



Tech companies like Instagram would have to do more to protect kids from harmful content under the Kids Online Safety Act, a bill that should be quickly passed, an attorney writes.

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Kids Online Safety Act would help protect children from social media harm

BY JEFFERY M. LEVING

The internet and social media have revolutionized the way we communicate and interact with friends and acquaintances, changed the way we shop and allowed for us to expand our sphere of influence.

There is a dark side to it however, especially for children.

More and more, children are suffering from eating disorders, depression and bullying as a result of too much time spent online — and up until now, I believe big technology has been complicit. The bipartisan Kids Online Safety Act would institute much-needed new rules and safeguards covering some of the biggest concerns related to child safety.

The bill, introduced by Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., and Sen. Marsha Black-

burn, R-Tenn., would require apps to create stricter safety measures for users under 16 by default, including tools to protect against stalking, exploitation, addiction and other “rabbit holes of dangerous material.” Apps would also have to build parental supervision tools and dedicated channels where harm could be reported, and kids could turn off recommendations based on algorithms that use their personal data.

According to the bill, tech companies — including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok — would have a “duty of care” to protect kids from content that promotes self-harm, suicide, eating disorders, substance abuse and sexual exploitation and would be barred from showing ads to kids for products that are illegal to them like alcohol and tobacco.

“Senator Blumenthal and I have heard

countless stories of physical and emotional damage affecting young users, and Big Tech’s unwillingness to change,” Blackburn said in a statement. The bill would set “necessary safety guardrails” and “give parents more peace of mind.”

Protection over profits

There is no question that too much activity on the internet and social media can be harmful to children. While parents should take the lead in setting rules and boundaries for their kids — and divorced parents should have a plan ironed out and approved by the court — it is impossible to police one’s children all the time. That’s why this bill is vital. Big tech companies have made billions and can afford to forsake some profits for the safety of our children.

Former Facebook employee Frances Haugen testified in October before a Senate subcommittee after leaking internal research showing the company knew about Instagram’s negative impact on some teens. (Facebook owns Instagram). She also said that Facebook consistently chose profits over safety.

In her testimony, she said the company’s leadership knows how to make Facebook and Instagram safer but refuses to “because they have put their astronomical profits before people.”

“Congressional action is needed. They won’t solve this crisis without your help,” Haugen said.

The reported internal research Haugen leaked to the press, members of Congress and federal regulators showed the company was aware of the ills of its platforms, including the toxic risks of Instagram to some teenage girls’ mental health and the prevalence of drug cartels and human traffickers on its apps. That information formed the basis of a blockbuster investigative series by The Wall Street Journal and has fueled anger and investigations in Washington.

Facebook internal research provided by Haugen found that 13.5% of teen girls said Instagram worsens suicidal thoughts and 17% of teen girls say that Instagram contributes to their eating disorders.

Amid the controversy over Instagram’s research, Facebook announced it is pausing the development of a version of Instagram for users 13 and younger.

But in December, the app’s head, Adam Mosseri, told lawmakers that the company still believes building an app for kids, with parental supervision, is the right thing to do.

Facebook parent company Meta has said it supports new regulations on tech companies, and Mosseri has said the industry should come together to propose safety standards for kids on social media.

After her testimony, Haugen received bipartisan praise from senators who pledged to work together on privacy reforms. Democrats and Republicans also appeared united in considering that Facebook had acted without restraint for far too long.

Blumenthal and Blackburn have proposed a common-sense bill that will help keep our children safe. Their bill should be passed, and quickly.

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