

Sen. Baldwin: In letter to facebook, requests information on how Instagram promotes posts glorifying eating disorders to younger users

Posted on Friday, Oct 15, 2021

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WASHINGTON – U.S. Senators Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV) sent a letter to Facebook expressing concern that content on Instagram may promote eating disorders among young users, specifically teenagers and girls.

In the letter, the senators highlighted Facebook Whistleblower Frances Haugen’s testimony to the Senate Commerce Committee last week, noting Haugen’s belief that **“Facebook knows that they are leading young users to anorexia content.”** The senators also wrote that **“Ms. Haugen’s complaints to the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) also indicate that Facebook has additional information about its impact on eating disorders that Facebook has not shared with policymakers, parents, or the public.”**

They continued later in the letter: **“The stakes here are incredibly high — studies have found that eating disorders have one of the highest mortality rates of any mental illness. We have long fought to ensure Americans can access treatment services for eating disorders, but more must be done to protect our kids from being exposed to content on Facebook and Instagram that glorifies and promotes eating disorders.”**

Baldwin, Klobuchar and Capito have been long-standing leaders in ensuring Americans can access treatment services for eating disorders. They cosponsored the bipartisan *Anna Westin Act*, which included provisions to increase training and

education on eating disorders and ensure parity for insurance coverage of residential treatment of eating disorders. Provisions of this bill were ultimately signed into law in 2016 as part of the *21st Century Cures Act*.

The bill was named in honor of Anna Westin of Chaska, Minnesota, who was diagnosed with anorexia at the age of 16. Despite the urgency of her condition, her family was informed that they had to wait until their insurance company 'certified' Anna's treatment, ultimately delaying and limiting the treatment Anna received. After struggling with the disease for five years, Anna died at the age of 21.

Full text of the letter can be found [HERE](#) and below.

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg and Mr. Mosseri:

We write to express our concern about the dangers of Instagram, especially for young people who suffer from eating disorders. Instagram has broad reach among teenage women and girls, meaning that harmful content posted to its platform can be especially dangerous.

We are well aware of the dangers of these diseases. The three of us were the leaders of the *Anna Westin Act*, a bill that was signed into law in December 2016 and increased training and education on eating disorders and ensured parity for insurance coverage of residential treatment of eating disorders.

In her testimony before the Senate Commerce Committee, Frances Haugen told us that "Facebook knows that they are leading young users to anorexia content." Other efforts found that Instagram not only failed to take action on accounts that promote eating disorders, but that the platform actively promoted them. Thanks to the whistleblower's disclosures and testimony, we know that internal Facebook research documented that Instagram makes eating issues worse for 17% of teen girls who use the platform.

Ms. Haugen has stated that Facebook's own research says that Instagram is "distinctly worse than other forms of social media" in its harms to teenagers. Teens are uniquely vulnerable to this kind of harmful content, and studies indicate eating disorders often begin in the early teens and twenties. Ms. Haugen's complaints to the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) also indicate Facebook has additional information about its impact on eating disorders that Facebook has not shared with policymakers, parents, or the public.

The stakes here are incredibly high — studies have found that eating disorders have one of the highest mortality rates of any mental illness. We have long fought to ensure Americans can access treatment services for eating disorders, but more must be done to protect our kids from being exposed to content on Facebook and Instagram that glorifies and promotes eating disorders.

We ask that you answer the following questions by October 27, 2021:

1. What measures, both automated and manual, do you employ on Instagram to detect accounts or content that promote unhealthy eating and other eating disorders?
2. How many Instagram accounts have you removed in the last year for promoting unhealthy eating habits?
3. How many Instagram users do you estimate have seen content promoting unhealthy eating in the last year? Please provide estimates for both all users and separately for teenage or younger users.
4. What resources do you offer to Instagram users who were shown harmful content promoting unhealthy eating?
5. Please describe any additional information you have collected about the relationship between any of your apps and eating disorders affecting your users. This includes any academic research, market studies, informal studies, user interviews, surveys, strategy documents, or other documents.
6. Facebook's internal research found that teens self-report "inappropriate advertisements targeted to vulnerable groups" as one of Instagram's harms.
 - What are the top 100 advertisements seen by teenage users of Instagram in the last year?
 - For each advertisement, please describe the content of the advertisement, including any videos, pictures, and text included in the advertisement, as well as data about the reach and viewership of the advertisement.

An online version of this release is available [here](#).