

**REMARKS BY FCC CHAIRMAN AJIT PAI
AT THE MEDIA INSTITUTE**

WASHINGTON, DC

NOVEMBER 29, 2017

I take the stage at a bittersweet moment. As you may know, the Media Institute's longtime leader, Patrick Maines, is stepping down. Considering his stature, I feel compelled to open with a variant on Shakespeare:

*Friends, lawyers, countrymen, lend me your ears;
I come to praise Patrick Maines, not to bury him.*

Since 1984, Patrick has led the Media Institute with great distinction. 33 years of standing strong for the First Amendment, the spine of American democracy. 33 years of advocating for values we prize, like freedom of expression, journalistic excellence, and open markets. 33 years of perceptive cultural commentary, such as when he opined in *USA TODAY* four years ago that *Breaking Bad* was "perhaps the best show that's ever been on television." And 33 years of urging the FCC to adopt better policies, such as when he proclaimed that "deregulation is the only rational approach in the radically transformed digital information age of media abundance in the 21st century." (He wrote that in Media Institute comments to the FCC 17 years ago; I'm sorry it took us this long to respond.)

Patrick, thank you for your able leadership. As you depart the stage, we're grateful for your contributions to the Media Institute and to the body politic. What Marc Antony said in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* could well be said of you: "Only he acted from honesty and for the general good. His life was gentle, and the elements mixed so well in him that Nature might stand up and say to all the world, 'This was a man.'" Congratulations on your work and godspeed.

Speaking of transitions, these are difficult times for many of those who tell the stories that define our communities—America's broadcasters and newspapers. Attention spans are short. Advertising dollars are going elsewhere. Competitors are everywhere.

I value the work that our media does, and my record reflects that. That's why the FCC under my leadership has aggressively modernized its rules to give broadcasters and newspapers a fair chance to compete. From updating our media ownership rules to reflect 2017 instead of 1975, to repealing outdated regulations, we're doing what we can to encourage a bright future for those who keep our communities informed.

But let's be honest: Americans are increasingly turning away from traditional media and toward the Internet. And even with greater freedom for newspapers and broadcasters to compete, this shift toward online platforms as the go-to place for news, information, and entertainment is certain to continue.

There are many sources, as you know—streaming video, gaming, and the like—but a major factor is social media. Two-thirds of U.S. adults get news from social media. For Americans under 50, it's four out of five. Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and other online platforms are where millions of Americans now "meet" and "talk." In a sense, these platforms constitute the public square in the digital era.

Many public servants have entered that square in recent years, including me. In my first meeting as an FCC Commissioner in 2012, I announced that I had joined Twitter. I was the first Commissioner ever to do so. And it's taken me in some unexpected directions.

In December 2013, a tweet brought to my attention the story of Kari Rene Hunt, a woman who was killed that month by her estranged husband in a Marshall, Texas hotel room. Her nine-year-old daughter, who was with her, frantically tried dialing 911—but the call never went through because she

had to dial a “9” first. A few weeks later, I spoke with Kari’s father. A month later, I started an investigation into direct 911 dialing in hotels across America. A year later, I reported, with Hank at my side, that we had made substantial progress, with thousands of properties making changes that could have helped Kari’s daughter place that call. And it all started with a tweet.

Some of the “work” online has been fun, too. For instance, a few years ago I got to know New Orleans Saints coach Sean Payton on Twitter, which led to us meeting in person. He and his staff showed me how the Saints use technology. It almost made up for him denying me a tryout (the Saints wouldn’t have needed to draft Michael Thomas had they given me a chance!).

In all seriousness, there is no question that social media in some ways has made me a better public servant. It’s enabled me to hear from people whose stories I might otherwise never hear. It’s allowed me connect with those whose causes have become my own. And it’s helped me get my own message out in ways unimaginable to our predecessors at the FCC.

More generally, social media has had positive social effects on America, too. There are countless examples to pick from. But to me, the most salient one is the recent #MeToo groundswell. We’ve seen an amazing surge of women who now feel comfortable publicly sharing their stories of abuse and mistreatment at the hands of powerful men. Every day, it seems, we hear awful stories about men who treated women poorly (to say the least). Social media has empowered many women in this cause. It’s given them a sense that they’re not alone in their experience and won’t be abandoned if they go public. That’s a good thing. I hope more of them come forward. I hope our culture shines a bright light on disgusting conduct that for too long thrived in the shadows—especially to help those women who continue to suffer in silence, like hotel workers and restaurant servers.

But there have been downsides to social media, too. Harassment. Threats. Unfiltered rage. The past few days, I’ve seen a lot of that—much more than I (or my family) would like. Many others feel the same way. And this vitriol seems to reflect the growing feeling that America today is a meaner, coarser place than it used to be, especially when it comes to politics. Indeed, there’s a quiet sense that, far from helping things, social media is making it worse. This unprecedented medium for collaboration and connecting people feels like it’s dividing us and driving us apart.

And that brings me to the question I’d like to pose to you today: Is social media a net benefit to American society? Given the increasingly important role that social media plays in our daily lives, this is a question that all of us, including groups like the Media Institute, need to grapple with.

Now, I will tell you up front that I don’t have an answer. And I won’t touch on particular policy issues, like social media’s role in elections. What I have in mind is something broader.

With that, let me suggest two trends that I believe have lowered our discourse—and how social media has enabled each.

First: Everything nowadays is political. Everything. When I was younger, I remember “politics” being something about public policy that was covered on the evening news or in the daily newspaper. You watched or read a story about President Reagan battling Speaker Tip O’Neill on the issue of the day. And then you would go on with your life.

No more. Today, politics infuses everything from entertainment awards shows to natural disasters. And there is no respite from it. Virtually every aspect of American life seems to have been tainted in one way or another with politics.

And everyone is expected to have an opinion. If they don’t, they are suspected of being on “the other side,” which is of course bad. If you don’t believe me, Google “Taylor Swift” and “politics.” You’ll see endless headlines. Just a few: “Taylor Swift Refuses to Get Political”; “Taylor Swift’s New Album ‘Reputation’ Says Nothing About Politics”; “Taylor Swift’s Spineless Feminism”; and “Taylor

Swift Needs to Sit This Year Out.” The subhead for the last article contends that “[t]he pop star has always avoided politics, but in Trump’s America, there is no more room for her petty personal drama.”

Well—yes there is! She’s a singer and a songwriter. She’s talented. And people want to hear her—including me. If she chooses to use her voice to champion an issue, great. But no one should be demanding that she take a position on tax reform or illegal immigration. As Ms. Swift once intoned, “Haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate.” I hope she keeps shaking it off.

This view that politics-is-all is often made worse by social media. I’ll bet you’ve seen it too in your own lives. I’m no longer active on Facebook, but when I was, I saw a dynamic play out time and again on my News Feed. I used to love seeing snapshots of my friends’ lives—kids’ pictures, job updates, and so on. But those happy timelines changed dramatically in the lead-up to and aftermath of the 2016 presidential election. Friends who had known each other for years—sometimes going back to grade school—would routinely denounce each other in very harsh terms. I can’t tell you how many times I saw a friend post something like “If you voted for [pick a candidate], unfriend me now. We clearly have nothing in common, because you’re [pick a pejorative], and I don’t want to associate with you.”

Ironically—or maybe fittingly—I saw for myself a great example of how political social media has gotten. It came after a recent non-partisan forum on the Future of Speech Online hosted by the Newseum Institute, the Center for Democracy and Technology, and the Charles Koch Institute. I was invited to speak, as was activist DeRay Mckesson. We sat next to each other and had a chance to chat. After the event, DeRay tweeted, and I quote, “@AjitPaiFCC, good to meet you today. Looking forward to a longer conversation soon.” I replied, “Good to meet you as well, @deray! Hope to catch up sometime soon—much to talk about, including possible [*Game of Thrones*] endings.” You can probably guess how some of our Twitter followers reacted. One of DeRay’s followers wrote, “I would have told Ajit to take his oversized cup of coffee and @#\$% right off.” One of mine asked, “Why would you as a member of the cabinet, even meet with that racist joker? #disappointed.” Tribalism is a powerful drug.

And it’s terrible for our country. I daresay that in every democratic society, political issues are guaranteed to divide. That’s why there once seemed to be an understanding in America that those issues were third-rails in casual conversation. I remember at the Sportsman Barber Shop in my hometown of Parsons, where I used to get my hair cut as a kid, they had a rule: no politics and no religion. That’s not the way things are in America today. Any and all interactions are now fair game for ferreting out whether your opinions entitle you to simple pleasantries, let alone friendship. It’s even extended to dating; the chief scientific adviser to Match.com earlier this year said that liberals and conservatives are more often screening each other out; as she put it, “all singles are becoming more rigid in their views,” with many imposing political litmus tests before a single clink of wine glasses.

The second trend I’d suggest to you: The virtual is displacing the real. As we’ve become more accustomed to interacting on the Internet, we don’t prioritize or experience in-person conversations as much. And with the lack of personal contact, we’ve forgotten the mores that we used to learn through face-to-face conversations—mores like civility and tolerance.

When you shake someone’s hand, when you look someone in the eye, when you actually hear his or her point of view directly, it’s just harder to be nasty. You may disagree, but at least you learn to limit your disagreement within a civilized range. This is healthy. This kind of tolerance helps maintain civic institutions. It’s why we prize the famous friendships of Justices Scalia and Ginsburg, or the famous collaboration of Reagan and O’Neill, or even the famous marriage of James Carville and Mary Matalin. It’s not just the novelty of ideological opponents getting along that strikes us. It’s because this is the glue of society. It’s what staves off rank tribalism and ultimately helps make us a nation.

Some have argued that anonymity has made our discourse nastier, and I think that’s true. When your identity is secret, you feel no restraint. You say literally anything you want, and nobody will hold

you accountable. Without the constraint of manners, the most terrible things can be said—and are. I’ve certainly been on the receiving end of much of this bile. But I’m not at all unique. Try having a social media presence as any public official, or any prominent woman, or any corporate leader, or any number of other roles or identities. Make a wave, however reasonable, and you’ll often get a tsunami in response.

Of course, even self-identified speakers (say, “verified” users in Twitter parlance) have no problem bashing someone with snark or writing off others as “evil” without ever so much as hearing a different point of view—partly because they never have to encounter that someone in person. (I would put in this category the Facebook message I received early this year, from a well-to-do doctor who was a friend-of-a-friend, that called me a bunch of expletives—and added for good measure that my wife was ugly and fat. And the alleged comedian who recently said Indian-Americans “would like [me] to leave [my] pigment at the door. On the way out.”)

In a way, one could say that “social media” is perhaps the most inapt phrase ever coined. It allows us to stay in touch while keeping a distance. It has sped the breakdown in human interaction. It has fed the unfiltered id at the expense of genuine understanding. And it has to some extent enabled the worst of human impulses—the drive to associate only with one’s own and to exclude the “other.”

And this drive can spill from the virtual world to the real one. If you want to know where it leads, try visiting a college campus these days wearing a “Make America Great Again” hat.

Where does America go from here?

I certainly don’t have a magic solution. But what I do know is that we can’t allow the strident rudeness of an angry few to overwhelm what I continue to believe is the quiet decency of most Americans. I firmly believe that we are better than the side of our country we often see on social media. Indeed, the contrast between much of what I’ve seen in the virtual world and what I’ve seen during my travels in the real world is breathtaking.

I remember those I met in Houston after Hurricane Harvey who told me about how people used social media to look out for one another and coordinate rescue attempts by volunteer responders.

I remember the emergency room doctors and nurses I met in Fishersville, Virginia who told me how telehealth has helped them reduce mortality rates.

I remember the students and instructors I met in Barrow, Alaska who are using online tools to pass their Native heritage from one generation to the next.

I remember the farmer I met in Allen, Kansas who is using digital tools to manage his livestock.

I remember meeting the countless entrepreneurs from all corners of the country who have used broadband to help start and grow their small businesses.

These interactions remind me of the power of the Internet to improve the lives of the American people. But more to the point here, they also remind me of what America really is. The America I know is one in which neighbors look out for each other; where people take pride in their communities; where dreamers want to and do build a better life for themselves and their families; and, yes, where people tend to be more civil to one another.

* * *

A few years ago, my friend Pat Butler, who many of you know as the President and CEO of America’s Public Television Stations, shared with me a speech delivered in 1998 by his former boss, Senator and White House Chief of Staff Howard Baker. The topic was Baker’s Dozen (pun intended and executed) principles for successful Senate leadership. I think his words have relevance today, and far beyond the upper chamber:

“What really makes the Senate work . . . is an understanding of human nature, an appreciation of the hearts as well as the minds, the frailties as well as the strengths, of one’s colleagues and one’s constituents. . . . We are doing the business of the American people. We do it every day. We have to do it with the same people every day. And if we cannot be civil to one another, and if we stop dealing with those with whom we disagree, or that we don’t like, we would soon stop functioning altogether.”

My friends, I submit that there’s something in Baker’s vision of the Senate that our country needs right now.

At the FCC, we’re working to make sure that every American is connected with high-speed Internet access. But while we’re becoming connected digitally, we can’t allow our nation of 326 million to become disconnected from each other. We need to see our fellow citizens as real people with real strengths and frailties, not as abstract online avatars. We need to speak with each other eye-to-eye in order to understand each other’s values, not snipe at each other remotely in order to demean. And when we disagree, we need to do so civilly—to see each other as people aspiring for a better country but envisioning different paths for getting there.

That’s the future that I want for this country I love. And that’s the future that we must strive for if we are to remain these *United States* of America.