



Oral Testimony of James P. Steyer

CEO and Founder, Common Sense Media

**before the House Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology**

hearing on

**“Holding Big Tech Accountable:
Targeted Reforms to Tech's Legal Immunity”**

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Chairman Pallone, Chairman Doyle, Ranking Member McMorris Rogers, Ranking Member Latta, and distinguished subcommittee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify at this important hearing.

I am James P. Steyer, the founder and CEO of Common Sense Media, America's leading organization dedicated to helping kids and families harness the power of media and technology as a positive force in kids' lives.

I'm testifying as a father of 4 and children's advocate about how Facebook and some other social media platforms are failing to meet the needs of children and youth, and the expectations of their parents.

Ten years ago, I wrote a book called "**Talking Back to Facebook**" that highlighted the harms to kids and teens from that platform, including an entire chapter on body image – one of the very issues that your courageous panelist, **Frances Haugen**, speaks about so urgently. I met with Facebook leaders to share my experience and those of Common Sense parents. And Facebook did nothing to change its harmful practices.

Congress must act...on a bipartisan basis.

For many reasons, but perhaps none more important than the well-being of our children, Congress must hold platforms accountable. This is a watershed moment. The time is right to take action to protect our kids, our families, and our democracy.

Ms. Haugen has revealed the very disturbing truth that we have been talking about for years. Companies design their platforms to exploit kids and teens' vulnerabilities and get them to spend more time online - to make more money.

Children are uniquely vulnerable online because their brains are still developing, they are prone to oversharing, and they are not equipped to think about the consequences of their online actions. They also spend more time online than ever before, particularly black, Latino, and lower-income children.

There are clearly advantages that kids, and all of us, experience from being online. But just as clear are the unrelenting harms to kids and teens.

My written testimony provides greater detail, but here are just a few ways that social media hurts kids and teens:

- Platforms' algorithms drag kids down rabbit holes that recommend increasingly harmful content, to promote eating disorders, body dysmorphia, suicide ideation, and more. This hurts kids and teens already struggling with their mental health, like Molly Russell, who tragically took her own life in 2017 just days before her 15th birthday. In her final months, Molly was consumed with Instagram content encouraging self-harm and suicide.
- Platforms feed off kids and teens' desire to be accepted by peers through "likes," follows, comments, and reactions.
- Platforms enable harmful and sometimes fatal viral challenges, like the "blackout challenge" on TikTok, which tragically ended in several children's deaths, the youngest of whom was just 10 years old.
- Teens look to social media more than ever now as their source of news, yet platforms knowingly amplify misinformation and disinformation and are not doing enough to fact-check or remove patently false information.

Parents are worried about their kids and teens' well-being but they are powerless to change industry practices. And existing consumer protection laws are not enough to protect kids and other vulnerable populations.

Congress must act. There is a growing sense of urgency.

As has been said, many platforms are not just turning a blind eye to harmful content on their sites – they make intentional design choices to get more views and engagement, and more ad revenue, and they use Section 230, and other policy loopholes, as a shield.

Facebook and some other platforms have taken advantage of their Section 230 immunity to act with impunity.

Our children, and our society, are paying the price.

Reforming 230 is one of several steps needed to hold Big Tech accountable. There must be a comprehensive approach.

We support your bill, Chairman Pallone, to limit 230 liability protection when a platform knows or should know its algorithm is personally recommending content that is promoting or recklessly amplifying harmful content, which many platforms clearly do. And we support the other three bills under consideration today, among others.

To be clear, Congress must take a truly comprehensive approach; we must update privacy laws, especially COPPA, enact the CAMRA research bill, and pass the KIDS Act, to make the internet a healthier place for all kids and teens, and for our society, by turning off the firehose of data companies collect from them, and banning manipulative design and harmful algorithms.

Companies will not regulate themselves, especially as they venture into the lucrative worlds of VR, AR, and AI with the added dangers they pose to kids and other groups.

The Wild West wasn't tamed by hiring a sheriff and gathering a posse. The harmful effects of the internet won't be either. We need thoughtful and comprehensive change in tech policy with the power of strong enforcement.

Congress must act. This is truly a watershed moment.