

Media entrepreneur unites young activists with power brokers for fight to make social media safe

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A media entrepreneur is trying to connect young people disturbed by the impact of social media on mental health with older power players to

fight for change in how tech companies do business.

The newly-formed [Sustainable Media Center](#) is intent on stopping companies from using algorithms to push damaging information to vulnerable youths, dark things like suicide methods. Venture capitalist and trustee [Bradley Tusk](#) has seen it personally; he believes his daughter's eating disorder was made worse by what she saw online.

It's a long way from initial hopes that the internet would connect the world for more positive uses, said founder Steven Rosenbaum, former producer of "[MTV News: Unfiltered](#)," several documentaries and ex-leader of the [NYC Media Lab](#).

"When you find that what you helped build is causing more harm than good, there's no way you can get up in the morning and not do anything about it," Rosenbaum said.

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy in May [called for immediate action](#) to protect young people, noting that social media use is near universal but its impact on mental health is not fully understood.

The Sustainable Media Center is not alone in this effort. The organization [Fairplay](#) lobbies to stop tactics that manipulate children into spending too much time online. [Waituntil8th.org](#) urges parents to not give children smartphones until they reach the eighth grade, and to keep them off social media until they're at least 16.

Josh Golin, executive director of Fairplay, said there's room for Sustainable Media Center's approach, particularly in empowering more young people to share their own experiences.

"From my perspective, the more the merrier," Golin said. "We are going up against one of the most powerful and well-resourced industries in the

world."

Besides Tusk, prominent Sustainable Media Center backers include veteran media executive and YES network founder [Leo Hindery Jr.](#); [Roger McNamee](#), investor and author of "Zucked: Waking Up to the Facebook Catastrophe"; [Eric Gertler](#), executive chairman of U.S. News and World Report; and [David Hornik](#), a Silicon Valley-based venture capitalist.

Rosenbaum has also gotten young people with large online followings involved, such as [Emma Lembke](#), founder of Log Off, an organization founded by teenagers to address social media use; [Zamaan Qureshi](#), co-chairman of Design it For Us, another activist group in social media; and [Aidan Kohn-Murphy](#), founder of the progressive activists Gen-Z For Change.

In the past month, U.S. Sen. Cory Booker, a New Jersey Democrat, held a Zoom roundtable for young activists and expressed support for their goals.

"If had a child and they were 14, 15, I would do everything I could to keep them off of these platforms," Booker said at the session. "We would all probably say that's worse than cigarette smoking."

Tusk, in an interview, said that he's involved with the Sustainable Media Center in part because he wants to mobilize young people in support of another cause he supports, voting by mobile phone.

He said he hoped the group could take some dramatic action to give the social media issue greater visibility.

The Sustainable Media Center is working with Columbia University to do a comprehensive review of research on the issue, Rosenbaum said.

He wants to convene a summit of Gen Z leaders to plan strategy. The organization has an initial operating budget of \$1.5 million, although only a quarter of that has been collected or pledged, he said.

Like Golin, Tusk said he recognizes it's an uphill battle for organizers.

"I don't think that anybody would put the odds in our favor," Tusk said. "But I do know, that if we don't try, it's only going to get worse."

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