

US lawmakers grill Facebook on spiking mental health fears

September 30 2021, by Joshua Melvin



Facebook Global Head of Safety Director, Antigone Davis, testifies remotely before a Senate hearing on possible harm to teens online.

US lawmakers Thursday demanded pledges from Facebook to address escalating worries over its platforms' impact on teens' mental health, but

a top executive instead offered assurances the sites are already safe.

Senators grilled the social media giant's Antigone Davis in an hours-long Capitol Hill hearing called over damning reports that Facebook's own research warned of the harm photo-sharing app Instagram can do to teenage girls' well-being.

"This research is a bombshell. 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," Senator Richard Blumenthal said.

Davis, under questioning from Blumenthal and other senators, repeatedly said a Wall Street Journal series had selectively chosen parts of its studies to give an inaccurately dark vision of the company's work.

She told lawmakers that a survey of teens on 12 serious issues like anxiety, sadness and eating disorders, showed that Instagram was generally helpful to them.

"On 11 of the 12 issues, teen girls who said they struggled with those issues were more likely to say that Instagram was affirmatively helping them, not making it worse," said Davis, who delivered her testimony remotely.

Yet, Blumenthal read aloud excerpts from company documents he said were leaked to lawmakers by a Facebook whistleblower that directly contradicted her.

Facebook whistleblower

"Substantial evidence suggests that experiences on Instagram and Facebook make body dissatisfaction worse," he said, adding the finding

was not a disgruntled worker's complaint but company research.



Senator Richard Blumenthal (center) speaks during a hearing examining Facebook's effects on teen health.

A Facebook whistleblower is set to testify before senators on Tuesday, but it was not immediately clear if that person was also the source of the leaked documents.

The social media giant has faced a growing backlash, including Thursday's hearing, in the wake of the Journal reports, and it has halted work on a fiercely criticized plan to make a version of Instagram for children under 13.

Facebook argued a specially designed platform would allow some parental control in an online world already full of children, but critics called it a cynical strategy to hook the youngest users.

Lawmakers on Thursday demanded a pledge from Facebook to release all of its research and not to take aims at children under 13.

"Miss Davis will you commit that Facebook will not launch any platforms targeting kids 12 and under that include features... that allow children to quantify popularity?" asked Senator Ed Markey.

Davis sidestepped his query and instead said the company's products "enrich" lives by allowing teens to connect with friends and family.

She added Facebook was looking into ways to share more of its findings, but that there were "privacy considerations" to take into account.

On Wednesday, the company released a heavily annotated version of two presentations on its own research but it was unclear what percentage they represent of its internal studies.

The company has been under relentless pressure to guard against being a platform where misinformation, hate and child-harming content can spread.

Legislators have struggled to pass new rules that would update online protections in decades-old laws crafted long before social media even existed.

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Citation: US lawmakers grill Facebook on spiking mental health fears (2021, September 30) retrieved 23 April 2024 from

<https://techxplore.com/news/2021-09-lawmakers-grill-facebook-spiking-mental.html>

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