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**How the Media Frames Mental Health and Social Media:
A Case Study of the Facebook Whistleblower**

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Honors Thesis

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Introduction

In September of 2021, a former employee of the big technology company, Meta, known at the time as Facebook, Inc, leaked thousands of confidential documents from the company. These documents contained internal research that had been performed at the company, revealing their findings about how they knew that Instagram was bad for the mental health of teenagers. The former Facebook employee, more popularly known as the Facebook Whistleblower, was later revealed as Frances Haugen, a former employee of Facebook, Inc.

In 2019, Haugen began her career at Facebook Inc., with a position as lead Product Manager on the Civic Misinformation team. In her short time working for the company, she observed the choices that Facebook Inc. repeatedly made to prioritize their own profits over the safety of the public and its users. Before leaving the company, less than two years after joining, Haugen made copies of thousands of pages of confidential papers, including those about internal research. She later shared these documents not only with lawmakers, but also with *The Wall Street Journal*, an American newspaper, that published these reports in what became known as, “The Facebook Files”. This story was then picked up by news outlets across the country.

On October 5th, 2021, Frances Haugen testified before the United States Senate Sub-Committee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security. This congressional hearing brought to light many issues with Facebook, Inc., including revealing how their social media platforms Facebook and Instagram negatively affect young users. The documents leaked by Haugen included a slideshow called “Teen Mental Health Deep Dive”, in which Facebook Inc. shows internal research and results they’ve found regarding the mental health issues of teenagers’ and how Instagram may affect them.

In this thesis, I study the case of the Facebook Whistleblower to examine how the media report on social media and mental health. In order to study this case, I performed a critical discourse analysis of thirty print media articles from *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*. In particular, I looked at how the media frame this problem, how they discuss gender and mental health, and the solutions they present.

The Rise of Instagram

In 2010, Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger began working together on an app that would allow people to check-in with each other. This app, which was to be called Burbn, allowed for its users to locate and share details about the best bourbon locations with each other. After working on it for a bit, Systrom and Krieger came to the conclusion that this app was not strong enough to compete with the number of powerful media apps that were already on the internet (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 9). Therefore, the two completely scratched their old app idea and replaced it with one that includes photographs, comments, and likes, with an optional check-in (Swisher, 2013, cited in Leaver et al., 2020, p. 9); the resulting app is what we now recognize as Instagram.

On October 6, 2010, Instagram made its official launch in Apple's app store. At its launch, Instagram was only offered as an iPhone app, and pictures could only be taken from the app's camera, not uploaded from a phone's photo gallery (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 10). The app gave its users access to different filters to use on their photos and the ability to follow, like, and comment on other users' posts. This app did not only allow for users to post photos of things that they enjoyed and they thought represented them, but it also allowed for there to be a form of communication around these photographs, making the app an instant success. According to Vaidhyathan (2018), the social experience of gaining likes and comments was central to the app's overall success.

On April 9, 2012, Facebook Inc. announced that it had bought Instagram for \$1 billion (Facebook, 2012, cited in Leaver et al., 2020, p. 11). This announcement led to intense backlash from the public, however, as many people believed the big tech company would modify the app to better fit their brand, changing it to become just another extension of their main platform, Facebook. Despite these concerns, Instagram stayed as it was, and continued to develop as its own app, not just another version of Facebook. By 2018, surveys suggested that fewer than half of Americans even knew that Facebook owned Instagram (DuckDuckGo, 2018, cited in Leaver et al., 2020, p. 12).

This changed, however, when Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger both officially stepped down from their head roles at Instagram in October of 2018 (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 32). This marked a huge shift in dynamic between Instagram and its parent company, Facebook Inc., as it showed there must have been underlying tensions between the two companies, as Zuckerberg wrestled for more control over the platform (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 33). After Systrom and Krieger left, Mark Zuckerberg, founder, chairman, and CEO of Meta (formerly known as Facebook Inc.), made plans to completely redesign Instagram, Messenger, Facebook, and WhatsApp, integrating messaging across the four platforms (Hern, 2019, cited in Leaver et al., 2020, p. 37). This showed that the original plan of keeping Instagram as a platform separate from Facebook and other Facebook-owned platforms was no longer an objective for the company.

While Instagram is a social media platform, the focus of it being a visual application has played an important role in its success (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 1). Instagram has grown to become an app that allows people to connect with each other through photographs, and has furthermore come to define culture in the offline world. The offline world has been changing to become a more “Insta-worthy” world, and has redesigned what it means to take a photograph (Leaver et

al., 2020, p. 2). In fact, some businesses now specialize in creating these “Insta-worthy” products for their consumers to post about on Instagram. For example, Flamingos Coffee Bar in Hampton, New Hampshire, has signs posted around their store, selling what they call, “The Instagram Treatment”. For an extra \$1.50, they will create their specialties lattes to look like the ones that they post on their Instagram account, so consumers too can post photos of their special drinks on their own Instagram accounts.

For years, people have critiqued social media for cultivating problems, such as body image issues, bullying, depression, anxiety, and many more. As a popular social media platform for teenagers, especially in the United States, it is important for Instagram to recognize how this population uses their technology. As a matter of fact, in 2018, Instagram released a guide called, ‘Know how to talk with your teen about Instagram: A parent’s guide’. In this guide, “parents are walked through issues teenagers using Instagram might face, including overuse, bullying, and unwanted attention” (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 174). By feeling the need to put out this guide, Instagram recognizes there is a link between their social media platform and the well-being of teenagers.

Social Media & Well-Being

Emily Weinstein (2018) discusses the relationship between teens well-being and social media, comparing it to that of a see-saw. Adolescents’ use of social media is not necessarily automatically harmful, but rather, different aspects of the experiences that teens have on social media can both positively and/or negatively impact their well-being (Weinsten, 2018, p. 3599). This is why teens' social media use is well-described as a see-saw. Certain uses of social media and social media platforms can have a positive impact on the mental health and well-being of its teenage users, whereas other aspects of social media can have a negative impact. It depends on

how the teen uses and interprets what they see on social media. As Weinstein (2018) says, “Much like a see-saw, well-being involves tilts and shifts based on the dynamic nature of an individual's experiences - including his or her psychological, social, and physical resources and the challenges he or she faces” (p. 3600).

According to Weinstein (2018), among 13-17 year-olds based in the United States, 94% use one or more social media platforms (p. 3598). In her study, she focused on four functional dimensions and how different encounters saw interviewees experience these dimensions in both positive and negative lights. First, she studied relational interactions, and she found that when teens describe their experiences with social media platforms, they “attribute both positive and negative emotions to the ways social media use intersects with and influences their relationships and feelings of connectedness to other people in their lives” (Weinstein, 2018, p. 3612). She found that teens have developed both feelings of closeness with other people, as well as feelings of disconnectedness through their use of social media. Second, she studied exploration, which is defined in reference to active, interest-driven pursuits. In this research, Weinstein (2018) found that teens experience both inspiration and distress when they explore new interests on social media (p. 3614 - 3615).

Furthermore, Weinstein studied the impact of browsing on the well-being of teens. Browsing, in this case, refers to both content and social browsing, the former meaning for the purpose of entertainment and the latter meaning pursuing other people’s posts and portrayals of their life on the platform (Weinstein, 2018, p. 3615). In general, this is an act performed almost daily by most teens on social media, and Weinstein learned that this act is characterized by multiple different feelings. Browsing is typically done as a source of entertainment, or out of boredom, and it can cause both feelings of admiration and envy (Weinstein, 2018, p. 3616).

Finally, Weinstein studied self-expression and its relationship to teens' use of social media. She found that teens described both positive and negative effects of being able to express themselves on social media - affirmation when sharing posts that bring them joy, but also concern of what others will think about their forms of self-expression (Weinstein, 2018, p. 3611). This study is extremely important in understanding the relationship between teens' social media use and their well-being because it shows the impact of social media on their well-being can be both positive and negative. It is something that is complex and fluid, as the impacts of social media ultimately depend on the user.

In understanding this subject as complex and fluid, it's important that we don't assume a direct and universal effect, but rather we take into account other factors as well. One way to do this is described by Sonia Livingstone (2007), as a "risk-based approach". Livingstone (2007) defines this as, "...identifying the wide range of factors that may be at work. It [this approach] then seeks to establish the conditions under which any particular factor operates, to weigh these factors one against the other for their relative contribution, and to check the importance by conducting interventions that reduce putative factors to see whether, indeed, the outcome is altered" (p. 9). This approach is an important lens to use to look at the complexity of mental health. It cannot simply be stated, for example, that social media is harmful to the mental health of teenagers, but rather, this approach emphasizes the importance of taking other factors into consideration as well.

Emily Weinstein (2018) also discusses well-being, saying it is a complex construct defined and measured in many different ways, and that it concerns "optimal psychological experience and functioning" (Ryan and Deci, 2001: 142, cited in Weinstein, 2018, p. 3598). In this case, we are not only concerned with well-being as a whole, but also what is known as

digital well-being. Digital well-being can be defined as having access to an online space that can be used as a positive influence on the mental, social, and physical health of its users. In addition, digital well-being includes giving the user the power to manage their use of the platform and its features (Lehnart & Owens, 2021, p. 11). These definitions of well-being and digital well-being are important to understand because they demonstrate the complexities of these terms and how well-being is not something that can be reduced to a single variable, such as happiness or satisfaction in life, with a single solution for how to improve it.

Amanda Lehnart and Kellie Owens (2021) found that many social networking companies do not actually consider adolescents when designing their platform. The platforms also do not tend to collect data about adolescent users specifically, which is why it is so hard to understand their experiences on the app without doing outside research. This also directly impacts the experiences that users (especially teens) have on their platforms. By consciously making strategic choices about what information not to collect, companies are not fixing the parts of the platform that cause negative impacts on young users' health and well-being. What's more than this, they are avoiding even discovering what the issues might be. Facebook's research, however, conflicts with the assertion that companies don't ever do this kind of research. Regardless, companies need to take a moral responsibility for the impact of their platform on the health and well-being of their users, especially teens, who are in a vulnerable stage of their lives (Lehnart & Owens, 2021, p. 13). Lehnart & Owens (2021) found that outside pressure from negative media attention and society have the most impact in convincing these large companies to change their behavior and how they design their platforms. As Lehnart & Owens (2021) say, "Additional press attention to adolescent health and digital well-being could hold companies accountable for

negative impacts and spark entire new products or teams within companies that would be more empowered to safeguard adolescent well-being” (p. 36).

One recent example of companies being held accountable for their actions was when Instagram announced their plans for Instagram for Kids, which is an app that Instagram specifically made for kids aged 10-12 years old. This received significant pushback from policymakers, regulators, child safety groups, and consumer rights groups, as they believe that it would be used simply to hook kids into social media at an earlier age (Satariano, 2021). As of right now, kids under the age of thirteen are not allowed to use Instagram. This is due to the federal law, the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA). This act prevents internet platforms from collecting data from children under thirteen, so there has been much concern with developing a different version of this platform for kids. Without this pushback from the media and civil society, Facebook likely would not have reversed the launch of this app, and would have continued. The media has more influence over large tech companies than people may realize. The proposal of Instagram for Kids has sparked major concern about the well-being of younger populations on social media, as they are seen as more vulnerable. However, this narrative of fear surrounding vulnerable populations' use of new technology is not new.

Gender & Moral Panics

The panic that comes with young women and girls and their use of technology is not new rhetoric in the United States, as noted by Cramer and Casell in their article, “High Tech or High Risk: Moral Panics about Girls Online”. In the media, women, and young women especially, are often portrayed as naive, innocent, and vulnerable in the face of technology, and this has been the idea for centuries. There is much historical evidence to demonstrate the ways in which women have been seen as at risk when new technologies have been introduced. For example, when the

telegraph and telephone became popular, there was a moral reaction from the public of fear and condemnation when women would try to use these technologies (Cassell & Cramer, 2008, p. 59-60). This fear stems from the fact that it was assumed women would use these new technologies in “frivolous” ways, and this idea has only continued to intensify in recent decades. The media has made it widely-believed that new technology removes girls from the safety of their homes, causing a panic around young women and girls using this technology. Not only does this cause a panic, but it also diminishes girls’ confidence in using new technologies, and keeps them out of technological fields of work.

The term “Moral panic” was a term first introduced by Stanley Cohen, in reference to the perceived threats to society posed by Mods and Rockers in the 1960s. Quoting Cohen (1972), Cassell & Cramer (2008) say, “Intrinsic to his argument was the role of the media in producing stylized and stereotypical representation of the deviants, and the role of the broad audience that consumed that representation” (p. 13). While this is not a new term, it is used in a slightly different way in the current climate. Cohen’s definition of the moral panic relies on bias, exaggeration, and distortion, and these are all methods used today to induce a panic around young women and girls and the dangers of allowing them to use technology. It is slightly different today, as now it is used when referring to womens’ use of new technology, with fear of how their use of this technology may make them more susceptible to becoming victims of online predators and child pornographers, amongst other cybercrimes.

Marwick (2008) characterizes moral panics in a few ways. First, there is concern, which is heightened over the idea of a certain group and their behavior that is believed to cause negative consequences for the rest of civil society. Next, she cites hostility, meaning that civil society views this group as evil and deviant, and they are seen as the enemy. Third, there must be

a consensus from the rest of society that the threat posed by this group is real and serious.

Finally, she claims that moral panics are volatile, and that they fade in and out over a period of time.

Marwick then extends this idea of the moral panic surrounding technology, citing what she calls a technopanic. She says, “A technopanic is an attempt to contextualize the moral panic as a response to fear of modernity as represented by new technologies” (Marwick, 2008, para. 22). She characterizes this idea of a technopanic in three main ways. First, she says that technopanics usually occur with the focus of new media forms, like computer-mediated technologies. Additionally, she claims that technopanics typically regard young people’s use of this media as unhealthy and having negative consequences. Finally, she claims that civil society attempts to regulate young people’s behavior within these new technologies, whether it be by controlling the young people themselves, or attempting to control the creators of the media product.

In short, the current portrayal in the media of young girls as vulnerable and “victims” in regard to their use of social media can be characterized as a “moral panic”, and furthermore, a “technopanic”. Based on these moral panics and technopanics that the media have historically created, there have been calls for more regulation in the media; however, this creation of new policy surrounding social media has historically fallen short.

Media Policy

Once a media problem has gained the attention of the public, and subsequently lawmakers, it generates deliberation about the next moves of the legislative agenda. Policymakers tend to get key stakeholders, such as lobbyists, researchers, and advocates, involved in producing this legislative agenda (Jordan, 2008, p.236). Action is then taken by the

politicians, who become involved in the shaping of the proposed media policy. While many working bodies in the government are involved in this aspect, the two key regulatory bodies for implementing media policy are the Federal Trade Commission and the Federal Communications Commission (Jordan, 2008, p. 239).

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC), specifically, is important in relation to media on the internet as it has to do with consumer protection and regulation of advertising content, especially in how it pertains to children. While advertising is protected as free speech, Jordan (2008) states, “the FTC must restrict its regulatory activities to ad content that is clearly harmful to the developing child or that exploits the vulnerabilities of a less-sophisticated audience” (p. 240). In doing this, one of the important acts that they implemented was the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998, also known as COPPA. This law has to do with the usage of media online, and addresses the security and privacy risks of children under 13 being online. It requires that operators of websites and online services obtain verifiable consent from parents if their sites are directed at or heavily used by children under thirteen (Jordan, 2008, 238).

Alongside COPPA, another important piece of regulation introduced surrounding media policy online was the, Keeping the Internet Devoid of Sexual Predators Act of 2007, also known as the KIDS Act. This act was created as the social media networks MySpace and Facebook became increasingly popular, raising public concerns and gaining attention from lawmakers’ about Internet-related vulnerabilities for children (Jordan, 2008, p. 244). It required those who have previously been convicted of sex offenses to provide identifying Internet information, such as e-mail addresses and instant messages, to law enforcement, placing them on the National Sex Offender Registry (Jordan, 2008, p. 244). This was introduced as a way to protect vulnerable populations from other dangerous users.

While these few important acts have been passed, there continue to be challenges with media policymaking today. One of these challenges has to do with what is known as a policy window, “a brief opportunity for those invested in a particular issue to push through regulation that might otherwise receive limited support” (Draper, 2019, p. 45). These policy windows often open when there is significant public attention around an issue, whether that attention is predictable or unexpected. When a policy window is opened unexpectedly, such as with the case of the Facebook Whistleblower and concern over the mental health of teens on social media, these windows tend to close quickly. In these instances, media coverage plays a significant role in how long this window stays open. The length of how long the policy window stays open has to do with what kind of regulation may get pushed through, as if it closes too quickly, it is possible the legislation may never pass.

Another challenge posed in the realm of policymaking has to do with the constant stream of new media technology forms. As Jordan (2008) says, “Congressional leaders do not interact with new media technologies in ways that provide great insight into their capacity for good and harm” (p. 247). In 2006, Senator Ted Stevens exemplified this by describing the internet as a “series of tubes” and further comparing the web to a “dump truck”, highlighting the inability of policymakers to grasp the new forms of technology that they are in charge of (Jordan, 2008, p. 247). More recently, in 2018, there is the instance of Senator Orrin G. Hatch of Utah asking Mark Zuckerberg how Facebook makes money without charging its users, to which Zuckerberg infamously replied, “Senator... we run ads”.

With the challenges in mind, it is necessary to recognize the importance of regularly updating and changing already implemented policies. As Jordan (2008) points out, “Ultimately societal awareness and use of media-related information and technology and the effect of the

policy on media use by children and families are distinct avenues of inquiry that promise to contribute much to the discussion of whether and how media policy can contribute to the positive role of media in the developing child's life" (p. 249). In spreading awareness about new forms of technology and media, it can help policymakers to better understand how these new media forms are affecting children and teen's lives. This will remind them of the importance of both implementing new policies as new forms of media are developed, and updating current forms to make them stronger.

Overall, it is important to understand that the way in which the media frames and reports on these issues matters, as they play a significant role in guiding public opinion and policy making, therefore, influencing what legislation gets pushed through.

Methodology

The ideas outlined above highlight the need for further investigation in this area. The purpose of the research done in this paper is to investigate how news media frames the relationship between mental health and social media. In order to do this, I performed a critical discourse analysis of news articles that were written and posted in the wake of the revelations from the Facebook Whistleblower, Frances Haugen.

In the following analysis, I looked at thirty news articles from three different news media outlets. The outlets chosen were the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. These outlets were chosen as they are widely read news media sources throughout the United States. Ten articles from each outlet were chosen through stratified random sampling between the dates of 14 September 2021 and 14 November 2021. The two biggest guidelines that I outlined to this study were that the articles needed to be printed newspaper articles, and they had to be strictly "news" articles, not commentaries or editorials. In

order to choose these articles, I based my search on the keyword, “Instagram”, and looked at the titles, abstracts, and subject tags of each article for terms and sayings, such as “internal research, mental health, teenagers, and whistleblower/whistleblowing”. This provided me with upwards of 10 articles from each outlet, and in order to randomly select the articles I would analyze, I put them in chronological order and selected every third article until I reached ten, and repeated this for all three news outlets.

It is important to note that this study focuses on the analysis of news articles printed in between the dates of 14 September 2021 and 14 November 2021. These dates were chosen, as they are significant in the timeline of the Facebook Whistleblower incident. On September 14th, 2021, *The Wall Street Journal* released the first part of what became known as, “The Facebook Files”. These files contained information about internal research leaked by (at the time) an unnamed source. As other news media outlets began picking up the story, *The Wall Street Journal* then released, “The Facebook Papers”, which included a document leaked from Facebook’s internal website regarding the impact of Instagram on teenagers’ mental health. On October 3rd, 2021, the Facebook Whistleblower revealed herself as former Facebook employee, Frances Haugen, and through the month of October, many news media outlets referred to the congressional hearings and testimonies that took place. The end date was chosen as November 14th, 2021, as news coverage of the Facebook Whistleblower significantly declined.

As noted above, I will be using the approach of a critical discourse analysis in order to study news articles posted in the time of the Facebook Whistleblower leak. As noted by Cotter (2015), a critical discourse analysis is, “critical in the sense of revealing societal power operations and invoking a call to social responsibility” (p. 799). Therefore, this approach will be used to study the text of news media via three news outlet sources, investigating how they reveal,

establish, and reinforce ideas about society. The three key components the discourse of news media encapsulates are, “the news story, or spoken, written, or visual text; the process involved in producing the texts; and alignments to audience(s) (Cotter, 2015, p. 801). Keeping these in mind, this paper aims to identify and analyze themes surrounding the way(s) in which the media frames mental health and social media during this time.

In analyzing these articles, I’ve asked the following questions:

- 1) What is identified as the problem? (Is it technology, Facebook, social media, information environment, etc?)
- 2) How is the problem being identified? (How is it being framed/described?)
- 3) How gender and age are implicated in the description of the problem?
- 4) Is mental health discussed? If so, how?
- 5) What is (if there is) the balance presented between positive and negative consequences of social media use?
- 6) If/What solutions are presented? (Is it up to parents, government, social media platforms, etc?)
- 7) Are any other patterns emerging?

The following section indicates my findings through the lens of a critical discourse analysis, keeping text, purpose, and audience in mind.

Results

The Problem

The language used in news media articles plays a large role in the shaping of the audience’s perspective. In order to understand the ideas that news media journalists are trying to get across when writing their articles, it is important to understand the framework(s) they use. In

the case of the Facebook Whistleblower and how the news media talks about social media and mental health, it is necessary to recognize what news media outlets frame as the problem.

Throughout the thirty articles I've studied, the majority of them identify Facebook, the company, as the problem. Some articles have used phrases such as "digital monster" and "morally bankrupt" to frame the company in such a way that the audience will ultimately view them in a negative light. Using this perspective, they have incorporated language and outside quotes from mental health professionals, government officials, and teenagers who have shared their experiences on Instagram, that support this framework.

A multitude of articles across all three news media outlets discussed how they viewed Facebook's priorities. Many articles brought up the congressional testimony of the Facebook Whistleblower, Frances Haugen, and her accusations of how Facebook has chosen growth and profits over the public good. One article from *The Washington Post* quoted Haugen, stating, "There were conflicts of interest between what was good for the public and what was good for Facebook. And Facebook, over and over again, chose to optimize for its own interests, like making more money,' Haugen said in the interview" (Zakrzewski & Lima, 2021). An article from *The New York Times* also quoted Haugen and her statement of, "Facebook, over and over again, has shown it chooses profit over safety" (Ryan & Kang, 2021). Haugen was not the only one who stressed this idea, though, as others had similar ideas. For example, Senator Blumenthal from Connecticut stated, "It [Facebook] has attempted to deceive the public and us in Congress about what it knows, and it has weaponized childhood vulnerabilities against children themselves" (Kang, 2021). In choosing these specific outside quotes to discuss how Facebook operates, journalists have found that the language in these quotes portrays to their audience that Facebook's priorities are out of line, and the company should be more concerned about the

public good. This relates to the themes of how Facebook has been called “morally bankrupt” and how because of this company, “humanity seems to be imploding”. In framing Facebook this way, journalists are presenting the company as selfish, caring only about themselves and their profits rather than the good of its users and society.

Another way in which the news media frames Facebook as the problem is through discussion of the leaked internal research. It was emphasized in many of the articles that Facebook downplayed their own research in order to lessen the public perception that they are a morally corrupt company. Quotes from Facebook and Instagram executives attempted to minimize the rhetoric surrounding the leaked internal research. In the use of these quotes, however, journalists wrote about the downplaying of their research as a form of damage-control for the company, which didn't make sense as it was their own research. As one article from *The Washington Post* stated, “Facebook has sought to deny and deflect the revelations, downplaying the documents - even tearing into its own internal research - in blog posts, interviews, and congressional testimony” (Zakrzewski & Lima, 2021). This quote demonstrates the lack of accountability that Facebook shows, as they are willing to rip apart their own internal research, as opposed to owning up to their actions and admitting they knew of the harm that their platforms were doing. Additionally, an article from *The New York Times* stated, “This week, the company downplayed the internal research on which the Journal has partly based its articles, suggesting that the findings were limited and imprecise. That angered some employees who had worked on the research, three people said” (Isaac et al., 2021). In saying this, the journalists are attempting to demonstrate the ways in which Facebook will do anything to protect their image, except take accountability for their actions, even if that means dismissing the important research conducted by their workers. Furthermore, the term “downplayed” was one of the most common

terms used in the articles when discussing how Facebook chose to defend their leaked internal research. In using this term, the news media outlets are attempting to show how Facebook reduced the emphasis of the importance of these leaked documents, caring only about saving themselves, rather than standing up for the public good and admitting their mistakes.

In beginning this research, one perspective I believed I would find evidence of in these articles was that of technological determinism. Technological determinism can be defined as, “the idea that technology develops as the sole result of an internal dynamic, and then, unmediated by any other influence molds society to fit its pattern” (Winner, 1980, p. 122). Essentially, this is the idea that technology has a one-way impact on us, and as a society, we mold ourselves to adapt to technology. However, I was interested to find that I found no evidence of narrative of addiction to technology as causing the problem. In the articles I studied, the journalists did not present the idea of technology itself as the reason that users’ were strongly impacted by this issue, but rather this was an issue of Facebook itself.

In studying this issue, it is important to recognize who is quoted. I found that across all three news media outlets, U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal, the democratic senator from Connecticut, was consistently mentioned and quoted. As the Chair of the Senate Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security, Senator Blumenthal has long sought for the protection of consumers in an attempt to hold companies accountable for their products. As a large part of coverage at the congressional hearing, “Protecting Kids Online: Testimony from a Facebook Whistleblower”, many quotes came up from this Senator, in order to frame Facebook as harmful to its users. Blumenthal, as an avid protector of people online, provided a plethora of quotes that demonstrates his distaste of Facebook as a company.

In using a source, such as Blumenthal, these articles are building ethos in order to get their audience to find their statements about Facebook as a “digital monster” and “morally bankrupt” to be true. Blumenthal is a credible source in which readers will trust, as he is a Senator of the United States. Therefore, when he is quoted in *The New York Times* saying, “It’s [Facebook] chosen growth over children’s mental health and well-being, greed over preventing the suffering of children”, for example, it shapes the audience's way of thinking about Facebook, and frames them in a negative light (Kang, 2021). His ideas about this subject follow what Nirit Weiss-Blatt talks about in her book, “The Tech Lash and Tech Crisis Communication”. Quoting Macmillan Dictionary, she states, “A techlash is a strong reaction against the major technology companies, as a result of concerns about their power, users’ privacy, and the possibility of political manipulation, etc.” (Weiss-Blatt, 2021). Based on the quotes from Blumenthal that are cited in these articles, it can be suggested that he follows this idea of the Techlash, as he holds a strong, negative, opinion on Facebook and the power that the company holds. Blumenthal’s lack of nuance is exemplified in these articles.

Additionally, Blumenthal is quoted in *The Wall Street Journal* saying, “Facebook seems to be taking a page from the textbook of Big Tobacco - targeting teens with potentially dangerous products while masking the science in public” (Wells et al., 2021). In using this quote, the journalists are using a credible source to compare Facebook to Big Tobacco, which is associated with lies, deception, and manipulation. According to Draper and Turow (2019), capital systems often benefit from following this framework of Big Tobacco and the mining industries. In talking about their methods, they state, “They identify a set of predictable corporate responses to crises: first denial, then acknowledgement, and finally token accommodations and strategic engagement. They conclude that these routine responses aim to encourage public feelings of

futility about the possibility of changing these unwanted practices” (Draper & Turow, 2019, p. 6). This supports Blumenthal’s comparison of Facebook to Big Tobacco, as it shows the parallels between how tobacco companies managed their situation, and how Facebook is managing theirs.

Exploration of Mental Health

A common theme running through these articles has to do with the impact of social media, most specifically Instagram, on users’ mental health and well-being. Of the thirty articles I studied surrounding the Facebook Whistleblower’s leak of internal research, many of them brought up the leak of research surrounding Instagram and its negative impact on the mental health of teens. Among these mental health discussions, a handful of the articles brought up specific disorders linked to Instagram, such as anxiety and depression. The two largest mental health disorders that came up repeatedly, though, were ones that surrounded body image and eating disorders/disordered eating.

Many of the articles discuss how Facebook's sites, particularly Instagram, negatively affect teenagers’ mental health, (“Teen Mental Health Deep Dive”, 2021). This information was found in the documents leaked by Frances Haugen, and is incorporated in most all articles that I studied surrounding this case. However, this is mentioned briefly in many of the articles and left unexplained. As noted in the literature review, mental health is an extremely complex topic, but the way that it was covered doesn’t give us very much insight into the ways that social media might be exacerbating this trend.

Those articles that did attempt to include specific information from the internal research leak, one statistic surrounding body image that came up in multiple articles was about how one in three teenagers said that Instagram made their body image issues worse. This is a jarring statistic used in multiple articles in the discussion of mental health from Facebook’s leaked

internal research, but it was not contextualized to discuss the complexities of how this impacts users in the long-term. While it is a terribly troubling statistic, it is not necessarily revealing. They also did not go into depth on how this Instagram directly relates to mental health and body image issues or how this problem could be solved. The way in which this statistic was introduced in the articles presented it as a very straightforward, uncomplicated problem, insinuating that the problem was one that could be solved with a simple solution, such as banning Instagram.

In these articles, it can be argued that the complexities of mental health were brushed over, especially in relation to social media and teenagers. It was used more as a piece of influence for the journalists of these articles to guide their readers to frame Facebook and its platform, Instagram, in a negative light.

In reality, the issues surrounding mental health and well-being are much more complex, especially when discussing adolescents and teenagers. In, “The Unseen Teen: The Challenges of Building Healthy Tech for Young People” by Amanda Lenhart and Kellie Owens, they discuss this idea of ‘digital well-being’. In this article, they note, “digital well-being is hard to define and won’t mean the same thing to every population” (Lenhart & Owens, 2021, p. 10). This is important in recognizing the complexities of mental health issues. Mental health and well-being mean something different to everyone, and by including a jarring, and possibly triggering, statistic without any effort to find out what the relationship between teens, Instagram, and their body image issues or what it meant, news media outlets are simplifying it. They are presenting it as an uncomplicated issue and making it seem as though there is a simple solution to solve issues surrounding these disorders, and that it is all to blame on Facebook.

Mental health is significantly more complex than it is presented in these news media articles, and journalists need to change the way in which they introduce the issues surrounding

mental health. As Lenhart and Owens (2021) say, “Rather than focusing on overly simplistic notions of screen time and technology addiction, journalists could tell more complex stories about structural and community-based harm that would shift corporate attention to adolescents and other subgroups facing discrimination and abuse” (p. 36). In the case of the Facebook Whistleblower, journalists made no effort to examine the complications and intricacies of poor mental health on teens from their use of social media, thus painting a simplistic picture of it.

It is important to recognize that mental health and well-being in relation to social media is not this linear relationship that has been presented in the articles studied on the Facebook Whistleblower. Weinstein (2018) relates well-being and mental health to that of a “see-saw”, stating, “well-being involves tilts and shifts based on the dynamic nature of an individual’s experiences - including his or her psychological, social, and physical resources and the challenges he or she faces” (p. 3600). This idea is not supported through the news media articles I studied, as they presented mental health as having a linear path, as opposed to being an intricate problem.

Gender

The internal research that was leaked by the Facebook Whistleblower included research surrounding the effects on Instagram on teens’ mental health. While this research supported research around both male and female teens, any statistics or talk around this leaked research tended to be gendered towards teen girls, leaving teen boys out of the discussion.

Of the thirty articles I studied, only two of them included statistics around teen boys and their mental health on Instagram, whereas over half included the mention of how teen girls, specifically, were negatively impacted by Instagram, as found in the leaked internal research. This aligns with what is known as the “moral panic” around girls online. As argued in Justine

Cassell and Meg Cramer's, "High Tech or High Risk: Moral Panics about Girls Online", this is not a new narrative. Their research supports this idea that, "there has been a recurring moral panic throughout history about the putative danger of communication technologies to young women" (Casell & Cramer, 2008, p. 54).

According to Cassell & Cramer's research, this moral panic, in contemporary times, refers to the fact that the news frames girls as "victims", citing them to be "vulnerable". The articles studied in this case study support this ongoing rhetoric that girls are vulnerable and naive in relation to technology, and that they are those who suffer the most from using new forms of it. One article from *The New York Times* stated, "Facebook's internal research showed that Instagram, in particular, had caused teen girls to feel worse about their bodies and led to increased rates of anxiety and depression, even while company executives tried to minimize the app's downsides" (Satariano & Ryan, 2021). By focusing specifically on girls as the victims and framing them as vulnerable and easily impressionable, this quote is demonstrating the idea of the 'technopanic'. This quote is portraying young women and girls as naive in the face of this technology. This article, in particular, also called Instagram "toxic" for teen girls, making no mention of how the social media platform affects teenage boys. In the internal research that was leaked, however, there are also statistics and research that demonstrate findings linked to the negative effects of Instagram on teenage boys. In this case, it is a matter of why is this information about the effect of Instagram on teenage boys omitted from so many of the news articles that talk about the Facebook Whistleblower?

Of the two articles that mention the impact Instagram has on teen boys, they both use the same statistic that, "14% of boys in the U.S. said Instagram made them feel worse about themselves" (Wells et al., 2021). This is a significant statistic that has been overlooked by many

journalists in the news media, as their focus has been more on playing into already existing fears about girls and technology, as opposed to providing all of the information they have come across.

Additionally, the majority of articles that mentioned “teen girls” mentioned these girls in relation to how Instagram makes their body-image issues worse. For example, articles talked about how in the leaked research, “Some documents showed that some teen girls reported Instagram made their body image issues worse” (Lerman & Lima, 2021). Over half of the thirty articles mention this (in their own words), but only one article from the Wall Street Journal talks about how Instagram impacts the body image of teenage boys as well. As the article says, “In their report on body image in 2020, Facebook’s researchers found that 40% of teen boys experience negative social comparison” (Wells et al., 2021). This is a jarring statistic that demonstrates the negative effect that Instagram had on boys’ body image as well, something that doesn’t come up in any of the other news media articles studied in this case study. This is supported by Justine Cassell & Meg Cramer's (2008) hypothesis that, “...girls significantly more than boys bear the effects of being the target of the moral panic..” (p. 64). While boys are also highly prone to having body image issues because of Instagram, it is not something that the news media aims to cover. This is because they only talk about girls' negative effects in relation to it, thus framing girls as vulnerable and easily impressionable, inciting a moral panic.

Furthermore, it is useful to point out how anecdotes and examples in these news media articles are being used. In the few articles that use these narratives, they are spoken about teenage girls. For example, when an article from *The Washington Post* discussed the negative effects of social comparison on teenagers, they gave an example of a thirteen year old female, Veronica, discussing how she had told her mom some photos on Instagram made her feel bad about how she looked. In addition to that, when Blumenthal’s staff created a finsta to better understand how

teens experience Instagram, they posed as a thirteen year old teenage girl. They found that after following a few accounts about disordered eating, Instagram began promoting extreme dieting and self-harm posts to the account. Even more so, the article from *The Wall Street Journal* that discusses the leaked internal documents uses real examples of girls in their teens and twenties to describe how social media has negatively affected them, and no specific examples of teenage boys.

These all show how girls are portrayed as vulnerable in the media. There are no examples of teenage boys who are having mental health problems or body image problems due to Instagram, but rather only teenage girls. In using anecdotes and examples only of teenage girls, the media is framing this problem in a way that leads their audience to believe that this is a problem that only really affects teenage girls, when that is not the reality.

Finally, it is important to note the comparison of girls and children in the news media. Both girls and children have been called ‘vulnerable’ and ‘impressionable’ under the scope of Instagram, placing them at the same level developmentally. In discussing MySpace, Alice Marwick (2008) says, “Parents are frequently urged to keep their children from using MySpace, or at least to monitor their children’s online activity”. This rhetoric is similar to what the articles I have studied are insinuating. While they are not explicitly stating that girls shouldn’t be on Instagram, they are showing the negative effects that Instagram has on teenage girls, causing a panic around allowing girls online. This, in turn, places young women and teenage girls into the same category as young children, generalizing them and leading people to believe that they are very impressionable and that using Instagram is harmful to them.

Policy Implications

What does this mean for the future? Many of the articles studied in this case study included calls to action, with what the journalists believed should be the next step. For the most part, journalists called for more government regulation of companies and social media platforms. They framed the issue, in most cases, as a bipartisan issue between companies and legislators to find a common ground that protects children, teens, and the mental health of users' on social media platforms.

For years, government regulation has been deliberated around protecting users' of social media from the Big Tech companies, such as Facebook, but nothing has been done and the news media journalists have recognized this. In an article from *The Washington Post*, the journalists say, "Lawmakers for years have threatened legislation they say would increase Facebook's responsibility for privacy abuses or amplifying harmful or misleading content. But to date, Congress has not passed any comprehensive social media bills into law, allowing companies such as Facebook to flourish without legal restriction" (Zakrzewski & Lima, 2021). They understand that this is something that has been talked about routinely in congressional hearings, but no action has been taken. In light of the Facebook Whistleblower, journalists are again calling for lawmakers to step in and take action, whether it be editing old policies or creating new ones.

Some journalists agreed with the idea that editing previously written legislation is the proper way to take action. For example, an article from *The Wall Street Journal* says, "Sen. Maria Cantwell (D., Wash.), who leads the powerful Commerce Committee, said the big policy takeaway was the need to update the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, known by its acronym COPPA, which has been criticized as inadequate for the current social-media environment" (Ryan & McKinnon, 2021). COPPA was implemented by the Federal Trade

Commission in 1998 and, “requires operators of websites and online services directed to children or heavily used by children under age thirteen to obtain verifiable parental consent and keep confidential information disclosed from parents” (Jordan, 2008, p. 238). This Act, as it has to do with protecting children, is thought that if it is updated enough can take some power away from Big Tech companies, such as Facebook. Most others, however, believe that completely new legislation needs to be proposed.

Most of the other articles, however, call for new laws and forms of government regulation. One article from *The Washington Post* states, “Something has to change. And that doesn’t mean a little tinkering around the edges of what already exists. The digital revolution requires a revolutionary change in restraining out-of-control practitioners” (Sullivan, 2021). This is a big call for action from journalists which needs to be pushed within a certain frame of time, as there is a history of Facebook that shows these policy windows tend to close before any regulation gets passed. Nora Draper (2019) provides an example saying, “A case can be made that, prompted by media coverage for troubling corporate and government practices fueled by popular concern about the security of digital information, a policy window for online privacy was flung open in the United States in the last decade of the twentieth century” (p. 45). It is important to note that Draper mentions these policy windows rely on media coverage of the issue, as when the media stops reporting on a topic, the public may lose interest and therefore the push for regulation may quickly subside. As stated in an article from *The New York Times*, “Lawmakers called for regulations to rein in Facebook, saying repeated scandals involving safety, data-privacy abuses and misinformation have created a trust deficit” (Kang, 2021). Due to Facebook’s long history of wrongdoing, these journalists feel new, stricter policies need to be implemented in order to control them.

Some articles also reference how Haugen believed regulation was the right move, as well, but not necessarily just by lawmakers. One article from *The Washington Post* states, “Haugen thinks Congress should create a group of federal regulators made up of people who understand the digital economy: academics, programmers and the like. She thinks that Facebook has to be forced to be more transparent in its operations” (Givhan, 2021). Haugen does not necessarily think that lawmakers need to be the one’s in charge of creating the policy, but she does think it needs to be regulated by the government in order to keep big companies in line. Using one of Haugen’s quotes in an article from *The New York Times*, she says, “The path forward is about transparency and governance...It’s not about breaking up Facebook” (Ryan & Kang, 2021).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the leak of confidential documents surrounding internal research at Facebook has revealed how the media report on social media and mental health. Through my critical discourse analysis of thirty print media articles surrounding the case of the Facebook Whistleblower, from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, I found that media coverage of this case has strong implications on how the problem, gender, mental health, and policy are framed.

The media plays an important role in how long the policy window stays open, so the amount of coverage and type of coverage that the media presents is important in supporting the regulation that may or may not get pushed through. The way that the media frames this problem has important implications for how their audience views the problem, and what solutions are presented or what type of regulation may get pushed through.

I believe that future research can look into how media coverage directly influences policy and policymakers. Academic researchers have the ability to look into the successes and failures

of regulation that has been attempted to go through in regard to digital media. I believe a focus on how this regulation directly affects teenagers, young women, and mental health would be extremely beneficial.

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