

Facebook exec pushes back on whistleblower claims

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In this file image taken from video, Monika Bickert, Facebook's head of global policy management, speaks during an interview with The Associated Press, Wednesday, Oct. 6, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/File

Monika Bickert, Facebook's head of global policy management, says the social media giant does not prioritize engagement and user growth over safety. That contradicts Senate testimony by whistleblower Frances Haugen, who claims Facebook knows its systems harm vulnerable people

and hasn't made meaningful changes to prevent it. The platform is designed to exploit negative emotions to keep people on the platform, Haugen says.

Facebook has pushed back on Haugen's claims but hasn't pointed to any [factual errors](#) in her testimony or in a series of reports that outlined massive shortcomings at the social network, identified by its own internal research.

Bickert spoke to The Associated Press following Haugen's Senate testimony on Oct. 5. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Does Facebook prioritize engagement and profit over [safety](#)?

A: We do not and we have not prioritized engagement over safety. I've been at this company for more than nine years. I'm a mother. I also was a criminal prosecutor and worked on child safety for more than 10 years. And I can tell you I wouldn't be at this company if we weren't prioritizing safety.

Q: You've said repeatedly that the majority of teens have a positive experience on Instagram, but your research showed that some teens are harmed. What is Facebook doing specifically to address the issues that your own research raised?

A: The entire reason that we do research is because we understand that even if the majority of teens are getting support from their time on Instagram, even if a few teens are having a bad experience or a small number of teens are having a bad experience, that's too many, and we need to build features and products to support them. And that's exactly what we've done over the years.

Q: Is your repeated reference to the documents as stolen a signal that

you're planning to sue the whistleblower or retaliate against her in another way?

A: I can't answer that. I can only tell you that this was an employee who didn't work on these issues, and I do work on these issues and want to represent the hard work that the more than 40,000 employees working on safety and security at Facebook do every day.

Q: Can you point to anything in her testimony that was not truthful?

A: A number of these documents have been mischaracterized, including the research on Instagram use. The suggestion that the research showed that Instagram is somehow a toxic experience is simply not true, and we've now published that research. Look, I want to be clear this is not peer reviewed research. We do have a serious research program at Facebook. We participated in more than 400 research articles in the last year alone. These stolen documents show more of a survey, so this is not peer reviewed research, but that stolen survey has been misrepresented as suggesting that Instagram is a toxic environment for teens.

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