

Dear Senate Judiciary Committee, Big Tech's **\P** Failure to protect kids demands URGENT (\*) ACTION

**Special briefing:** Snapshot study into the harms of Instagram and TikTok and personalized messages from people across the U.S. supporting urgent legislative action



Ekō is a people-powered campaign organization with over 20 million members across the globe, taking action to hold corporations to account and push for a better world.

Ekō's 22-million global strong membership cares passionately about the fight for a better internet and has been at the forefront of global efforts to rein in Big Tech – from making the case for a strong Digital Services Act in Europe to forcing Meta to shelve Instagram for Kids to blocking WhatsApp's abusive data policy in Brazil. All these efforts reflect a strong belief in the need for laws that protect people from the destructive, surveillance-based business model of the global tech giants, especially children. We have a proven record in high-quality investigative research on problematic content on social media platforms, many of which led to concrete changes and action from lawmakers, and the companies themselves.

For these reasons, our movement applauds the efforts of the Senate Judiciary Committee in holding a <u>hearing on January 31st</u>, spotlighting Big Tech's failure to protect children online.

Social media giants are making a staggering 11 billion dollars in U.S. ad revenue from ads targeted at minors, and despite promising to take action to stop directing personalized ads to children, they continue to do so. YouTube was recently caught serving up personalized ads from big name brands like Disney and Mars on 'made for kids' content, despite promises from YouTube's CEO to end the practice. While social media companies make billions in profits, teens and children are paying the price. Health experts are increasingly worried about the role of social media platforms in fuelling the child mental health crisis, while multiple studies have exposed the growing problem of child sexual exploitation online; and academics point to the growing evidence of addiction to social media among young people.

This issue will likely worsen with the increased use of Artificial Intelligence tools (AI). Troubling evidence from <u>Stanford</u> University found that thousands of child sexual abuse images were used to train AI tools able to create hyper-realistic photos, as reported <u>by parents</u> across the world. This and many other troubling pieces of evidence showcase how **protecting kids online demands decisive actions from lawmakers. It is imperative** as the era of half-hearted measures and voluntary self-regulation by social media platforms has proven ineffective.

To highlight the depth of support for concrete regulation, Big Tech accountability and protection for kids, **in this document we offer** to the Members of the Committee:

- 1. **Research data** collected between January 18th-25th 2024, proving **platforms** like Instagram and TikTok **are actively promoting** and targeting harmful content, such as **suicide**, **incel**, **self-harm**, **and skin whitening**;
- 2. We asked our U.S. members to write messages to you, elected representatives and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, expressing their hopes for leadership on this issue. We were inundated with messages from across the country.

These reflect public frustration, even despair, at the failure to hold social media companies to account for their trail of destruction and also signal a strong desire to end a system where billionaire executives can freely profit off of manipulation, disinformation, abuse and hate. There were far too many messages to include here, but at the end of this brief is a representative sample.

# **Call for Legislative Action**

This briefing serves as an urgent call for legislative action. The updated study we conducted, especially for Members of the Committee ahead of the January 31st hearing, provides yet further evidence that social media companies are not only failing to safeguard young users from harm, but actively profiting from it.

These online harms are a direct consequence of Big Tech's broken business model – which relies on extracting users' personal data, and then tracking and targeting them with ads and personalized content that maximizes the amount of time they spend on the platform and the money they bring in. **This predatory approach is not inevitable**, or immutable. Indeed, other governments have already brought in a host of new laws that show it is possible to regulate the tech wild west. To ensure that the US is also protecting its young people, and actively shaping global regulation rather than playing catch up, Congress must urgently act.

The European Union's Digital Services Act is a blueprint for regulating Big Tech's worst abuses. Norway has prompted an <u>EU-wide ban on Meta's use of behavioral advertizing</u>, and <u>Ireland's new media regulator</u> is currently consulting on a proposal to outlaw video app platforms like TikTok and YouTube from building data profiles of kids for commercial purposes. Laws to make sure that companies design platforms in a way that protect children are gaining momentum in both Europe and the US, and many countries globally have passed comprehensive data protection laws.

It's clear that the solutions to mitigate Big Tech's worst harms exist and are starting to be implemented by other governments. Now we need political leaders in the U.S. to step up and pass laws that create a safer, better internet for everyone, including the most vulnerable. These should include a full ban on surveillance advertising, and an algorithmic oversight board, which would draw a line in the sand against the abuse of citizens' personal data by multibillion-dollar corporations and set a powerful example for other rights-respecting governments to follow.

We can't afford to jeopardize the health and wellbeing of future generations. We urge you to listen to the public's concern, next to the wealth of evidence documenting online harms, take courage and act.

Emma Ruby-Sachs Executive Director, Ekō

#### Ekō's research

This report includes explicit language and content related to eating disorders, mental health, including self-harm and suicide, violence, and violent misogyny.

# The investigation uncovered over 33.26M posts on Instagram and TikTok under hashtags housing problematic content directed at young users.

Investigations conducted by Ekō in 2021 and 2023 into Instagram and TikTok exposed systemic failures in content moderation that leave young users exposed to harmful content such as body image issues, skin whitening, mental health issues, including suicide and self-harm, as well as incel and misogynistic content. This updated research, conducted between January 18th-25th, 2024 provides concrete data for Members of the Committee on how this kind of **problematic content** not only **remains rampant** on the platforms but in some cases has increased in volume.

The platforms' failure to properly moderate such content, or to address the underlying system design that drives its distribution, results in the dissemination of harmful posts to vulnerable audiences, including adolescents and children, with TikTok exhibiting particularly egregious instances of these harms.

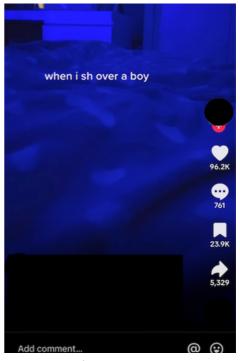
### **TikTok**

Ekō researchers examined 38 hashtags promoting suicide and incel-related content, analyzing them against <u>Ekō research</u> from March 2023.

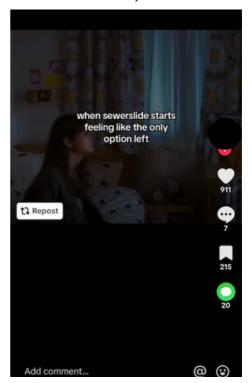
The incel movement (short for "involuntary celibate") is an online community whose members self-identify as unable to get a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one. The incel subculture is a part of the 'manosphere', an umbrella movement of interconnected communities on the rise on social media platforms. This content is grounded in a highly misogynistic ideology that has resulted in real-world violence, including mass killings in both the U.S. and U.K.

#### Suicide

- 8 hashtags were identified that promote suicide, potentially leading to 1.54M suicide-related posts. Including hashtags such as #sh (short for 'self-harm'), #ihatemylife, and #sewerslidall.
- The platform's search engine actively recommended highly viral and dangerous content, including videos with razors, knives, and guns alongside text suggesting explicit promotion of self-harm or suicide.
- Much of this content breaches
   <u>TikTok's own Community</u>
   <u>Guidelines</u>. According to TikTok,
   the platform does not allow
   content depicting, promoting,
   normalizing, or glorifying
   activities that could lead to
   suicide, self-harm, or
   disordered eating.
- The number of posts under these hashtags increased by 33% since 2023 when compared to Ekō's previous research.

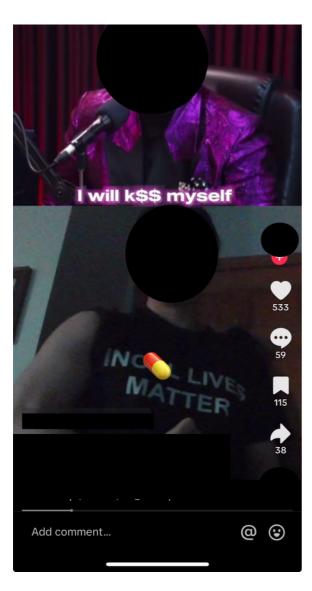


A sample of content recommended by TikTok ('sh' is short for self-harm)



A sample of content recommended by TikTok

I: Content sample: <u>#sh</u>, <u>#ihatemylife</u>, and <u>#sewerslidall</u> - we recommend logging into the platform's app to better visualise the promoted content depicted in these links.



A sample of content recommended by TikTok

#### Incel

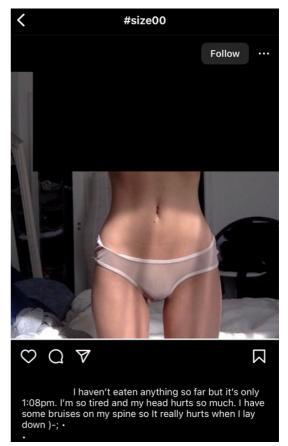
- 14 hashtags were identified that promote incel and manosphere content, potentially leading to 1.07M incel and 'manosphere' related posts. Including hashtags such as #redpilltiktok, #bluepill, and #blackpil.<sup>2</sup>
- The platform is rampant with posts promoting both incel and manosphere content that objectify women and glorify their mistreatment. Including content that is explicitly tied to incel culture that seems to target young men and boys.
- This content breaches <u>TikTok's</u>
   <u>Community Guidelines</u> which claims to not allow hateful ideologies that praise, promote, glorify, or support misogyny.
- The number of posts under these hashtags increased by 161% since 2023 when compared to Ekō's previous research.

### Instagram

On Instagram, the research focused on 66 hashtags associated with an ecosystem of problematic content promoting eating disorders, plastic surgery, and skin whitening. Targeting some of society's most vulnerable and marginalised demographics – young teens and people of color – the platform perpetuates unrealistic Western beauty standards, endorsing starvation, and glorifying damaging solutions like extreme dieting, self-harm, and suicide. Ekō researchers analyzed individual hashtags and tracked the proliferation of posts promoting this toxic content, comparing these figures to data analyzed from previous Ekō research in September 2021 to gauge Instagram's responsiveness to these issues.

## **Eating disorders**

- 5 hashtags were identified that promote eating disorders on Instagram, potentially leading to over
   1.28M eating disorder-related posts. Including hashtags such as #bodycheck, #hipbones, #size00, #collarbone, #goalweight.<sup>3</sup>
- These posts were promoting to users content glorifying appetite suppressants, extreme dieting, starving practices and self-harm.
- This content goes against <u>Meta's</u>
   <u>Community Standards</u> which claims to remove any content that encourages suicide, self-injury, or eating disorders.
- The number of posts under these hashtags has decreased by 23% since 2021 when compared to Ekō's previous research.



A screenshot with caption text that reads: "I haven't eaten anything so far but it's only 1:08pm. I'm so tired and my head hurts so much. I have some bruises on my spine so it really hurts when I lay down )-;•"

# **Plastic surgery**

- 16 hashtags were identified that promote plastic and body modification surgeries, potentially leading to over 24.84M plastic surgery-related posts. Including hashtags such as #lipo, #brazilianbuttlift, #lipfiller, and #boobjob.4
- These posts were filled with clinics offering services and pushing unrealistic beauty standards with promises of good results.
- The number of posts under these hashtags has increased by 67% since 2021 when compared to Ekō's previous research.

# Skin whitening

- 22 hashtags were identified that promote skin whitening, potentially leading to 4.54M skin whiteningrelated posts. Including hashtags such as #whiteningcream, #whiteningscrub, and #whiteningbody.<sup>5</sup>
- These posts were flooded with content selling unapproved skin-whitening products and <u>health-threatening</u> <u>practices</u>. Posts under these hashtags seem to be the least moderated as all 22 hashtags under analysis were flagged as having problematic content.
- Skin whitening products target people of color, enforcing Western beauty standards and colorism, which the platform's moderation seems to reinforce.
- The number of posts under these hashtags decreased by less than 1% since 2021 when compared to Ekō's previous research.

<sup>4:</sup> Content sample: <u>#lipo</u>; <u>#lipfiller</u> - we recommend logging into the platform's app to better visualise the promoted content depicted in these links.

<sup>5:</sup> Content sample: <u>#whiteningcream</u>; <u>#whiteningscrub</u>; <u>#whiteningbod</u>y; - we recommend logging into the platform's app to better visualise the promoted content depicted in these links.



# Messages from across the U.S. to Members of Senate Judiciary Committee

#### Social media and teen depression

The studies are in. The epidemic of older youth depression and suicide is directly tied to the destructive messaging of social media. It deforms self-image, upholding false ideals of every kind, and communicating: 'you are a failure. You have not made it. You will not make it.' While society as a whole has the responsibility intervening in the horrifying tech dependency, the tech industry has the responsibility of correct messaging. Correct messaging will, in fact, contribute to the easing of the dependency. The tech addiction is driven by the tolerance principle of all addictions: 'this did not feel good, maybe I have to increase it to get the high I used to.

Thank you. Robert Sandgrund, LCSW

#### Social media regulation

To whom it may concern: (that's everyone!)

Social media can be a great way to communicate, but too much damage is being done to our kids and grandkids. We know you love them as much as we do, so please make some changes to protect them from the abuse being perpetrated by predatory Big Tech platforms which only care about the \$\$\$ signs.

Thank you for your careful consideration, and please protect our young people!

Sally Jenks Roth Bristol, VT

#### The most vulnerable kids are at greatest risk

I have young children and was horrified by what they saw on social media and online. It's not hard for kids to access. In many cases, it's pushed onto them.

Single mothers working two jobs shouldn't have to do big tech's dirty work and take on the expense of protecting kids for companies like Meta and Google, which have vast resources and are well-equipped to keep kids safe if they prioritize it.

It's the most vulnerable kids who are at greatest risk of predatory behavior online. We cannot abandon them as a society, and we must hold tech companies accountable for what they give kids access to. If they were delivering damaging material to our doors and handing them to children, then we would be outraged. But the truth is that they are doing far worse—they are nonstop inundating kids online with all kinds of damaging material. It's time they stop passing the buck, take accountability for the damage they've done, and do far more to make sure kids are protected in the future.

Rebecca Sato

#### Thank you

Thank you for looking into tech companies' responsibility to protect kids online. The power and influence of Google, Meta, X and Al demands an ongoing system of research, understanding and modification. Perhaps we might consider a Tech Hippocratic Oath, "First, do no harm." Also, Tech companies and regulators would be well served to adopt an agile mindset, where, when a problem or harm is discovered, it is dealt with openly (to the extent possible) and rationally.

Thank you. Ilene Joy Marcus

#### **Big Tech Companies**

The growth in AI technology, exponential and rapid growth of new information without time to pause, and ask questions about "what is important?" and "is this good for humankind worldwide?" needs to be asked. One of the aspects needed, and missing in AI technology is the teaching of ethics. Safety measures to protect private, personal information and users' identities must have increased security and protection, which Big Technology is not adequately providing currently. The mining of personal information by Big Technology for use in advertising and profits must be curtailed and regulated.

As a retired Psychologist of 20 years I have seen the dumbing down of children, adolescence and young adult students who cannot read or write at a needed level scholastically. The use of smartphones and PCs to access the internet has become an addictive process. Social skills are sorely lacking in both young people and adults with the creation of a false sense of intimacy created by social media platforms. This also needs to be reined in and regulated.

Thank you for your attention in this very serious matter.

Sincerely, Thomas G Stewart

#### **Big Tech companies and privacy**

As a young person concerned about both privacy and mental health, I worry about being tracked constantly across the web. What product will I see a Facebook ad for next? What information will a background check for a job demand? What if I'm subject to a lawsuit? What information will tech companies provide to the courts given their near limitless data on me?

I'm advocating for more privacy, more user control over what information is shared, and more transparency about how our data is used. Thank you for standing up to big tech and doing what's right for Americans like me.

Sincerely, Seth Roseman York, PA

#### Big Tech v. Safety of Children and Adolescents

While I am a firm believer in parental control, the onslaught of social media platforms has allowed unchecked and unfettered access to on-line sites that negatively influence vulnerable minors. There is well-documented research on negative social media influence with eating disorders, suicidal ideation and attempts, harassment of others, and significant misinformation that can, and does result in harm to self or others. Despite parental controls, access is so easy because there is a lack of regulation that it is impossible for parents to prevent exposure to dangerous and influential videos and posts. There needs to be regulation in an attempt to reign in unnecessary exposure to vulnerable children and teens. Meta and Google have consistently failed to implement any reasonable changes and therefore, I am requesting Congress execute legislation to halt or at least mitigate this significant issue.

Thank you, Mary Weeden

#### **Big Tech**

My children have grown past the ages particularly recognized for social media disfigurement. But they remain vulnerable, as we all do, to the malformed views of the world promoted by today's tech venues. The online proliferation of lies and digitally repeated blessing of pathological behavior is overwhelming our ability to trust one another, and thus to perceive and enjoy a free and just society. These companies have desperately clung to irresponsibility for their content, but they cannot be held irresponsible. Just as newspaper editors and publishers of old had to oversee what was fit to print, online media must be responsible for what they propagate. In a nation that gets its social and political news through online media, less is a death knell for societal well-being.

Yes, the tech companies are threatening my children, even though they are grown. Please make them change.

Dan Greaney Eureka, California

#### Dehumanizing Effects of Soc. Media on Kids

I am very concerned about the increasing alienation of **children** and young people – their ever-increasing detachment from day to day interactions, both at work and in life. Harvard's School of Public Health recently released a study that showed social media companies made approximately \$11BILLION on ad revenue aimed at minors. Although this technology holds the promise of much good, it is being seriously misused, mismanaged, and manipulated solely for the profit of a few billionaires and a few companies.

Sadly, the social media companies are turning entire generations of users into "monetization opportunities" – no longer considering them human, but merely money machines. Given the massive impact of technology today, and the fact that tech companies refuse to take responsibility for governing and taming the monster they have created –– have failed miserably to apply any boundaries, standards or brakes on themselves – YOU MUST DO IT.

PLEASE. I beg you! ACT NOW. The European Union and others are ahead of us in grappling with this thorny issue. No one wants unnecessary regulation. But when private companies do massive harm and position themselves to do even more harm, the government must step in. It's what the government was created to do: help ensure the smooth running of the nation and the welfare of the country, not just one influential and entitled, monied sector.

THANK YOU for doing the right thing and grappling with this major problem NOW.

Tomorrow will be too late. No more messing around, no more delay, no more failed 'self-regulation' for those who can not, will not, and don't want to do it.

Best regards, Nancy Campbell Kansas City MO

# **Big Tech**

Please stand firm and reject Big Tech's predatory business model. These companies are fueling a man-made mental health epidemic by bombarding kids with toxic posts that push harmful content including eating disorders, self-harm, and body image issues.

This must be stopped.

Thank you. Virgene Link



# Thanks for all that you do



