

# reason

## Josh Hawley Wants to Ban YouTube's Autoplay Feature in the Name of Fighting Social Media Addiction

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America faces some big problems, from endless wars to congressional dysfunction to police abuse to the spiraling cost of health care, housing, and education. Now Josh Hawley, from his perch in the United States Senate, has decided to focus his precious attention on a problem that only the power of the federal government can solve: YouTube's autoplay feature. No, I am not kidding.

Today the Missouri Republican introduced a bill that would ban the feature in the name of fighting social media "addiction." The bill, which Hawley has dubbed the Social Media Addiction Reduction Technology—or SMART—Act, would also outlaw such features as infinite scroll and Snapchat's "streaks," which encourage users to engage in unbroken communications with friends. The bill would additionally require social media companies to install time-use dashboards, and it would give the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Department of Health and Human Services the power to regulate other features in the future.

Even for Hawley, who has spent his short time in Congress pushing bills that would give the federal government more power to regulate large tech companies, this is remarkably petty. Hawley appears to believe wasting time on Facebook and Instagram is a problem so big it requires the federal government to solve.

You might not be a fan of social media (I certainly have my qualms), but it seems hard to view this as anything but a wild misuse of federal power—and potentially far more sweeping than the bill initially sounds. Hawley is proposing to empower federal agencies to regulate any and every design and interface decision made by a social media company in the name of protecting some nebulous concept of public health. It's all too easy to imagine this being abused for political purposes to punish or elevate companies that have fallen out of favor with the government. Indeed, punishing social media companies that Hawley doesn't like for the sin of creating products that people want to use seems like the point of the bill. This is legislation in pursuit of an obvious political vendetta.

Hawley: "So, you admit that you've attempted to make your service functional and easy to use, in hopes that people would... use it more frequently?"

Tech: "Well... yes?"

Hawley: "YOUR FOUL SORCERY ENDS NOW, SVENGALI!"

It's also based on a misleading representation of the underlying health issues. Framing the issue as one of addiction, as Hawley's bill does, misrepresents the current medical consensus around heavy internet use. As Jeffrey Singer wrote for *Reason* earlier this year, researchers have not come to any firm consensus about whether the perception of heavy internet use—something difficult to pin down even when operating in good faith—constitutes addiction. Hawley's bill effectively tasks the federal government with determining which tech features are good for you and which ones aren't, which, given the federal government's poor record when it comes to making determinations about what's healthy, seems like a bad idea.

Hawley has emerged as tech's most outspoken congressional critic. That makes this bill a fairly revealing example of how he thinks not only about social media companies, but about the ordinary users he claims to want to protect.

Over the past several months, Hawley has proposed bills banning video game loot boxes and requiring large social media companies to seek a federal certification of political neutrality in order to maintain their current legal protections. He signed a letter to the FTC seeking federal investigations into conservative "censorship" on large tech platforms (in the process evincing a fundamental misunderstanding of what censorship is). In May, he delivered a speech titled "The Big Tech Threat," warning that tech companies are seeking to devour our attention and raising the question of whether they have any social value at all—as if the job of an elected official was to decide which industries are worthwhile and to eliminate any that doesn't pass muster from the marketplace.

Hawley has it in for big tech. But this is more than just a petty political vendetta against Facebook and its peers. It is a larger worldview, one that presumes individuals are inherently powerless, that they cannot make informed decisions on their own, and that the government, via legislation and regulation, must therefore step in to protect them from their own stupidity. It attributes wizard-like mind-control powers to tech companies that simply don't exist, and it assumes that users are helpless to resist.

Hawley's bill even warns, in its introduction, that the "design choices" he wants to ban "interfere with the free choice of users." But Hawley's vision of free choice requires the federal government to intervene and make their choices for them, down to the smallest design detail.

The problem with Hawley's bill isn't just that it's so pathetically trivial, or that it's a waste of resources in the context of our larger challenges. It's that it's designed to treat Americans like weak-willed children who need a politician like Josh Hawley to tell them how to live their lives. For someone who claims to champion the idea of individual dignity, Hawley has an awfully condescending view of human agency.

Hawley's new bill probably won't pass. Like most of Hawley's anti-tech proposals so far, it's stunt legislation designed primarily to raise public awareness and get press. That's at least a little ironic for a bill that opens by declaring that "the business model for many internet companies, especially social media companies, is to capture as much of their users' attention as possible." He's been in office less than a year, but so far, capturing people's attention with time-wasting antics appears to be Josh Hawley's business model too.