

Facebook whistleblower's testimony may set algorithmic accountability and antitrust on a collision course

Article

The news: During a landmark hearing, **Facebook** whistleblower **Frances Haugen** advocated for a grab bag of solutions to combat AI algorithms' role in amplifying harmful content—ranging from algorithm-focused reforms of **Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act**, to the creation of a new data-focused regulatory agency, and increased data transparency between Facebook and independent researchers investigating its algorithms.

- Haugen's testimony builds off weeks of reporting in The Wall Street Journal showing Facebook acknowledges Instagram's deleterious effect on teens' mental health and evidence that 2018 changes to its News Feed algorithm may have led to more extreme content.

Why this matters: The widely viewed hearing serves as a final blow to Facebook's Instagram for Kids project and could tank already **dismal** user trust.

Prior to the hearing, Facebook announced it would “pause” efforts to create an Instagram experience focused on children 13 and under. As we've previously **noted**, this demographic represents Facebook's largest (and most valuable) growth area.

The hearing also risks inciting some Facebook users to leave the platform altogether according to a recent Morning Consult **report**:

- **41% of US adults** said they would stop using a social media brand if they had been found to have allowed harmful content on their platform.
- Overall, **52% of US adults said they didn't trust social media platforms like Facebook**—a figure significantly higher than any other type of tech brand.

What's next? While the hearing didn't reveal much new information about Facebook, it did provide a major platform for legislators to revisit the idea of algorithm-focused exceptions to Section 230 protections, which could have implications far beyond Facebook.

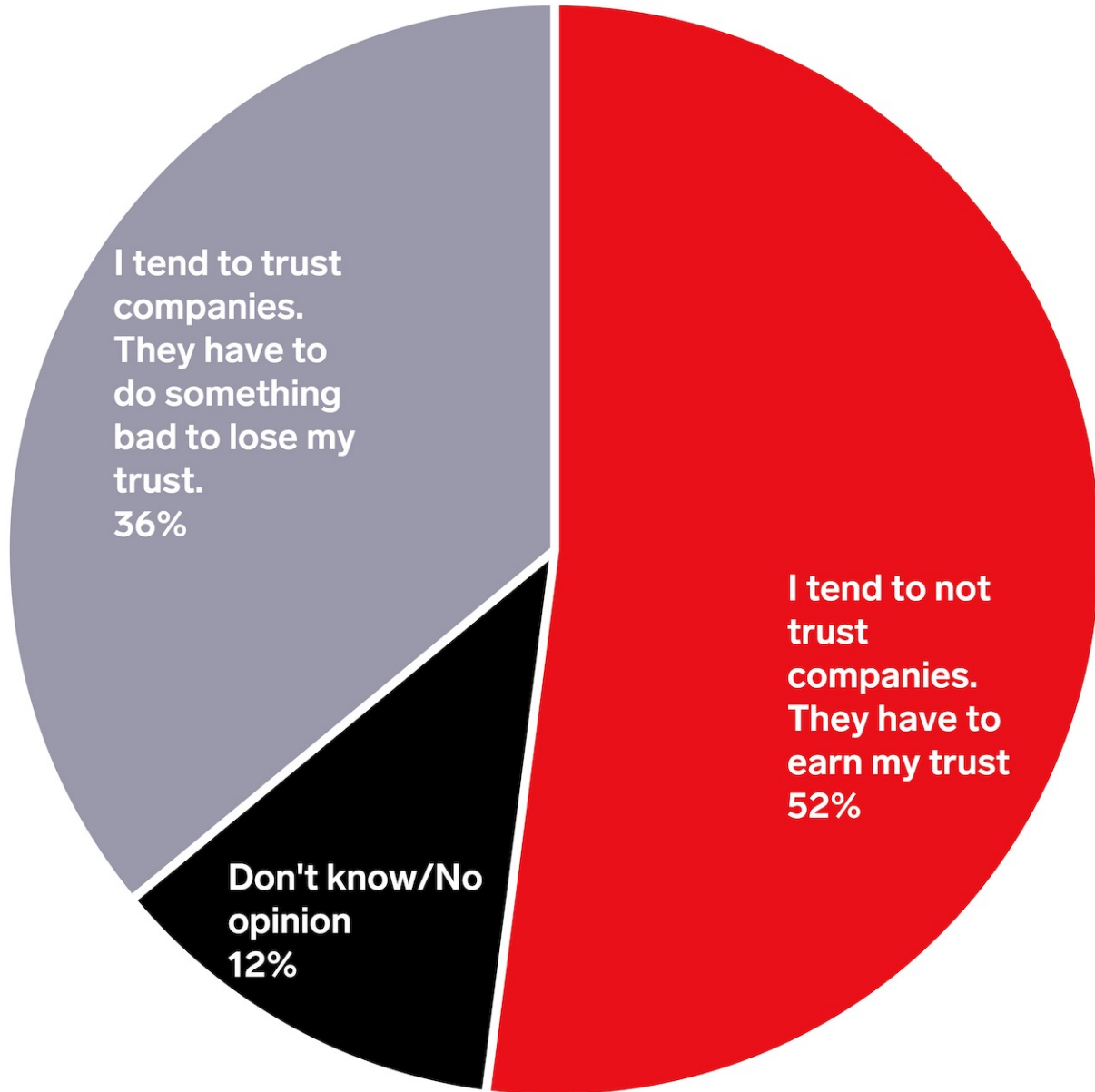
Haugen suggested tweaking 230 to hold Facebook “responsible for the consequences of its intentional ranking decisions,” which she believes could incentivize the company to turn away from its engagement based algorithmic ranking system.

Will it succeed? Though legislators from both sides of the political aisle have expressed interest in reforming 230 reforms, a majority of Republican and Democrat voters in a recent Pew survey said they opposed the idea of suing social media companies for content that other users post on their platforms. Algorithm-focused reforms could strike a convenient, more tailored middle ground.

What's the catch? Though algorithm focused reforms may appear an attractive solution for both lawmakers and consumers, the effort could face scrutiny from advocates favoring increased antitrust, since critics have argued such exceptions could entrench Big Tech dominance by placing restrictions on technology from smaller competitors like TikTok.

Over Half of US Adults Don't Trust Social Media Companies

% of US adults



Source: Morning Consult, "The Current State of Consumer Trust in Tech," October, 2021

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