

Testimony of Frances Haugen, Meta Whistleblower
Before the Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs
In support of S. 289, an act relating to age-appropriate design code
February 15, 2024

The bill before you today, the Age-Appropriate Design Code, addresses a matter of critical public health interest. I am so glad that the states aren't waiting for the federal government to act because these are our kids' lives, and every year that goes by is a year that makes up a huge fraction in each of those children's lives.

We invest a huge amount of attention in understanding who are the adults that our children spend time with. We run our teachers through background checks. We sometimes ask probing questions of the parents and of our children's friends, and we do these things because the people our kids spend their time with help shape who they are.

Social media has changed a huge amount since, say 2010. When I ask people what is Facebook for?

What is Instagram for? A lot of people will say things like, it's for keeping up with my family and friends. Back in 2010, that was true. When I came to Facebook, it was kind of like a fancy inbox, an email inbox. You pick who you wanted to receive content from, and that's people who you would hear from, but over time, those products change in really profound ways because your friends and family let Facebook down. If your friends and family had kept producing infinitely more content, we could still have products that were mostly about our family and friends, but a trend that has happened across product, after product, after product, it can be Facebook, it can be Instagram, it can be Pinterest, it can be TikTok, is that if companies want you to consume ever more content, they want you to spend ever more time on these products and they need to do that because they're advertising supported.

Every minute you spend on Instagram, you spend on TikTok is more money those companies make. The problem with that is now we've moved from a world where you can look at who your children are interacting with. What are you intentionally choosing to instead putting your kids in the hands of an artificial intelligence, an algorithm which is picking out the content they see, because once you move from people choosing what you see to computers, choosing what you see, you can keep people online for basically infinite amounts of time. There's always something out there in the world they can show you. The problem with this is those algorithms are amoral. We've already had people talk about the idea that you can have a child go and look up for information about healthy eating, but exercise and the algorithm will go, oh, interesting. This is the topic that you're interested in. This content is what keeps you online longer and

often that content is more extreme content and meta was very, very clear about this in their documents, and we've seen from things like the filings from the attorneys general, that Meta actually had a huge amount of research on this idea that content that is provoking is extreme, would keep kids online longer. One of the things that happens also, when you start to have these fancy algorithms, they pick out what you get to see instead of an email inbox type model where it's your family friends, your senior updates is now whether or not you mesh, you click with that algorithm is whether or not you're going to get that attention, and so when we talk to kids, kids talk about how intense the moment is right after they post, because that next hour, that next two hours is the moment of truth. Do people like them? Is what they did valid is interesting enough and that's really, really problematic on a number of levels. First, if we rolled back in time to the eighties, there were very, very few 13 year olds in the world that were intensely thinking about shaping their personal brand, shaping.

How much did the public like them did anonymous people out there approve of 'em? Think about that. Those 13 year olds did not turn out well, and yet we've decided that it is safe and developmentally appropriate to expose all the children in the United States, this experience. The other issue is around what Josh talked about in terms of developmental vulnerabilities. When we have advertising supported models, that means more time on the platform equals more money for those companies. Keeping your kids online as late as possible just means more minutes to make money. A surgeon general last year announced that 30% of adolescents were on screens till midnight most school nights. Contemplate that for a moment. If 30% are until midnight, probably 10 or 15% are until 2:00 AM sleep deprivation is one of, I think is the most serious danger of social media for kids because the data is extremely, extremely clear that sleep deprivation hurts kids in school.

It physically hurts their development increases the chance of mental illness issues, not just depression, but also things like bipolar or schizophrenia, increases substance use, upper because they're tired, downers because they're depressed. Risk of dying from accidents, not just car accidents, but accidents of all kinds. This is a really simple thing where kids probably shouldn't be online past 10 30, 11 o'clock at night, and yet lots and lots of kids are glued to those screens until 2:00 AM. The last thing I'm going to close you with is just a couple things that I think big tech is going to tell you about this bill. They're going to be like, no, you can't do this, bill. The only way we can protect children is to have a giant database of IDs and do you want a giant database of IDs?

There are lots and lots of ways to find kids online. We now have a number of different technologies where each of 'em may only be say 95% precise, but when you combine them altogether, we can find all the kids. There's not one way of finding kids checking IDs. There's 10 or 15 different ways and I'm happy to talk to you more offline about the world of possibility we have. When it comes to keeping kids safe, they're going to say, this should be done at the app store level. Facebook has put a huge amount of money into online advertising saying parents have the ability to control what apps kids install on their phones. I strongly support giving

parents more tools, more choices, but that doesn't do anything to guarantee that the apps they do install are going to be safe. In the opening speech we talked about the idea that you don't question if your car seat is safe.

There's a duty of care to make sure that car seat is appropriate. We need to have a duty of care for those apps even after the parents approve that they're being installed. And then lastly, they're going to say, we're already doing lots and lots to keep kids safe. One of the things that I found very hypocritical about a lot of the statements they've made in the last year is they've started publishing lists of all the safety features they rolled out. If we were to stack rate those features and figure out which ones have the biggest impact on kids, the vast majority of those all got launched in a couple week period in the summer of 2021, and that's because the UK passed the age appropriate design code, and when they did that, Facebook was like, well, we're going to raise the floor for the whole world.

They have tools to keep kids safe. They choose not to use 'em because they make less money, kid just a little bit less money, not even tons less money, but they make less money and they grow slower when they prioritize the safety of children. We need laws like what you're considering right now because we need to change the incentives that these platforms operate under. Kids are vulnerable, they need appropriate software, they need appropriate places to congregate online. They need to be prioritized, and the only way that's going to happen is if people like you stand up and change the incentives that these companies operate under. So thank you.

Response in Q&A

People talk a lot about choices. They'll say, this should be about parents policing this issue. This should be about kids making better choices. One concept that I think often gets dropped is you hear from a lot of kids, I want to spend more time in person with my friends, but to make that choice to actually be a real choice, their friends have to make that choice. At the same time, a single family can't say, I want to spend more time in person with people unless other people make that choice at the same time, and that's so important in terms of giving people even the chance to make choices.