Responses to Written Questions Submitted by Honorable John Thune to Tristan Harris

Question. Innovation cannot be focused on building new capabilities alone. It has to be paired with forward thinking design that promotes safety and user trust. Do companies have a social responsibility to design technology that is optimized for consumers' digital wellbeing?

Response. Yes, companies absolutely have a social responsibility to design technology that is optimized for consumers' digital wellbeing. Today, they are acting as if they have none – they assume their impact is good. But now that the world has woken up to the harms intrinsic to their business model, which is to extract attention and data through mass behavior modification, that must change. More than do no harm, technology platforms should have a responsibility to get clear about the goods they aim to achieve, while avoiding the many harms and externalities to mental health, civic health and the social fabric.

There is a precedent for this kind of responsibility. The asymmetry between technology's power over those it impacts is comparable to that of a lawyer, doctor or psychotherapist. These occupations are governed under fiduciary law, due to the level of compromising and vulnerable information they hold over their clients. Because the level of compromising information technology platforms hold over their users exceeds that asymmetry, they should also be governed under fiduciary law.

This would make their advertising and behavior modification business model illegal, much like it would be illegal for a doctor, psychotherapist or lawyer to operate under a business model of extracting as much value from their clients by manipulating them into outcomes only possible because of their knowledge of their clients' vulnerabilities. This means it is critical to ensure that this asymmetric power is governed by a relationship of responsibility, not of extraction - very similar to the responsible practices and standards that the FCC created to protect children and children's television programming.

As technology eats the public square, companies have a social responsibility to protect both consumers' digital wellbeing and the social fabric in which they operate.