

March 22, 2023

Hon. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, Chair  
Committee on Energy and Commerce  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2125 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Hon. Frank Pallone, Ranking Member  
Committee on Energy and Commerce  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2322 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chair McMorris Rodgers and Ranking Member Pallone:

The evidence has become abundantly clear: Social media platforms including but not limited to Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Twitch, and YouTube are addictive and dangerous to American children, teenagers, and young adults. [Studies](#) have clearly shown that these platforms contribute directly to anxiety, depression, cyberbullying, and drug use among youth. The deaths of [dozens of](#) young people, including deaths by suicide and asphyxiation, have been attributed to the platforms.

And [newly unsealed evidence](#) in a pending lawsuit has made clear that executives at these companies were aware of the dangers, worked to conceal those harms, and continue to profit from predatory algorithms that trap young adults in harmful spirals on their platforms. Regularly serving children content that promotes self-harm and body image issues has permanently affected their educational development, mental health, and ability to succeed as adults. These companies knew the human cost associated with their platforms. They knew the damage they would cause, and they did it anyway.

ByteDance, the owner of TikTok, admitted in internal documents that it knew that because children and adolescents “overestimate their ability to cope with risk,” they are open to social pressure that makes them more likely to engage in the dangerous viral challenges they see on TikTok.

We appreciate that Chair McMorris Rodgers and Ranking Member Pallone have prioritized protecting children online and are glad that TikTok’s CEO, Shou Zi Chew, will be testifying before the House Committee on Energy and Commerce this week. We encourage the Committee to use this opportunity to ask what steps are being put in place to better protect children and teens online. We also encourage the Committee to examine the behavior of additional companies, including Meta and Google, which have profited from spreading harmful content to our children, often knowingly.

At Meta, the parent of Facebook and Instagram, internal documents show that CEO Mark Zuckerberg was personally advised that the company was falling short of well-being metrics

related to young people, including “problematic use, bullying and harassment.” Instead of addressing the problem, Meta reportedly defunded its mental health team instead, according to the documents.

These documents might never have been seen by the public if they hadn’t been brought to light as part of a lawsuit. As the plaintiffs’ lawyers put it: social media companies have been “burying internal research documenting these harms, blocking safety measures because they decrease ‘engagement,’ and defunding teams focused on protecting mental health.”

The dangers of social media to our children are not theoretical. Viral challenges are not games; they kill. Just in the past two years, at least [20 children](#) have died by asphyxiation, due to the TikTok viral challenge known as the “blackout challenge,” “pass-out challenge,” or “choking game.”

[As one grieving mother wrote](#), “Many parents hear our family’s story and, although they feel for us, they think ‘not my child.’ I beg you to not assume that your child knows better. Every child is susceptible to impulsive behaviors and peer pressure. My son was an intelligent, curious, normal 15-year-old boy who went to a good school and had great friends. I am an engaged parent who regularly communicated with him about potential dangers on the internet — but none of this matters when your child has access to inappropriate content on social media platforms that make huge profits from continually pushing extreme and even unsafe content to our kids.”

No parent should have to deal with the horrific reality of losing a child to online bullying, illegal or harmful substances sold over social media, or from falling prey to dangerous online communities like the “pro-anorexia” movement.

In the name of our children we have lost and our children who struggle and suffer, we urge you to take action and investigate tech platforms like Meta and TikTok to hold them accountable for endangering children and teens.

Sincerely,

Fairplay  
Parents Together  
The Tech Oversight Project  
Accountable Tech  
Center for Digital Democracy  
Common Sense Media  
Tech Transparency Project

Eating Disorders Coalition  
Friends of the Earth