



Biden's Foolish Rush To Regulate How Kids Use Tech

Instead of empowering the government to intervene, we should look more holistically at the experience of young people online.

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During his State of the Union address on Tuesday, President Joe Biden called for more regulation of technology platforms, particularly regarding young users. Specifically, Biden called for banning targeted advertising to kids.

In recent years, calls for the regulation of technology to protect children and teens have increased from policy makers on both sides of the aisle at both the state and federal levels. But when it comes to determining the best way to help kids and teens use the internet, parents (or other trusted adults in a young person's life) should be making the decisions, not the government.

Many people, including policy makers, are legitimately concerned about the rising rates of mental health issues in teens and young people today. In search of a solution to a difficult problem, some are quick to blame what is new, such as increased social media use.

But the data currently available do not clearly support a causal relationship between social media use and mental health problems. A one-size-fits-all approach decided by the government not only would likely fail to solve any alleged problem, but it would also have serious consequences for both young people and parents.

Despite concerns about the negative impacts of social media on young people, there are also incredibly positive examples of how young people have used social media. Whether it's body-positive images that improve body satisfaction, the ability to form communities around shared interests like video games or basketball, or young people sharing their voices and explaining what it's like to be a teenager today, online platforms and social media can be highly beneficial for today's digital natives.

Policy is a poor tool for dealing with nuance, and many proposals could result in limiting the beneficial or benign uses of technology.

For example, calls to regulate "mental health content" recommendations to teens would also likely ban positive recovery content for those struggling. Other proposals risk blocking young people from accessing important information about topics deemed sensitive or could make tasks like college recruiting more difficult by eliminating targeted advertising. In general, such

proposals treat all online usage by young people similarly by over-focusing on preventing potential negative consequences.

Biden's call on Tuesday for a ban on targeted advertising to young people online is just the latest example of a politician demonizing data usage and algorithms without fully understanding the alternatives and consequences.

Banning targeted advertising could result in more general ads that are less appropriate for the age group accessing a website. Banning advertising altogether or making it difficult to offer advertising services would likely result in costs being passed along to consumers, which could raise the price of kid-friendly apps in the process. In either case, kids, teens, and parents would likely continue to face concerns over the ads they might encounter while struggling with fewer and more costly options.

It's a bit ironic that the State of the Union address was given on "Safer Internet Day." This day highlights a range of tools and resources available to help parents and young people navigate their online experiences. The right tools may vary from family to family and even child to child based on specific needs.

In some cases, parents may want to use filters to ensure that their child or teen does not access certain content that goes against their values. In other cases, parents may trust their child but want to have time limits around device use.

An education- and conversation-based approach can better prepare children to navigate the internet independently as adults, and it can be an opportunity to pass along digital and media literacy skills. This will be particularly true as the first generation of digital-native millennials starts to have children.

The State of the Union highlighted the returning panic around children and teens online. As a society, we've seen this before—not only around the internet itself but also around other media like video games and comic books. Rather than empowering the government to intervene out of fear, we should look more holistically at the experience of young people online. And we should empower both parents and members of the next generation to make wise choices around technology.

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