

Testimony of Brandon Silverman to the Subcommittee on Privacy, Technology, and the Law (Senate Judiciary Committee)

Hearing: Platform Transparency: Understanding the Impact of Social Media

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Introduction

My name is Brandon Silverman, and for over ten years, I was the CEO and co-founder of CrowdTangle, a social media analytics tool acquired by Facebook in 2016.

Our mission was to help make Facebook the most transparent social media company in the world, and we were very good at what we did. By the end of 2020, the New York Times called us "perhaps the most effective transparency tool in the history of social media."¹ However, in the spring of 2020, after an intense internal debate, Facebook paused all work on CrowdTangle and disbanded the team running it. I left the company shortly thereafter. Today, the future of CrowdTangle is up in the air, and along with it, one of the most robust and successful real-time transparency programs that Facebook operates.

I've worked with data from almost every major social media platform from Vine to Twitter to YouTube to Instagram. I've seen how tens of thousands of researchers, journalists & activists can use social media data to protect our elections, prevent real-world violence, fight global pandemics, empower independent journalists, hold platforms accountable, and more. And I've worked on transparency from inside one of the largest platforms in the world.

I'm here today to share my story, what I experienced first-hand, and ultimately why I believe it's time to stop sitting back and hoping that platforms voluntarily share data and instead pass legislation that makes data sharing mandatory for the entire industry.

Our Story

When CrowdTangle started, we were a social media analytics tool that made it easy for publishers to understand what was happening on social media. We made it easy to see what stories were going viral, track influencers, stay on top of trends, and more.

In 2016, we were acquired by Facebook², and I spent four years leading the CrowdTangle team while there. For a while, being inside Facebook gave us a powerful home that supercharged our work to help publishers and news outlets. Our team tripled in size; we launched dozens of new features and expanded the team internationally.

In 2018, we underwent an important shift: instead of just trying to support publishers, we began focusing on a new mission of making Facebook the most transparent social media platform in

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/02/business/media/crowdtangle-facebook-brandon-silverman.html>

² <https://www.theverge.com/2016/11/11/13594338/facebook-acquires-crowdtangle>

the world. We expanded our work to more and more industries, including academia³. Our data was the basis of hundreds of academic research papers, including in Nature⁴, Science, as well as referenced in thousands of news articles by journalists around the world reporting on social media. Our insights were referenced in Congressional testimony, used by human rights organizations in developing countries and lauded by Facebook's executives. We became one of the most widely used tools in the world to understand and see what was happening on social media in real-time and there was no shortage of use cases.

The Power of Transparency

Unless you've spent time trying to study social media, it can be hard to understand what transparency actually looks like in practice and why it's so hard right now.

When it comes to the type of transparency we focused on at CrowdTangle, one way to think about it is to imagine television except with two big differences. There are no any ratings and instead of having 3 or 4 prominent news shows, there were hundreds of thousands of channels broadcasting news live at any given moment. If you were interested in studying a medium like that and you wanted to know what was the largest broadcast on any given night, who the most influential host was, what the biggest story of the day was or what was being said about COVID, it would be impossible. If you wanted to study that information ecosystem and understand how it might be shaping and influencing our society, it would be impossible. That's essentially how social media functions unless platforms voluntarily decide to make that data available.

Our goal at CrowdTangle was to make all that information accessible and incredibly easy to use for as many social platforms as we could possibly work with. At one point, we had integrations with Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Vine, Twitter, and Reddit. As a result, we saw more use cases than we ever imagined, including:

- We worked with hundreds of local news outlets to help them report on and monitor social media in their local communities⁵.
- In 2020, we worked with every single local election board across the US to help them monitor for misleading voting information⁶ and have it taken down from the platform.
- In the Philippines, our tool helped Rappler and this year's Nobel Peace Prize Winner Maria Ressa's team identify accounts violating Facebook's terms of service and spreading disinformation in the lead-up to national elections⁷.
- When COVID took off, we made public versions of CrowdTangle available in almost every country in the world⁸ so that local communities could monitor the public discussion about the pandemic.

³ <https://wersm.com/facebook-opens-up-crowdtangle-to-academics-and-researchers/>

⁴ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-0452-1>

⁵ <https://www.adweek.com/performance-marketing/crowdtangle-for-local-news/>

⁶ <https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Helping-to-Protect-the-US-2020-Elections.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/investigative/245290-marcos-networked-propaganda-social-media/>

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/gpa/blog/launching-crowdtangle-covid-19-vaccine-live-displays>

- We helped public interest, and advocacy organizations like Avaaz hold platforms accountable⁹ for their public commitments to elections, misinformation, COVID, and more.
- We partnered with hundreds of fact-checking organizations around the world¹⁰, including the International Fact-checking Network, and became a critical part of their effort to identify & respond to misinformation in real-time.
- We helped researchers uncover inauthentic networks and help them get removed from the platform as quickly as possible, including Russian-linked influence operations in Africa¹¹ and more.
- In developing countries like Myanmar, Ethiopia, and Sri Lanka, we helped human rights organizations like the Myanmar Accountability Network¹² protect the integrity of elections and help prevent real-world violence.
- NGOs like Design 4 Democracy Coalition used CrowdTangle to help analyze the information ecosystems in places like Kosovo, Hong Kong, Moldova, and more in order to study the overall state of democracy around the world¹³.

And the list could go on. Truthfully, there was no shortage of use cases because of how critical social media has become to the political and civic discourse of the world and how essential that data is to the public.

However, ultimately, there was a limit to how far we could push transparency from within Facebook when it all came crashing down in May of 2021.

The Limits Of How Far Platforms Are Willing To Go On Their Own

It's not easy to work on transparency from inside a major social platform.

When an advocacy organization releases a high-profile report on how the company has been dropping the ball on climate misinformation¹⁴, and they cite your team's data, it's uncomfortable. When your data is misinterpreted to create a misleading narrative¹⁵ that is repeated for months on end in some of the most prominent news outlets in the country, it's uncomfortable. When there is a viral video about fake COVID cures¹⁶, and outside journalists only catch it because they are using your system, it's uncomfortable. When the White House uses your data¹⁷ to claim

⁹ https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/climate_briefing_report/

¹⁰ <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2020/the-ifcn-adds-crowdtangle-as-an-ally-in-the-fight-against-misinformation/>

¹¹ https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/29oct2019_sio_-_russia_linked_influence_operations_in_africa.final_.pdf

¹² <https://twitter.com/riovictoire/status/1446896304542650373>

¹³ <https://d4dcoalition.org/articles-list/using-crowdtangle-explore-democratic-contexts-around-world?page=1>

¹⁴ https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/climate_briefing_report/

¹⁵ <https://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-right-wing-echo-chamber-data-executive-pushback-2021-7>

¹⁶ <https://www.theverge.com/2020/5/12/21254184/how-plandemic-went-viral-facebook-youtube>

¹⁷ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/16/white-house-says-facebook-needs-to-do-more-to-fight-vaccine-misinformation.html>

that your platform is failing to protect Americans around COVID and literally "killing people," it's deeply uncomfortable.

Those moments take a toll on your team. They also make it harder to get resources, they make it more difficult to launch new features or new data, and ultimately, they provide constant ammunition to executives who are skeptical about transparency at all.

On top of that, there are also organizational challenges that make it hard as well.

There are conflicting regulatory & legal requirements around the world that all are interpreted differently depending on which team or set of lawyers you talk to. There's the constant reality of regulatory pressure that encourages a "wait and see" approach instead of rewarding proactive efforts. There's a growing lack of trust between platforms and the media that covers them, which has meant increasingly less appetite to work together between the industries. There are some teams that believe in transparency but are never quite ready for it to be applied to their products. There's the fact that no matter how much transparency you provide, you're rarely going to get any public credit for it. And across the board, there is immense pressure to focus on short-term outcomes and constant, fierce competition for resources. And that's to name just a few.

But above all else, the single biggest challenge is that in the industry right now, you can simply get away without doing any transparency at all.

YouTube, TikTok, Telegram, and Snapchat represent some of the largest and most influential platforms in the United States, and they provide almost no functional transparency¹⁸ into their systems. And as a result, they avoid nearly all of the scrutiny and criticism that comes with it. That reality has industry-wide implications, and it frequently led to conversations inside Facebook about whether or not it was better to simply do nothing since you could easily get away with it.

Where To Go From Here

In October of 2021, as we approached the five-year mark of being at the company, there was finally an intense internal debate¹⁹ about the kind of transparency we provided and whether it was ultimately worth the public scrutiny and criticism that came with it. That debate eventually resulted in me leaving Meta²⁰ and my team of more than 50 people being reassigned to other projects or leaving the company altogether.

Today CrowdTangle is still available, but it's in maintenance mode. Meta has stopped onboarding new partners²¹, no new features or major updates have been released in over a

¹⁸<https://www.marketplace.org/shows/marketplace-tech/we-hardly-ever-talk-about-youtube-and-disinformation-not-anymore/>

¹⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/14/technology/facebook-data.html>

²⁰ <https://www.theverge.com/2021/10/6/22713109/facebook-crowdtangle-founder-brandon-silverman-leaves>

²¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/29/tech/facebook-meta-crowdtangle/index.html>

year, and a global partnerships team that used to run it no longer exists²². The tool is slowly dying, and one of Facebook's most significant commitments to transparency is very much up in the air.

Meanwhile, other major platforms, including ones that host large swaths of our civic and political information ecosystems, continue to do almost nothing to let the outside world look into their black boxes and face no real consequences. And all the while, as a country, we're only spending more and more time on social media as a country and continuing to see the powerful impact it has on us individually and societally.

While CrowdTangle has its limitations, I saw all the ways in which makes a difference. It helps monitor the most important discussions and debates of the day. It helps hold platforms accountable for living up to the commitments they've made to their users and the public. It helps make sure our new, digital information ecosystems are as open as possible instead of existing inside obscure black boxes. It helps advance our collective understanding about the role of social media in our lives and our democracies.

However, I think our experience is a bellwether; that the days of simply hoping that platforms will voluntarily share data are over. It's simply too easy for platforms to do nothing. I believe it's time to create legislation that sets some baselines for what we as a society expect and demand.

That's why in the last few months, I've been consulting with lawmakers around the world who are considering transparency legislation, including in Europe, where data sharing & transparency are major parts of the Digital Services Act which passed in late April, as well as other pieces of legislation being considered in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and more. Here in the United States, the Platform Accountability and Transparency Act represents a similar piece of legislation and one that I think would be a powerful step in the right direction.

Ultimately, transparency is one of the most powerful levers we have to help make sure that social platforms live up to their promise of helping protect free & open societies. And we have an opportunity here in the United States to be a global leader in showing the world exactly how to do that.

How To Get It Right

There's no shortage of challenges to getting any legislation around transparency and data sharing right, including balancing data sharing with privacy concerns, trade secrets, surveillance issues, the First Amendment, and more. Those issues are real, complicated, and in some cases, they'll require tough tradeoffs.

But that's why we need the government's help in deciding what those tradeoffs should be. The government, not a set of private companies, should be adjudicating those questions, hearing from civil society and experts, and helping craft a set of rules & requirements that would apply to

²² <https://sfist.com/2021/07/14/facebook-is-dismantling-crowdtangle-because-it-showed-the-platform-to-be-a-right-wing-echo-chamber/>

the entire industry. In fact, I think in many cases, the industry would welcome the government's role in helping set those rules.

But it's also important to realize that any legislative solution to transparency shouldn't have a one-size-fits-all approach.

We need solutions like CrowdTangle that make privacy-safe data available in real-time that are easy to use and widely accessible to a broad swath of civil society, if not the public writ large.

But that's just one pillar of what any comprehensive legislation should require.

The truth is there's no perfect data set, no magic metric, or no single tool that accomplishes everything we need. The vast majority of the public interest issues we care about require a variety of different approaches to studying & understanding them. That's why any transparency requirement should come in several different shapes and sizes.

Any comprehensive approach to transparency should include requirements that fulfill as many of the following needs as possible:

- Datasets and tools like CrowdTangle that make it easy to monitor the most important and influential public accounts on a platform in real-time,
- Mechanisms for sharing privacy-sensitive data in safe & protected ways with highly vetted researchers,
- Ways to archive and share sensitive content that has been removed for violating specific community standards that are particularly important to the public interest,
- Transparency around all advertising on a platform, not just social and political ads,
- Legal & financial protection for people scraping in the public interest,
- Ways for professional auditors to study the design of algorithms for harmful or unintended outcomes,
- Sampled content of datasets that help provide a holistic view of the platform, and
- Reports that use industry-wide accounting practices & definitions around content moderation, hate speech, election protection, and other public interest areas.

We also need approaches that reflect an industry that is constantly evolving. Any set of transparency requirements should be able to adapt its provisions at the same speed that the industry, bad actors & ordinary user behaviors are all changing on a constant basis.

Conclusion

The most important thing in this discussion is that without moving forward with legislation, we will continue to be in the dark about the real impact of social media on our lives. We're going to continue jumping from one anecdotal data point to another, from one leaked document to another, from one urban myth to another, without ever establishing baseline, evidence-backed conclusions about what problems we should focus on. And that means we're going to risk

having an internet that weakens free societies instead of a building an internet that protects them.

When I think about social media and a lot of the public discourse about the role it plays in our lives, I'm reminded of the anecdote about the policeman who sees a drunk man searching for something under a streetlight and asks what the drunk man has lost. He says he lost his keys, and they both look under the streetlight together. After a few minutes, the policeman asks if he is sure he lost them here, and the man replies, no, that he lost them in the park. The policeman asks why he is searching here, and the man replies, "this is where the light is."

For too long, our public discussion about social media has been focused on the moments when we briefly found ourselves under a streetlight. Whether it was because of leaked documents, individual anecdotes, or moments where a small group of researchers & journalists were given a glimpse into the systems, those are each fleeting moments of a single streetlight lighting up a tiny part of our digital world for a brief moment in time. We need are transparency solutions that are sustainable, industry-wide and operating at a much larger scale. It's time to turn on the lights for good. It's time to pass legislation making it clear what we expect platforms to share and how to share it in safe and responsible ways. We've been wandering in the dark for too long.