

A Better Wisconsin Together: GOP ignores the elephant in the room, lets Big Tech off the hook With latest proposal on social media

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MADISON, Wis. — We're all concerned about our and our children's safety when using social media. But a Republican state legislator's recent proposal to restrict access to social media for minors ignores the elephant in the room by letting tech companies off the hook for developing safe platforms and protecting the privacy of underage users, according to Jake Hajdu, disinformation coordinator at A Better Wisconsin Together.

"We all care about our safety online, especially for kids using social media," said Hajdu. "And we know that laws that focus on how tech companies currently design platforms to addict kids, and laws that hold them responsible for their product features, are what actually get to the heart of the issue."

As proposed by State Rep. Dave Steffen, parents would be expected to monitor their kids' online activity without raising the bar for the platforms' addictive and dangerous product designs. Similar legislation passing the buck onto parents while absolving Meta, Google, TikTok, Snapchat, and other tech giants of their responsibility to create products that are safe for children was most recently enacted in Utah.

The mental health and safety crisis young people face today is being exploited by social media products, and isn't the fault of parents or kids, Hajdu noted. All children deserve to be safe, regardless of whether their parents can access the suite of tools provided by the platforms.

The exploitative parts of the internet that collect data for companies' profit and feed addictive content to kids is a direct product of Big Tech's business model and product engineering.

Laws that instead focus on how tech is designed in unsafe ways and on tech companies' responsibility for the product features that put people at risk are what is making a difference. For example, in the United Kingdom, where a bill focused on tech design is already law, TikTok has turned off strangers' ability to message kids, Google turned on safe search by default, and YouTube disabled autoplay by default for users under the age of 18.

Hajdu concluded, "As well meaning as Rep. Steffen may be, by ignoring the elephant in the room, Big Tech and the platforms they've designed, he's not getting to the real issue or the right solution. The way forward is requiring Big Tech to build better platforms for kids, ones that are safe by design and that remain safe as they evolve and change practices and add features."