

'We're basically pushers': Court filing alleges staff at social media giants compared their platforms to drugs

Meta said the allegations "rely on cherry-picked quotes and misinformed opinions" to present a misleading narrative.



Attendees visit the Meta booth at the Game Developers Conference 2023 in San Francisco on March 22, 2023. | Jeff Chiu/AP

By **TYLER KATZENBERGER**
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SACRAMENTO, California — Top Meta staff allegedly compared Instagram to a drug and worked for years to obscure the social media platform's potential dangers from parents and children, even as they appeared to acknowledge their technology was harmful, according to newly unsealed internal communications cited in a court filing.

The 5,807-page filing was submitted this month as part of proceedings in a [high-profile, years-old lawsuit](#) alleging social media companies including Meta, TikTok, Snap and YouTube knowingly designed defective products that are addictive and harmful for teens. A federal judge ordered its contents be unsealed in an Oct. 30 order.

The filing includes a series of detailed reports from four experts, who examined internal documents, research and direct communications between engineers and executives at the companies. Experts' opinions broadly concluded that the companies knew their platforms were addictive but continued to prioritize user engagement over safety.

“IG [Instagram] is a drug,” Shayli Jimenez, a Meta senior researcher, is quoted as saying in one internal communication, referenced during a sealed deposition conducted earlier this year.

“LOL, I mean, all social media. We’re basically pushers,” another Meta employee then allegedly responded in the same conversation. (Jimenez said in her deposition, according to the filing, that those comments were made “sarcastically.”)

The striking comments appear to lend weight to the most critical views of the social media giants. They also seemingly cut against Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s and other executives’ repeated insistence in public and [to lawmakers in Congress](#) that they have prioritized kids’ safety and parental control in product design.

Zuckerberg’s own deposition from this March is referenced in the filing. In a February 2016 email discussing Facebook’s live video streaming platform, Zuckerberg is quoted as suggesting the company should shield teens’ live video content from their parents as a way to avoid losing young people to competitors.

“If we tell teens’ parents and teachers about their live videos, that will probably ruin the product from the start,” Zuckerberg is quoted as writing in the email. He added: “My guess is we’ll need to be very good about not notifying parents / teachers.”

A Meta spokesperson told POLITICO in a statement that the company “strongly disagree[s] with these allegations,” arguing they “rely on cherry-picked quotes and misinformed opinions in an attempt to present a deliberately misleading picture.” The company pointed to its recently introduced Instagram “Teen Accounts” and other parental controls on features



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A Google spokesperson said in a statement to POLITICO on Saturday that the lawsuits “fundamentally misunderstand” how its social media platform YouTube works and called the allegations “simply not true.” The spokesperson pointed to safety controls developed in consultation with experts as evidence it has “developed dedicated tools for young people.”

Snap and TikTok did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Plaintiffs suing social media companies in the ongoing 2022 case compiled some of the evidence unsealed in the court filing into [a brief](#) that was filed Friday in the U.S. District Court of Northern California.

Their brief, [reported first by Time magazine](#), alleges Meta was aware of sexually predatory behavior occurring on its platforms and had a precise understanding of how its content delivery mechanisms exacerbated eating disorders, body dysmorphia and even suicide in teens.

“Despite understanding that the impact can be very negative, they did not warn the public,” Previn Warren, an attorney representing plaintiffs in the case, told POLITICO in an interview. “They essentially buried these research findings.”

Many of the documents referenced in the Nov. 14 Los Angeles Superior Court filing remain sealed, as do depositions of employees from Meta and other companies. Most are not included in full. Those that are included are snippets of longer conversations or contain redactions that obscure some details, like the names of the senders on certain internal messages.

However, in the few documents and quotes from depositions included in the filing, employees in multiple instances compared their technology to hard drugs and discussed tech addiction in a seemingly joking manner.

At TikTok, internal documents indicated the app's safety features for kids under 14 were weaker than those provided on the Chinese equivalent to TikTok, Douyin, according to an expert opinion included in the filing that included review of sealed evidence.

“We give spinach to kids in China and opium to kids in America,” the document is quoted as reading in the expert opinion, prepared by University of California, Davis communications professor Drew Cingel.

In a statement sent Sunday after publication, a spokesperson for TikTok said the quotation was “grossly inaccurate.”

“TikTok documents indicated no such thing, but rather cited the existence of others making that false claim,” the spokesperson added.

[A 60 Minutes report](#) from November 2022 quotes Tristan Harris, a tech ethicist and former Google employee, accusing TikTok parent company ByteDance of making its Chinese platform “a spinach version of TikTok, while they ship the opium version to the rest of the world.”

At Snap, a January 2017 email chain quotes an employee responding to data that showed nearly half of users who participated in “Snapstreaks,” which counts how many days in a row two friends exchange photos or videos, were teens.

“Yeah we seem to have tapped into some mass psychosis where 17 million people must keep the streaks going,” the employee, whose name is redacted in court filing, wrote in response. “I’m glad what we are making will make it even more fun to streak.”

Meta, TikTok and YouTube have continued to defend personalized feeds against legislative efforts to mandate parental controls, arguing they use personalized recommendations to show kids age-appropriate content. The companies filed a lawsuit last month asking federal courts to block a 2024

California law that requires minors obtain parental consent before viewing algorithmic content feeds like TikTok's "For You" page.

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