'We're trying to solve a problem here': Senate takes Facebook, YouTube, Twitter to task over 'addictive' algorithms

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Policy executives from Facebook, YouTube and Twitter testified Tuesday before bipartisan members of the Senate Judiciary Committee amid accusations that their social media platforms create algorithms critics believe are "addictive."

The hearing titled "Algorithms and Amplification: How Social Media Platforms' Design Choices Shape our Discourse and Our Minds" comes as Congress is still grappling with how it could proceed on regulating social media algorithms.

While subcommittee chair Chris Coons, D-Del., and ranking member Ben Sasse, R-Neb., both said algorithms can be useful, the lawmakers also believe they create dangerous content that may need regulation.

"The results can be harmful to our kids' attention spans, to the quality of our public discourse, to our public health, and even to our democracy itself," said Coons at the D.C hearing.

Sasse wondered whether the companies are benefiting from users' emotions and a slew of misinformation or not. "People are pretty good at short-term rage, and the product capitalizes on that doesn't it?"

Tuesday's three-hour meeting was unlike a tense five-hour session last month where lawmakers slammed big tech leaders Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, Google's Sundar Pichai and Twitter's Jack Dorsey for the roles their companies played in the deadly U.S. Capitol attack in January and for failing to combat conspiracy theories, extremism, COVID-19 misinformation.

Tristan Harris, a co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology and a former Google design ethicist who testified at the hearing, said lawmakers should focus on the social media platforms' business models, instead of how many moderators they have overseeing content. Harris said the platforms are unlikely to take action as long as they stand to profit from the increased engagement.

"At the end of the day, a business model that preys on human attention means that we are worth more as human beings and as citizens of this

country when we are addicted, outraged, polarized, narcissistic, and disinformed because that means that the business model was successful at steering our attention using automation," said Harris, who added that Americans are sitting through 10 years of results he calls "psychological deranging process."

Harris added that as long as the social media companies profit by turning the American conversation into a "cacophony" and their model of everyone getting a chance to speak, "We're each going to be steered down a rabbit hole of reality."

During the hearing, Sasse said Harris is "making a big argument and we're hearing responses (from the companies) that I think are only around the margins."

Joan Donovan, research director of Harvard's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, said, "the biggest problem facing our nation is misinformation-at-scale."

Donovan said America must face the misinformation of suffer at times, deadly consequences. "Disinformers, scammers, drifters use social media to sell bogus products, amplify wedge issues, impersonate social movements, and push conspiracies," Donovan said. "Misinformation is a feature of social [media](#), not a bug."

Monika Bickert, Facebook's vice president for content policy, said that would be "self-defeating" for platforms to point users to extreme content.

"The reality is, it is not in our interest financially or reputationally to push people toward increasingly extreme content," Bickert said.

For her part, Lauren Culbertson, Twitter's head of U.S. public policy,

said, "We have no incentive to have a toxic or unhealthy conversation on the service."

Lawmakers focused on Harris and Donovan's guidance for the bulk of the hearing, rather than the tech executives.

When asked by Sen. Kennedy whether they would vote on a bill to revoke Section 230, Harris and Donovan both said they would have to know more about the details. Kennedy posed a similar question to Facebook's Bickert, Twitter's Culberson and Alexandra Veitch, YouTube's director of government affairs and public policy. They also didn't give firm responses.

"At some point, we've got to get down to it. I'm looking for solutions," Kennedy said. "Don't just word whip us. We're trying to solve a problem here."

At various points throughout the hearing, the senators pointed out how [social media platforms](#) played key roles in helping organize groups spreading misinformation about the presidential election, the pandemic, and the deadly Capitol insurrection that Chairman Coons said still has traumatic effects.

By the end, Coons said he believed a bipartisan solution could be reached either through voluntary, regulatory or legal reforms.

"None of us wants to live in a society that as a price of remaining open and free is hopelessly politically divided," Coons said. "But I also am conscious of the fact that we don't want to needlessly constrain some of the most innovative, fastest-growing businesses in the West. Striking that balance is going to require more conversation."

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