

Facebook Is 'Making Us Sick,' Alleges Ex-Company Director

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A former Facebook director is accusing the social network of profiting off division and misinformation like tobacco companies have from addictive cigarettes.

"We took a page from Big Tobacco's playbook, working to make our offering addictive at the outset," said Tim Kendall, who was Facebook's first director of monetization.

He made his comments during a US congressional hearing on Thursday examining whether social media is radicalizing Americans and resulting in actual violence. According to Kendall, the threat is real, despite the good intentions Silicon Valley entrepreneurs originally envisioned for their products.

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"I wanted to improve the world we all lived in. Instead, the social media services that I and others have built over the past 15 years have served to tear people apart with alarming speed and intensity," he said in his prepared remarks.

"At the very least, we have eroded our collective understanding –at worst, I fear we are pushing ourselves to the brink of a civil war," he added.

[embedded content]

Kendall worked at the company between 2006 to 2010—well before

Facebook became mired in numerous misinformation and privacy controversies, which really ramped up during the 2016 presidential election.

Still, Kendall said he regretted helping Facebook develop a business model that sought to “mine as much attention as humanly possible” in return for advertising profits. According to Kendall, Facebook created a system that keeps users hooked in with “extreme incendiary content,” including misinformation, conspiracy theories, and fake news.

“These algorithms have brought out the worst in us. They’ve literally rewired our brains so that we’re detached from reality and immersed in tribalism,” he said. “This is not by accident. It’s an algorithmically optimized playbook to maximize user attention—and profits.”

Facebook didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment. But it will no doubt disagree with Kendall’s assessment. The company has previously said it routinely cracks down on rule-breaking posts while trying to maintain free speech on the platform. Nevertheless, the social network continues to face accusations it’s doing too little to stop misinformation and hate from circulating, especially around the Black Lives Matters protests and the upcoming election.

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Kendall’s solution is for US lawmakers to regulate Facebook; he claims the social network can’t police itself. “Without enforcement, they’re just going to continue to be embarrassed by the mistakes and they’ll talk about empty platitudes, about ‘Oh gee, we hope we can get better operationally next time.’ But I don’t believe anything systemic will change,” he said.

He also pointed to loopholes in Facebook’s rules on content moderation, which bad actors can easily exploit. “Obviously, you can’t incite violence. But you can lie and incite hate.

And we all know that leads to violence. There's no accountability," he said.

Kendall joins the growing number of former Facebook employees who've publicly protested or expressed concerns about the social network's effect on society. "I think we have created tools that are ripping apart the social fabric of how society works," said Facebook's former VP of User Growth, Chamath Palihapitiya, in 2017.

In 2019, former Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes went as far to call on US regulators to break up the company, accusing it of holding a monopoly on the social networking industry.

Kendall is now CEO of Moment, which has published an app to help users limit and manage their screen time with their phone. He has also recently appeared in the new Netflix documentary "The Social Dilemma," which examines the negative effects of social media.

"These services are making us sick. These services are dividing us," he added in his prepared remarks.

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