



THE MORNING DISPATCH

The Morning Dispatch: It's Instagram's Turn Before Congress

Plus: A clinical psychologist on social media and mental health.

🔒 The Dispatch Staff 5 hr ago ❤️ 122 💬 272 ➦ ...

Happy Thursday! Quick reminder, as some people apparently need one: Please do not, under any circumstances, travel to Midtown Manhattan at 12:14 a.m., climb to the top of a 50-foot-tall Christmas tree, set it on fire, and run away. That is arson, and you will go to jail for arson.

Quick Hits: Today's Top Stories

- Pfizer and BioNTech announced preliminary results of a laboratory study yesterday that showed two doses of the companies' COVID-19 vaccine likely still protects individuals from *severe disease* induced by the Omicron variant, but two doses may not be sufficient to protect against *infection*. A regimen of two vaccine doses plus a booster, however, was found to be about as effective against the Omicron variant as a regimen of two vaccine doses was against the original SARS-CoV-2 strain.
- President Joe Biden on Wednesday ruled out sending U.S. troops to Ukraine in the event of a Russian invasion. "We have a moral obligation and a legal obligation to our NATO allies, if they were to attack under Article 5," he told reporters. "That obligation does not extend to ... Ukraine. But it would depend upon what the rest of the NATO countries are willing to do as well. But the idea the United States is going to unilaterally use force to confront Russia from invading Ukraine is not in the cards right now."
- Social Democratic Party leader Olaf Scholz was officially sworn in as German

chancellor on Wednesday, ending Angela Merkel's 16-year run as leader of the country. In an [interview with ZDF TV](#) yesterday, Scholz said Russia would face "consequences" if it invaded Ukraine, but declined to confirm whether shutting down the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline is on the table.

- Canada and the United Kingdom on Wednesday [joined](#) the United States and Australia in their diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. "We are extremely concerned by the repeated human rights violations by the Chinese government," Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [said](#).
- The House of Representatives [voted 428-1](#) on Wednesday to pass the [Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act](#), which would ban the import of all products manufactured in China's Xinjiang region unless Customs and Border Protection determines the goods were not made with convict, forced, or indentured labor. The Senate [passed a similar bill](#) over the summer, but the two chambers need to reconcile any differences before sending it to President Biden, who has not said whether he will sign it or not.
- In a largely symbolic gesture, the Senate [voted 52-48](#) on Wednesday to block the Biden administration's vaccine or testing mandate for large businesses, with Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin and Jon Tester crossing party lines to vote with all 50 Republicans. Enforcement of the mandate has already been paused by federal courts, and White House press secretary Jen Psaki [told reporters](#) this week that President Biden would veto the measure if it manages to pass the House.
- The January 6 Select Committee is [moving to hold](#) former White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows in contempt of Congress after Meadows—who has reportedly turned over thousands of pages of texts and emails to the committee—informed lawmakers through his lawyer that he will no longer cooperate with the investigation. Meadows [sued](#) the nine members of the select committee and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi on Wednesday in an effort to block enforcement of "two overly broad and unduly burdensome subpoenas."
- An appeals court on Wednesday [granted a temporary stay](#) allowing Apple to hold off on [making court-ordered changes](#) to its App Store payment system while the tech company's appeal works its way through the system. Back in September, a U.S.

district judge ordered Apple to do away with its policy prohibiting app developers from offering users alternative, non-Apple payment systems within 90 days.

Lawmakers Grill Instagram CEO



(Photo by Yasin Ozturk/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)

Over the past five years, it's become something of a Washington, D.C., time loop: A tech company gets ravaged by scandal. The tech company's CEO gets hauled before Congress. Lawmakers yell at the tech company's CEO for several hours. The tech company's CEO evades questions. Lawmakers announce that new federal regulations are imminent. Partisan differences—and considerable industry lobbying—thwart any legislative efforts. Another tech company gets ravaged by scandal.

Yesterday, it was Instagram CEO Adam Mosseri's turn in the barrel.

A few months back, the *Wall Street Journal* published "The Facebook Files," a series of

investigative reports—based on a whistleblower's leaked documents—that detailed various missteps made or hard truths suppressed by tech giant. And as we wrote to you a few months back, one of the most devastating stories had to do with Instagram, the photo-sharing app Facebook acquired for \$1 billion in 2012.

[The report] unearthed internal Facebook research showing the company was aware of Instagram's deleterious effects on younger users, particularly teenage girls.

“We make body image issues worse for 1 in 3 teen girls,” reads the headline of one slide in a November 2019 presentation. Another notes that “teens blame Instagram for increases in the rates of anxiety and depression” and “teens who struggle with mental health say Instagram makes it worse.”

As the Senate Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security Subcommittee hearing got underway Wednesday afternoon, Mosseri—a longtime Facebook employee who was elevated to head of Instagram in 2018 after the app's two co-founders abruptly departed—sought to paint a rosier picture of the company. “Sometimes young people come to Instagram dealing with hard things in their lives,” he said in his opening testimony. “I believe Instagram can help many of them in those moments.”

Mosseri came prepared to tout a number of proactive steps the company had taken in the wake of the Facebook Files to prioritize teen mental health. Instagram's new “Take A Break” feature, if turned on, will suggest users close out of the app if they've been scrolling for too long. New tools let users bulk delete old posts and automatically dismiss messages including certain words or coming from people they don't follow, and the company said it would be “stricter” about the kinds of posts its algorithm recommends to teenagers. Controls coming early next year will give parents the ability to manage the amount of time their child spends on the app and send them a notification if their child reports another user. Most of these developments were announced Tuesday morning, slightly more than 24 hours ahead of yesterday's hearing.

Lawmakers noticed. “What they're doing is a half measure,” Republican Sen. Marsha Blackburn—the subcommittee's ranking member—told CBS News in the lead up to

Mosseri's testimony. "They're doing it because they know that legislation is coming soon, and they are quite concerned about that."

Facebook has for years now been begging Congress to regulate certain segments of its own business, in part because it's tired of all the headaches and in part because regulations tend to entrench dominant players that can afford to comply with them and freeze out upstarts that can't. Mosseri took a similar approach yesterday.

"We believe there should be an industry body that will determine the best practices when it comes to what I think are the three most important questions with regard to user safety: how to verify age, how to build age-appropriate experiences, and how to build parental controls," he said, noting TikTok and YouTube are more popular with younger users than Instagram. "With teens using multiple platforms, it is critical that we address youth online safety as an industry challenge and develop industry-wide solutions and standards."

Sitting in the hearing room on Wednesday, lawmakers' frustration was palpable—and bipartisan. "Parents are asking, 'What is Congress doing to protect our kids?'" said Democratic Sen. Richard Blumenthal, chair of the subcommittee. "I believe the time for self-policing and self-regulation is over. ... Self-policing depends on trust. Trust is over."

Republican Sen. John Thune of South Dakota pushed for more transparency on how the platform functions. "Do you believe consumers should be able to use Instagram without being manipulated by algorithms that are designed to keep them hooked?" he asked. Mosseri said his team is working on bringing back a chronological feed that users could opt into.

In a brief interview with *The Dispatch*, a miffed Sen. Amy Klobuchar, Democrat from Minnesota, described Mosseri's testimony Wednesday as "more of the same."

"We've got to actually pass things," she concluded.

A Clinical Psychologist on Social Media and Mental Health

In light of Mosseri's testimony before Congress, we wanted to better understand the existing research on whether there's a connection between social media use and mental

health—and if Instagram's proposed tweaks would have any effect. So we called Dr. Jacqueline Sperling, a psychology instructor at Harvard Medical School and director of the McLean Anxiety Mastery Program at McLean Hospital in Massachusetts. She is the author of *Find Your Fierce: How to Put Social Anxiety in Its Place*.

Our conversation is below, edited for length and clarity.

TMD: Could you summarize what we know about the relationship between social media use and mental health? Has it been around long enough to be able to draw some conclusions?

Dr. Jacqueline Sperling: Research has shown links between social media use and negative impacts on one's mood, like depression and anxiety. It can also negatively impact one's self-esteem and their body image, as well as contribute to sleep difficulties. But it's important to keep in mind the *type* of social media use, because it's not all types of use that are connected to those negative impacts.

TMD: Could you break down those different types of social media?

Sperling: There is self-oriented vs. other-oriented, and active vs. passive. So, for example, a self-oriented and active activity might be updating one's profile. That activity, in and of itself, is not necessarily linked to a negative impact on one's mood. It's the passive activities—such as scrolling through one's newsfeed—and other-oriented activities that create opportunities for social comparison. That's the type of engagement that has been found to be linked to negative impacts on one's mood, and body image and self-esteem difficulties.

You might see that someone has more likes than you got, or you might see different comments on their post compared to yours. You may see forms of social exclusion, friends of yours who are posting a picture at an event to which you were not invited. And then you also can see people posting pictures where they've used filters to adjust their photos before posting them. When people constantly see photos that have had filters applied, that may also distort their perspective of what a common body type actually is.

People select snippets of positive experiences to post; it's not their entire life that is

displayed on social media. Other users may then see that in someone's profile and think, "Oh gosh, their life is better than mine."

TMD: In rolling out its new health and safety tools, Instagram seems to be nudging younger users to spend less time on the app. Is social media addictive?

Sperling: Research has suggested that there can be an addictive quality of using social media, as it does activate the reward system of the brain. Social media is unpredictable, and due to something called variable schedule reinforcement, that unpredictability can keep people on the apps. People won't know how many likes they will get, they won't know what kinds or how many comments they will get, they won't know who is going to post next, and what that post is going to say. That unpredictability makes them more likely to check.

TMD: When it comes to teenagers, mental health struggles aren't new. Body image and self-esteem issues aren't new. Bullying isn't new. Are the challenges that social media poses unique, or are we just seeing problems inherent to human nature being mapped onto a different platform?

Sperling: I do think there are different elements. One is that users now can be on *all the time* and that people may be more likely to say something unkind behind a screen than directly to one's face. Before the use of social media, bullying or social exclusion might have happened just at school, and you also might not have known that you were socially excluded from something unless someone explicitly told you.

People also seem to be more disinhibited behind a screen, meaning they're more likely to post something, a comment, that they may not be as likely to say directly to someone's face. You see these experiences of cyberbullying, or people commenting snarky or unkind responses to some people's posts that they would not necessarily say to someone directly.

Teens are more likely to be exposed to these kinds of experiences, and they don't have fully formed impulse control. They are developing, and it's like they're getting enhancements to the gas pedal, but they don't have the brakes in their car just yet.

TMD: Is it possible to have a healthy relationship with social media? What would that

look like?

LOOK LIKE:

Sperling: I encourage users to do something called a behavioral experiment. Before they start using a social media app, they rate their mood on a scale from zero to 10. Maybe I'm a 7 happy, 4 worried, 3 mad. Before using an app, pay attention to which app you're using and how you're using it—self-oriented vs. other-oriented, passive vs. active use. And then once you're done, rerate your mood. And if you notice you're feeling worse afterwards, that might motivate you to make some changes.

Now, what are some changes that you could make? Some people find that curating their newsfeed is helpful for them. You can remain connected with people, send direct messages, and at the same time you can unfollow them on Facebook, you can mute their posts on Instagram, and mute their stories so that you don't actually see their updates in your newsfeed or at the top of the app. Find ways you can adjust how you use them to make sure that you're at least not feeling worse.

TMD: What do you make of Instagram's efforts to address some of these concerns?

Sperling: I was just reading about the 'Take a Break' feature, and I appreciate the company trying to take steps to curb the negative impact on youth using these apps. And at the same time, I think it's really important to keep in mind that it's not necessarily the *amount* of time that they're spending on the apps, it's *how they're using* it. So I think it's important to find ways to keep users informed about the different types of use, so that they can make decisions that best support their health.

Worth Your Time

- Right on cue: U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy's office published a report this week on the state of youth mental health in America, and the findings are grim. "Recent research covering 80,000 youth globally found that depressive and anxiety symptoms doubled during the pandemic, with 25% of youth experiencing depressive symptoms and 20% experiencing anxiety symptoms," it reads. "In early 2021, emergency department visits in the United States for suspected suicide attempts were 51% higher for adolescent girls and 4% higher for adolescent boys compared to

the same time period in early 2019.” The report offers possible solutions, outlining the role various institutions—families, schools, health care organizations, social media companies, employers, governments, etc.—can play in reversing some of these trends. “For a generation of children facing unprecedented pressures and stresses, day in and day out, change can’t come soon enough,” the report concludes. “It won’t come overnight..”

- The *Washington Post* on Wednesday used CDC data to put together an interactive graphic that lets readers visualize just how effective COVID-19 vaccines are at preventing hospitalization and death. At points during October’s Delta surge, for example, the data visualization tool shows that unvaccinated people were more than 19 times as likely to die from COVID-19 than their vaccinated counterparts. “It’s clear from the data—and the visual above—that there is an appreciable benefit to the vaccine.”

Presented Without Comment



The Daily Beast

@thedailybeast

Rep. Dan Crenshaw torched some of his most prominent Republican colleagues this week, calling members of the hard-right House Freedom Caucus “grifters” and “performance artists” who only “know how to say slogans real well.”

trib.al/PyuUMFC

December 7th 2021

50 Retweets 189 Likes

Also Presented Without Comment



The New York Times

@nytimes

The bride walked down the aisle. The groom's buddy made a toast. There was dancing at the reception. And it all happened in the

metaverse.

nyti.ms/3EFAIVu



December 8th 2021

388 Retweets 1,676 Likes

Toeing the Company Line

- In yesterday's Sweep, Sarah takes an early look at some close 2022 Senate races that could determine which party finds itself in the majority. “Republicans, after all, need only one pickup to win control of the Senate,” she writes. “But it’s worth remembering that they have at least three open seats to defend, with no incumbent in Ohio, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania.”
- This week’s Capitolism (🔒) focuses on the history of China and the World Trade Organization and addresses claims that, knowing what we know now, China’s entry into the body was a mistake. “It’s a straightforward political story, but—like most straightforward political stories—it suffers from several historical, economic, and factual flaws,” Scott Lincicome writes.
- In Wednesday's G-File (🔒), Jonah takes a victory lap on the demise of the term

“Latinx,” which even Democratic strategists and lawmakers are now disavowing. “The Democratic Party and mainstream media are bedeviled by the egghead equivalent of the lab leak theory,” he writes. “They refuse to observe the intellectual and academic protocols of good hygiene. If grad schools are going to teach intersectionality, they should at least post signs saying, ‘Wash Your Hands of This Stuff Before Talking to Normal People.’”

- Audrey and Harvest write about how K-12 education could become a sticking point for Virginia Democrats who are seeking reelection to Congress next year, in particular Reps. Abigail Spanberger and Elaine Luria.
- And Khaya dives into the lawsuit filed against The Gateway Pundit and founder Jim Hoft by two elections workers from Fulton County, Georgia, who were targeted after Hoft published false stories about them.

Let Us Know

Do you use social media? Do you consider yourself to have a healthy relationship with social media?

Reporting by Declan Garvey (@declanpgarvey), Andrew Egger (@EggerDC), Charlotte Lawson (@lawsonreports), Audrey Fahlberg (@AudreyFahlberg), Ryan Brown (@RyanP_Brown), Harvest Prude (@HarvestPrude), and Steve Hayes (@stephenfhayes).

Update, Thursday, December 9, 2021: This newsletter was updated with additional notes and clarifications from Dr. Jacqueline Sperling post-publication.

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Write a comment...



Brett Houseman 5 min ago

The extent of my social media use is right here. I tried FB for a year about a decade ago (I'm

38) and all it did was confirm my priors that it's a net negative for society. I don't touch any of those platforms, they're exacerbating social decay. That metaverse wedding post above is just weird and sad.

 Reply ...



NateQueso 34 min ago

"Parents are asking, 'What is Congress doing to protect our kids?'" - As a parent, I've never, ever asked this question.

 5 Reply ...

270 more comments...

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