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GUEST ESSAY

Surgeon General: Why I'm Calling for a Warning Label on Social Media Platforms

June 17, 2024

By Vivek H. Murthy
Dr. Murthy is the surgeon general.

One of the most important lessons I learned in medical school was that in an emergency, you don't have the luxury to wait for perfect information. You assess the available facts, you use your best judgment, and you act quickly.

The mental health crisis among young people is an emergency — and social media has emerged as an important contributor. Adolescents who spend more than three hours a day on social media face double the risk of anxiety and depression symptoms, and the average daily use in this age group, as of the summer of 2023, was 4.8 hours. Additionally, nearly half of adolescents say social media makes them feel worse about their bodies.

It is time to require a surgeon general's warning label on social media platforms, stating that social media is associated with significant mental health harms for adolescents. A surgeon general's warning label, which requires congressional action, would regularly remind parents and adolescents that social media has not been proved safe. Evidence from tobacco studies show that warning labels can

increase awareness and change behavior. When asked if a warning from the surgeon general would prompt them to limit or monitor their children's social media use, 76 percent of people in one recent survey of Latino parents said yes.

To be clear, a warning label would not, on its own, make social media safe for young people. The advisory I issued a year ago about social media and young people's mental health included specific recommendations for policymakers, platforms and the public to make social media safer for kids. Such measures, which already have strong bipartisan support, remain the priority.

Legislation from Congress should shield young people from online harassment, abuse and exploitation and from exposure to extreme violence and sexual content that too often appears in algorithm-driven feeds. The measures should prevent platforms from collecting sensitive data from children and should restrict the use of features like push notifications, autoplay and infinite scroll, which prey on developing brains and contribute to excessive use.

Additionally, companies must be required to share all of their data on health effects with independent scientists and the public — currently they do not — and allow independent safety audits. While the platforms claim they are making their products safer, Americans need more than words. We need proof.

The rest of society can play a role also. Schools should ensure that classroom learning and social time are phone-free experiences. Parents, too, should create phone-free zones around bedtime, meals and social gatherings to safeguard their kids' sleep and real-life connections — both of which have direct effects on mental health. And they should wait until after middle school to allow their kids access to social media. This is much easier said than done, which is why parents should work together with other families to establish shared rules, so no parents have to struggle alone or feel guilty when their teens say they are the only one who has to endure limits. And young people can build on teen-focused efforts like the Log Off movement and Wired Human to support one another in reforming their relationship with social media and navigating online environments safely.

Others must help, too. Public health leaders should demand healthy digital environments for young people. Doctors, nurses and other clinicians should raise the issue of social media with kids and parents and guide them toward safer practices. And the federal Kids Online Health & Safety Task Force must continue its leadership in bringing together the best minds from inside and outside government to recommend changes that will make social media safer for our children.

One of the worst things for a parent is to know your children are in danger yet be unable to do anything about it. That is how parents tell me they feel when it comes to social media — helpless and alone in the face of toxic content and hidden harms. I think about Lori, a woman from Colorado who fought back tears as she told me about her teenage daughter, who took her life after being bullied on social media. Lori had been diligent, monitoring her daughter's accounts and phone daily, but harm still found her child.

There is no seatbelt for parents to click, no helmet to snap in place, no assurance that trusted experts have investigated and ensured that these platforms are safe for our kids. There are just parents and their children, trying to figure it out on their own, pitted against some of the best product engineers and most well-resourced companies in the world.

Parents aren't the only ones yearning for solutions. Last fall, I gathered with students to talk about mental health and loneliness. As often happens in such gatherings, they raised the issue of social media.

After they talked about what they liked about social media — a way to stay in touch with old friends, find communities of shared identity and express themselves creatively — a young woman named Tina raised her hand. "I just don't feel good when I use social media," she said softly, a hint of embarrassment in her voice. Her confession opened the door for her classmates. One by one, they spoke about their experiences with social media: the endless comparison with other people that shredded their self-esteem, the feeling of being addicted and unable to set limits

and the difficulty having real conversations on platforms that too often fostered outrage and bullying. There was a sadness in their voices, as if they knew what was happening to them but felt powerless to change it.

As a father of a 6- and a 7-year-old who have already asked about social media, I worry about how my wife and I will know when to let them have accounts. How will we monitor their activity, given the increasingly sophisticated techniques for concealing it? How will we know if our children are being exposed to harmful content or dangerous people? It's no wonder that when it comes to managing social media for their kids, so many parents are feeling stress and anxiety — and even shame.

It doesn't have to be this way. Faced with high levels of car-accident-related deaths in the mid- to late 20th century, lawmakers successfully demanded seatbelts, airbags, crash testing and a host of other measures that ultimately made cars safer. This January the F.A.A. grounded about 170 planes when a door plug came off one Boeing 737 Max 9 while the plane was in the air. And the following month, a massive recall of dairy products was conducted because of a listeria contamination that claimed two lives.

Why is it that we have failed to respond to the harms of social media when they are no less urgent or widespread than those posed by unsafe cars, planes or food? These harms are not a failure of willpower and parenting; they are the consequence of unleashing powerful technology without adequate safety measures, transparency or accountability.

The moral test of any society is how well it protects its children. Students like Tina and mothers like Lori do not want to be told that change takes time, that the issue is too complicated or that the status quo is too hard to alter. We have the expertise, resources and tools to make social media safe for our kids. Now is the time to summon the will to act. Our children's well-being is at stake.

Vivek H. Murthy is the surgeon general and vice admiral of the Public Health Service Commissioned Corps. He was also the surgeon general in the Obama administration.

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A Warning on Social Media Is the Very Least We Can Do

June 17, 2024

By Pamela Paul
Opinion Columnist

You're in the middle of a public health emergency involving a dangerously addictive substance — let's say an epidemic of fentanyl or vaping among teens. Which of the following is the best response?

1. Issue a warning. Tell everyone, "Hey, watch out — this stuff isn't good for you."

2. Regulate the dangerous substance so that it causes the least amount of harm.

3. Ban the substance and penalize anyone who distributes it.

In the midst of a well-documented mental health crisis among children and teenagers, with social media use a clear contributing factor, the surgeon general, Dr. Vivek Murthy, recommends choice one. As he wrote in a Times Opinion guest essay on Monday, "It is time to require a surgeon general's warning label on social media platforms, stating that social media is associated with significant mental health harms for adolescents."

It's an excellent first step, but it's a mere Band-Aid on a suppurating wound. Telling teenagers something is bad for them may work for some kids, but for others it's practically an open invitation to abuse. To add muscle to a mere label, we need to prohibit its sale to people under 18 and enforce the law on sellers. We need to strongly regulate social media, as Europe has begun to do, and ban it for kids under 16. Murthy urges Congress to take similar steps.

Free-speech absolutists (or those who play the role when a law restricts something that earns them lots of money) will say that requiring age verification systems is an unconstitutional limit on free speech. Nonsense. We don't allow children to freely attend PG-13 or R-rated movies. We don't allow hard liquor to be advertised during children's programming.

Other objections to regulation are that it's difficult to carry out (so are many things) and that there's only a correlative link between social media and adverse mental health rather than one of causation.

Complacency is easy. The hard truth is that many people are too addicted to social media themselves to fight for laws that would unstick their kids. Big Tech, with Congress in its pocket, is only too happy for everyone to keep their heads in the sand and reap the benefits. But a combination of Options 2 and 3 are the only ones that will bring real results.

A correction was made on June 17, 2024*: An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of the surgeon general. He is Dr. Vivek Murthy, not Murphy.*

Pamela Paul is an Opinion columnist at The Times, writing about culture, politics, ideas and the way we live now.

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PAMELA PAUL

America Is Averting Its Eyes From Something Very, Very Wrong

Dec. 21, 2023

By Pamela Paul
Opinion columnist

For some people, social media is inconsequential — a cat photo here, a banana slip TikTok there. For others, it's all-consuming — a helpless catapult into a slurry of anxiety, self-harm and depression.

To each his own internet.

Still, we can make some generalizations about the impact. We know social media use can harm mental health. We know that this disproportionately affects young people. Both the surgeon general and the American Psychological Association put out related health advisories this year. And we know that girls, who use social media more than boys, are disproportionately affected.

But social media use also differs by race and ethnicity — and there's far less discussion of that. According to a new study by Pew, Black and Hispanic teenagers ages 13 to 17 spend far more time on most social media apps than their white peers. One-third of Hispanic teenagers, for example, say they are "almost constantly" on TikTok, compared with one-fifth of Black teenagers and one-tenth of white

teenagers. Higher percentages of Hispanic (27 percent) and Black teenagers (23 percent) are almost constantly on YouTube compared with white teenagers (9 percent); the same trend is true for Instagram.

Overall, 55 percent of Hispanic teenagers and 54 percent of Black teenagers say they are online almost constantly, compared with 38 percent of white teenagers; Black and Hispanic kids ages 8 to 12, another study found, also use social media more than their white counterparts.

What we don't fully understand yet is why.

But it's important to discern the reasons behind these differences and explore the implications, especially given that earlier research on social media use, according to some researchers, focused almost exclusively on white teenagers.

"For these kids to be stuck to a computer is concerning," Amanda Calhoun, a clinical fellow at the Yale Child Study Center who studies race and digital media, told me.

"But we also have to ask," she went on, "why they are so drawn to social media? Is it the messages on social media that's exacerbating the depression and anxiety, or was the depression and anxiety already there to begin with and social media is a way to self-medicate?"

Black and Latino kids use social media differently from white kids, Linda Charmaraman, director of the Youth, Media and Wellbeing Research Lab at Wellesley Centers for Women, told me. "It's culturally more acceptable in youth of color households to use technology for social and academic reasons compared with white households," Charmaraman said. "Parents don't worry as much about it. There isn't as much shame around it."

WhatsApp, hugely popular in Latin America, is used by Hispanic teenagers more than by other demographic groups of the same ages. Hispanic teenagers also often act as "digital brokers" for their parents, who may have poorer English language and digital skills.

Not surprisingly, disparities in social media usage reflect inequalities in the real world. Largely because of lower income levels, Black and Hispanic teenagers are less likely to have broadband access or computers at home. This makes them disproportionately use their smartphones, where social media apps ping, whiz and notify. Lucia Magis-Weinberg, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Washington who studies teenagers and tech, compares internet use of the phone to snorkeling, whereas computers allow more of a scuba dive.

The phones, at least, are always there. “We know broadly that youth of minoritized communities have longer commutes, fewer opportunities to do after-school activities, fewer resources,” Magis-Weinberg told me. They may not have spaces to hang out safely with friends nearby; social media is a more accessible option. “But we have to ask,” Magis-Weinberg added, “what is social media use displacing?”

The answer, according to experts, includes sports participation, in-person socializing, after-school clubs and activities, exploring the outdoors, reading and more.

Let’s consider just reading, which also happens to be correlated with both mental well-being and school achievement. According to Scholastic’s most recent Kids and Family Reading Report, the percentage of kids ages 6 to 17 who read frequently for pleasure dropped to 28 percent in 2022 from 37 percent in 2010. Those numbers fall precipitously as kids get older; 46 percent of 6- to 8-year-olds read frequently in 2022 compared with only 18 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds. And these declines are tied to internet use. All this raises the possibility that disparities in internet use could in turn intensify overall declines and existing differences in reading across racial groups among adults. The average daily time spent reading per capita by ethnicity in 2022 was 0.29 hours for white adults, 0.12 for Black adults and 0.10 for Hispanics.

In other words, one danger is that social media not only reflects real-world disparities, it could also exacerbate them.

Greater use of social media by Black and Hispanic young people "can help perpetuate inequality in society because higher levels of social media use among kids have been demonstrably linked to adverse effects such as depression and anxiety, inadequate sleep, eating disorders, poor self-esteem and greater exposure to online harassment," Jim Steyer, the founder of Common Sense Media, told me.

As is so often the case, the kids most affected are likely to be the ones least equipped to handle the consequences. Akeem Marsh, medical director of the Home of Integrated Behavioral Health at the New York Foundling, a social services agency, said that among the hundreds of largely Black and Hispanic kids he sees from communities with fewer resources, social media use is often a primary concern or it comes up in treatment. Kids who use it frequently often respond with traumatized feelings and repeated anxiety.

"The way social media use presents itself is as something that is actively harmful," Marsh told me. Already kids from these communities have few advantages, he explained. They may not have access to after-school programs. They're often in single-parent households. They lack support systems. "I think in the long term," he said, "we're going to see real differences in the impact."

To better understand what that long term might look like, we should go beyond additional research. We need greater awareness of the disparities as well, and most likely, immediate action. What we do not need is another "sudden" yet regrettably delayed realization that something has gone very, very wrong with America's kids, but we were too busy looking the other way.

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Pamela Paul is an Opinion columnist at The Times, writing about culture, politics, ideas and the way we live now.

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GUEST ESSAY

Social Media Is a Mess. Government Meddling Would Only Make It Worse.

Dec. 14, 2023

By Jeff Kosseff
Mr. Kosseff is a senior legal fellow at The Future of Free Speech Project.

This term, the Supreme Court will reconsider America's laissez-faire approach to regulating the internet, and in doing so it will address vital and new First Amendment questions. Can states stop social media sites from blocking certain content? Can the federal government pressure platforms to remove content it disagrees with?

In each of these cases, the Supreme Court must decide whether the government can interfere with private companies' editorial judgments, and I hope the justices will articulate sufficiently clear principles that can endure and continue to protect online speech. Despite the unprecedented new societal challenges created by the internet, the court should not back away from its firm stance against most government intervention.

In 1997, when fewer than one in five U.S. homes had an internet connection, the court rejected the government's request to narrow the internet's First Amendment protections as it had done for television and radio broadcasters. In striking down much of the Communications Decency Act, Justice John Paul Stevens recognized the internet as "a vast platform from which to address and hear from a worldwide

audience of millions of readers, viewers, researchers, and buyers." At the same time, the court left alone Section 230 of the law, which immunizes online platforms for liability from user-generated content. Section 230, combined with strong First Amendment protections, left courts and government agencies with little control over platforms' content decisions.

Since then, many on the left and right have questioned that approach, as social media providers and other centralized platforms gain increased power over everyday life. Some conservatives, angry at what they view as politically biased moderation decisions, championed the passage of laws in Florida and Texas that limit platforms' discretion to block user content.

Some liberals, upset that the companies have left up or algorithmically promoted too much constitutionally protected but harmful content such as health misinformation and hate speech, have pressured the companies to become more aggressive moderators.

The Supreme Court will weigh in on the constitutionality of both efforts by this summer. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit struck down much of the Florida law, ruling that limiting platforms' discretion over their content is likely unconstitutional. Judge Kevin Newsom, a Trump appointee, wrote last year that "social-media platforms' content-moderation activities — permitting, removing, prioritizing and deprioritizing users and posts — constitute 'speech' within the meaning of the First Amendment." But later in the year, the Fifth Circuit upheld the Texas law that also limited platforms' ability to remove user content, rejecting this reasoning. (The Florida and Texas laws have been combined into one case.)

In the other case headed to the Supreme Court, the Fifth Circuit concluded that some efforts by the White House, surgeon general and some federal agencies to encourage social media companies to remove constitutionally protected content, such as alleged Covid misinformation and claims of election fraud, likely violated the First Amendment, finding that officials repeatedly "coerced the platforms into direct action via urgent, uncompromising demands to moderate content."

If the Texas and Florida laws are upheld, 50 state legislatures could inject their political preferences into content moderation, potentially leading to the absurd and unworkable result of different content moderation rules based on an internet user's home state. And if the Supreme Court gives wide latitude for the government to threaten platforms if they don't remove constitutionally protected content, such "jawboning" could lead to frequent and indirect government censorship. While the court should allow the government to respond to harmful content — something at which it has not been terribly effective in recent years — it should draw a clear line that prohibits the use of state power to coerce censorship.

I understand the temptation to overhaul Justice Stevens's approach. The internet is far more pervasive than it was in 1997, so any problems with the internet today have a larger impact. But greater government control of the internet is a cure worse than the disease.

Solutions typically require agreement on the problem. And we don't have that. Some people think that platforms moderate far too aggressively, and others think that they are not aggressive enough. Under the hands-off approach, platforms are largely free to develop their own moderation policies, and they'll be rewarded or punished by the free market.

And even if everyone could agree on the One Problem — the shortcoming that causes many to believe that the internet is responsible for society's problems — diluting First Amendment protections would make things worse. As seen in the many countries that have more power to regulate "fake news," at some point, a judge or elected official will take advantage of power over online speech to suppress dissent or stifle debate. For instance, in 2018, Bangladesh passed the Digital Security Act, which gave the government greater power to prosecute people who spread falsehoods. In March, a reporter for the country's largest daily newspaper was arrested and jailed for nearly a week for allegedly reporting false information in an article about the nation's cost of living. (The act was scrapped earlier this year.)

Rather than immediately seeking to prohibit online misinformation, we should examine why people are so eager to believe it. When people lack trust in their government and other institutions, they might be more likely to believe misinformation.

Other countries, like Finland, have invested heavily in media literacy programs starting in primary school, equipping citizens with the tools to better evaluate the veracity of online claims. Some research has found that these countries have higher levels of media literacy. Similarly, it is hard to consider the rise of online misinformation without looking at the rapid decline of regional and local media outlets.

Revitalizing trusted news sources is a tougher task than allowing the government to arbitrarily forbid "misinformation," but it avoids the abuse and censorship that we have seen around the world. And decentralized online services such as Mastodon, which give users a greater say over the level of content moderation that they receive, address many of the concerns about concentrating power in the hands of a few large internet companies.

We should be under no illusions that such solutions are anything close to a panacea for the many concerns about the modern internet. But even the most stringent regulations fail to present full solutions, and often worsen the harms. If, for instance, people are concerned about misinformation leading to the spread of authoritarianism, weakening the First Amendment should not be at the top of their agenda. A fire prevention plan should not call for the elimination of the fire department. And widespread government censorship would not lead to greater trust of institutions.

Messy problems arise from speech, and many will continue to exist with or without government intervention. As Justice Stevens recognized, regulation "is more likely to interfere with the free exchange of ideas than to encourage it." I hope that his successors share this wisdom.

Jeff Kosseff is a senior legal fellow at The Future of Free Speech Project and the author of the new book "Liar in a Crowded Theater: Freedom of Speech in a World of Misinformation."

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SUBSCRIBER-ONLY NEWSLETTER

David French

Florida Has Barred Kids' Using Social Media, but It Won't Be That Simple

March 28, 2024

By David French
Opinion Columnist

My entire life I've seen a similar pattern. Older generations reflect on the deficiencies of "kids these days," and they find something new to blame. The latest technology and new forms of entertainment are always bewitching our children. In my time, I've witnessed several distinct public panics over television, video games and music. They've all been overblown.

This time, however, I'm persuaded — not that smartphones are the sole cause of increasing mental health problems in American kids, but rather that they're a prime mover in teen mental health in a way that television, games and music are not. No one has done more to convince me than Jonathan Haidt. He's been writing about the dangers of smartphones and social media for years, and his latest Atlantic story masterfully marshals the evidence for smartphones' negative influence on teenage life.

At the same time, however, I'm wary of government intervention to suppress social media or smartphone access for children. The people best positioned to respond to their children's online life are parents, not regulators, and it is parents who should

take the lead in responding to smartphones. Otherwise, we risk a legal remedy that undermines essential constitutional doctrines that protect both children and adults.

I don't want to minimize the case against phones. Haidt's thesis is sobering:

> Once young people began carrying the entire internet in their pockets, available to them day and night, it altered their daily experiences and developmental pathways across the board. Friendship, dating, sexuality, exercise, sleep, academics, politics, family dynamics, identity — all were affected.

The consequences, Haidt argues, have been dire. Children — especially teenagers — are suffering from greater rates of anxiety and depression, and suicide rates have gone up; and they spend less time hanging out with friends, while loneliness and friendlessness are surging.

Neither smartphones nor social media are solely responsible for declining teen mental health. The rise of smartphones correlates with a transformation of parenting strategies, away from permitting free play and in favor of highly managed schedules and copious amounts of organized sports and other activities. The rise of smartphones also correlates with the fraying of our social fabric. Even there, however, the phones have their roles to play. They provide a cheap substitute for in-person interaction, and the constant stream of news can heighten our anxiety.

I'm so convinced that smartphones have a significant negative effect on children that I'm now much more interested in the debate over remedies. What should be done?

That question took on added urgency Tuesday, when Ron DeSantis, the governor of Florida, signed a bill banning children under 14 from having social media accounts and requiring children under 16 to have parental permission before opening an account. The Florida social media bill is one of the strictest in the country, but Florida is hardly the only state that is trying to regulate internet access by minors. Utah passed its own law; so have Ohio and Arkansas. California passed a bill mandating increased privacy protections for children using the internet.

So is this — at long last — an example of the government actually responding to a social problem with a productive solution? New information has helped us understand the dangers of a commercial product, and now the public sector is reacting with regulation and limitation. What's not to like?

Quite a bit, actually. Federal courts have blocked enforcement of the laws in Ohio, Arkansas and California. Utah's law faces a legal challenge and Florida's new law will undoubtedly face its day in court as well. The reason is simple: When you regulate access to social media, you're regulating access to speech, and the First Amendment binds the government to protect the free-speech rights of children as well as adults.

In a 2011 case, Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association, the Supreme Court struck down a California law banning the sale of violent video games to minors. The 7-to-2 decision featured three Democratic appointees joining with four Republican appointees. Justice Antonin Scalia, writing for the majority, reaffirmed that "minors are entitled to a significant measure of First Amendment protection, and only in relatively narrow and well-defined circumstances may government bar public dissemination of protected materials to them."

The state certainly has power to protect children from harm — as laws restricting children's' access to alcohol and tobacco attest — but that power "does not include a free-floating power to restrict the ideas to which children may be exposed," the majority opinion said. Consequently, as the court has repeatedly observed, "Speech that is neither obscene as to youths nor subject to some other legitimate proscription cannot be suppressed solely to protect the young from ideas or images that a legislative body thinks unsuitable for them."

Lawmakers and parents may find this doctrine frustrating, but there is a genuine method to the free-speech madness, even for children. In a free-speech case from 1982, Island Trees School District v. Pico, Justice William Brennan cast doubt on a public school district's effort to remove "improper" books from library shelves and wrote powerfully in support of student free speech and students' access to ideas. "Just as access to ideas makes it possible for citizens generally to exercise their

rights of free speech and press in a meaningful manner," Brennan argued, "such access prepares students for active and effective participation in the pluralistic, often contentious society in which they will soon be adult members."

Justice Brennan is exactly right. We can't shelter children from debate and dialogue and then expect them to emerge in college as grown-ups, ready for liberal democracy. Raising citizens in a flourishing republic is a process, one that isn't susceptible to one-size-fits all bans on speech and expression, even if that speech or expression poses social and emotional challenges for today's teens.

Compounding the problem, social media bans are almost always rooted at least in part in the content on the platforms. It's the likes, comments, fashions, and trends that cause people to obsess over social media. Yet content discrimination is uniquely disfavored in First Amendment law. As the Supreme Court has repeatedly explained, one of the most basic First Amendment principles is that "as a general matter, the government has no power to restrict expression because of its message, its ideas, its subject matter, or its content."

For content discrimination to be lawful, it has to pass the most difficult of legal tests, a test called "strict scrutiny." This means that the law is only constitutional if it advances a "compelling government interest and is narrowly drawn to serve that interest." While one can certainly agree that protecting the mental health of young people is a compelling interest, it is much more difficult to argue that sweeping bans that cut off children from gaining access to a vast amount of public debate and information are "narrowly drawn."

Finally, attempting to restrict minors' access to social media can implicate and limit adult speech. Age verification measures would require both adult and child users of social media platforms to reveal personally identifying information as a precondition for fully participating in the American marketplace of ideas.

It's for these reasons (and others) that federal district judges in California, Arkansas and Ohio have blocked enforcement of each state's social media law, and it's for these reasons that the laws in Utah and Florida rightly face an uphill legal climb.

The government isn't entirely powerless in the face of online harms. I think it is entirely proper to attempt to age-limit online access to pornography. The Supreme Court has permitted state and local governments to use zoning laws to push porn shops into specific, designated areas of the community, and "zoning" online porn for adults only should be entirely proper as well. The Supreme Court hasn't permitted age-gating pornography yet, but its prior objections were rooted in part in the technical challenges to age verification. With better technology comes better capability to reasonably and easily distinguish between children and adults.

The distinction between social media and pornography should be obvious. There is a difference between denying access to content to minors that they possess no right to see or produce, and to denying access to content that they have a right to both see and produce.

It is also entirely proper to ban smartphones in schools. The court has long held that the First Amendment rights of students should be construed "in light of the special characteristics of the school environment." And it's highly likely that courts would uphold phone bans as a means of preventing proven distractions during instruction.

But the primary responsibility for policing kids' access to phones should rest with parents, not with the state. Not every social problem has a governmental solution, and the more that the problem is rooted in the inner life of children, the less qualified the government is to address it.

And don't think that a parent-centered approach to dealing with the challenge of online generation is inherently inadequate. As we've seen throughout American history, parenting cultures can change substantially, based on both information and experience. Public intellectuals like Jonathan Haidt perform an immense public service by informing the public, and just as parents adjust children's diets or alter discipline habits in response to new information, they can change the culture around cellphones.

In fact, there are signs this is already happening. I have three children — aged 25, 23 and 16 — and I can personally attest to the changing culture in my little corner of the world. I gave my oldest two kids iPhones when they were 12 and 11, and granted access to Facebook and Instagram with little thought to the consequences. Most of my peers did the same.

Quickly enough, we learned our mistake. When my youngest entered middle school, I noticed that parents were far more cautious. We talked about phone use, and we tried to some extent to adopt an informal, collaborative approach so that no member of the friend group was alone and isolated while all her peers were texting on their phones and posting online. It didn't work perfectly, and my daughter spent a few unpleasant months as the last friend without a phone at age 15, but awareness of the risks was infinitely higher, and even when children did receive phones, the controls on use were much tighter.

One of the core responsibilities of the American government at all levels is to protect the liberty of its citizens, especially those liberties enumerated in the Bill of Rights. At the same time, it is the moral obligation of the American people to exercise those liberties responsibly. Haidt and the countless researchers who've exposed the risks of online life are performing an invaluable role. They're giving parents the information we need to be responsible. But the First Amendment rights of adults *and* children are too precious to suppress, especially when parents are best positioned to protect children from harm online.

David French is an Opinion columnist, writing about law, culture, religion and armed conflict. He is a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and a former constitutional litigator. His most recent book is "Divided We Fall: America's Secession Threat and How to Restore Our Nation." You can follow him on Threads (@davidfrenchjag).

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SUBSCRIBER-ONLY NEWSLETTER

David Wallace-Wells

Are Smartphones Driving Our Teens to Depression?

May 1, 2024

By David Wallace-Wells
Opinion Writer

Here is a story. In 2007, Apple released the iPhone, initiating the smartphone revolution that would quickly transform the world. In 2010, it added a front-facing camera, helping shift the social-media landscape toward images, especially selfies. Partly as a result, in the five years that followed, the nature of childhood and especially adolescence was fundamentally changed — a "great rewiring," in the words of the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt — such that between 2010 and 2015 mental health and well-being plummeted and suffering and despair exploded, particularly among teenage girls.

For young women, rates of hospitalization for nonfatal self-harm in the United States, which had bottomed out in 2009, started to rise again, according to data reported to the C.D.C., taking a leap beginning in 2012 and another beginning in 2016, and producing, over about a decade, an alarming 48 percent increase in such emergency room visits among American girls ages 15 to 19 and a shocking 188 percent increase among girls ages 10 to14.

Here is another story. In 2011, as part of the rollout of the Affordable Care Act, the Department of Health and Human Services issued a new set of guidelines that recommended that teenage girls should be screened annually for depression by their primary care physicians and that same year required that insurance providers cover such screenings in full. In 2015, H.H.S. finally mandated a coding change, proposed by the World Health Organization almost two decades before, that required hospitals to record whether an injury was self-inflicted or accidental — and which seemingly overnight nearly doubled rates for self-harm across all demographic groups. Soon thereafter, the coding of suicidal ideation was also updated. The effect of these bureaucratic changes on hospitalization data presumably varied from place to place. But in one place where it has been studied systematically, New Jersey, where 90 percent of children had health coverage even before the A.C.A., researchers have found that the changes explain nearly all of the state's apparent upward trend in suicide-related hospital visits, turning what were "essentially flat" trendlines into something that looked like a youth mental health "crisis."

Could both of these stories be partially true? Of course: Emotional distress among teenagers may be genuinely growing while simultaneous bureaucratic and cultural changes — more focus on mental health, destigmatization, growing comfort with therapy and medication — exaggerate the underlying trends. (This is what Adriana Corredor-Waldron, a co-author of the New Jersey study, believes — that suicidal behavior is distressingly high among teenagers in the United States and that many of our conventional measures are not very reliable to assess changes in suicidal behavior over time.) But over the past several years, Americans worrying over the well-being of teenagers have heard much less about that second story, which emphasizes changes in the broader culture of mental illness, screening guidelines and treatment, than the first one, which suggests smartphones and social-media use explain a whole raft of concerns about the well-being of the country's youth.

When the smartphone thesis first came to prominence more than six years ago, advanced by Haidt's sometime collaborator Jean Twenge, there was a fair amount of skepticism from scientists and social scientists and other commentators: *Were*

teenagers really suffering that much? they asked. *How much in this messy world could you pin on one piece of technology anyway?* But some things have changed since then, including the conventional liberal perspective on the virtues of Big Tech, and, in the past few years, as more data has rolled in and more red flags have been raised about American teenagers — about the culture of college campuses, about the political hopelessness or neuroticism or radicalism or fatalism of teenagers, about a growing political gender divide, about how often they socialize or drink or have sex — a two-part conventional wisdom has taken hold across the pundit class. First, that American teenagers are experiencing a mental health crisis; second, that it is the fault of phones.

"Smartphones and social media are destroying children's mental health," the Financial Times declared last spring. This spring, Haidt's new book on the subject, The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness, debuted at the top of the New York Times best-seller list. In its review of the book, The Guardian described the smartphone as "a pocket full of poison," and in an essay, The New Yorker accepted as a given that Gen Z was in the midst of a "mental health emergency" and that "social media is bad for young people." "Parents could see their phone-obsessed children changing and succumbing to distress," The Wall Street Journal reflected. "Now we know the true horror of what happened."

But, well, do we? Over the past five years, "Is it the phones?" has become "It's probably the phones," particularly among an anxious older generation processing bleak-looking charts of teenage mental health on social media as they are scrolling on their own phones. But however much we may think we know about how corrosive screen time is to mental health, the data looks murkier and more ambiguous than the headlines suggest — or than our own private anxieties, as parents and smartphone addicts, seem to tell us.

What do we really know about the state of mental health among teenagers today? Suicide offers the most concrete measure of emotional distress, and rates among American teenagers ages 15 to 19 have indeed risen over the past decade or so, to about 11.8 deaths per 100,000 in 2021 from about 7.5 deaths per 100,000 in 2009. But

the American suicide epidemic is not confined to teenagers. In 2022, the rate had increased roughly as much since 2000 for the country as a whole, suggesting a national story both broader and more complicated than one focused on the emotional vulnerabilities of teenagers to Instagram. And among the teenagers of other rich countries, there is essentially no sign of a similar pattern. As Max Roser of Our World in Data recently documented, suicide rates among older teenagers and young adults have held roughly steady or declined over the same time period in France, Spain, Italy, Austria, Germany, Greece, Poland, Norway and Belgium. In Sweden there were only very small increases.

Is there a stronger distress signal in the data for young women? Yes, somewhat. According to an international analysis by The Economist, suicide rates among young women in 17 wealthy countries have grown since 2003, by about 17 percent, to a 2020 rate of 3.5 suicides per 100,000 people. The rate among young women has always been low, compared with other groups, and among the countries in the Economist data set, the rate among male teenagers, which has hardly grown at all, remains almost twice as high. Among men in their 50s, the rate is more than seven times as high.

In some countries, we see concerning signs of convergence by gender and age, with suicide rates among young women growing closer to other demographic groups. But the pattern, across countries, is quite varied. In Denmark, where smartphone penetration was the highest in the world in 2017, rates of hospitalization for self-harm among 10- to 19-year-olds fell by more than 40 percent between 2008 and 2016. In Germany, there are today barely one-quarter as many suicides among women between 15 and 20 as there were in the early 1980s, and the number has been remarkably flat for more than two decades. In the United States, suicide rates for young men are still three and a half times as high as for young women, the recent increases have been larger in absolute terms among young men than among young women, and suicide rates for all teenagers have been gradually declining since 2018. In 2022, the latest year for which C.D.C. data is available, suicide declined by 18 percent for Americans ages 10 to 14 and 9 percent for those ages 15 to 24.

None of this is to say that everything is fine — that the kids are perfectly all right, that there is no sign at all of worsening mental health among teenagers, or that there isn't something significant and even potentially damaging about smartphone use and social media. Phones have changed us, and are still changing us, as anyone using one or observing the world through them knows well. But are they generating an obvious mental health crisis?

The picture that emerges from the suicide data is mixed and complicated to parse. Suicide is the hardest-to-dispute measure of despair, but not the most capacious. But while rates of depression and anxiety have grown strikingly for teenagers in certain parts of the world, including the U.S., it's tricky to disentangle those increases from growing mental-health awareness and destigmatization, and attempts to measure the phenomenon in different ways can yield very different results.

According to data Haidt uses, from the U.S. National Survey on Drug Use and Health, conducted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the percent of teenage girls reporting major depressive episodes in the last year grew by about 50 percent between 2005 and 2017, for instance, during which time the share of teenage boys reporting the same grew by roughly 75 percent from a lower level. But in a biannual C.D.C. survey of teenage mental health, the share of teenagers reporting that they had been persistently sad for a period of at least two weeks in the past year grew from only 28.5 percent in 2005 to 31.5 percent in 2017. Two different surveys tracked exactly the same period, and one showed an enormous increase in depression while the other showed almost no change at all.

And if the rise of mood disorders were a straightforward effect of the smartphone, you'd expect to see it everywhere smartphones were, and, as with suicide, you don't. In Britain, the share of young people who reported "feeling down" or experiencing depression grew from 31 percent in 2012 to 38 percent on the eve of the pandemic and to 41 percent in 2021. That is significant, though by other measures British teenagers appear, if more depressed than they were in the 2000s, not much more depressed than they were in the 1990s.

Overall, when you dig into the country-by-country data, many places seem to be registering increases in depression among teenagers, particularly among the countries of Western Europe and North America. But the trends are hard to disentangle from changes in diagnostic patterns and the medicalization of sadness, as Lucy Foulkes has argued, and the picture varies considerably from country to country. In Canada, for instance, surveys of teenagers' well-being show a significant decline between 2015 and 2021, particularly among young women; in South Korea rates of depressive episodes among teenagers fell by 35 percent between 2006 and 2018.

Because much of our sense of teenage well-being comes from self-reported surveys, when you ask questions in different ways, the answers vary enormously. Haidt likes to cite data collected as part of an international standardized test program called PISA, which adds a few questions about loneliness at school to its sections covering progress in math, science and reading, and has found a pattern of increasing loneliness over the past decade. But according to the World Happiness Report, life satisfaction among those ages 15 to 24 around the world has been improving pretty steadily since 2013, with more significant gains among women, as the smartphone completed its global takeover, with a slight dip during the first two years of the pandemic. An international review published in 2020, examining more than 900,000 adolescents in 36 countries, showed no change in life satisfaction between 2002 and 2018.

"It doesn't look like there's one big uniform thing happening to people's mental health," said Andrew Przybylski, a professor at Oxford. "In some particular places, there are some measures moving in the wrong direction. But if I had to describe the global trend over the last decade, I would say there is no uniform trend showing a global crisis, and, where things are getting worse for teenagers, no evidence that it is the result of the spread of technology."

If Haidt is the public face of worry about teenagers and phones, Przybylski is probably the most prominent skeptic of the thesis. Others include Amy Orben, at the University of Cambridge, who in January told The Guardian, "I think the concern about phones as a singular entity are overblown"; Chris Ferguson, at

Stetson University, who is about to publish a new meta-analysis showing no relationship between smartphone use and well-being; and Candice Odgers, of the University of California, Irvine, who published a much-debated review of Haidt in Nature, in which she declared "the book's repeated suggestion that digital technologies are rewiring our children's brains and causing an epidemic of mental illness is not supported by science."

Does that overstate the case? In a technical sense, I think, no: There may be some concerning changes in the underlying incidence of certain mood disorders among American teenagers over the past couple of decades, but they are hard to separate from changing methods of measuring and addressing mental health and mental illness. There isn't great data on international trends in teenage suicide — but in those places with good reporting, the rates are generally not worsening — and the trends around anxiety, depression and well-being are ambiguous elsewhere in the world. And the association of those local increases with the rise of the smartphone, while now almost conventional wisdom among people like me, is, among specialists, very much a contested claim. Indeed, even Haidt, who has also emphasized broader changes to the culture of childhood , estimated that social media use is responsible for only about 10 percent to 15 percent of the variation in teenage well-being — which would be a significant correlation, given the complexities of adolescent life and of social science, but is also a much more measured estimate than you tend to see in headlines trumpeting the connection. And many others have arrived at much smaller estimates still.

But this all also raises the complicated question of what exactly we mean by "science," in the context of social phenomena like these, and what standard of evidence we should be applying when asking whether something qualifies as a "crisis" or "emergency" and what we know about what may have caused it. There is a reason we rarely reduce broad social changes to monocausal explanations, whether we're talking about the rapid decline of teenage pregnancy in the 2000s, or the spike in youth suicide in the late '80s and early 1990s, or the rise in crime that

began in the 1960s: Lives are far too complex to easily reduce to the influence of single factors, whether the factor is a recession or political conditions or, for that matter, climate breakdown.

To me, the number of places where rates of depression among teenagers are markedly on the rise is a legitimate cause for concern. But it is also worth remembering that, for instance, between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s, diagnoses of American youth for bipolar disorder grew about 40-fold, and it is hard to find anyone who believes that change was a true reflection of underlying incidence. And when we find ourselves panicking over charts showing rapid increases in, say, the number of British girls who say they're often unhappy or feel they are a failure, it's worth keeping in mind that the charts were probably zoomed in to emphasize the spike, and the increase is only from about 5 percent of teenagers to about 10 percent in the first case, or from about 15 percent to about 20 percent in the second. It may also be the case, as Orben has emphasized, that smartphones and social media may be problematic for some teenagers without doing emotional damage to a majority of them. That's not to say that in taking in the full scope of the problem, there is nothing there. But overall it is probably less than meets the eye.

If you are having thoughts of suicide, call or text 988 to reach the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline or go to SpeakingOfSuicide.com/resources for a list of additional resources.

Further reading (and listening):

- On Jonathan Haidt's After Babel Substack, a series of admirable responses to critics of "The Anxious Generation" and the smartphone thesis by Haidt, his lead researcher Zach Rausch, and his sometime collaborator Jean Twenge.
- In Vox, Eric Levitz weighs the body of evidence for and against the thesis.
- Tom Chivers and Stuart Ritchie deliver a useful overview of the evidence and its limitations on the Studies Show podcast.

- Five experts review the evidence for the smartphone hypothesis in The Guardian.
- A Substack survey of “diagnostic inflation” and teenage mental health.
