are considered a threat to Meta’s bottom line.

**6. Did the Meta legal team understand the safety implications when it instructed you to change studies and findings from your research?**

Yes. Meta’s legal team made informed decisions to change research studies in a manner they knew would negatively impact and hurt Meta’s users. I repeatedly, directly raised these concerns to Meta’s Legal team making clear that their actions in pre-emptively changing research designs, limiting research methods, altering reports, or erasing data were antithetical to keeping Meta’s users safe.

As an illustrative example, after one of my research studies discovered that experiences in Meta Virtual Reality led to emotional and psychological harm (particularly for women), Kristin Zobel from Meta Legal demanded that I remove all existing survey questions asking about emotion or psychological well-being. I objected to this directive, explaining (i) this was wrong because our past research already showed the relationship of VR and emotional/psychological harm and that (ii) removing it would kneecap our understanding on how to stop harm from happening. In response, Kristin Zobel became visibly frustrated and verbally confirmed my concerns, stating, “I know, this is ridiculous, but we have to do it.”

**7. To your knowledge, has Meta ever brought in child health and safety experts to advise on virtual reality products?**

Yes. During my time in Virtual Reality, I recall Meta allowing child health and safety experts to give their views and advise on virtual reality products. I also witnessed this occur on other Meta products such as Facebook and Instagram.

Furthermore many Meta researchers *are themselves child health and safety experts* who joined Meta from academic and non-industry backgrounds with the belief they could improve child safety on Meta products. However, this was far from the reality as throughout my time at Meta, I consistently saw Meta place the opinions of third-party experts above the opinions of Meta’s in-house experts, when the outside experts’ opinions bolstered Meta’s ability to shirk accountability.

**a. Did Meta’s findings or recommendations align with what you were seeing?**

From what I saw, Meta ignored the safety recommendations of child health and safety experts. Meta leadership would not even consider implementing expert recommendations that could potentially slow down the development of Virtual Reality or increase resource allocations for research to understand VR’s impacts on children and adults. Recommendations included taking time to better learn the impacts of VR on users, before lowering the ages allowed in Meta VR to

include those 10-12yo (“Project Salsa”). From Meta’s perspective, I understood that lowering the age floor would have the desired effect of reducing how many children could be considered “under age” as well as expand the market for their product since children drive adoption. Meta did not allow this recommendation to alter their plan to lower the acceptable ages of those in VR to include 10-12yo.

**b. Did Meta implement or act on any recommendations from these experts?**

No. I do not personally know of any implementations of safety recommendations Meta made to their products where the provenance was solely derived from the child health and safety experts with the goal of improving child health or safety.

**8. What was Meta Leadership’s expressed intention in lowering the minimum age of virtual reality users?**

Generally, there are two instances of Meta Leadership lowering acceptable ages in Virtual Reality that inform the answer to this question. First was Meta lowering the minimum age allowed in Meta’s flagship Virtual Reality app “Horizon.” In mid-2022, Meta decided to lower the minimum age allowed from 18yo allowing 13-17yo within Meta Horizon.

In August 2022, I asked the VR Research Director Tim Loving why Meta was allowing kids under 18 onto Meta’s Virtual Reality. I raised researcher concerns that this would cause harm to children. Tim Loving flatly told me that the release to wider audiences (i.e. children) would massively boost user adoption and engagement of Horizon.

The second instance of Meta lowering ages in VR is “Project Salsa”, when Meta allowed 10-12yo to begin using Virtual Reality. On one hand, Meta described in their internal documentation that lowering minimum ages allowed in Virtual Reality would be an “alternative” strategy to address the FTC’s increased pressure for Meta to improve the number of children under the age of 13yo on their products. On the other hand, Project Salsa was openly discussed between myself and internal teams as being a move for Meta to increase user engagement by allowing more ages of individuals to use VR. In Meta’s overview deck describing Project Salsa (See: exhibit Charlie\_42), Meta makes reference to both:

- Meta describes lowering minimum ages in Virtual Reality as an “alternative” strategy to address increased pressure from the FTC to improve detecting and removing underage accounts. By decreasing ages allowed in VR to 10-12yo, Meta quite literally has to do less work to identify and remove underage users;
- Meta describes that apps we know to drive user engagement (like RecRoom) were blocking Meta’s users under the age of 13 in an undesirable way; and
- In the overview document, Meta even mentions the benefit of growth and retention that will follow as a result of this change to allow children 10-12 to use VR.

Beyond their own written documentation above, both my own management and leadership directly referred to the lowering of minimum ages as something that was happening “no matter

what”, and they referenced the belief that increased audience of child users would drive growth and engagement within Virtual Reality

**9. On January 31st, 2024, Mark Zuckerberg testified that Meta does not instruct teams to focus on engagement.**

**a. Is this statement true?**

No. This statement is absolutely contradictory to the reality inside Meta.

I was directly informed by Meta’s leadership that the focus of *all our work* must be tied directly back to user engagement. This engagement-first directive was constant and made repeatedly over the years I worked at Meta. Even as I repeatedly raised the inherent conflict of such a primary imperative to Integrity and Safety work, Meta never relented in basing success on user engagement.

**b. If not, how were these directives shared at Meta?**

These directives were shared from leadership, directly in meetings. In multiple instances, leadership in Virtual Reality (Director Tim Loving) informed Virtual Reality researchers that Mark Zuckerberg (CEO, Meta) had given this directive to VPs in the company, including Reality Lab’s VP Mark Rabkin. As such, we were expected to find a way to tie our work directly to increasing user engagement.

**c. Were they shared company-wide?**

To my knowledge, these directives were shared company-wide. In my own experiences, I witnessed individuals across Meta’s products pressured to relate everything they did back to user engagement, regardless of their focus. Additionally, given that Meta Leadership (Tim Loving) stated that this was a mandate from Mark Zuckerberg himself to his VPs, it follows that the directive would have been applied across Meta’s teams.

**QUESTIONS FROM SENATOR COONS**

**1. I co-lead the *Platform Accountability and Transparency Act (PATA)* which is designed to create mechanisms for independent research of social media platforms, their harms, and the effects they are having on users or society at large. In light of what you observed at Meta regarding their approach to internal research, could you elaborate on the value and importance of having effective independent ways to research platform behavior?**

The disclosures and the extensive documentary evidence from the six of us whistleblowers makes Meta’s approach to internal research abundantly clear. Meta cannot be trusted to ethically perform their own research internally at the company. Despite Meta’s success in hiring industry-leading researchers, they apply inappropriate control, manipulation, distortion and erasure to pervert research findings they don’t like. Without independent audits, Meta will continue to employ unethical tactics to bury knowledge and data documenting the harm their

products cause. Meta’s historical actions – including those exposed by our whistleblower disclosure – demonstrates that distorting the truth is no impediment when Meta is avoiding responsibility for its actions.

This is especially true in spaces that Meta themselves deemed as “sensitive” such as user experience research on safety and well-being, as well as research pertaining to susceptible or vulnerable users, such as children.

We know that Meta will not take appropriate action to address even their most egregious failures regardless of public pressure. Our whistleblower disclosure directly exposes how Meta responded to Frances Haugen’s 2021 disclosure by doing precisely the wrong thing. The 2021 whistleblower revelations triggered Meta’s systematic locking down and manipulation of research as well as implementing policies to prevent gathering meaningful data to keep children and adults safe. Meta’s compromises of internal researchers and their work needs to stop, but until then, it would be powerful to develop *independent* and *effective* ways to research behavior across Meta’s platforms. Just this one requirement would remove Meta’s ability to fully control and manipulate the research data collected, reports written, and the narratives about Meta product safety that derive from research.

**2. During your time at Meta and regarding the businesses you worked on or otherwise had insight into, to what degree did Meta facilitate independent research regarding the harms caused by their products? Was such research permitted or possible?**

Meta does have programs to facilitate external research, some of which does include harms caused by Meta’s products. In fact, during my time at Meta, I was directly involved with fielding potential researchers who were considering collaborating with Meta to perform such work. However, based on my direct involvement in these programs, I can confidently say that these programs are neither *independent* nor *efficient* for the purpose of running an independent research program and to produce unbiased research.

At the core, Meta’s facilitates its “independent” research programs in a way that allows Meta to maintain control over data and insights from the research itself. The limitations on potential third-party research studies that I witnessed while working at Meta made clear that Meta did not want to produce unbiased, independent research but rather engaged these projects to appease the public. Even in recent history, the timing of Meta’s announcements around “independent” research point to this. For example, while I worked for the company, Meta announced the “Instagram Data Access Pilot for Well-being Research” with the Center for Open Science (COS) on January 29, 2024. This was only two days before Mark Zuckerberg was forced by subpoena to appear before the Senate Judiciary Committee regarding child safety. The conveniently timed announcement enabled Mark Zuckerberg to make misleading claims of progress before the Senate.

For illustrative purposes, I’d like to actually use Meta’s “Instagram Data Access Pilot for Well-being Research” with COS to highlight issues with Meta’s “independent” research programs. One thing to keep in mind as I review these critiques is that Meta has placed numerous limitations on “independent” research programs and their access to data in the name of user

privacy. Despite us internal Meta researchers having relatively less restricted access to data, Meta *still limited internal researchers* from executing meaningful research on sensitive topics such as well-being. Thus, Meta maintained complete control of research externally and internally.

Approving research. Despite the COS program appearing as if they review and accept research proposals independent from Meta, Meta has a significant amount of control over which research projects can truly move forward in the “independent” research program. COS (and not Meta) are ostensibly responsible for selecting which research studies are approved. However, Meta reserves the right to, “...evaluate and respond to researchers’ Data Request Forms for their Registered Reports.” This effectively gives Meta a veto over research studies and the scope of their work/data they have access to if their study is to move forward. The *impact* is that Meta still retains actual control over what research topics are approved and which researchers ultimately gain access to Meta’s data.

This is *not* an “independent” process.

Controlling the data shared. One aspect of this external Meta research program is that the only data shared with research is “privacy-preserving.” On the surface, this sounds great, because it appears Meta cares about protecting Instagram users’ data. However, in practice, this requirement means that Meta is only giving sanitized data to researchers that limits their ability for researchers to understand the relationship of Instagram and well-being. For example, the explicit restrictions include requirements that:

- the data will not include the content from Instagram that people engage with (e.g. content, posts, or messages), meaning researchers lack context into what Instagram users are experiencing at all and how it’s impacting them; and
- The data will be aggregated or collapse in ways that removes researchers’ ability to know exactly what experiences or behaviors are actually impacting a user’s experience while using Instagram

The *impact* of how Meta is controlling data with this “independent” research program is that it destroys researchers’ ability to gain an accurate, appropriate picture of how Instagram relates to the social and emotional health of teens and young adults. Essentially - if Meta provides limited, poor data to researchers, it will result in limited, poor research findings. This only helps Meta further avoid their responsibility of keeping their users safe.

Just a few examples of how this is the case:

- By Meta not sharing data on the *content* people see (e.g. posts, comments, etc.), researchers will be limited in how they can understand causality between what Instagram users are seeing/experiencing and the impact to their emotional health. There may be overall relationships between variables that researcher may find, but due to Meta’s limited sharing of data, these findings will be high-level and easy for Meta to explain away if the resulting findings are undesirable for the company;

- By Meta sharing select limited, aggregate data, any conclusions that *can* be made would have limited value. Simple behaviors such as sharing a post are very different based on the context of what is being shared (e.g. sharing a meme vs. sharing hate content), and independent researchers making independent research decisions would not choose to limit the context of data being shared. Meta, however, is; and
- The COS' program website states that Meta's program is for "Enhancing Transparency and Reproducibility", but unless the program (i) shares data that internal Meta researchers have access to, and (ii) allows internal and external researchers to compare results, then implications that the program's goals are to enhance "Transparency and Reproducibility" is a farce.

Ultimately, Meta has created a system where they control the research and insights about their products both internally and externally. Our whistleblower disclosure offers both testimonial and documentary evidence that Meta manipulates and controls research internally, to further their narratives to shareholders and to the public. Meta's external, "independent" research programs are no different, as Meta has set them up in a manner to ensure that whatever data is collected reveals the least amount of damning information about Meta as possible.

**3. Do you think there is more that Meta could be doing now to facilitate independent research into these products? What might that look like if Meta wanted to cooperate?**

Yes, there is much more Meta could be doing to facilitate independent research into their products. It all starts with Meta stopping the manipulation of over research, data, and methodologies in order for researchers and experts to perform unbiased and reliable research.

- In any research program created, independence is required in the determination of: (i) the whole scope of appropriate and acceptable research proposals, (ii) methodologies allowed, (iii) plans for data analysis, (iv) the sharing of appropriate data based on the research question(s) and (v) the final form of research proposals to be executed.
  - Meta needs to develop an appropriate, privacy-sensitive way to allow independent researchers access to Meta's data that does not fully remove content, context, or other data necessary to determine the impact of Meta's products on people. This is entirely possible to do safely while ensuring users' privacy - although Meta has failed time and time again to protect user privacy. Such appropriate and responsible approaches to sound research would require increased investment from Meta to develop and deploy procedures, reviews, personnel management, and legal processes.
  - Meta could also form stronger bi-directional, undistorted knowledge sharing between internal and external researchers. For transparency and reproducibility, internal Meta researchers should be active in sharing ideas with those externally, and vice-versa.
- 4. Based on your experiences, how would you expect Meta to respond to (or argue against) requests to facilitate such independent research, and how would you respond to their contentions?**

Based on my experience, Meta would likely raise numerous objections and create impediments to prevent or neuter independent research programs developed outside of their control because Meta's biggest fear is losing control over the narrative of their products. Their playbook in arguing against the need for an independent research program would follow the same pattern they have always used when they fear external pressure is weakening the absolute control they have over their product. Meta would likely argue that:

Meta already does enough. Meta would argue that they have created a number of "industry-leading", independent research programs, meaning that any new program or oversight for independent research is unnecessary. Meta would likely cite the overall number of research programs or the total number of studies that the programs have produced, hoping that the large numbers they cite mislead the public that they are doing enough. Unfortunately as I mention above, the total number of Meta's "independent" research programs or studies they've produced is moot without context. What matters is that Meta has retained control over these "independent" programs, undermining the efficacy of even having independent research programs.

Meta is better at understanding their products than anyone on the outside. Meta would argue that "independent" researchers are not as capable as employees internally at understanding the intricacies of Meta's products and the impact they have on users. Meta may cite that external researchers lack context into Meta's products, how they operate, or even lack an ability to perform the work itself - omitting the fact that Meta itself precludes research access to the data needed to perform the research. In fact, as I write my supplementary declaration on September 25, 2025, Meta spokesperson Andy Stone was making this precise argument on Twitter/X. He claimed that a recently released, truly independent third-party assessment of Instagram's safety tools is, "...a highly subjective, misleading assessment that repeatedly misrepresents our [Meta's] efforts..."

Meta is so concerned about user data privacy that it cannot possibly allow independent researchers access to the data they need. Meta would argue that further independent research programs – especially any requiring more transparent sharing of Meta user data to independent researchers – would "put users and their data at risk". Meta has deployed this false rationale many times in the past, arguing it cares about users' privacy too much to do this. In response, I would point out that Meta's long history of violating user privacy would make this argument ridiculous on its face. Meta's poor track record on user privacy includes but is far from limited to: (i) Cambridge Analytica, (ii) Texas biometric data, (iii) Illinois biometric data, (iv) tracking browsing while logged out and (v) the recent debacle with the Flo period-tracking app. Furthermore, as a multitude of companies and industries have proven, sharing data with independent researchers can be done in ways to mitigate risks to privacy. Sharing less filtered data in a privacy-protected way requires Meta to make significant investments that they have not and will not make voluntarily.

5. **What would you see as the greatest challenges to creating a process by which vetted independent researchers could study platform behavior in the businesses you have insight into? How could those challenges be addressed?**

Given what I describe above as being necessary for a truly *independent* and *effective* research program such as this, the largest and most immediate challenge I see is Meta themselves. Meta will use every resource – financial and legal – to stop the creation of any independent research program they see as removing direct control over their data and whatever possible research results are produced. The only way around this would be a government mandate.

Past that, the largest challenge I see is creating a way for independent researchers to *safely* gain access to Meta’s raw, log data. This data is powerful for researchers to drive stronger, causal inferences between the content and experience of Meta’s products and how this impacts Meta’s users. There are clear privacy risks involved, but there are also investments that could be made to mitigate said risks. For instance, Meta could make good faith investments to improve research vetting before data is made available to researchers for their work. Increased investments into procedures around data access could be made. For instance, past scrubbing data of explicit PII, data could retain raw or classified content so that researchers understand specific experiences users engage with. When in tandem with controlled data workspaces, the risk of re-identifiable data emerging in a given report would be low.

There are other challenges including the logistics of managing Meta’s data itself. From my own work at Meta, I can attest to how poorly managed Meta’s user data systems are. I repeatedly found myself trying to hunt down (i) exactly who owned certain data sets, (ii) the provenance of the data collected, (iii) what data was actually included within data sets, and (iv) whether data sets were accurately storing the information they supposedly included. This challenge would require Meta’s involvement to interface with any independent research program, all to shepherd them through roadblocks in understanding the data itself.

**6. What would you see as most necessary to get right to have as effective a mechanism for independent research as possible?**

Most necessary is to divorce Meta from having control over the research being performed. As I describe above, Meta has exerted control at every stage of research internally *and* externally to make sure they can control the narrative from any research output about their products. In their “independent” research programs I discussed, this included (i) what research can be conducted at all, (ii) what data will be made available to researchers, (iii) how that research will be made available.

Any independent research program needs to be developed with explicit, binding policy that leaves no gray area in the planning, execution, and analysis of research where Meta could prevent, alter, bury or otherwise manipulate research to be biased for the sake of Meta and their brand. Based on past experiences, we know that if there is any gap in a program policy, Meta will invariably exploit those loop holes to manipulate research as much as they can.

I need to say - in the advent of any potential independent research program of this sort, I would be more than happy to contribute to helping design it to prevent such exploitation from happening.

**7. Apart from independent research, what transparency (e.g., data, reports, etc.) do you think Meta could and should be providing regarding the businesses you have insight into so that the public, researchers, and policymakers can better understand the effects of its products?**

In my view, the best steps for transparency that Meta could and should take is becoming transparent with the public, in terms of their research practices, the data they collect, the reports they make (and choose not to invest in), and the ongoing data Meta collects about users' experiences. It is possible for Meta to re-build itself with a more "open research" approach, while also mitigating business risks that the company may be concerned about:

- Report availability. Meta could make internal research reports (redacted of proprietary corporate information and of PII) available for public access. This could look like a public repository with tagged, cataloged reports that helps the public walk through what Meta knows about its users, the data Meta collected, and the conclusions that Meta is making as a result
- Live tracking of metrics and user data. Meta could make public a live feed of metrics and data that they collect about the experiences on their platform. This could be a real-time dashboard including measures such as content removed from Instagram, user reports made in Virtual Reality, or any number of user-facing measurements being tracked by Meta. Of course, specific measurements requiring sensitive handling could be carved out from inclusion.
- Open audits from third party assessors. Meta could make its internal machinations completely open to external audit by independent research assessors. This would allow an unbiased view of Meta's data retention, data management, research processes, and other related items.
- Truly independent research partnerships. Meta could establish bidirectional, good-faith, and truly independent partnerships with researchers external to the company. On one hand – as I discuss in part above – this would require Meta to relinquish the pre-emptive restrictions and limitations that they impose on "independent" research partnerships by either asserting oversight for research design, methods, or overly compromising the integrity of data passed to researchers. On the other hand, this could also look like Meta is committed to building a stronger platform for internal and external researchers to keep each other accountable. Other key elements to enable independent and reliable research would be to allow Meta researchers to share concerns about Meta's research practices or methods (washed of any proprietary data) to an external research body - and - to allow external researchers to directly partner and critique the development of internal studies. There are numerous ways these processes could be built responsibly.

**8. Based on your experiences, how would you expect Meta to respond to (or argue against) requests for such transparency, and how would you respond to their contentions?**

Based on past history, Meta's contentions would likely follow a similar pattern to what I outline in question #4 above. I would expect Meta to claim:

Meta already does enough to be transparent. Meta would argue that they already go above and beyond “other companies” to stay transparent, and they would likely attempt to cite their efforts around data (e.g. the Meta Content Library and API) and independent research (e.g. Research Awards and Requests for Proposals (RFPs), collaboration with Center for Open Science, etc.) as a way to convince the public that additional transparency levers are not necessary.

In response as I outlined above, I would point out that Meta’s transparency efforts have been purposefully developed so that Meta retains tight control over what research is executed, the extent of meaningful data shared to be analyzed and who is permitted to even see the research or its findings. The result is that Meta is able to limit researchers’ ability to produce unbiased research that accurately portrays the impacts of Meta’s products on people.

Research and data will be taken out of context. Meta would likely argue that if their internal research and data is made more public and transparent, then their work will be discussed out of “context” and to create “false narratives.” This is a refrain I have heard from Meta repeatedly, especially when the public is given irrefutable evidence showing the harm that Meta’s products do to people. In November 2021 and in response to Frances Haugen’s whistleblower disclosure, Meta circulated documentation internally featuring Mark Zuckerberg himself stating that the disclosure was, “...work taken out of context and used to construct a false narrative.” More recently on September 8, 2025, Meta via spokesperson Dani Lever critiqued this very whistleblower disclosure in the same way. Lever stated that the evidence we present derived from our extensive experience as Meta researchers was, “stitched together to fit a predetermined and false narrative,” and that Meta was, “...dismayed by these *mischaracterizations* of the team’s efforts” (emphasis added).

My first response to this is that as researchers, we hold the context of the research and knowledge produced about users. Meta cannot make the argument that research is being taken out of context if it is researchers themselves who disclose the work, speak about it, or otherwise frame it to the public. Any context Meta would add above that of researchers would be to obfuscate or control the research in order to protect their unethical business practices. This is the same response Meta has to *any* exposure to the public of the negative impacts Meta’s products have on their users, making it clear that Meta is not capable of reliable, unbiased, or truthful narration about their own research.

This could harm user privacy. Again, it is predictable and likely that Meta would hide behind an assertion that Meta is “doing the right thing” by restricting data access, since increased transparency could be a “risk to Meta’s users”. Meta would claim that sharing more detailed data *or* having less oversight into research selection, development, or data handling would inherently put their users’ data and the privacy of said data at risk.

There are two strong responses I have to this. First – as I review in more detail in response to question #4 – Meta has an incredibly long history of *violating their own users’ privacy and improperly handling user data*. Second, the relationship and balance between transparency into Meta research and ensuring privacy of user data is not some zero-sum game. It is possible for Meta to both increase transparency into their research and share more granular user data, and to build mitigations to ensure user data is also handled properly. The core issue is that it would

require Meta to commit to investments in both transparency and user privacy, something that isn't the highest grade on Meta's report card.

This would offer too much risk to Meta. Meta would likely argue that an increase in transparency is an unfair risk to their business model. For instance, they may argue that sharing in greater detail their research and data could expose the company to competitive risk (e.g. information shared could help their competition), legal risk (e.g. information shared could implicate Meta for criminal or civil liabilities), or brand risk (e.g. information shared could make their company look bad).

First, arguments around competitive risk are overblown, to say the least. Not only does Meta have a near two-trillion dollar market cap, but they have arguably achieved a monopoly on global social media use, Messaging services, Virtual Reality, and other emerging technologies and hardware. Second, I would respond that no one should have concern for legal risk to Meta: (i) legal implications from increased transparency would simply be a result of Meta's own behavior, and (ii) as our disclosure clearly shows, Meta has weaponized their own legal team to knowingly perpetuate Meta's misconduct and cover up of the harm of their products. Third, brand risk shouldn't be a concern to Meta, as it doesn't appear that public sentiment of their brand could go any lower.

Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing  
“Hidden Harms: Examining Whistleblower Allegations  
that Meta Buried Child Safety Research”

**Questions for the Record for Cayce Savage**

QUESTIONS FROM SENATOR BLACKBURN

**1. Was Meta truthful in its responses to the Washington Post story about Meta’s child safety practices in its virtual reality (VR) devices?**

No, Meta was not truthful.

*“In a statement to The Post, Meta spokeswoman Dani Lever said that the allegation that Meta curtailed research is based on a few examples “stitched together to fit a predetermined and false narrative...””*

This is not a predetermined, nor a false narrative.

*“...and that the company has had no blanket prohibition on research about people under 13. Meta has produced research on youth safety in virtual reality and the company consulted children and their parents as it created the tween accounts, she said.”*

We are not claiming that Meta has a “blanket prohibition” on research about individuals under 13. The issue is not whether research was done at all, but how difficult Meta made it to do research with *anyone* under the age of 18, despite there being a grievous need for it. In particular, required legal reviews significantly lengthened research timelines, which is often unacceptable for researchers, given that product teams and leadership demand they usually conduct and report research as quickly as possible. This process became even more arduous for researchers needing to conduct research with people under 13. Despite my title being the lead - and only - youth-focused VR UXR, I had to request special permission to conduct research with people under 13 to support Project Salsa - the purpose of which was to lower the minimum age of VR headset use from 13 to 10, meaning research with 10-12 year olds was *necessary*. Despite this, and despite the fact that leadership was pushing the Project Salsa team to move as quickly as possible, it took several months for my legal counterpart to even identify a path by which I would be allowed to conduct research with people under 13, despite this being something we had been discussing since the beginning of my time on the team many months prior. legal never permitted me to conduct research with individuals under 13.

*“Lever added that Meta’s virtual reality devices have long had safety features including the ability to block problematic users, and over time the company has used research to develop additional protections for young people, including parental supervision measures and default settings that allow teens to communicate only with people they know.”*

We are specifically discussing the presence of safety features *for children*, which Meta has only had for its VR devices since mid-2022, eight years after its acquisition of Oculus and six years after it released its VR headset to the market, despite copious existing research which indicated that children would likely be heavily early adopters.

With regards to the parental supervision measures and default settings - While these are good things to have, our documentation and declarations show that these are insufficient so long as Meta fails to (1) educate parents about the risks their children face in VR and (2) improve the quality of their age data to ensure teen users are actually using teen accounts - only then will features like parental supervision and social default settings be triggered.

*“We stand by our research team’s excellent work and are dismayed by these mischaracterizations of the team’s efforts,” Lever said.”*

We are the research team in question and we are not mischaracterizing.

*“Meta did not directly dispute or confirm the events in Germany described by the researchers but said such a deletion would have been meant to ensure compliance with a U.S. federal law governing the handling of children’s personal data and with the General Data Protection Regulation, a landmark European privacy law that broadly prohibits companies from collecting personal information from anyone without consent. “Global privacy regulations make clear that if information from minors under 13 years of age is collected without verifiable parental or guardian consent, it has to be deleted,” Lever’s statement said.”*

GDPR and COPPA (As I assume Ms. Lever meant by “a U.S. federal law”) only apply when collecting data directly from a child under 13 (i.e. interviewing them directly) or when dealing with personally identifiable information (i.e. their address). Neither of these circumstances were present in this case.

With respect to “If information from minors under 13 years of age is collected without verifiable parental or guardian consent,” we were interviewing the child in question’s *mother*, who gave explicit consent both before the interview and during, by urging her elder son to continue speaking about the younger son’s usage.

*Meta told The Post that the headsets were meant only for people 13 and older and emphasized that the product packaging made that clear.*

Here is everything Meta’s VR box says about child usage (on the bottom of the box in small font): “Parents: Not all children are ready for Meta Quest. See child safety guidance at QR code or [meta.com/quest/parent-info](https://meta.com/quest/parent-info). Meta accounts for 10+ (varies by region).” and, in another paragraph, “Not recommended for younger or smaller-sized children or if headset cannot be adjusted to fit properly.”

Nowhere on Meta’s box does it explicitly state the *minimum age of use for the headset itself*. I’ll also note that Ms. Lever appears confused regarding Meta’s minimum age of use - It’s 10, not 13.

*“Meta said that lawyers have long partnered with research teams at the company and that there is nothing controversial about Meta lawyers advising researchers on attorney-client privilege or explaining that some work might require legal advice.”*

That would be true if that was what Meta’s lawyers were doing. As clearly presented with first-hand knowledge and documentation submitted to Congress, Meta’s lawyers were actively interfering with research, including preventing some work from being done and editing some work after the fact to obscure findings.

*“Changes instituted after Haugen’s disclosures were intended to make sure that research is high-quality and accurate, the company said.”*

In context, this reads like Meta believes its lawyers are qualified to assess the quality of and manage the research process. They are not.

This is also *not what Meta’s lawyers were doing*. If that were the case, they wouldn’t have been prohibiting certain topics from being researched, but rather providing guidance as to the best approach.

*“Meta told The Post that the company does not view app reviews as a reliable source of information about users’ ages and that it has better ways to determine how old users are.”*

We did not assert that app reviews were being used to assess the ages of users. I used app reviews to gather qualitative evidence that children were being harmed using Meta’s VR devices and to identify what kinds of harms those children were experiencing. These were a public source accessible to me after Meta’s legal team had prevented me from conducting original research into this topic.

With respect to “It has better ways to determine how old users are”...not really. That’s why I had proposed Project Horton to research age assurance. Until Meta released its age verification solution, which only applies after the fact to require users to provide evidence of their age *if* Meta suspects they are underaged, it had relied *entirely* on stated age, which research across Meta’s products shows is highly unreliable. At this current juncture, using app reviews as an age signal might be a good idea until Meta develops a more robust age assurance ecosystem.

*“The company disputed that a lawyer would be in a position to approve or a (sic) reject a study and said that lawyers never edit research results. Lawyers offer advice and suggestions, the company said, but research leaders ultimately determine which studies to pursue and the scope of their projects.”*

Unfortunately, Meta’s assertions are wholly untrue. I and many of my colleagues repeatedly experienced Meta Legal explicitly approving/rejecting studies, editing research results, and determining the scope of our studies.

*“Asked about the rush, Lever said the effort to create tween accounts came “on top of all the protections we had already in place” for teens.”*

“All the protections” already in place at Meta were under adopted, ineffective and insufficient - and Meta knows this.

*“Meta told The Post that it chose a 10-year-old cutoff so it could make sure it was offering age-appropriate content.”*

Before Meta leadership made the decision to lower the minimum age to 10, *no* research was conducted on the age appropriateness of VR content, only on the headset hardware, despite myself and other researchers flagging this as a serious safety gap. When I and other researchers raised concerns that Meta’s VR app ratings were insufficient to help parents make meaningful decisions about age appropriateness, Meta flatly told us that it did not want to invest in this area.

*“The company said it later implemented an initiative that asked headset users to confirm their birth dates. Those who said they were under 10 were removed.”*

This Meta assertion is misleading and the company knows it. Any of Meta’s so-called protections that rely on self-disclosure are insufficient. The issues contributing to underage usage are (1) a lack of parent education and (2) a lack of reliability in stated age data. Asking users to verify their age under these circumstances means the majority of under age users are still going undetected, as parents may provide their own information to “verify” the account. Moreover children have shown that they are more than capable of finding clever work arounds (using someone else’s ID, using AI images for the face scanner, etc).

*“Lever told The Post that leaders of the Reality Labs research team decided not to move forward with Project Horton because the company was already developing parental control tools and the initiative that asked headset users to confirm their ages by entering their birth date.”*

Project Horton was formally reviewed and approved *after the parental supervision tools in question had already been released to the public*. There was no new information about the parental *supervision* (not “control”) tools which would have affected anyone’s opinion regarding the necessity of this project.

Asking users to confirm their ages by entering their birth date is a low confidence method for gathering age data. It is very easy and common for users to simply give false information - Especially when users and their parents aren’t aware of the risks which make providing an accurate birthday important. Reliance on “stated age” (as this was called internally) is the reason I had proposed Project Horton in the first place.

*“An internal FAQ explaining the changes said the company’s “culture of openness” must now be balanced against “the risks that naturally stem from conducting and sharing research on sensitive topics and populations.” Meta told The Post that the changes were meant to ensure that research projects are accurate and findings are incorporated into the company’s product decisions.”*

Meta's statements here are false. Meta research leadership and my legal counterpart both told me that this shift in culture and process was to "protect" myself and other researchers in the event our work was to be "leaked" to the public. I was also explicitly *told* by Legal that this shift was to "mitigate risk" to Meta.

*"Meta told The Post that it requires users to verify their age with an ID or credit card if it suspects they are lying and that it created a tool to help third-party VR developers understand their users' ages."*

Yes, *if it suspects they are lying*. This means the user will have already been using the product for some time, and that this will only happen for *some* of the underaged users on Meta's platform. A company prioritizing user safety should aim to identify underaged users *proactively* and *en masse*.

*"In his affidavit submitted to Congress, the researcher wrote that he thought he was being told to avoid gathering data that could "implicate the company in future engagements with regulators." Meta said that characterization was inaccurate and that the lawyer was trying to help the researcher achieve the approved objective of his study, which did not involve collecting information about users under 13."*

To be clear, a user above the age of 13 mentioning that someone - not in the room - under 13 is using a VR headset is appropriate and standard research practice, and is neither in violation of COPPA nor GDPR. If Meta were leveraging research in good faith, it would *want* to collect these insights, as they would indicate that there was an issue of underage usage which should be addressed.

**a. A Meta spokesperson stated that Meta added more protections for young people on its VR devices. Are you aware of any protections that Meta added?**

Meta's continued pattern of vaguely referring to "protections" and the like indicates that they are not approaching this conversation in good faith. Any features Meta has already added to its product are now public facing, meaning there is no reason for Meta to avoid citing precisely *which* "protections" it has added. If Meta's goal is truly to deliver safer experiences, surely it would wish to educate the public how to use its products more safely at every opportunity.

Meta has released additional features since my time on the team. We are not asserting that Meta has not released *any* "protections," but that the "protections" it has released are retroactive and insufficient - and Meta is aware of and disingenuous about the efficacy of these "protections." For example, the website behind the QR code on the VR headset box delivers concise and actionable supervisory and safety guidance for parents, *but* this information is needed in more discoverable places (for example, in a flyer *in the box itself*), as it is well established that putting information behind a QR code decreases the likelihood of people accessing it. Meta is aware of this through my own assertions, the assertions of my colleagues, and because this is general best practice within the UX field.

The core safety risks to young users which our disclosure has raised still have not yet been meaningfully addressed. If Meta's defense is that it has added new protections, why have those protections not meaningfully addressed the largest risks to the safety of young users? This too reflects Meta's bad faith approach to this conversation. At the time I left the company children were rampant in VR, and I regularly observed and heard accounts of children being propositioned for sex acts, groomed, harrassed, getting doxxed and more. The vague mentions of "protections" could refer to something as simple as moving the parental education page in front of the Meta account log in requirement (as they have recently done), a change which is certainly a good one, but which does not meaningfully address the fundamental issue that *user awareness remains low about the minimum age of use of their headsets and the risks of harm on platform*. For example, Meta has still not chosen to clearly and concisely state the minimum age of headset use on the box itself. Their own spokesperson did not even seem to know the minimum age of headset use when responding to this whistleblower disclosure.

Finally, Meta has a history of adding features and using their presence as proof that Meta is behaving responsibly, when these features do not necessarily make the experience safer. For example, Meta bragged about its parental supervision features for teen, then tween VR users, when existing research of which Meta was aware clearly showed that parental supervision features alone are not sufficient because they often go underutilized, and need to be paired with meaningful conversation (and co-usage for younger users). Meta's own internal data reflected this, showing low adoption rate of their VR parental supervision features.

Meta's spokespeople perhaps forget that some whistleblowers that are party to this disclosure are *still at the company*, and so the information we have about what "protections" Meta has added is current. I would like to see a list of the "protections" Meta's spokesperson speaks of, as well as a detailed explanation of why the company believes these efforts are effective, given the grievous nature and frequency of harm to which they are responding.

- b. Meta disputed your assertion that lawyers were able to approve or reject research projects, and they said that lawyers never edit results.**
  - i. Is this statement consistent with your experience at Meta?**
  - ii. Would a company lawyer being involved in child safety research interfere with such research?**

[b.i.] This statement is wholly inconsistent with my personal experience at Meta, as well as the experience of many of my colleagues, with whom I regularly discussed this issue. During my time in Meta's Reality Labs, legal interference was so frequent and disruptive that my UXR team spent numerous meetings discussing this issue. I was also told by researchers supporting a variety of Meta's products, including Instagram, Horizon, and Reality Labs more broadly (mixed reality, wearables, etc) that Legal interfered with their research, and witnessed this occurring on more than one occasion.

I will also note that Legal's leadership was well aware that Legal was acting in this capacity, as I experienced Legal directors engaging in this behavior themselves. UXR leadership was also aware that Legal was behaving in this capacity and told our research team on numerous occasions to defer to Legal when making decisions about research.

Legal interference I (and my colleagues) experienced included:

- Rejecting proposed areas of inquiry, stating that they were too “sensitive” or “risky” (This included investigating what kinds of harms children were experiencing in VR.)
- Editing specific research questions (meaning, within a specific area of inquiry, the more specific things we could investigate)
- Editing discussion guides and survey questions
- Editing research reports to remove or abstract information
- Controlling with whom research reports could be shared

To make this very clear, *Legal was given the power to behave in these ways by both legal and research leadership*, and there are *no other bodies that engage with research in this way, nor have this power at Meta*.

[b.ii.] Yes, “youth” in VR was my explicit area of study, and I was given a legal counterpart to review *everything* I wrote down which I intended to share with anyone other than my manager, and with whom I was instructed by my manager to discuss any plans for future research. Legal’s interference prevented me from investigating (1) the prevalence and causes of underage users in VR, (2) the harms these users experienced and potentially caused, (3) what could be done to address points 1 and 2.

**c. Andy Stone, Meta Spokesperson, stated that Meta approved almost 180 studies on safety and well-being on its virtual reality platforms since 2022. How would you respond to this assertion?**

This is an absurd statement which belies, at best, a fundamental lack of research literacy. That Meta would allow someone displaying such a lack of knowledge to speak on their behalf is itself concerning.

Firstly, the number of studies *approved* is not the same as the number of studies *conducted*. As we saw from the age assurance project (Project Horton) example, a study could be approved and still not be conducted.

Secondly, we have not claimed Meta’s Reality Labs has done no safety and well-being research. That was my colleague Dr. Sattizahn’s specific area of study for which he conducted numerous research studies. My specific concern is about the lack of due diligence with respect to the safety and well-being of *children* using Meta’s VR headsets, given their heavy presence in Meta’s virtual spaces. Children have meaningfully different safety and well-being needs from those of adults with respect to the usage of digital media, so dedicated research is necessary.

Thirdly, even the number of studies conducted is not a sensible metric by which to gauge Meta’s dedication to user safety. It matters what the studies’ areas of inquiry area are, with whom the research is conducted and at what scale, the truthfulness and directness with which researchers are able to report findings, whether other staff are made aware of the research findings, whether the research findings are actioned upon, and whether the actions taken are meaningful. As our evidence, disclosures, and testimony show, Meta Legal and leadership actively undermine these

steps. Given the grievous nature of the concerns under discussion, it would benefit the public if Mr. Stone could stay on topic in future communications.

## **2. What is the relationship between Meta's Reality Labs and Instagram?**

Meta shares a variety of resources across its wide diversity of products, including Reality Labs and Instagram. The bulk of Meta's resources are dedicated to whatever area it considers to be its strategic area of focus at the time. Prior to 2021, Instagram was Meta's area of focus, such that the majority of its funding, talent, and headcount resources were concentrated there. When I joined Reality Labs in January of 2022, it was widely acknowledged internally that Meta's focus had shifted from Instagram to Reality Labs, such that the funding, talent, and headcount were being increasingly concentrated there instead. The implications of this were that people were transferring internally from Instagram to Reality Labs at an increasing rate, bringing with them established processes, knowledge, etc.

Internal transfers from Instagram to Reality Labs were very common, and there was no contextual training to make this transition. This actively caused issues, as VR is a general computing hardware device often used for gaming, and Instagram is a social media app. Folks coming over from Instagram often struggled to make the conceptual shift; I had to repeatedly explain to fellow Reality Labs employees, including leadership in C-suite, that VR was different from a two dimensional software experience and that this had strong implications for user safety and well-being (i.e. The immersive and embodied nature of VR means that harm has greater impact than equivalent experiences on any two dimensional app, and so establishing robust protections is even more critical in VR.).

Individuals coming over from Instagram to Reality Labs brought with them established processes, such as the rapid six month development cycle used for app development. This rapidity contributed to and, in some cases caused, user safety issues. For example, leadership demanded the VR Parental Supervision product team develop net-new parental tools for VR in less than a year, when this is something which needed significant research and careful thought.

Many employees work across products (i.e. Product Compliance and Policy), including VR/Reality Labs and Instagram, and make decisions which affect both of these areas. Some of these teams are even user-facing - For example, the Avatars team creates avatars which are used across both Instagram and VR, as well as a number of Meta's other products.

Some employees dedicated to Reality Labs' products also supported Instagram. For example, during my time in Reality Labs, I shared my VR research with Instagram teams to guide their decision making, and vice versa. I also partnered with Instagram researchers to conduct net-new research relevant to both of our products. Such knowledge sharing and collaboration is common and encouraged across Meta's products - Or rather, it was when I worked there.

Most of Meta's products are connected on the backend. For example, when I worked with the VR Integrity team to identify those users behaving maliciously towards children, the team noted that they were significantly hindered in their ability to do this. The problem was, the information VR users gave when setting up their VR headsets and accounts didn't correspond to information

they used when setting up their other Meta accounts (Facebook, Instagram, etc), so the team's access to existing information about the person (such as age) was more limited than usual. This is an example of just how normal it is for Meta's teams to collaborate and share information across products, including about its users.

Finally, Meta is actively pursuing avenues by which to create shared experiences across VR and Instagram in order to boost engagement. For example, Meta has been showing short video clips of VR on Instagram, and has been pursuing the creation of an "Instagram feed" within the VR homescreen. Not only are these products connected in a myriad ways on the backend, but Meta is actively seeking ways to connect them for the user as well.

**3. What implications are there for user safety when Instagram or other social media content is integrated into VR?**

Firstly, this is a privacy issue, given the high prevalence of VR headset and account sharing. Only one user's Instagram is going to be shown within the VR homescreen, and introducing an Instagram feed into VR means anyone in the household using the headset can easily access this person's private account.

Secondly, as I mention in my documentation and declaration, VR introduces new and more severe kinds of risks. Reading a bullying message in Instagram in real life may feel painful, but reading it in VR may feel even more severe - Research into the effects of this kind of experience don't yet exist within or outside of Meta.

Thirdly, overuse is a serious concern for VR, as the headset covers your eyes, making it difficult to perceive time passing in the real world. We already know Instagram can be addictive for both adults and children, but introducing Instagram (or any social media) into VR could potentially exacerbate this effect. Again, the research on this risk has not been done.

**4. Meta has said publicly that its VR headsets are intended for children aged 10 and older. But based on the internal documents you shared, as many as 80 to 90 percent of users in some virtual rooms were under ten years old.**

**a. How are underage users able to access Meta VR?**

Underage users are able to access Meta VR in two ways:

- Sharing a headset/account with an older user
- Using inaccurately aged accounts (i.e. their parent's account or an account the child intentionally made to have an older age)

Headset sharing is common, as VR headsets are expensive and most households do not own a headset for every household member. Account sharing is common, especially for younger users, for a variety of reasons, including convenience and the perception that this enables supervision.

Research indicated that parents are most involved in their child's usage of Meta's VR headsets during account creation, and that parents may create an account on behalf of their child, or instruct their child to create an account using the parent's information, to protect the child (by not

giving Meta the child's information) and to facilitate supervision. It is also very well established in research across digital media/experiences that children, especially tweens and teens, seek increasingly mature experiences, and so are likely to create adult-aged accounts for a variety of reasons (i.e. to have access to M-rated games).

**b. Why is this problem still ongoing?**

Firstly, because Meta has not sufficiently invested in parental education. Parents are largely unaware of Meta's stated minimum age of use for their VR headsets (it's not even on the box) and are largely unaware of the risks their children face when using VR. For these reasons, many parents do not understand why adhering to the minimum age of use or using accurately aged accounts for tweens or teens matters, and so they continue to allow underaged usage and inaccurately aged accounts. I want to emphasize that this education is not difficult to do - Simply doing things like putting a flyer in the VR box and putting the minimum stated age on a discoverable part of the box itself would go a long way.

Secondly, because Meta released this technology without setting the precedent for appropriately aged usage in the first place. Even the best approach to education about minimum age and risk is going to be less impactful now that the headset is in so many households and underaged usage is normalized.

Thirdly, because Meta refuses to invest in meaningful age assurance. As I discuss in my declaration, age assurance is comprised of stated age, predicted age, and age verification. To meaningfully improve their age assurance ecosystem, Meta needs to:

- Educate users and parents about why providing an accurate stated age matters (The reason is the risk children face)
- Investigate age prediction technologies, such as pupil distance, height determination, etc. This will require Meta to work closely with industry experts and parents to ensure this approach feels appropriate (This was the work proposed in my "age assurance" study, called Project Horton, which was shut down by Meta.), given that VR is a newer form of technology which enables novel forms of age prediction. It is of paramount importance that any new age prediction approaches feel appropriate, given concerns about user privacy.

Meta continues to assert that they now require age verification if they suspect an account is being used by a minor, but Meta knows that, without these other two steps, verification can be easily foiled and is unlikely to catch the majority of underaged users or users who should be using a tween or teen account.

These are the tactical reasons underaged usage continues, but all of these are things Meta could readily address - If it wanted to. The reason the issue persists is because Meta does not want to deal with the business downside. Meta is required to remove accounts when it becomes aware they are being used by underaged individuals. Doing so would decrease their usage metrics, which Meta relies on to demonstrate shareholder value. Meta chooses not to meaningfully address underaged usage in favor of maintaining inflated metrics for their shareholders.

## 5. What can Meta do to make VR safer? Why isn't Meta implementing these measures?

### What Meta can do to make VR safer:

1. Meta should listen to its users and prioritize their safety.
2. Meta should begin investigating safety risks and mitigations *proactively*. Today, Meta tends not to conduct good-faith research on the safety of its products - including VR - until after it's already in a rush to get the product out to market. For example, Meta could have begun developing parental supervision features for VR when it first acquired Oculus, but instead waited eight years until it was already the subject of regulatory oversight to invest in this much needed feature set. Having multiple years to research these features would have ensured that Meta could produce an industry-leading experience, but they chose to develop something in a rushed manner and release a sub-par experience.
3. Meta should establish a practice of proactively referencing existing research and speaking with relevant experts - Many of whom they already employ. I witnessed Meta regularly ignore its *own employees* for whom they paid for their expertise, when it was perceived that engaging with the concerns the employee raised would generate "risk" or slow the team down. I also witnessed Meta ignore experts outside of the company. For example, Meta's VR policy team regularly engaged with industry experts to get their thoughts on Meta's approach to various aspects of its product. The concerns of these experts were regularly ignored.
4. Meta should enable its researchers to do their job (without interference from legal) in order to identify the risks users face and the paths towards addressing those risks.
5. Meta should *meaningfully* invest in accurately identifying the ages of its VR users. Any other safety features related to a user's age are meaningless without this.
6. Meta should *meaningfully* invest in parental education, especially regarding the minimum age of use, the risks that children face, and how best to keep young users safe (i.e. time limits, co-usage, etc).

### Why Meta is not implementing these measures:

The things I've listed above would arguably be *more efficient* than any frantic, after-the-fact scrambling on Meta's part. Having a safer experience is better for the health of both the product and the company, as it increases usage, time used, company trust, sentiment, etc. Even Walt Disney insisted that investing in user safety as a pillar of development is just good business sense. The only conclusion I'm able to come to here is simply that Meta's desire to "move fast" and get products out in front of the public as quickly as possible is more of a priority than user safety. I might say that perhaps Meta doesn't understand the business value of trust and safety, but they employ *hundreds* of researchers who have repeatedly told them otherwise. Unfortunately, prioritizing speed over safety is a conscious choice.

## 6. Did the Meta legal team understand the safety implications when it instructed you to change studies and findings from your research?

Yes. In some cases, I explained the safety implications to them. In other cases, their instructions were *because* they understood the safety implications. For example, instructing me to remove mentions of users under the age of 13 or 10 meant they had to first be aware that underaged users

were being organically mentioned in research. If Meta responds here by saying their legal team didn't have a tidy list of safety risks, I will remind them that Legal's interference was the reason *they did not have that list*.

**7. To your knowledge, has Meta ever brought in child health and safety experts to advise on virtual reality products?**

Yes. Firstly, I was aware that Meta's VR policy team hosted a regular meeting (I believe it was monthly) with industry experts regarding VR, some of whom had relevant expertise in areas regarding child health and safety. Secondly, Meta *employed* individuals with this expertise, including former tenured professors of developmental psychology.

**a. Did Meta's findings or recommendations align with what you were seeing?**

No. I consistently saw Meta ignore the recommendations of the experts it consulted. Some of my colleagues who were child health and safety experts even expressed to me that they felt threatened by Legal for expressing concerns about the way Meta was approaching its VR product.

**b. Did Meta implement or act on any recommendations from these experts?**

I am not aware of Meta acting on any recommendations from external child health and safety experts. Meta has acted on the recommendations from some of its internal experts, but only when those recommendations aligned with Meta leadership's existing goal of quick growth. Otherwise, I know internal experts have had to fight hard to get the company to act on even very basic recommendations regarding child safety - for example, *putting the minimum age of headset use on the outside of the box*.

**8. What was Meta Leadership's expressed intention in lowering the minimum age of virtual reality users?**

Minimum age was lowered both for Meta's VR headset and for its VR social app Horizon.

With regards to the headset, I was shown a slide deck when "read-in" to this highly confidential project which included leadership rationale for lowering the minimum age. The rationale in that slide deck stated that Meta was seeking to lower the minimum age as a response to increased FTC pressure, and that they believed doing so would increase engagement.

With regards to the Horizon app, I was explicitly told by Tim Loving that leadership believed it would increase adoption and engagement.

**9. On January 31st, 2024, Mark Zuckerberg testified that Meta does not instruct teams to focus on engagement.**

**a. Is this statement true?**

No. This statement is false, and Mr. Zuckerberg knows that it is false. Throughout my four years

at Meta, I was embedded in Facebook Marketplace, Facebook Jobs, Buy and Sell Groups, and VR. For every one of these products, our *primary* directive was to increase engagement, many times at the expense of good user experience. Every time, I was told these directives came from Mark Zuckerberg himself.

**b. If not, how were these directives shared at Meta?**

These directives were shared by leadership in documents, in Workplace “posts,” and in meetings both big and small. Our success metrics usually reflected these directives. For VR specifically, Tim Loving (UXR director) explicitly told our team that Mark Zuckerberg wanted “every team” to focus on engagement.

**c. Were they shared company-wide?**

It depends on the scope of the directive - Sometimes directives are only relevant for one product (i.e. Just Reality Labs but not Instagram, Facebook, etc). However, (1) the directive from Mark Zuckerberg to focus on engagement was company-wide and (2) even before this specific instance, evidence that the standing directive for *the company as a whole* was to focus on engagement was pervasive.

**QUESTIONS FROM SENATOR COONS**

- 1. I co-lead the *Platform Accountability and Transparency Act (PATA)* which is designed to create mechanisms for independent research of social media platforms, their harms, and the effects they are having on users or society at large. In light of what you observed at Meta regarding their approach to internal research, could you elaborate on the value and importance of having effective independent ways to research platform behavior?**

Meta has clearly demonstrated that they are *unwilling* to conduct good faith research on the ways their products affect users, particularly when they deem the area of inquiry to be “risky” to them. In example, Meta responded to Frances Haugen’s 2021 whistleblower disclosure by making it *more* difficult to investigate the effects of their products on minors, rather than facilitating this research openly and in good faith.

Given how pervasive social media is, and especially how much time people on average spend on social media, meaningfully understanding the effects these products have on us is critical to identifying risks to our individual health, well-being, and so on, as well as the risks to our health and well-being as societies, for social media impacts us both psychologically and sociologically. Meta’s consistent behavior has shown they are not willing to take responsibility for conducting and communicating research to this end on their own. Independent research would be a powerful tool to hold Meta accountable for the ways their products affect the public.

It is also critical to understand the *cumulative effect* social media technologies have on us (i.e. the use of social media across Instagram, TikTok, etc). This research must be conducted

independently to minimize bias - I would argue that it is impossible for for-profit companies to conduct unbiased research on their own products in a competitive context.

**2. During your time at Meta and regarding the businesses you worked on or otherwise had insight into, to what degree did Meta facilitate independent research regarding the harms caused by their products? Was such research permitted or possible?**

No, I am not aware of Meta facilitating independent research regarding the harms caused by their products. I *am* aware of independent research being done on the harm caused by Meta's products, but none of this research was done in association with Meta, and I was at times discouraged from sharing such independent research within Meta.

Meta does have programs which facilitate research through third parties, though none of this work is what I would describe as independent, as Meta enacts control over the process, including:

- The kinds of research questions which are prioritized
- The methodology
- How research participants are sampled
- The way questions are asked
- The way findings are represented
- What research findings are represented
- How research findings are prioritized

To be very clear - If there were good-faith independent research on harms caused by Meta's products, Meta's own employees would have a clearer understanding of the harms caused by Meta's products. And yet, there are rarely reports one can point to internally to confidently and concisely say "These are the ways in which our users are being harmed by our products." Instead, employees must often create a patchwork understanding across numerous documents, rely on word of mouth, or share the information with each other in secret. For example, when investigating possible harms children using VR were facing, I spoke with a Facebook researcher who shared a robust, exhaustive document citing research on bullying children experience on Facebook. The researcher cautioned me not to share the document with anyone, and not to tell anyone they had shared it with me.

**3. Do you think there is more that Meta could be doing now to facilitate independent research into these products? What might that look like if Meta wanted to cooperate?**

Before discussing Meta's facilitation of independent research, I think it is necessary to acknowledge Meta's current relationship to its own internal research. If Meta is actively interfering with good faith research being conducted internally - going so far as to remove findings from reports - I do not believe we can reasonably expect Meta to facilitate independent research in any manner with good faith.

There are ways in which research being conducted independently can protect the fidelity of the findings, but there are other ways in which Meta can actually interfere with the research in even

more significant ways. For example, research being conducted independently means, in theory, that Meta cannot control what research questions are prioritized, but this also means the independent research body will be comparatively limited because they won't have access to Meta's internal data. For example, if the independent research body wanted to investigate bullying on Instagram, they wouldn't have access to Meta's internal data about things like usage of Meta's safety tools (i.e. blocking, reporting, etc) unless, of course, *Meta gave it to them*. Given Meta's interference with its *internal* research, I can't imagine that we could expect them to engage in good faith with requests to reference user data in such ways.

In terms of what cooperation would look like:

- The independent research body would need to be fully in control of the area of inquiry, the specific research questions investigated, the methodologies used, the sample used, the research conduct, data analysis, and reporting.
- Meta would need to work with an outside party to determine meaningful, appropriate ways to share existing research and user data with independent research bodies as needed. Data Meta provides would need to include the level of fidelity necessary for the research project, meaning it would not be appropriate for Meta to insist on providing only anonymized or aggregate data for certain studies. Data sharing of this kind is possible to conduct in ways which are respectful of user privacy and is common practice in other areas of research.

**4. Based on your experiences, how would you expect Meta to respond to (or argue against) requests to facilitate such independent research, and how would you respond to their contentions?**

Firstly, I expect Meta to say that they already work with independent research bodies, and to provide a vague quantification of this (i.e. "We work with over 50 independent bodies") or, at best, to cite a few bodies with no context (i.e. "We work with this NGO."). To this, I would say, whatever they're doing now clearly isn't working, given the known harm Meta products cause, and a conversation about user safety isn't the time to argue semantics.

There are *many* independent research and advocacy groups, as well as independent subject matter experts, who have clearly articulated what Meta needs to do differently regarding the safety of its products. If Meta were willing to listen to independent bodies, those changes would already have been made. For example, if Meta had spoken to Fairplay even briefly about parental supervision for VR, they would have prioritized robust, discoverable parental education. And yet, the parental education Meta chooses to provide remains buried behind a tiny QR code on the bottom of the box.

Secondly, I expect Meta will say that they *can't* share user data with independent research bodies because it would violate users' concerns about privacy. To this I would say, first, Meta's users are already deeply concerned about their privacy in Meta's hands. This is one of the main reasons parents don't give Meta their child's accurate age today. Secondly, I would say that Meta engages in this very behavior *constantly* when working with their third party vendors. Throughout the contractual engagement, the third party vendor may have access to relevant Meta log data, to

users' full names, phone numbers, emails, even addresses if the research is in person. Engaging with independent bodies would be no different.

Thirdly, it is possible that Meta will argue against this by making a defensive claim of its internal researchers. For example, Ms. Lever's response to our assertions in the Washington Post, "We stand by our research team's excellent work and are dismayed by these mischaracterizations of the team's efforts." To this, I would say the six whistleblowers in this disclosure *were* and *are* Meta's research team, and we have come forward precisely because we are concerned about the ways Meta weaponizes and suppresses its own internal research. The reason I am advocating for independent research is not because of any concerns with Meta's internal researchers, but rather it is because *Meta* has demonstrated that it will not let their own researchers conduct investigations in good faith.

**5. What would you see as the greatest challenges to creating a process by which vetted independent researchers could study platform behavior in the businesses you have insight into? How could those challenges be addressed?**

For platforms with such wide adoption as Instagram or Facebook, conducting research on their users would often be quite straight forward. Many independent bodies already do it. The biggest hindrance in my opinion will be the lack of access to platform/log data, for a few reasons. Firstly, users' perception or memory of their experience or behavior sometimes differ meaningfully from the reality. For example, a user may claim that they blocked another user, when in fact they did not successfully do so. These discrepancies are critical to understand, particularly when considering user safety and well-being. Secondly, having access to "log data" or internal data about how users engage with the product can be critical to identify trends without needing to survey all users (which is not possible). For example, seeing the log data which indicates that adoption of parental supervision features is very low. This information might be necessary for an independent research body to identify that this is a problem area requiring deeper inquiry, as, clearly, Meta cannot be fully trusted to identify the needed areas of inquiry. This particular challenge can be addressed, quite simply, through good-faith cooperation with the independent research body, provided care is taken to protect users' privacy in the handling and sharing of log data.

**6. What would you see as most necessary to get right to have as effective a mechanism for independent research as possible?**

It is critical that the independent research body be

- Protected as much as possible from Meta's interference, intimidation, and disparagement
- Attractive to researchers as a place to work in order to attract some of those experts who are currently under Meta's employ. This will require funding and tooling to enable high quality, expeditious research.
- Able to "move fast" to keep up with the speed of Meta's decision making, especially given this body would likely find out about decisions retroactively
- Able to meaningfully disseminate this research to appropriate bodies (i.e the public, regulatory bodies, etc)

It will be critical for any independent research body to have consistent, good faith access to Meta's usage and user data as appropriate in a manner which is respectful to users, and that the data Meta makes available to them accurately reflects users' real experiences - Not just the picture Meta wants to paint.

I, and the other whistleblowers taking part in this disclosure, are excited by the prospect of such an independent research body and are eager to support it.

**7. Apart from independent research, what transparency (e.g., data, reports, etc.) do you think Meta could and should be providing regarding the businesses you have insight into so that the public, researchers, and policymakers can better understand the effects of its products?**

Generally, Meta must stop censoring its own researchers, stop compromising the integrity of internal research findings, and must cease its bad faith usage of numbers/statistics to demonstrate responsible action. For example, Andy Stone's recent claim that Meta had "approved almost 180 studies on safety and well-being on its virtual reality platforms since 2022" belies either a fundamental lack of understanding of or care for research. The number of studies approved is not the same as the number of studies conducted (as we saw from the cancelled age assurance study), and the number of studies conducted is not a sensible metric by which to gauge Meta's dedication to user safety. This is a wholly meaningless response which underscores Meta's lack of willingness to discuss user safety in good faith.

In terms of more specific practices, Meta must shift to having a more open relationship with the public. Their products permeate the lives of individuals across the world, and I believe the public would greet open dialogue eagerly and actively.

- Sharing research: Today, Meta shares selective reports which are positioned to advocate for the company (i.e. Meta's Trust, Transparency & Control Lab). Given Meta's history, I believe a more robust, regular cadence of public disclosure of research would be appropriate, provided proprietary information is not shared, user consent is given, and PII is removed. This should be inclusive of both past and future research.
- Research for the public: I would also advocate for Meta creating a cadence of "research for the public." These would be studies done on topics the public cares deeply about (i.e. Instagram bullying) in which Meta makes public all relevant aspects of the study, including research questions, methods, sampling approach, timeline, discussion guides or survey questions, analysis approach, and final report. Meta should provide explanations for the decisions made about the studies (i.e. "Here's why we used this methodology"). The goal of these studies would be transparency and public education. I should note that Meta does currently make some research publicly available (i.e. their Trust, Transparency and Control Lab), but this research is cherry-picked to demonstrate Meta's good deeds.
- Public tracking of key metrics: Given Meta's history, I believe making public certain metrics related to user well-being and safety is needed. For example, making public the rate of adoption of its VR parental supervision tools overall, as well as the individual features.

- Enabling third party audits of the product development process and the products themselves: Meta must enable third party insight into *how* it develops products, as well as the outcomes of the products it creates.
- 8. Based on your experiences, how would you expect Meta to respond to (or argue against) requests for such transparency, and how would you respond to their contentions?**

Meta consistently employs a playbook in response to whistleblower disclosures such as ours which I expect to be repeated here. Broadly, this will look like Meta critiquing the validity of the ask, rather than engaging with it directly:

- Meta will likely claim that it is already being transparent, providing vague examples such as Mr. Stone's "almost 180 studies approved."
- Meta will attack the credibility of the requester, for example claiming the individuals making this request have an agenda or just don't understand how much Meta allegedly already does.
- Meta will attack the credibility of any evidence provided, claiming it's being taken out of context, isn't sufficient, etc without specificity.
- Meta will play the victim. This may look like Ms. Lever's statement to the Washington Post that our lawful disclosure was a "mischaracterization" of their research team's excellent work, thereby positioning the critique as one not of the company but of specific employees who need protection. Or it may look like Meta's internal communications that Frances Haugen's 2021 disclosure made it difficult for researchers to do their job, thereby positioning the critique as one which unfairly hurts a company just trying to do the right thing.
- But, most importantly, Meta will not acknowledge the validity of the critique, no matter what.

My response to any of Meta's contentions is this:

To respond to requests for greater transparency with anything other than meaningful engagement (such as, "Absolutely, how can we help?") is to clarify that the safety and well-being of your users is not your priority. We are no longer having a conversation about the validity of the critique, because the body of supporting evidence and whistleblower accounts of Meta's bad acts is too comprehensive, consistent and compelling to be ignored. At some point, highly consistent data becomes significant. Whether greater transparency is needed is no longer up for debate, so we ask Meta to stay on topic. Don't try to distract us with a series of empty percentages or make this conversation about protecting your employees. We know how hard they work. Some of the whistleblowers that have come forward currently work for you. Help the public understand how your products affect them, so we can work *together* to make them better. Your users are telling you what they want. It's time to listen.



## APPENDIX

**The following submissions are available at:**

*<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-119shrg62327/pdf/CHRG-119shrg62327-add1.pdf>*

**Submitted by Senator Klobuchar:**

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