

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 12, 2023

Mr. Neal Mohan
Chief Executive Officer
YouTube, Inc.
901 Cherry Ave
San Bruno, CA 94066

Dear Mr. Mohan,

We write to express continued deep concern for the impact of social media on the mental health and development of children and teens. While social media has become an innovative tool for people to connect with friends, family, and others, these platforms also present a serious risk to underage users.

The proliferation of computers, smart phones, and other connected devices has dramatically increased underaged consumption of online content,¹ with nearly two-thirds of teenagers using social media platforms daily.² A growing body of research has simultaneously shown evidence of negative health impacts of excessive social media use on underage users.³ We know that social media is contributing significantly to the ongoing youth mental health crisis, exacerbated by increased engagement on social media platforms during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, and it cannot go ignored and unaddressed.⁴

Reporting has highlighted that social media companies are aware that their platforms have a negative impact on children; and are continuing to prioritize engagement over the consequences. In 2021, former Facebook employee, Frances Haugen, publicly shared information that Facebook knew of the significant harms Instagram caused to teen mental health,⁵ particularly to young girls, and other current and former employees have raised major concerns about these products.⁶ There is significant evidence that companies can be doing more to adequately protect children.

Parents are rightfully worried about their children's privacy. Social media companies have taken advantage of, and profited off, underaged users through manipulative design and recommendation tools, encouragement of in-app purchases, targeted advertising, and expose them to harmful content and unhealthy behaviors. At this critical point in their brain development, many kids do not fully understand how companies are collecting, processing, and using their data – nor grasp the potential consequences of how this data is used.

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/>

² https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web_0.pdf

³ <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2023/02/harms-benefits-social-media-kids>

⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9407706/>

⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/26/frances-haugen-facebook-whistleblower-documents/>

⁶ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739>

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy recently released an advisory on social media and youth mental health underscoring our deep concern that companies are not responsibly mitigating the risks and subsequent harms to kids on their platforms.⁷ As he notes, parents cannot bear the entire burden of monitoring and managing their children online in the age of social media.⁸ These products must be developed and designed in a responsible manner to even the playing field.

Given the immediate and direct harms caused to children, we respectfully request answers to the following questions by June 30, 2023, to clarify what steps your company is taking to protect children and teens online, by implementing the Surgeon General's recommendations regarding what technology companies can do to design safe online environments and prevent, minimize, and address the risks associated with social media:

1. What steps does your company take to mitigate children and teens' exposure to harmful content, online abuse, and other threats and to prioritize their online health and safety?
2. Does your company conduct transparent assessments of your platform, algorithms, products, and services to determine the potential health and behavioral impacts on children and teens?
 - a. How often does your company conduct such assessments?
 - b. When was the last such assessment conducted?
 - c. If you have conducted such assessments, what have those assessments found?
 - d. What recommendations from such assessments has your company implemented and when?
 - e. What recommendations from such assessments has your company failed to implement and why have you failed to implement them?
 - f. Does your company share data and findings from such assessments with independent researchers, health experts, or auditors?
 - g. If you do share such data and findings, have you received recommendations from independent researchers, health experts or auditors that have reviewed that information?
 - h. Have their concerns or recommendations been used to inform design choices that prioritize the health of children and teens?
 - i. If you are not already doing so, do you commit to conduct transparent assessments of your platform, algorithms, products and services to determine the potential health and behavioral impacts on children and teens, to implement recommendations that emerge from those assessments and to share data and findings from these assessments with independent researchers, health experts, or auditors to assess the potential health impacts of your platform on underage users?
3. Does your company engage or allow independent third parties to conduct transparent assessments of your platform, algorithms, products, and services to determine the potential health and behavioral impacts on children and teens?
 - a. When was the last such assessment conducted?
 - b. If you have engaged or allowed such assessments, what have those assessments found?
 - c. What recommendations from such assessments has your company implemented and when?

⁷ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/05/23/social-media-children-danger-parents-surgeon-general/>

- d. What recommendations from such assessments has your company failed to implement and why have you failed to implement them?
 - e. Does your company share data and findings from such assessments with other independent researchers, health experts, or auditors?
 - f. If you do share such data and findings, have you received recommendations from independent researchers, health experts or auditors?
 - g. Have their concerns or recommendations been used to inform design choices that prioritize the health of children and teens?
 - h. If you are not already doing so, do you commit to engage and allow transparent third party assessments of your platform, algorithms, products and services to determine the potential health and behavioral impacts on children and teens, to implement recommendations that emerge from those assessments and to share data and findings from these assessments with independent researchers, health experts, or auditors to assess the potential health impacts of your platform on underage users?
4. Does your company share algorithmic data with independent researchers, health experts, or auditors?
 - a. If so, have their concerns or recommendations been used to inform design choices that prioritize the health of children and teens?
 - b. If not, do you commit to share algorithmic data with independent researchers, health experts, or auditors to assess the potential health impacts of your platform on underage users?
 - c. Do you commit to publicly share data and findings from these assessments to offer parents and others transparency on the potential health impacts of your platform on underage users?
5. Does your company currently have an advisory committee or office dedicated to informing the safe design of your platform for underaged users?
 - a. If not, does your company intend to create an advisory committee on this subject, and when does your company expect to establish this committee?
6. What steps are your company taking to ensure the design and default settings of your platform prioritize the highest standards of health and safety for underaged users?
7. Does your company consult with mental health and youth development experts to inform the design of your platform and potential impacts on underage users?
8. Please describe any minimum age requirements you have adopted for the use of your platform.
9. How does your company enforce any such policy?
 - a. Does your platform use age verification technology?
 - b. How does that technology work?
 - c. Can your platform's algorithm determine the approximate age of a user, and enforce increased protections for users identified as underage?
10. What tools and processes does your company make available for parents, children, educators, researchers and others to raise concerns or complaints regarding harmful content, online abuse, and other threats to underage users' health and safety on your platform?
 - a. What is your platform's average time in evaluating and adjudicating requests or complaints from users of online harassment, harmful content, and other threats to underage users?
 - b. When evaluating these requests does your platform provide transparent means for these individuals to understand outcomes of adjudicated requests?

Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress



Jake Auchincloss
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David Trone
Member of Congress



Marc Veasey
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