



## The government cracking down on social media won't make kids less sad

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In his recent State of the Union address, President Biden implored Congress to hold “social media platforms accountable for the national experiment they’re conducting on our children for profit.” Following suit, a bipartisan group of eight state attorneys general launched a nationwide investigation into whether TikTok is intentionally “designing, operating, and promoting its social media platform to children” in order to cause “mental health harms.” Though well-intentioned, these efforts are misplaced. In the name of “the children,” people have been freaking out about new arts and technologies for centuries, and social media platforms are just the latest target. And while there likely is a mental health emergency, this moral panic allows politicians to divert attention away from the more complex causes of the problem, while not helping children at all.

New products and technologies often scare older generations. Even the teddy bear was once cast as a public enemy. In an era of social upheaval caused, in part, by women entering the workforce, ministers and legislators argued the toy would thwart development of girls’ maternal instincts. Schools called for teddy bear bans, and newspaper headlines across America cried “teddy bear denounced” and warned of a “horrifying new toy.” Though many seemed to believe the bear posed a critical threat to youth, we now know it wasn’t actually about the teddy bear: “Teddy bear fad destroys motherly instinct and trends to race suicide, says priest.”

Fast forward to 1985, when much of America became convinced that heavy-metal music was the root cause of child sex abuse, teen suicide, alleged upticks in devil worship, and premarital sex. Tipper Gore’s Parental Advisory Resource Center insisted that saucy lyrics were causing “rape,” “teen pregnancies and teenage suicide rates” in “epidemic proportions,” culminating in one of the most infamous Senate committee hearings of all time. Watching it now, nearly forty years later, the bipartisan pearl-clutching seems more like a satire about puritanical censorship than an

actual legislative deliberation. Yet Tipper prevailed, and musical acts like Prince, Twisted Sister, and the Mothers of Invention received parental advisory warning labels on their records.

Likewise, speculation that games lead to devil worship and violence gripped us for decades, from the “satanic panic” over Dungeons and Dragons to the accusations that first-person shooter video games were to blame for the school shooting at Columbine. This scapegoating campaign was successful enough that the Supreme Court had to weigh in. The Court struck down a “think-of-the-children” video game sale ban in Brown v. EMA, concluding there was no compelling evidence supporting a link between youth violence and video games.

Today’s panic over social media is no better substantiated than the panics which preceded it. Frances Haugen’s “Facebook papers,” frequently cited by social media platforms’ detractors, are weak and mostly correlational. Haugen reported that 17 percent of youth with eating disorders and 13.5 percent of youth with thoughts of suicide think Instagram makes their issues worse. Tragic as that is, depression and eating disorders far predate social media platforms, and it’s likely that *any* exposure to the fashion or entertainment industry will create these effects in vulnerable youth.

More rigorous examinations of the relationship between social media use and mental health disorders in youth suggest popular concerns are overblown. A 2020 study of 430,000 U.S. and British teenagers found no correlation between social media use and mental health issues “that would explain the level of panic and consternation around these issues.” Likewise, a study by Oxford University’s Internet Institute found that links between life satisfaction and social media use were “trivial,” accounting for less than 1 percent of a teenager’s sense of wellbeing.

Conspicuously absent in these artistic and technological moral panics are considerations of the greater societal forces at play. Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, the U.S. Surgeon General, issued a youth mental health advisory in December, writing that “the pandemic era’s unfathomable number of deaths, pervasive sense of fear, economic instability, and forced physical distancing from loved ones, friends, and communities have exacerbated the unprecedented stresses young people already faced.” It’s much harder to legislate against a “pervasive sense of fear,” (or, in the case of the teddy bears, against the collapse of traditional gender roles) than it is to regulate TikTok.

Scapegoating new products or technologies has intuitive appeal. It allows us to create a singular, identifiable source of our problems and to forge a clear, hopeful path forward to solve them. These are ideal conditions for do-something politicians, particularly when the consequences of their legislation will not be known until long after they have left office. But the absurdity of past panics should serve as a reminder that widespread acceptance of a scapegoat does not mean that it is actually responsible. The youth mental health crisis deserves a careful response, not another hysterical moral panic.

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