

Senators push Facebook exec on Instagram policies for youth

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In this March 20, 2018 file photo, Facebook's head of global safety policy Antigone Davis speaks during a roundtable on cyberbullying with first lady Melania Trump, in the State Dining Room of the White House in Washington. Facing lawmakers' outrage against Facebook over its handling of internal research on harm to teens from Instagram, Davis is telling Congress that the company is working to protect young people on its platforms, on Thursday, Sept. 30, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Evan Vucci, File

Senators fired a barrage of criticism Thursday at a Facebook executive over the social-networking giant's handling of internal research on how its Instagram photo-sharing platform can harm teens.

The lawmakers accused Facebook of concealing the negative findings about Instagram and demanded a commitment from the company to make changes.

During testimony before a Senate Commerce subcommittee, Antigone Davis, Facebook's head of global safety, defended Instagram's efforts to protect young people using its platform. She disputed the way a recent newspaper story describes what the research shows.

"We care deeply about the safety and security of the people on our platform," Davis said. "We take the issue very seriously. ... We have put in place multiple protections to create safe and age-appropriate experiences for people between the ages of 13 and 17."

Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., the subcommittee chairman, wasn't convinced.

"I don't understand how you can deny that Instagram is exploiting young users for its own profit," he told Davis.

The panel is examining Facebook's use of information from its own researchers that could indicate potential harm for some of its young users, especially girls, while it publicly downplayed the negative impacts. For some of the Instagram-devoted teens, the peer pressure generated by the visually focused app led to mental-health and body-image problems, and in some cases, eating disorders and suicidal thoughts, the research showed.

The revelations in a report by The Wall Street Journal, based on internal

research leaked by a whistleblower at Facebook, have set off a wave of anger from lawmakers, critics of Big Tech, child-development experts and parents.

Comparisons to the tobacco industry's coverups of cigarettes' harmful effects abounded in a session that united senators of both parties in criticism of the giant social network and Instagram, the photo-sharing juggernaut valued at around \$100 billion that Facebook has owned since 2012.

Said Sen. Edward Markey, D-Mass.: "Instagram is that first childhood cigarette meant to get teens hooked early. Facebook is just like Big Tobacco, pushing a product they know is harmful to the health of young people."



In this Nov. 29, 2018, file photo, the Instagram app logo is displayed on a mobile screen in Los Angeles. Political adversaries in Congress are united in outrage against Facebook for privately compiling information that its Instagram photo-sharing service appeared to grievously harm some teens, especially girls, while publicly downplaying the popular platform's negative impact. Facebook's head of global safety, Antigone Davis, has been summoned to testify for a hearing Thursday, Sept. 30, 2021, by a Senate panel. Credit: AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes, File

The episode is quickly burgeoning into a scandal for Facebook approaching the level of the Cambridge Analytica debacle. Revelations in 2018 that the data mining firm had gathered details on as many as 87 million Facebook users without their permission similarly led to a public-relations offensive by Facebook and congressional hearings.

"It's abundantly clear that Facebook views the events of the last two weeks purely as a PR problem, and that the issues raised by the leaked research haven't led to any soul-searching or commitment to change," said Josh Golin, executive director of the children's online advertising group Fairplay. The group, formerly known as the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, doesn't take money from Facebook or companies, unlike the nonprofits Facebook tends to bring in for expert advice on its products.

Facebook's public response to the outcry over Instagram was to put on hold its work on a kids' version of Instagram, which the company says is meant mainly for tweens aged 10 to 12. On Monday, Instagram head Adam Mosseri said in a blog post that the company will use its time out "to work with parents, experts and policymakers to demonstrate the value and need for this product."

Already in July, Facebook said it was working with parents, experts and policymakers when it introduced safety measures for teens on its main Instagram platform. In fact, the company has been working with experts and other advisers for another product aimed at children—its Messenger Kids app that launched in late 2017.

Pressed by senators, Davis wouldn't say how long the pause would last. "I don't have a specific date but I do have a commitment" that Facebook executives will consult with parents, policymakers and experts, she said. "We want to get this right."

Blumenthal and Sen. Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee, the panel's senior Republican, also plan to take testimony next week from a Facebook whistleblower, believed to be the person who leaked the Instagram research documents to the Journal. An interview with the whistleblower is set to air on CBS' "60 Minutes" program Sunday.

Davis, a one-time middle school teacher and aide in the Maryland attorney general's office, insisted that the research on Instagram's impact on young people "is not a bombshell."

"This research is a bombshell," Blumenthal countered. "It is powerful, gripping, riveting evidence that Facebook knows of the harmful effects of its site on children, and that it has concealed those facts and findings."

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The research documents released Wednesday by the Wall Street Journal: [s.wsj.net/public/resources/doc ... son-on-instagram.pdf](https://www.wsj.net/public/resources/doc...son-on-instagram.pdf)

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