

## Beyond Censorship: How Social Media Harms Children and Families

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### Webinar Transcript

December 9, 2021

*Clare Morell (00:05):*

Well, welcome. Thank you so much for joining us. My name is Clare Morell and I have the privilege of serving as a policy analyst at the Ethics and Public Policy Center heading up our Big Tech Project. We thank you for tuning in today to this important online event, Beyond Censorship: Social Media's Harms to Children and Families. Unfair and ideologically-driven censorship is not the only problem plaguing social media platforms today. They are increasingly being shown to have harmful effects on our children and families, too. So with this event, we are pivoting and broadening our focus from Big Tech censorship issues to ask deeper questions about how we should think about the platforms operated by Big Tech companies and their impact on our children, families, and society. We want to consider today, what is best for human flourishing?

*Clare Morell (00:54):*

I think often, the de facto mindset in our culture can be that technology is mainly beneficial, and we embrace it without caution. But is that true? Often over time, we come to realize there are harmful aspects to these technologies, and so we want to start today just questioning how beneficial is social media? Do we really need it? Is it best for our human flourishing?

*Clare Morell (01:19):*

Recently, social media platforms have been in the spotlight as harms of their technologies have been exposed. The Wall Street Journal's Facebook Files have shown the harms of Facebook and Instagram on teens' mental health, and other reports have shown how TikTok's algorithms are serving up dangerous content to minors and sending them down rabbit holes of illicit and violent content. So with the rise of the internet, smartphones, and social media, there has also been a dangerous epidemic of online pornography, which is affecting, in particular, our children who now have 24/7 access to infinite content at their fingertips, and social media can often be the entry point to such pornographic material.

*Clare Morell (02:03):*

Lastly, we want to talk about the use of social media platforms and the way they are designed have fundamentally changed how we relate to each other and communicate, affecting our family and community relationships. So these are the issues we're excited to dig into today with our esteemed panelists. So without further ado, I want to introduce our panelists, and then we'll discuss these topics through the lens of really what is best for human flourishing, and hopefully at the end, touch on some possible solutions for addressing some of these harms.

*Clare Morell (02:39):*

Let me start with our first panelist, Carl R. Trueman. Carl is a fellow in EPPC's Evangelicals and Civic Life

Program, where his work focuses on helping civic leaders and policymakers better understand the deep roots of our current cultural malaise. He also serves as a professor at Grove City College. Carl is the author of the bestselling, award winning 2020 book, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to the Sexual Revolution*. His commentaries on contemporary issues appear regularly in *First Things*. He's also published in *Public Discourse*, *Deseret News*, and *Catholic World Report*.

*Clare Morell (03:20):*

Our second panelist, Sean Clifford, is the CEO of Canopy and a father of four young children. Sean aspires to build products that give families the good of the internet without the bad. Sean founded Canopy in 2019 to help build a world of healthy tech users, starting by protecting children from pornography. He previously served as the vice president of Baron Public Affairs, where he advised leading tech ventures, nonprofits, and Fortune 500 companies at the intersection of culture and policy. Sean, his wife, and their four children live in Austin, Texas.

*Clare Morell (03:55):*

Finally, we have Dr. Jimmy Myers. He is the founder, co-owner, and CEO of The Timothy Center located in Austin, Texas, which is a unique multi-campus practice that offers affordable Christian counseling. Then several years ago, Jimmy founded the Sexual Addiction Recovery at the Timothy Center, and this aspect of the counseling practice works with addicts, partners, couples, and teens as they work their way through the devastation of sexual addiction. Dr. Myers has spent more than 40 years writing, ministering, and speaking nationwide on the subjects of Christian marriage and parenting and sex and pornography addiction, and he's published two books, including one called *Fearless Parenting: How to Raise Faithful Kids in a Secular Culture*, which he co-authored with George Barna in 2017.

*Clare Morell (04:44):*

The first topic I hope we can discuss today is the harms to children's mental health and development caused by social media. I want to start by just asking and open it up to any of you, what are some of the common mental health effects that we're seeing, particularly in children and youth, due to or correlated with social media use?

*Carl R. Trueman (05:17):*

Shall I go first?

*Clare Morell (05:19):*

Anyone, please, you're welcome to jump in.

*Carl R. Trueman (05:22):*

Well, it seems to me one of the big problems with social media is the way ... Well, one of the problems is it's massively expanded the scope for what one might call social recognition or social acknowledgement by peers. I think when I was growing up, I had a group of seven or eight friends. I knew them. I had physical interactions with them. They were the only people whose approval I needed as I was growing up in order to have a secure sense of self. But I think what I'm noticing among young people today is when you use things like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, you massively expand the number of people whose opinions may come

to be important for your sense of selfhood and well being and security.

*Carl R. Trueman (06:06):*

My hunch is that a lot of the anxiety we're seeing rising among young people today is because we no longer have that small and secure group of friends to give us a sense of self and self worth that we had in times past, that social media has really shattered that as a possibility and has led to increasing levels of anxiety. I think at Grove City College, 40% of the students at Grove will have some contact with the counseling center while they're here. That strikes me as extremely high, particularly for students, many of whom come from pretty safe, secure, stable, well-off backgrounds. What's the reason for that? I suspect the reason for that is things that go on on social media.

*Clare Morell (06:54):*

No, that's really helpful. Sean, do you have anything to add?

*Sean Clifford (07:01):*

Certainly. Look, I think the first thing we all need to acknowledge is that we are in the midst of a massive social experiment. Let's bear in mind that the smartphone emerged just 12 years ago, and we effectively went from the invention of this new tool to near universal penetration, especially among teenagers, approaching 95% now, in the span of just a few years. So we're still trying to unpack exactly how it's impacting, and needless to say, it's multifaceted. There are so many ways that it is changing at a very deep level adolescence in America.

*Sean Clifford (07:35):*

So as we try to unpack that, I look to some of the research that's been done, and we can tackle this from different angles. From the social research, I think Dr. Jean Twenge, in conjunction with Jonathan Haidt, have really demonstrated that there's been a marked shift. If you look at longitudinal data, you will always see ups and downs in mental health and different trends. Something happened with the advent of the smartphone and the advent of social media that has caused a significant transformation in mental health, and it's moving in a problematic direction. You now have a jump where one third of American teenagers report being moderately to severely depressed in the last year. That's up 50% alone in the last year.

*Sean Clifford (08:21):*

You now have a doubling of teenagers reporting that they've had a major depressive incident in the last 12-month period.

*Sean Clifford (08:28):*

It's from 5 to 10% for boys and from about 12% to 26% for girls. Look, we're still trying to pinpoint exactly what it is, but much of the evidence suggests that this is tied to social media. The challenge that I think we need to confront is, number one, I'm not sure social media's going away. Technology is so entrenched in our lives. Your teenager's social life is their digital life. So the question is, how can we find ways to shift it to really understand that which is resulting in kind of this toxic impact on mental health, and that which actually does facilitate greater communication, education, and opportunities to learn.

*Sean Clifford (09:08):*

The last thing that I'll briefly say is I think one of the aspects that I'm interested in is these platforms have now taken something that used to be a little bit more fixed, in terms of our identity, and turned it into almost something that's plastic and performative, where your identity, what you project out to the world, can change by changing a profile picture or what you're liking or things like that, who you're associating with. And so that in turn, I think, has led to a lot of teenagers to view identity not as something that's a core and fixed representation of themselves that shifts in time, but something that's a lot more plastic, fluid, open, and that's pressure. That's a lot of pressure to figure out every day how you're going to define yourself to the world and project it out. So I think that plays a role as well.

*Clare Morell (09:56):*

No, that's very helpful. I don't know if either of you are able to speak to this, but I've been reading more and more recently that social media seems to be disproportionately affecting teenage girls more than boys in some of these symptoms, particularly around anxiety and depression, I think, stemming off of some of the social comparison that is constant on these platforms. So I don't know if either of you could speak to why this might be the case, that girls are being affected differently by social media than boys. And if that's not a familiar topic to either of you, that's fine. It's just something that I've seen more and more articles coming out about, is particularly how these platforms are affecting teenage girls.

*Sean Clifford (10:45):*

I'll jump out with two quick observations. The first is, if you look at how teenagers are spending their time and the breakdown between boys and girls, they're spending their time online in different ways. This is a overgeneralization, but boys allocate more of their time towards online games. And oftentimes in those games, they're paired up with friends and it is an activity where they are with a team trying to go accomplish a mission, versus girls spending a lot more time on social media, in particular on Instagram or TikTok where you are putting yourself out to the world, and at some level, the metric of your social validation is how many people are liking it.

*Sean Clifford (11:28):*

The first is, I think girls are more exposed to social media platforms where the likes that come in or that peer validation is just a present and active part of the platform itself. The second thing I'll say is, look, I don't believe that this study has been published, but there was interesting work that was looking at the incentives that social media platforms put out. One of the questions was, are there different incentives for boys and girls? And here was the example. They looked at ... I think it was TikTok, and if a girl included content that was judged more sexualized ... more skin, something like that ... the payoff in terms of validation and likes was much greater for girls than it was for boys. So a shirtless photo of a boy did not result in this same boost of likes as did an equally sexualized image of a girl. So the incentive structure was pushing people to post the type of content that oftentimes moves them in a sexualized direction that is correlated pretty significantly with having more anxiety around body image and how the world is viewing you and what you need to present.

*Clare Morell (12:44):*

Wow. That's very interesting. Carl, do you have anything to add? I have more questions, but I didn't want to cut you off if you had something on this question.

*Carl R. Trueman (12:53):*

No, no. Nothing to add to that at all.

*Clare Morell (12:56):*

The other thing I wanted to ask about, which I don't think is necessarily talked about as much in the mainstream media these days is, what role if any social media is playing in the rise of really the transgender movement in teens. Abigail Shrier's book, *Irreversible Damage*, has a chapter on this that she calls *The Influencers* about these trans influencers who talk about their transitions on social media and really using these platforms to try to similarly encourage other teens to transition or to think about transitioning if they feel uncomfortable in their bodies. I don't know if either of you have any experience or have looked into that topic at all in terms of is social media playing a role in this rise of transgenderism and body dysmorphia issues in youth and teens today.

*Carl R. Trueman (13:56):*

A couple of comments on that. I think one of the things that the things like TikTok, YouTube do is they trade in narratives. I think narratives are very, very powerful, particularly for ... well, for all human beings, but particularly for young people. I think what Abigail Shrier does in her book is demonstrate how the people that she's looking at who are transitioning have not been persuaded to do that by an argument. Their imaginations have been gripped by a narrative, and I think that visual media, TikTok, YouTube lend themselves to that kind of storytelling.

*Carl R. Trueman (14:29):*

Secondly, I think there's ... We may want to talk about this more later on. But I think that the new media in general is causing a realignment or a reconfiguration of authority structures. I'm a Reformation man by background and training, and there's one way of writing the Reformation story wherein it's addressing the impact of the printing press on relations of power in Europe in the late 15th through to the early 17th centuries. You see the printing press reshapes authority structures on a political level. I think we can see that with social media today. It strikes me that certainly reading books like Abigail Shrier's and chatting to students at college that social media is emerging as an authority in a way that is undermining or supplanting that position that's typically been occupied by parents and by schools.

*Carl R. Trueman (15:28):*

I remember a couple of years ago, a student saying to me, "One thing you need to realize, Dr. Trueman, is the most important voices in young people's lives are not parents, they're not schools. They're what they're seeing on YouTube and TikTok." So I suspect that the LGBTQ movement is merely one symptom of what's going on there, that what we're actually seeing is that the most significant input into young people's lives today is not coming through the kind of channels that people of my generation experienced or would expect, but actually this new media is reshaping the way people relate to each other in authority structures in a dramatic way. More dramatic than the 16th century, which incidentally, led to 150 years of blood conflict in Europe. So it's not a very positive outlook from that perspective. But I think perhaps the 16th century is the nearest analogy we can find to the information technology revolution of today.

*Clare Morell (16:20):*

Wow. No, that's a really fascinating observation, even just thinking of some of these things are symptoms of what you're talking about, a broader shift in authority today, which is really fascinating. We can circle back

on some of the social media harms on mental health effects, but I did just want to touch on pornography since I think we are seeing this epidemic of online pornography today, which is definitely being facilitated by social media. Sean, I know this is also an area of expertise for you, given the company that you founded to try to help address this problem, but either of you can speak to this. Where is pornography being found on the internet these days, and just how prevalent really is it? What kinds of content and types of pornography are we seeing these days in terms of particularly how that might be affecting children or children being exposed to that content?

*Sean Clifford (17:23):*

Well, Clare, not to quibble with the question, but one of the things you said is, where is it being found, and regrettably, today it's finding you. It's finding our children. It used to be that pornography was difficult to obtain, and then should you find it, somewhat limited in what it actually provided. I think for so many parents out there and for society at large, we still think of Playboy when we think of pornography. That kind of captures it. And it was a magazine, difficult to obtain if you were a child, that had 12 to 14 static images, so limited in its overall impact, still potentially very formative. Whereas today, pornography is everywhere. Not only has it proliferated in the number of pornographic sites that are out there that are attracting billions and billions of views, but it's now appearing on so many of the most popular platforms that you would think would not be host to this type of content.

*Sean Clifford (18:19):*

So whether it's Twitter or Reddit or any platform that allows user-generated content, explicit material is appearing. The impact of this for our children is that the age of exposure is just dropping. Just year over year, it's getting younger. Tough to really pin it down, different studies out there, but the best guess is somewhere between 9 and 11 years old now. What they have found is that for so many of that first encounter, it's accidental. 63%, according to one study, of the first time a child is exposed to pornography, they weren't looking for it. And so the net effect of that is our kids are being exposed to this when they're younger. That's important because they're being exposed when their brain is still developing and forming not only the psychological understanding of what a healthy relationship looks like, what intimacy should be, the role that sex plays in human interactions, but also when the brain is forming at a neurochemical level, as the synapses are wiring together.

*Sean Clifford (19:22):*

The second thing that I'll briefly say here is that the nature of the porn that they're exposed to today is also different. Not only is it appearing to them when they're younger and there's more of it, but the nature of it. It is more graphic. Since it's video instead of a static image, it's more visually compelling from the brain's perspective. The combination of the accessibility, the infinite variety is leading to it being the most bingeable pornography ever created. So the young age of exposure, the accessibility results in a more addictive pornography than we've ever encountered before. Yes, this is an age old problem. Plato warned about it when it was drawn on little clay shards. But we're a far world from that. We're even a far world from Playboy. And so that, I think, is what's novel about this current moment.

*Carl R. Trueman (20:12):*

Could I ask Sean a question?

*Sean Clifford (20:16):*

Of course, yes.

*Carl R. Trueman (20:20):*

I was a part-time pastor for some years, and I think the number one pastoral problem was young men into pornography, so that was not unusual. What I am picking up in conversation with pastor friends today is ... and I have no experience in this, I'm not a pastor anymore ... but that it's becoming an increasing problem with young women as well, which is somewhat counterintuitive to my way of thinking. I've always assumed pornography was a male problem, not a female problem. Is there evidence that actually pornography is becoming an issue for young women as well as young men?

*Sean Clifford (20:53):*

There is evidence. When you look at the breakdown, a higher percentage of men actively seek out pornography on a monthly basis as compared to women, so there still remains a gap there. That gap is shrinking. There's speculation as to why. One theory is that women, thanks to platforms like Instagram and TikTok and Snapchat, are more immersed in these visually-dominant social cultures than they ever have been before, and that the primacy of the visual has assumed a new importance and that is then resulting in over-indulgence on other visual stimulation. So that's one theory.

*Sean Clifford (21:38):*

The second thing ... I don't think this applies to kids as much. And I want to be mindful that the data on this is still something I'd like to dig into more. But Mark Regnerus, among others, have talked about the dating market that exists today, and for a variety of reasons, I think he would argue that men enjoy heightened capital or power in the dating market, and that they're now dictating more terms. One of the things that that's resulted in is they have expectations around what should happen in intimacy that have been informed by pornography, and that they are then trying to impose or bring into their relationships driving ... and this is again the theory ... driving more women to then seek out, "What is it? What is this thing that has set expectations and is informing what should be?"

*Sean Clifford (22:29):*

So it's now looked at as a normative source of behavior that, if you want to be successful in the dating marketplace, you need to be aware of. Again, that one seems a little bit more tenuous, but overall, yeah. The numbers for men and women are both going up, but the gap between them is shrinking.

*Clare Morell (22:49):*

That was really helpful, Sean. Thank you so much for your answers. We are going to be joined now by Dr. Jimmy Myers, who I introduced earlier. He's now going to join us. Well, welcome, Dr. Myers. We're so glad to have you. As we were just discussing the harms of the online pornography epidemic today, Dr. Myers, I wanted to ask you about what that looks like in your counseling practice, what you are seeing, particularly in this next rising generation of youth who are struggling with pornography, what that might look like and just what you're seeing in terms of your firsthand practice in counseling individuals struggling with pornography.

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (23:32):*

Sure. Things change. When people think about pornography, they think, "Oh, Playboy." They'll say, "Well,

porn's been around forever. Boys will be boys." This is not your father's pornography, especially with the advent of the late 2000 ... around 2010 with the widespread use of high-speed internet. We're seeing a process addiction emerge like never before. One of the main gists behind how our brain works is this concept of supernormal stimuli. There's the famous cardboard butterfly experiment back in the 70s where they took a butterfly, they made a cardboard replica of a female butterfly, but made the color scheme slightly more vibrant and made the actual cardboard replica slightly larger than an actual female. When they released all the males and females back into the cages with these cardboard butterflies, all the males immediately began trying to mate with the cardboard butterflies. And this idea of supernormal stimuli came about. We want something that is bigger, better, different, unique.

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (25:00):*

What high-speed internet pornography does is it supplies this supernormal stimuli never ending. If you're addicted to alcohol, at some point, you run out of money. Cocaine, you run out of money very quickly. But with high-speed internet porn, it's a never ending supply of this dopamine-producing behavior. And so we're seeing the use of pornography in children ... Now the average age of first use is somewhere between 8 and 10, and by 10, they are actively seeking it out. They're not just being shown by some friend or something.

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (25:45):*

So the more we know about neuroplasticity and how the brain works and you take something like pornography that a kid ... Let's say they are exposed at age eight and they're looking at this material consistently frequently over a long duration. Their brains physically alter over time.

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (26:07):*

Then it sets in motion this set of expectations that the brain has for how it's going to be soothed and numbed for the rest of a person's life.

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (26:20):*

So the impact is fairly devastating on individuals, and then when they get old enough to try to enter into a longterm relationship.

*Clare Morell (26:31):*

Wow. And just from your experience in counseling individuals, I'm just curious, what are the ways they're often first exposed to this content? Just for parents to be aware in terms of ... I know parents want to protect their children from this type of material. So how are they first coming across this? Is social media playing any role? Is it their peers? What do you often see in the people that you're counseling?

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (26:58):*

Well, social media is the easiest, because porn can be accessed on every social media platform there is. Snapchat exists for that purpose. But there was an op-ed done in the Dallas Morning News, I want to say maybe a year and a half ago, written by a mother who said, "As long as sixth graders have ..." This was the headline. "As long as sixth graders have access to rape porn, then school itself becomes a toxic environment." It was from her own daughter's experience of boys approaching her at her middle school and showing her just very violent rape porn.



*Clare Morell (27:43):*

Wow.

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (27:44):*

So the early exposure, first exposure does tend to be either accidental or a friend on a bus or whatever. But by age 10, the topic is so hot that they now know what it is, they know people who look at it, they've heard of this in their peer groups, and they are now actively seeking it out.

*Clare Morell (28:08):*

Wow.

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (28:08):*

Which is where Sean comes in.

*Clare Morell (28:11):*

Yes. No, that's great. That is really eye opening just to be aware of. I guess the last question on pornography before I actually ask about some just broader societal effects is, are you all concerned about beyond just the effect on individual people, the effect that this kind of epidemic of online pornography is having at a civilizational level? What are going to be the longterm effects if this is what all of our children and youth are being exposed to in terms of what effect that will have long term on marriages, families, society, these building blocks of our civilization, if you all have anything to add on that?

*Carl R. Trueman (28:59):*

I think the effect could be devastating. It's a work in progress. We have no idea where it's going to end. But I would say when you combine the very thin sexual ethic that society now operates with, which is essentially that of consent, with the kind of extreme pornography that Jimmy's just talked about, I think we can assume that over time, people's tolerance for an even approval of acts that were once considered to be violent, degrading, and dehumanizing, their tolerance and approval for that will increase. I think we will see a continual loosening of sexual morality over the coming generation in a way that I think will be very detrimental to society. I'm not a huge fan of Sigmund Freud, but I think Freud has a point that sexual codes lie at the heart of what a civilization is, and when those codes get demolished or transformed, it's not the equivalent of adding a few cents to income tax. It goes to the very heart of what a people is. So I'm very pessimistic, I think, about the future if pornography continues to be normalized as it clearly is being so at the moment.

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (30:20):*

What we're seeing individually, the impact on individuals, of course, is then impacting relationships. There have been so many different studies that have indicated that the more porn is viewed by someone in a longterm relationship, the less they feel lovable, the less they love their partner. The entitlement, the objectification that comes about ... You're already seeing now almost a quarter of all people ... men, seeking help for erectile dysfunction ... are now under 30 years of age. That was unheard of 15 years ago. And so you see that on a societal level. The good news is, teenagers are having less sex. Yay. But the problem is, it's because they're getting their sexual needs met online.

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (31:17):*

Marriage, longterm relationships are getting to be older and older. The average age of first getting married now is getting later and later in life. So we're already seeing the societal impact of this, but certainly, what Carl indicated, just the desensitization of all of this. Again, you can't have your brain exposed to this consistently, frequently over a long duration and not have major impacts. And when you look at by the time in America, a young male is 18, what is it, 95-plus percent are looking at porn, then you can't help but have, as a society, an impact as well.

*Clare Morell (32:07):*

Right. No, that's great. And that's a great segue into our third and final topic I really wanted to touch on, was just the harms to families and society arising out of social media and therefore also out of pornography online. Any of you are welcome to jump in on this. How would you say you see social media changing the way that we interact with each other in our families and family relationships and in children's peer relationships, and how is it then affecting our broader communities, like our neighborhoods, schools, and churches? What are you all seeing as we watch the effects of social media play out in our relationships?

*Carl R. Trueman (32:54):*

I think the disembodied nature of social media engagement is problematic when it becomes the normal way that we interact. I can only speak about my own particular sphere, I suppose, but I've noticed how discussions online tend to get hotter and hotter and nastier and nastier. That tends to be the gravitational pull. Whereas when I've sat on panels, sometimes with people I vigorously disagree with, when you're sitting next to somebody and engaged in a panel discussion, there are all kinds of physical tells that tend to push the other way, because you're sitting next to another real human being. You can't speak as bluntly or as explicitly as you might. You may not be as aggressive. I think the less and less we engage with physical proximity and the more and more we engage in the abstract online, the nastier and nastier public discourse is going to get. I think that's a problem.

*Sean Clifford (33:51):*

I think there's a few different angles that we could take this from, just beginning with the individual itself. I think we know that technology is shaping us in very powerful ways, whether it's our expectations of what we want from life and what we should find out there to the neurochemistry. I think that these tools and these platforms are turning us into dopamine junkies, and that has an impact beyond simply your interaction with your device. You're used to dopamine here, and your brain then maintains level and normal expectations elsewhere in life. It's all commingled together. So it's impacting us as individuals, which then obviously has broader implications for how we interact within a family, whether we want to look at what it's crowding out.

*Sean Clifford (34:46):*

As Jimmy just alluded, it's crowding out ... One of the stats is, yes, teenagers are having less sex, in part because they're meeting in person less. And this actually predates COVID. They are spending a lot less time socializing in person together. And so it is crowding out, it's transforming it. Again, some advances, I think, are beneficial, but it has radically transformed, especially for the American teenager, what social life looks like. And I think that it's not going away. This is not something that you can put back into the bag, and so the task is to figure out ... We're in the early stages of this massive social experiment. What does it look like

to live well with technology? We have our aims, and I don't think our aims have shifted that dramatically, but these tools are now there and they're changing them. What would it look like to reimagine the ways that they could facilitate this?

*Sean Clifford (35:38):*

Some of that will require different tools. Some of it will require different business models, so long as social media profits from harvesting as much of your attention as possible. I think the incentives will push them in a direction that is perhaps contrary to what we want to get from technology. But I think the thing that gives me some hope is that people recognize that the ways in which we're using tech now is not leading towards flourishing. We're not happy. Each individual step may feel small and incremental and in and of itself not that big of a deal, but very few people look at how technology has impacted their individual life, their relationships, their community, and says that as a whole, it's an unvarnished good. So I think that will be the spur and the impetus for people to find alternative ways forward.

*Clare Morell (36:26):*

No, that's great.

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (36:28):*

And I do believe that when you ... We know that no man is an island, but we're also discovering that no man is Grand Central Station either. Again, this grand experiment of 24/7 social interaction. Technology has always far outpaced our moral and ethical response to the technology. When the Model T was invented, anyone could ride a horse. A kid could ride a horse. Then comes the Model T, and after a while they're going, "Well, maybe a nine year old driving this thing is not the brightest thing to do." And so we look at it and we see the implications and we now address it again in a more proper, much more well balanced way. And social media, we've just handed this to children, and I'm sure as has been mentioned before, we keep kids away from gambling and cigarettes and alcohol, but these dopamine-producing devices ... We're throwing these devices at children at earlier and earlier ages just so that our children don't stand out in any way from a culture that we all dislike. And yet in some way, parents are trying to make sure that their kids reflect exactly that culture.

*Clare Morell (38:01):*

Wow. That's very interesting. One question I wanted to ask on this, too, is there's a lot of attention, even this week. The Senate Commerce Committee is holding two different hearings, one tomorrow with Instagram's CEO on the harms to kids, particularly the way they've designed their app and the algorithms. And then also on Thursday, there's a hearing on dangerous algorithms, how these algorithms are causing harms. And so a question that I have, and I would be curious to hear your thoughts is, are the issues arising in teens' mental health, in the epidemic of pornography, and then in these fraying or changing of relationships and the way we interact, is it mainly because of the way social media is designed? Or is it how we all are using social media? How much of the blame lies with these companies and the way they've designed their products? How much of the blame lies with us maybe not being as discerning as we should with our use of technology? Or is it some mix of both?

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (39:07):*

Absolutely.

*Clare Morell (39:07):*

So I'd be curious just to hear your thoughts.

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (39:10):*

How they're designed then produces the usage. There's no way of getting around ... What is it, the Netflix documentary? Social Dilemma, I guess?

*Clare Morell (39:25):*

Yes. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (39:27):*

What I love about that is they have the engineers that actually designed to have that little red dot appear every time that you get a like or whatever. So yes, this platform was designed to keep eyeballs on the screen. The negative impact of that is irrelevant when it comes to the bottom line. You see from body dysphoria and how girls are impacted more than boys, a lot of reason is just because young females use social media platforms more than boys. But where you see the dysphoria in boys is the porn-induced erectile dysfunction, so PIED, and also, penile dysphoria, young men believing that their penises aren't large enough. I just laugh. If I would have ever asked my grandfather if he thought his penis was large enough ... And when I came to, he would probably explain to me how that's a completely irrelevant question. What we've confronted now with our children is questioning who they are, why they are, with no really much other input, other than just this echo chamber of social media.

*Clare Morell (40:50):*

Yeah. Carl or Sean, do you have thoughts on that as well? How much of the blame lies with these companies, how they've designed their products to be addictive, their algorithms? How much of it lies with us, parents and families and just individuals, how we think about using social media?

*Carl R. Trueman (41:07):*

I think the question of blame is an interesting one, but the more pressing question is what do we do about it? I think it really does have to start with the parents at this point. I don't think we can rely on the government or Big Tech to clean up their act anytime soon. I think the most immediate and pressing need is that parents need to be very proactive in how they allow their children to engage with social media. I'm grateful both my boys grew up just before smartphones became a reality. I know it must take some spine for a parent to say to a kid, "I'm not going to give you a smartphone." But I think that's the kind of thing that has to be done. It'd be great if the government and the companies clean up their act, but in the meantime, kids' lives are being distorted, perverted, and destroyed, and the parents need to do what they can do and what they need to do in order to try to stop that from occurring.

*Clare Morell (42:02):*

Yeah. That was a great bridge. My last thing I want to touch on is solutions, and I actually did want to start at that first level, that most fundamental level that we're thinking about, which is parents and families. What advice would you all give to parents and families in terms about how they think about technology use in the home for their children, particularly like you mentioned, Carl, smartphone devices, social media accounts? How should parents think about putting safeguards around technology use in the home?

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (42:37):*

I'll step in real quick. Every time I ever hear this ... When I hear a parent say, "All I want is for my child to be happy," I want to just get up out of my chair and slap them because that's just the grossest goal for a parent to have. It's like, "Well, okay, then if that's your goal is for your child to be happy, then cocaine and some hookers in Vegas over the weekend and there you go. Your child can experience happiness." We've got to shoot higher than happiness for our children. Our job is not to make our children happy. I know when they're happy, they're not in our hair. They're leaving us alone, which is why all you need to be a bad parent is a La-Z-Boy and a remote control. To be a good parent, it's hard. It takes a lot of effort. And just because our child ... We want our families to be closer, and yet every Christmas and every birthday, we're handing them devices that continue to separate, and leading these kids that we know now into a toxic isolation.

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (43:58):*

So it absolutely begins and ends with parents. But parents today are much more interested in just not having any waves. It's all they can do to keep their nose above water with jobs and careers and schooling from home during the pandemic. But the fact is that parents have to be much, much more restrictive. They just don't see the danger. There's also a lack of education here. They don't understand the dangers that are implicit with these devices, and so part of it is just getting the word out.

*Clare Morell (44:39):*

Yeah. Sean, do you want to talk at all about ... Feel free to give a plug for your software that parents could use, if you want to just talk about Canopy and what you all are trying to do to help empower parents.

*Sean Clifford (44:53):*

Well, thank you for the tee up. I think Jimmy is right in that if you care about the well being ... And Jimmy, if I could use that instead of happiness. But if you care about the well being and the formation for your child, you cannot neglect, and in fact, you probably should invest most of your energy into the extent to which they're interacting with technology and how it's shaping them. Because it is perhaps the most formative force out there as a device itself, but also as a conduit for how they're interacting with peers, what types of ideas are coming in, how it's shaping norms and expectations. So I think parents recognizing the power that it has is the first step.

*Sean Clifford (45:33):*

The second, then, is reevaluating what we do to ensure that our kids are using technology well. I keep coming back to it, this idea that technology is not going away. And whether it's COVID-related lockdowns ... But even before that. It predates that. Education was moving online. So much of how we research and how we compute our homework and interact with our peers is now taking place on devices, so we have to make sure that there are safeguards in place. Canopy was created with hopes of restoring the curation and the control over how you're interacting with the internet in particular back to families, back to parents. The first way we were doing that is we're leveraging tech. So we want good tech against bad tech. We want artificial intelligence, algorithms that we're going to be talking about, that actually serve you, that serve your interests.

*Sean Clifford (46:27):*

Our primary way that we're leveraging that now is we've developed a tool that can identify pornography in real time in milliseconds, every word, every image, every video on an internet browser, and we can block

it before it populates on the pixels of your screen with hopes that the internet, again, is something where your kids can explore and can enjoy and can venture forth and socialize without that kind of toxic content coming in and shaping them in a very powerful way. So we want to be a tool that gives parents a chance to actually shape how they're interacting with the internet, which up until now ... Even if you're convinced that there's an issue and you're convinced that you need to do something about it, your ability to actually exercise control has been very limited. That's the gap that we've identified, and that's really where we wanted to jump in and assist as they navigate this crazy digital world.

*Clare Morell (47:19):*

No, that's incredibly helpful. I think it's great to see solutions coming from the private sector. I think a lot of times, we can just think the government should do something, but when they're not, I think it is really important that there are alternatives that you can actually offer power back to the parents. So thank you for sharing about that, Sean, and what you all are doing. Just briefly in the limited time we have left, a couple other levels of thinking about solutions. On the intellectual or academic level ... and Carl, I know this is really the world that you're in ... what kind of arguments do we need to be making to win public opinion on combating pornography and confronting these problems of social media? What are these arguments that we can make to really change the current culture on this?

*Carl R. Trueman (48:08):*

It's an interesting question. I'm not sure how much arguments in themselves carry weight in the public sphere at the moment, not unrelated to the impact of the way social media has transformed public discourse. I think if we're going to persuade people, then in some ways, we have to play the social media game. I think the presentation of powerful narratives of the harm that this stuff does to individual lives is the way of starting to make inroads and to have people think about things. We live in a narrative world. We live in a world where images carry great power. I think to the extent that we're able to leverage those things in our arguments against pornography and our arguments for action against pornography, to that extent, maybe we stand a chance of winning the public argument. It won't happen overnight, and sadly, it will only happen as a result of tragic narratives emerging that we're able to tell. But I think that may be the best way forward, when we're able to present the world with the examples of what pornography does to people. That is the most powerful, powerful way of presenting the issue, I think.

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (49:18):*

Carl, I could not agree more. There's a thing in psychology that's been used for depression, anxiety, just pick your disorder. It's a cognitive distortion called feelings are not facts. Just because you feel a certain way doesn't make it true. Just because you feel no one loves you doesn't mean that no one loves you. It's just how you feel. But today, feelings trump facts. My first response to your question, Clare, is just show them the research. Just show them the numbers. But I do it today, too. When I see a research study, the first thing I go to is who authored it, who sponsored it, because you can't even trust empirically peer reviewed research anymore.

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (50:10):*

And so I think Carl nails it. It's a narrative, and if we're going to exist in this realm of feelings, then let's let them know what feelings are produced by the devastation brought on by pornography and online bullying and you name it.

*Clare Morell (50:34):*

Yeah. Go ahead, Sean.

*Sean Clifford (50:37):*

I would just add two quick thoughts. I would add two quick things to that. One, I think for a narrative to take hold, one of the preconditions is that it resonates at some level. And regrettably, I think one reason why you may find the narrative approach something that actually is productive is that the prevalence of the people that are dealing with pain associated with this type of content is just at an order of magnitude than I think most people appreciate. So I do think that there is a broader cultural ... almost a dry forest bed, and a couple of sparks, I think, could really move this issue.

*Sean Clifford (51:17):*

I think that the second thing that I would say with respect to what could have an impact ... As we think about the broader society and how people are trying to address pornography, we have this public health machinery in place that has been deployed, and we can debate the merits of whether or not we agree with each individual lesson, but initially deployed against smoking. It then has taken ... whether it's the large soda in New York City or menu labeling in some cases, or most recently vaping. But when this gets going, this is something that I think has been demonstrated to really have a broader societal impact in a way in which ... If you think historically about pornography, there was a coalition that existed and this rises above it and is reframing how people are conceiving of it. That to me, I think, is an opportunity.

*Sean Clifford (52:12):*

As Jimmy has alluded, the research is now there. You still need to check it, of course, but the research is now there to make a very compelling fact-based, scientifically-sound argument that this is impacting us in very profound ways that are not consistent with a broad understanding of the public good. And so I think that's one area where you'll see more effort invested that results in a big payoff.

*Clare Morell (52:39):*

Wow. No, that's a great point. Well, I feel like I could keep talking about these subjects. This has been such a robust and interesting discussion, but for the sake of time, we should conclude. I did just want to briefly mention ... We didn't want to jump into this too much in our time, because I did want to focus on these other levels we discussed, but I do think there are things that the government could do, particularly legislatures at the state level and representatives in our federal Congress to try to protect children more, like updating COPPA, the Child Online Privacy Protection Act, or also different kind of legislative approaches to try to limit children's access to pornography, whether that be age verification laws or mandatory filter laws.

*Clare Morell (53:27):*

And so I just want to mention to everyone tuning in that the Ethics and Public Policy Center is going to be posting two resources along with this panel this Thursday related to those topics, a brief document about what state-level legislatures could do, particularly on limiting children's access to pornography, and likewise what Congress could do at the federal level to limit that access. I know that's just one issue among the many that we touched on in the broader kind of harms of social media, but specifically about protecting children from pornography, there will be some resources that we are posting later this week if that's of interest to anyone who's listened in today. So just be on the lookout-

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (54:07):*

And Clare, if I could mention something.

*Clare Morell (54:09):*

Yes, please. Go ahead.

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (54:10):*

There was recently a great victory with Pornhub, who is the largest ... MindGeek, I think, owns them, but they pretty much control all pornography on the internet, basically. They were forced to take down hundreds of thousands of videos that they could not verify were not videos of trafficked people, underage people, and it was ... I know some state legislatures took up the cause and just almost the threat of that finally made this behemoth of the porn industry act against their own best interests and remove all of these, again, hundreds of thousands of videos. So it can happen. We can make an impact for good in this very dark industry.

*Clare Morell (55:08):*

Thank you for sharing that. I always like to end on encouragement, and so thank you to really all three of you for the work that you're doing, and even just what we were discussing, of really trying to put this narrative out there to counteract the current harms being perpetuated by social media and by online pornography. I do think we are seeing encouragement in that more and more people are becoming aware, and I think as we continue to raise awareness about these issues, hopefully over time, shift public opinion and our culture on these. So thank you all for joining us today. We really appreciate it. Thank you for a great discussion, and stay tuned for more things to come from the Ethics and Public Policy Center on this topic. Thank you all so much.

*Dr. Jimmy Myers (55:56):*

Appreciate it.

*Sean Clifford (55:57):*

Thank you, Clare.