

Hindsight is 2020: Learning From our Past to Build a Better Future

March 16, 2021

- Thank you so much for joining us today. We are very lucky to be in the presence of some incredible people today. And just to sort of give you a little bit of information about the event today, so we're gonna be talking about creator platforms and social media platforms. As you know, creator platforms and social media platforms saw us migrate our social lives to the internet. While allowing us to share and interact with people we never could have before, it also fragmented our experiences and relationships. There's an endless list of unintended consequences. Today's platforms were inspired by the many that preceded them, but along the way, we started to go astray. How can we make sense of where we are today? What can we understand about the decisions that were made and the structures we had in place? And most importantly, how can the builders of new platforms that also intend to bring the world closer together, give everyone the power to create or organize the world's information, do it better? I'm Jad. I'm a current fellow at the Berkman Klein Center. and I'm also the co-founder of an internet company called Koodos. I study the evolution of internet communities, digital creative tools and content curation and I build products in this space. We are so honored to have three incredible panelists with us today and I'm personally very, very excited to be learning from them. I will quickly introduce them and then we'll jump straight into the conversation. If you would like to turn on your cameras, that would be great. So we have Caterina Flake, who is an investor at the Yes VC and the host of the number one tech podcast "Should This Exist?" She was a founder-partner at the Founder Collective, director and chairman of Etsy, serving on the board for nearly 10 years and currently sits on the board of Public Goods and the non-profit boards of the Sundance Institute and McSweeney's Publishing. She is of course also the co-founder of Flickr, the photo sharing site and online community. Caterina is an early creator of, and participant in online communities and a long time advocate of the responsibility of entrepreneurs for the outcomes of their technologies. We have Dr. Nancy Baym who is a Senior Principal Research Manager at Microsoft Research in the New England Lab. Her research concerns social dynamics of new communication technologies. She was a pioneer in the field of internet research, writing seminal early articles on online community in the early 90s. And she's the author of a number of books including most recently "Twitter: A Biography." She serves on the editorial boards of a number of journals and was the co-founder of the Association of Internet Researchers and served as its second president. And of course, David Bohnett is a philanthropist, technology entrepreneur, and the founder of Baroda Ventures. He is currently serving on a number of boards including the David Bohnett Foundation. And of course in 1994, he founded GeoCities, which was once ranked one of the four most trafficked sites on the web. GeoCities became publicly traded on NASDAQ and was acquired by Yahoo. So, yeah, thank you so much for joining me today. It's going to be an amazing conversation and let's just get started. So the first question I have is, each new internet community can be framed as the attempted creation of a new society with a new social contract and new assumptions about the wants and needs of its members. From my perspective, these assumptions haven't changed much, but the

technology around them really has. So I'm curious to learn, do you agree with that statement and how have those assumptions changed over the history of internet communities?

- Well, I'll jump in. And I wanna say I'm thrilled to be here with my fellow panelists to talk to the group and thank you to the participants for joining. And thank you, Jad for organizing the conference. I'll take a little bit of, I'll talk about a little bit of something you said already, which is how did we go to go astray? And I'll be interested to see what my current panelists say. It was always messy. I mean, maybe it's a little messier now, but building online communities and self-governing communities and people contributing their own ideas and content, you know, it's never easy and it's always messy. So can talk about perhaps why is it even more difficult now? But in the early days it was certainly like the constellations and the stars forming. My response to your first question is, I don't think the assumptions have changed so much and it's, you know, each new community or social platform has this sense of discovery by its users. So it's this sense of I'm finding something new and I'm sharing it with others. And it's the sense of ownership of the new, I think that has continued to propel the evolution of online communities. People wanna be somewhere where they feel like they've discovered it for themselves and they want to introduce it to their friends. And so I think that has remained very consistent over the evolution of online communities.

- I would say that, you know, as you said, human nature is consistent in many ways, but I think human behavior changes dramatically based on context. And on the internet, the affordances of the software and the platform have a lot of influence on people's behavior and how they communicate with each other, what kind of language is encouraged or permitted on a certain platform, how people behave. I think that, and many years ago, I wrote a article for Wired Magazine, which was called, it was about the Abraham of the software which I had gotten from, you know, those parts of the Bible that go on endlessly about like the begats, like the Abraham begat, and then everybody begat after that. And the Abrahams of the software, of the social platforms are really the founders in the initial community and the people who are actually starting it. And whatever their values and morays are, seemed to carry through the rest of the software. And you can do a lot to influence and change and manage how a community grows and develops from the outset. And so much of it is based on the personalities of the founders: what they value, what they don't value, how they design the software. And so on Flickr, you know, our back end, our admin interface was actually just as big as the, what you saw on the surface. There was an incredible amount of community cultivation, management, I often call it kinda the iron fist in the velvet glove. There's the sense of managing your community, there's like kind of a gardening element to it, like making sure that these behaviors are the ones that appear and that these are suppressed somewhat. So I do think that good modeling can help rules and their enforcement, you know, good community management practices, presence, I think is something that is actually, you know, not apparent in a lot of the platforms these days of the owners, managers and founders of the software, the participants. But maybe above all, the business models actually really affect the outcomes of a lot of these things, which we can address a bit later.

- All the things

- [David] Absolutely. that those two just said. I think that I would I would say that there's a lot of assumptions that get made and that continues to be the case. Whether those assumptions are accurate or not, I think is a somewhat different question. I think that what I see as the biggest change, I mean, there's all the ways that technologies have evolved and become more video-based and networked and feed-based and things like that. But I think that the, what I see as the biggest shift has been the difference between the systems of the early, of prior to the web that were really about people coming together, 'cause they wanted to do a thing. And then a layer of people like my esteemed guests coming and going, whoa, we could build a really cool thing and it could connect people. And that would be awesome. To where we're at now where I think you have a ton of businesses going, this is fantastic. We've convinced everybody that in order to have a viable career, they need to be constantly present on all of these networks so we can come in and exploit their relationships with one another and their desperation to remain employed and make a ton of money. And that was just- before and I think that's had real effects on the affordances that have been built into the platforms and the kinds of relationships that they foster.

- Totally, yeah, you know, this was already mentioned, but a big part of building new social platforms is witnessing how people use what you've built and how that then shapes the culture of the platform. So I'm really curious to learn more about, you know, how you think subcultures on these platforms develop, how do they interact with each other and, you know, importantly, how do we ensure that these platforms nurture inclusive subcultures?

- The future of the internet and how to stop it.

- [Jad] Easy.

- I think.

- Straight from Berkman. A Berkman Klein original.

- Right. You know, I think that, one of the things that I've certainly found is that each time there's a new iteration of software, it seems as if we learn the same things over again. It's kind of like David was saying, you know, it was always difficult and things don't change that much. And the, you know, kind of, you know, the [inaudible] of the software change, but the general principles of how to manage community, I mean, I actually look a lot to, a lot of online sociality can be mapped to offline sociality. You know, there's platforms that are like dinner parties. There's some like, that are town halls or concerts or PTA meetings or Quaker meetings. There's different forms of sociality that I think that we can always find the patterns for offline as well. And there's almost always a model in the offline world of a pattern that can be, is being replicated online, bad behavior being replicated online, good behavior, et cetera, you know, kind of the good police and the bad police, you know, of different styles of management, self-governance of some kinds and all of that. So, you know, there's a lot of people that are saying that there's, you know, a lot of big shifts in online social platforms. I was recently in a

conversation where people were talking about the new cult-like behavior. They're saying like this is all about, this is all like cults now. But I think that this has always been the case. And, you know, it's a description of a behavior of kind of like coercion, submission belief, you know, these kinds of cult-like things. And, you know, addiction was an early model for a lot of kind of software actually. People used to boast about the addictive nature of their technology. I think a lot of this also came from gaming. So, you know, a lot of these things, have always existed and, you know, if you look to history as, I think this conversation is somewhat doing, you know, you can actually see entire evolutions of products and what things were learned along the way. I mean, I learned everything that I know from The WELL and Howard Wrangell.

- I'm glad that Caterina set the foundation for, a lot of what we're talking about will build on the sense of the values of the founders and the values of the early, the Abrahams and the participants have tremendous amount to do with your question now in terms of fostering diversity and inclusiveness. And I've just seen that over and over. And I think we see it consciously and subconsciously reflected in new social networks and new communities that spring up. I'm attuned to it. I paid a lot of particular attention to the values of building communities of interest. And as Caterina says, we needed, we all needed to put a tremendous amount of resources into the back end, because you couldn't afford to hire enough people to moderate. You had to figure out other ways of moderating and developing networks of community leaders and structures, et cetera. But it is, it really is, I mean, to me, the answer to your question is, what would Caterina's comments were, is do the founders and the early settlers or participants in these communities value inclusiveness and diversity through their actions? And that's what helps foster it.

- Yeah. Well said.

- Yeah. I would piggy back onto that to say that founder values are very important but we've also seen founder values evolve as the things they found become bigger and more powerful. And the visuals they had originally get distorted by power and money as corrupt. Absolutely. Right? So I think that, I'm sort of afraid of founder values as a core, they're essential but I think that we see platforms over and over kind of lose their way when it becomes about the founder's values. And one of the ways I think that they go really wrong is that early on their users who are different from the founders who were running into real problems with those platforms and the users are going, hello, there's this really bad thing happening to me here. And the founders for whatever reasons are not fully able to absorb what they're hearing about the dangers their platforms are posing. And I don't mean to underestimate the technical and human labor demands of trying to deal with all of that adequately. They're very, very hard problems. But what has often happened is not, let's figure out a way to protect the women of color who are being harassed on our platform, it's been, hey, maybe if we introduce this thing people will circulate more messages. That would be cool. So there's, you have to listen to the people who are sending up the red flags really early. I think we'd be in a very different place if 10 years ago people had said, Oh my gosh we've got some real problems and we need to really rethink the affordances of our platform to influence the ways people are treating each other. And we need to perhaps set aside our commercial goals while we have that discussion and

really focus on what kind of society we're building here. Because I think you said Jad, you're imagining a new kind of social contract. I don't actually think that most people think through what kind of social contract they're creating when they build a platform and what that social context interaction with the larger social contract of the, not just the country in which they live but all the nations in which they're seeking to operate, that's a huge, complicated social contract. And I actually think it gets ignored most of the time or thought through in very very narrow app-specific specific terms.

- I think that there's so many threads to pull there. And I think the first one I'd want to kind of deep dive on a little bit is, kind of founder incentives. And as a founder myself, when you're looking at your numbers, you know, generally your North star metric is like level of engagement, level of retention. And, you know, if you, you know, in order maximize those metrics, either a certain kind of design decisions that you need to make. And a lot of these design decisions are at odds with creating an inclusive community, you know, Facebook's relationship status fields, for example or the poke button. Yeah. You know, those decisions were made for specific reasons. And I'm curious, what incentives do you see kind of distorting kind of founder decisions and what can be done to better align founders with creating kind of like safe inclusive subcultures and communities on their platforms?

- We've managed to avoid the kind of, you know, need to harvest and exploit user data by having a different business model for Flickr which was basically that you kind of paid for access. You paid them with the monthly fee and, you know, sensibly you were paying for the service, right? But you were really paying for yourself not to become, as we've all heard many times, you know, from yourself becoming the product. And I do think that it was fairly clear actually from the get-go that that was really a different decision and a different model and a different way of building a business when you're actually just paying for the service rather than getting it for free. Eventually when Flickr was acquired also by Yahoo, we ended up having it as a free service. It was more of a freemium model, but these are, you know, your business model really dictates how your software is designed and you know, of necessity. And if you're, you know, kind of like a young, you know, 20 something from, you know, Harvard dropout and, you know a bunch of venture capitalists come, you know, waving dollars at you, your incentives have already changed you know, from the, probably the original vision. And, you know, as Nancy says, you know, this is, you know, the road to hell is through small steps. And, you know, the founder values can easily be thrown out the window.

- I want to jump in here real quick, because I think this is the perfect time to ask this question. And since we are a Harvard, if you could hop in a time machine and go back to the Harvard dorm room in which Mark Zuckerberg hatched the idea of Facebook, what is the single piece of advice you'd give him? And you can assume Facebook's global ascendance in all possible timelines here.

- David I an going to give that one to you.

- You know, I'm glad you jumped to that question cause my answer at the time would have been pick a different name. Because if you call it Facebook, what's that going to be? It's about people's faces. It's about how people, you know, if you look at Facebook before there was Facebook, it was a Facebook of people's pages coming into the university. So speaking of founder values, I mean, I think that set the tone for all the self-referential posts we see today. Call it something other than your own Facebook. So, you know, it's sort of a glib answer but I think it says a lot in terms of how Facebook has evolved.

- It was a, you know, rating, it was to rate women for their attractiveness.

- I mean, I think a lot of these social platforms start that way. Snap was about exchanging images that disappear.

- Yeah. Myspace also actually, Myspace was designed that way.

- I guess we disagree but like that kind of self presentational focus is the problem with the internet, I think, and with Facebook, I think that there's a lot of good for a lot of people that's come from having a way to represent yourself and to see others representing themselves as they want to represent and be represented. And especially, I think people who don't always see themselves represented have found a lot of power in that. And there's a lot of good things there. I know that he would never have taken my advice but I think the two kinds of pieces that I would have wanted to give him were to make the people who created accounts co-owners, make it a cooperative rather than a for-profit business. I think that would have made a very different world. And I would say, remember that friction is a really really powerful disincentive and make sure you build in friction and make them get a little bit of a hurdle there for people to contribute. Don't just make it totally easy cause I think most of the evils that have come from what's happened there have to do with constantly trying to make everything frictionless. They just click, click, click, click, click, which goes back to the addiction making it addictive and hyping participation. Right.

- I think that's a great point, Nancy, which is the more, you know, the more kind of effort you have to invest in something, I think the higher the quality would tend to be, at least that's what we found in GeoCities which is, you know, giving people the tools to create their own pages and, you know, look at Myspace and others that, you know, people can get very, very invested based on the amount of time they spend learning the tools, using the tools in creative ways. And I think that that, I think that's a very good point.

- Yeah. It's like front porch versus next door, you know, which you have to wait 24 hours to, you know, before your post is posted, your submission, you have submit it and then it is posted after. You know, it goes through a moderator, say like, hey you may want to reword this, or this may not be the best, you know, most constructive way of responding. So there is a, you know, kind of a delay actually and it's very interesting how that delay changes the behavior of the people on the network. It's friction, it's basically, it's just, it's like introducing as Nancy says friction.

- Absolutely. Yeah. I think when, you know, sometimes when people talk about the problems of current internet platforms like harassment and addictive use of, you know, use patterns you mentioned, it feels like they might be talking about dynamics that have been around on the internet for a long time. David you mentioned, you know, it's been messy for a very long time, but sometimes there're, you know, new things that sort of have popped up that caused these issues to arise. And I'm curious what sort of problems you see as a continuation from the sort of internet we had in the era of GeoCities or Flickr and which seemed to be unique to these new platforms that we're seeing today.

- [David] Go ahead, Caterina.

- You know, it's interesting that the business model was very persistent. And I do think that a lot of people that are building software these days assume that the business model was the business model. You know, there is some new platforms that are being built where there's, you know, people are being shown to be willing to pay. The willing to pay thing that's been happening, in I'd say the past, like two or three years, people paying, I mean, I think, you know, newspapers, you know, online subscriptions have increased. There's been a great growth of platforms like Patreon, Substack, you know, like this, I mean, you know, even, you know, individual newsletters. I mean, I do think that people are evolving into a kind of a paid model in reaction to a lot of the, kind of exploitation that they've suffered under for a long time. And as a result of that, I think, you know, these are obviously very positive trends. I mean, I do think internet business models swing back and forth between, you know, the paid and the free and it's a pendulum swing that many of us, I think that work in kind of online social systems actually welcome to a great degree. So, I mean, I do think that the behaviors are different on platforms that you pay for, you know, for all of the reasons, you know, David and Nancy have already kind of explained.

- Yeah, I definitely agree. I think the trick with platforms you have to pay for of course, is that we want people who don't have excess income to be able to participate in online communities. So we have to think through how do you enable that so that people in poverty are not getting a third rate internet while the rich folks get the really good community, which of course exacerbates wealth and equity. When I think about what's changed, I think that the behaviors, the worst human impulses, the best human impulses, they all, I think have remained fairly consistent but I think that the capacity of people to mobilize large groups very fast for good and for bad is really, really different from what it was 10-15 years ago, with consequences good and bad. And I think that for me, I think that's probably the biggest changes because that mobilization happens in all kinds of ways, whether it's like let's get this person of GoFundMe a billion dollars and lift them out of poverty, or whether it's, let's give that journalists six years of harassment every day of her life or whatever, you know, that whole range is there, or let's get this false information out to everybody and try to manipulate the public sphere and see if we can do that really successfully. All of that, you can, people can do that so much more effectively than they used to be able to. And we have not figured out how to wield that power wisely as a world yet. I also always like to try to keep an eye on not just what's happening within the

boundaries of these platforms, but what's happening as a consequence of these platforms existing. And clearly we see a continuing exacerbation of wealth inequities, which this is part of, right? Mark Zuckerberg is one of the wealthiest people in the world, and that's not a coincidence, so are Twitter founders and so many technology founders, and I, while certainly I don't begrudge them being rich, I think we can ask whether it's a fair distribution of wealth that's happened given what an economic engine these platforms are and how many fewer people they employ than historic technologies and industries. I think, of course, the fact of data tracking, Caterina said earlier, something about we managed to avoid having to extract everybody's data by having people pay, that's an absolutely huge, and at this point, so much data has been hoovered up from so many people that I don't know how we even begin to put that genie back in the bottle. And again, it's something that as a set of societies we have not begun to figure out how to handle wisely.

- I think what's happened, from a technology standpoint is we have become more and more connected, more and more of the time. And so if, you know, the fact that we, most of us carry this around all day and the platforms that have migrated to mobile only or mobile first, and the fact that you weren't in front of your phone, or the computer is all day before. And especially now with, we haven't even talked about Zoom and the kind of community aspects that Zoom has created but the constant, you know, being online all day and all night I think has had a dramatic impact in terms of how people interact with these platforms.

- Definitely. And I wanted to kind of like shift the discussion slightly to talk about platform shifts, which, you know, are the main proponents or kind of the forces that really bring about waves of change. And, you know, GeoCities came after community-based sites like The Wall and BBS part of Flickr's success was Friendster, getting people accustomed to having a profile online, high-speed broadband, becoming more prevalent and cameras on phones. So I'm really curious how you'd situate Flickr or GeoCities within the broader trends of the time. Nancy, what did you learn from looking at Twitter's journey in your most recent book as well?

- Well we, I mean, this is one thing that I've learned as an entrepreneur is that Bill Gross actually, from Idealab, he did all this research on what made companies successful. you know, been part of what, like three, four, 500 companies, and starting them. And he looked at, you know, the team and the execution and the, you know, market and all of these other things but he concluded that the most important part was timing because you see it over and over again, you see companies that are, you know, started too soon or started too late, or don't hit it exactly. And the ones that are juggernauts, you know, like the GeoCities and Flickr's of the world have managed to just hit it just right. Like those things that you said, right? Friendster had introduced people to the idea of an online platform, more than 50% of camera phones were shipped with a camera phone, broadband was like more than 50% of all American households the year that we started Flickr and all of those things together, if they hadn't already been there, it was perfectly timed, perfectly timed. And it was this kind of internet juggernaut. And that is why, and, you know a lot of people, you know, entrepreneurs are like we really worked hard and this and that, and it's true, and you also hit it exactly the right moment. Timing was great. So there is that, I think that's an important part of it.

- Let me just make note that it must be getting dark in Helsinki.
- It is. I know it's only 6:30 p.m. and the sun is going down.
- So,
- That is true. Four months ago that was not the case. David
- That's so true that, we were looking for ways for people to break out of the walled gardens of the online services. And so, you know, this was just at a time when there was interoperability on email and I know this sounds like ancient history, but the timing is right where people were looking for ways to communicate with others outside of their traditional mode of being on a BBS or being on Prodigy, CompuServe or AOL. And so it was the sense of the world is even bigger than I thought. And opening that up to give people the opportunity to have, be a part of the biggest platform there is and there was at the time, I think was the key timing aspect for us.
- I had Geopages.
- A lot of people did.
- I figured Which one I was on, I was on Soho.
- [David] That's right.
- [Caterina] That's where I was.
- I got locked out of Flickr after the Yahoo acquisition. I got caught in a password reset loop.
- Oh that was a nightmare.
- By the time I got back, I was, I can get back in now, but the community feeling is gone.
- I feel for you.
- [Nancy] I loved Flickr.
- sign on.
- Yeah, it did not work out for me. Twitter's a decade after these two softwares. And it enters a really different environment which is mobile first, right? And it kind of begins as this, like, hey this'll be fun. We can like, Dodgeball was happening, right? So maybe Dodgeball was a thing that got people used to the idea that you could check in somewhere or you could start be sending little messages to people as you moved around the world. Right? And it was designed

for SMS to be mobile first, maybe the first, one of the first platforms to be designed as mobile first. And I don't think that Twitter really had very much of a sense of what did it want to be when it grew up when it started, you know, I think it was more of which goes back to this like, they certainly weren't thinking about one day the president of the United States could affect international politics with a tweet. We better plan a social contract before we accommodate that. Right? So you can see they took all these little steps that got them to that place without any way of envisioning that that was where they were going. And obviously you can't fault them for that. But at the same time, you can in retrospect say, well, there was a point where Twitter made an active decision that they were, I remember being in an audience when Ev was being interviewed and he said we're an information network, not a social network. Right? And they made a very active choice that we're about the distribution of information fast for serious news. We're not about that ephemeral water cooler breakfast stuff. Right? And that iterated with user activities in a way where Twitter became the place where you're supposed to be building a professional identity and selling yourself and marketing yourself and sharing up to the date news about stuff and these kind of socially connective, friendship kinds of connection became almost resistant ways of using Twitter.

- That's true.

- Right? And I look at what's happened with Twitter now and feel like, well, that's a lot to do with it. Right? Because they created incentives that were about create content that's going to spread really far and show big, big numbers. And some of them are bots that are distributing this information, whatever it's activity, people are sharing it. Right? So the retweet was a great example of that, and as soon as that got built in, it became a metric people strive for, you know, and we interview people and they talk about, yeah, you know, when I look back at my Twitter archive, I remember how we started in office competitions to see who could get the most retweets. That became a thing. Right? So really

- [Caterina] Nancy. change the incentives. Yeah.

- What was your first tweet?

- My first tweet?

- [Caterina] I saw it.

- My first tweet was when I was signing up for Twitter, even I didn't think I wanted it because I don't know if you know, Jason Herskowitz he's worked on a whole lot of different platforms. He's at Spotify now. He's got this idea of name staking that when there's a new platform, you got to go stake your name.

- Yeah.

- So I was name staking on Twitter since

- Okay.

- Platforms I was making sure nobody, no angry student from years past went and created an Twitter account. But yeah, a year later I was doomed. I still tweet every day. I'm still obsessed with the site even if I'm one of its bigger critics. I still, so much good stuff happens to me all the time.

- There's a lot of good stuff on there.

- Absolutely I still, it's still my favorite, well, one of my favorites.

- Of the platforms.

- [Nancy] Yeah.

- Caterina, I know you're also familiar with the early evolution of Twitter, so I'm not sure if you wanted to add anything or comment about the platform shifts that caused it.

- How it shifted. I mean, I do think that what Nancy is saying is absolutely true that it went from being a kind of a person to person social, kind of small community thing. And then I think with scale, it got to the point where posting personal things on there just no longer became relevant. I think the same thing happened actually with Facebook and then it did become article sharing and information sharing and all of those kind of more transactional relationships and networking and, you know, all that. And I do think that, you know, a great deal was lost in that. And there have been many efforts to bring back the small, intimate community, small networks, you know, PATH comes to mind actually, which, you know, limited the number of contacts that you can have. And, you know, I think that there's a kind of a nostalgia for that, the small communities and, you know, we, you know, David and I were part of the, you know, early Independent Web, and Nancy too. I mean, all of us were participating in these small networks. They were very intimate and very known. And, you know, even before Flickr, I was part of a blogging network. And, you know, I was actually dating Ev, and when they went and started Blogger. And the blogging community was incredibly small like it was just a handful of us. And we all would get together in this guy Peter's from peter.me, in his living room and we all knew each other. And that was a really wonderful time. I mean, I do think, I've been thinking a lot about this lately because, you know, how, I've been thinking about, you know, how, you know, promises that we will be judged by a jury of our peers. Right? And I think about this in the kind of the context of people getting canceled online and you know, all of the kind of animosity and kind of, and I'm just like, I understand what that guy is saying because he's a peer of mine. And I don't understand what that guy saying because he's not a peer of mine. We don't come from the same context, we don't come in, and the context, losing the context in which these conversations are taking place, the conversations that come, you know, backed with an entire set of values and worries that come from a community that is very different from the one that you come from. And, you know, a very early user group on Flickr was from the United Arab

Emirates. And, you know, there was a blogger named E. Fatima who had joined Flickr and had propagated it throughout United Arab Emirates. And so we had a lot of very conservative Muslim users on the platform very early on, who were outraged by the, at the time, you know, this is 2004, Brittany Spears was ascendant with the bare midriff and the you know, kind of low cut blouses and like this, these two, like this was oil and water. These communities did not mix. So I mean, managing this is, you know, it's an art not a science, but, you know, I do think that, you know, the internet has, you know, everything has grown to the extent that there's so much misunderstanding and there's so much kind of lack of context from all of the communication that's happening online that in some ways, all these conflicts are inevitable.

- That makes sense. I think the last question for me before we transition to audience questions is talking about the current platform shifts. You know, it feels as though we're seeing another big platform shift around user generated content, you know, from my vantage point, I see kind of ease of remixability, Tiktok being the main propagator here and interest in proof of ownership and willingness to pay for content, NFTs kind of being all the hype nowadays and the rise and popularity of decentralized models. So I'm really curious how you'd describe this next wave that we're seeing around social platforms. David, if you'd like to kick us off cause I know you mentioned this before.

- You talked about, you talked in passing about NFTs and what that, you know, what that means and what we're starting to see. It reminds me that, it would have been, some things would have been very easy to predict early on and then some things would be virtually impossible to predict, you know, how the technology would both evolve and shape our behaviors and create opportunities for the future. So, when we first started our sites, you know, when Flickr first started and GeoCities first started, it was pure fantasy and science fiction to think that there'd be something like Uber, where you have this device in your pocket and the car shows up and it takes you where you want to go. So, but you can trace back the evolution of technology from the early days, what Catarina mentioned this, all the things that had to happen built up to the point where an Uber could become an Uber. So one of the things that continues to excite me about the evolution of the internet technology is, this is still happening, and there's still so much more to come for all of our lifetimes, the evolution of the technology, not just NFTs, but some of the other things you've mentioned that we will be able to look back to say, yes, this is how that evolved. So I guess my point is that I always look for the early, you know, the early instances of new technology and how people are using it as an indication that, you know, there's a lot more that's going to be built on top of that. And we might not know what it is, there'll be a lot of roadkill along the way in terms of failed startups, but there will also be, there continues to be a lot of tremendous opportunity for the future as the technology continues to evolve.

- Caterina, do you want to comment on any kind of platform shifts we're seeing around social platforms today?

- Well, I've become a bit of a, kind of a Clubhouse obsessive, not that I participate honestly that much, but I'm just really interested in the behaviors that the design of the software permit and

allow, you know, like David, I'm always kind of on the lookout for like, oh, this is new, this is interesting, this, I haven't seen this before with Tiktok. And then I have, you know kind of frequently concluded that, you know, this is, you know, this is an earlier technology repackage, or just with more video or kind of like having these I also think we're in a really interesting moment at, you mentioned Zoom before. I think Clubhouse and Zoom's, you know, kind of massive expansion has been partially because of the pandemic and we're all kind of locked up in seeking, you know, social connection in many ways. And so I do think that the social platforms actually right now are thriving for that reason because we can't see each other face to face. And so, you know, it's not just kind of technological developments, I think that pushed technology along, but also these, you know, great unexpected events, you know, such as the pandemic which are also pushing us in a different direction that we would normally have gone. So..

- Absolutely. Nancy, do you want to comment on it, on the question?

- I guess I feel like we're in a moment where things are fragmenting so dramatically. I mean, the fact that we're talking about Clubhouse and Tiktok, which, you know, I mean, Tiktok was the new thing and now, I mean, I know I'm getting older but those two came in really rapid succession, a lot faster than the ones we were talking about even three years ago. Right? And so I kind of wonder like, okay, next week, what's it going to be that, oh, you're not on, whatever. Right? We've all left Tiktok and Clubhouse, that's where we're doing it now. So I do feel like the speed of change, and maybe it goes back to David's point about wanting to be the ones who claim something new and this is ours and we built it being a really powerful incentive. I love that point. So I do feel like that pace of change is changing and the desire for realtimeness, the voice element of Clubhouse is certainly very provocative in that regard, the whole live streaming change where people are not just generating new content but are generating content that's based on streaming other people's content as well, you know, like game live streaming is super fascinating. I guess the thing that continues to concern me and probably will end up concerning me for decades to come is, the way that so many of these platforms seem to be being built to facilitate the hustle so that people can keep trying to get an audience and keep trying to get attention and keep trying to make themselves viable and not as much about find your people, find your people and discover who you are and flourish as a human being. I worry that they're facilitating a hustle economy and instead of, I mean it's not their responsibility to fix the world, right? I kinda wish that we had a world that was taking better care of its citizens so that these platforms could be there to make, to help us flourish rather than to turn our every human encounter into an opportunity to hopefully build our audience and gain attention and be more marketable for whatever comes next, since we can't trust society to look after us.

- Definitely.

- [Caterina] Here, here.

- Yeah.

- [Jad] You can see that on the length of the,

- I like it.

- The length of the bios in the Clubhouse are indications of like, kind of the hustle mentality. It's like, you know,

- It's super real. Yeah.

- So moving into some audience questions. We have a question here from one of my recent mentors, and kind of people I look up to, Ethan Zuckerman, his question is, how much responsibility do early internet pioneers have for adopting models that have proven difficult in the long run? GeoCities was an early site providing free services supported by advertising, a model that's matured into surveillance capitalism as described by Zuboff, do David and his peers, which includes needs to accept responsibility for legitimizing and normalizing these models?

- I'm actually proud of it because we needed a way to, I mean this is not new, segmented audiences are not new. So if you go back to newspapers, radio, television advertisers, you know, in those mediums look for segmented audiences. And this is what we did in GeoCities is create communities of interest where advertisers had the opportunity to reach people that were interested in, potentially interested in their products and services. And I'm proud of the fact that we were able to create an economic model that has evolved, sure, has evolved in some great ways and has evolved in not so great ways, but this was not a new concept for GeoCities by any stretch of imagination. I was actually very proud that we were able to attract very significant advertisers based on our business model. And based on the fact that the content was created by the users.

- I don't think it was a straight line from the banner ad to Cambridge Analytica either.

- Absolutely. I'm really curious if maybe we could unpack

- If we could just unpack maybe, what are kind of the key decisions or key things that maybe caused us to go astray, where we went from the banner ad to Cambridge Analytica, like, does this come back to founder incentives and kind of founder motives?

- I would really love to hear from Caterina and David, knowing what you know now, if you were gonna go back, are there things that you might have done differently at that time?

- Well, I actually, you know, I actually remember Circa 2007 or eight when Facebook actually started ranking, first of all, we call it "the feed", right? You know, I would say that, you know, Flickr had one of the very first, like what is now called "the feed" but we called it "recent activity" and that it was renamed "the feed" which I thought was somehow very, there's just something evil in that word. Like it was kind of like pigs at a trough. Like I didn't like it. Like

when I heard feed, I'm like, what the hell is that? And then, so then the feed kind of showed up on the scene and I've spoken with Katie Gurminder, who was actually the person who was working at kind of Facebook at the time who like deployed this and, you know, it was very much about the, kind of distinction between what we consider to be online community and social media, right? Online community, you had to participate, everybody knew each other's names. It was like a participatory kind of like system, whereas a social media thing, it was very clear that you were just more passive and you know, kind of your attention was being harvested and sold. And so I think the kind of the inflection point for me with that I saw was in 2007 or eight, when Facebook started prioritizing the most viewed or the most interesting or the most sensational posts, and I saw this as being like a, kind of like a horrific and terrible thing. And I remember kind of writing about this and posting about it and complaining about it to many other people. Cause I was like, it's pretty clear that the inevitable outcome of this is that the most kind of controversial, divisive, sensationalistic, propagandistic content will be the things that is prioritized. It's obvious that that's going to be the direction that this goes, once you have made the decision and it's not ranked in terms of time or some other neutral way of ranking, you know, what appears in the feed. So for me, that was the inflection point. That was the point at which, you know, things turned bad.

- Interesting. That makes a lot of sense. So jumping into another question, Leora Kornfeld, another one of my mentors says, she's interested to hear your thoughts on why so many of the acquisition of truly innovative companies, just GeoCities, Flickr, Tumblr, Vine, often are the beginning of the end of them. And it's interesting to also take note that Yahoo bought both GeoCities and Flickr. So I'm curious if you could reflect on that.

- Well, again, this is not a new story because it's always gonna be the smaller nimble players that, you know, it's the David and Goliath, that when you become part of a larger organization, by definition, not just with GeoCities and Yahoo, it, you know, there just tends to be a lot more friction in the system and you can't innovate as quickly. And so because of the nature of the internet, which is one of its great, you know, beauties is how quickly new things can come on the scene as we've been talking about all morning. So, it's almost, unfortunately, it's almost inevitable that a larger company can't innovate as fast as a startup and a startup will capture more of the new users and become more dominant.

- I mean, I think that that has, you know, like it's kind of like an old saw, you know, like the acquisition of the company destroys the community. And I do think that that is an issue. But I also think that a lot of the reason that your company ends up getting sold is that it scales to the point where you can no longer manage it. And it just kind of like grows to the point where the community management is actually incredibly difficult. And so, you know, those things tend to happen at the same time, you know, the acquisition and the unmanageable scale. And so I think that, you know, in some ways the acquisition may be blamed for it but, and I do think that the, you know, inevitable, bureaucratic designed by committee that happens in larger companies also contributes to a lot of the, kind of slowness behind the evolution of even, you know, Flickr, which managed to stay fairly independent inside of Yahoo as well.

- You were talking earlier, Jad, about decentralized networks, and it feels like part of the reason that this churn happens and it's a really, it's a hard churn because it does kill the communities and it does disempower the people who felt invested in these things and built them with their labors of love and engagement over all that time and then it sells. And not only do they not see any benefits, they actually lose what they had there. I just wish that it was okay to be small, you know, that the pressure wasn't always on everything to scale, you know, why can't we have some companies that have 1500 really happy customers, who really love it? Why is that so incredibly horrible, right? It's this desperate need to have every customer on earth that could possibly use your thing being using your thing, or you're not gonna get acquired.

- Yeah.

- And so I think that that growth incentive is a really, again, it goes back to what's the social contract because is growth really, is growing the number of people who use the platform that you're building the thing that is best for the world, right? Or is it the thing that's best for your business, right?

- Scott Heiferman, the founder of Meetup, and I talk about this all the time and, you know, kind of the absence of a model for a middle-class company as it were, he tells them, you know, or kind of a company that can exist exactly like you described, like why can't it, you know, survive in that manner, does it always, is the internet, is the nature of the internet, this kind of, you know, infinite kind of growth, you know, winner take all scenario is that inevitable, you know,

- Everything you have to go in that direction, put on the brakes.

- That's how it is, like you're either going to be Beyonce or you're going to be

- Great, or you're just gonna be a Youtuber with a hundred followers.

- And in fact middle class musicians, right? But, the idea of let's, you know, Bandcamp goes and says, hey, let's serve these middle-class musicians. And they're always going to be this freaky little cute anomaly, sort of a relic of the GeoCities, Flickr era, you know?

- Yeah. They were at Yahoo too by the way. Their mail product had been acquired by Yahoo. So they were there at the same time we were. Ethan and Co. So, they had made their millions and so they started Bandcamp.

- So they could afford to go for the and not worry about growth. Yeah. Maybe that's what it takes. Maybe we just made all the ex founders to recant and start small platforms.

- Yeah. I think there's definitely, kind of space for both and they serve different purposes. And I think what's interesting is this transition away from the attention economy that require kind of maximum number of eyeballs in order for something to scale and, you know, kind of this decentralized model where you can have one person that's, you know, going to be paying for

your content and you can sustain sort of your, you know, your career as a creator, based on a small number of people supporting you. So there's definitely a shift that we're seeing there. And I know we're almost at time. So I wanted to kind of combine some of these questions that came up, that all kind of address the question of the future. And, you know, we had, we had questions, B. Covelo, Peter Gloviczki, Doc Searls, who is also one of the pioneers of the internet, who are asking some of these questions. And so I'm going to just focus in or kind of blend them together. So Doc says, given the digital world we pioneered has only been around since browsers, ISP is an E-commerce, took off in 1995, we will live in the digital world for many decades or centuries to come. So he's curious how early you think it is. And B Covelo and Peter Gloviczki are asking,

- What you'd imagine sort of the world of online communities will look like in 10 to 25 years. And I guess what your hopes are for the internet communities of the future. We can go around and maybe each person can pitch in here. It's a big question. So David, are you gonna kick us off?

- I guess my hopes are to see, what I see in my own life and other people's lives is inevitable pendulum swing that the technology will continue to evolve. Our engagement and interaction online will continue to happen, but there will be a pendulum shift toward being offline and being aware of being offline more than perhaps we have been. And maybe that's just gonna be a pendulum shift that goes back and forth, but I'm seeing it myself, I'm seeing in other peer groups and I'm seeing it in just anecdotal evidence. So, I just hope that pendulum continues to shift where we do have periods of time when we see the value of being offline as well as online.

- Yeah. And I think that one of the things is that when we started our, you know, our companies, we were offline a lot more than we were on. And the behavior of the, you know, that has kind of inevitably changed when we have our kind of handheld devices and our mobile devices and our kind of always on behavior like, you know, I was on Dialup. Geez. I mean, you know, there was, talk about friction, you know, the offline life was real, the offline life was actually something that was flourishing. And, you know, I would agree with you there in that, you know, I think that the trends that we've been talking about a lot of them earlier today about the, kind of the willingness to pay kind of the exhaustion with the, you know, kind of feed exhaustion and the cognitive overload of the internet, I think, you know, a lot of people are suffering, especially during, you know, kind of subsequent to this. So, you know, there's supposed to be like a roaring twenties rate, like after this pandemic thing is over. And, you know, hopefully that means more face to face.

- Let's hope so. Nancy, do you wanna round out the discussion for us?

- I never really worry about face to face communication, to be honest. And I see a future in which the boundaries between online and offline become ever less clear and that we're just distributing our sociality through multiple media without necessarily having to even really think about onlinenss or mediatedness, especially as we go back to workplaces where some people are in the room and some people aren't, and that's just the new norm and there's just this

continuity between co-presence and online co-presence. I guess, what I hope is that we can somehow get to a point where, I often think about, like AT&T and the telephone and what it would be like if when we made voice phone calls somebody chimed in every 20 seconds to give us an ad, and they monitored all of the words, and they called us up with ads all the time. And I just really, really hope that we can get to a future where we recognize that these are communication platforms and that communication is a fundamental facet of humanity, and it's not just a value that you can extract from people. It's something that really, it is the foundation that shapes our world and that needs to be honored. So my hope is that we can figure out a way to honor that first and let the business models follow.

- Thank you. That was a great statement to end on. I appreciate you all and I appreciate your insights and your pioneering work. And, you know, I credit to you guys for a lot of stuff that you did for, you know, enabling me to do what I'm doing today. So thank you. And, yeah, we will round up the discussion today. Thank you all for joining and I look forward to our next event. Take care.

- Thanks for bringing us together, this has been a real thrill.

- [David] Thank you.

- [Caterina] Thanks Jad.

- And thanks everyone who showed up to listen. Bye.

- Bye.

- Take care. Bye bye.

- [Jad] Bye bye.