



The Daily Dish

Children and Online Safety

DOUGLAS HOLTZ-EAKIN | MARCH 30, 2023

The recent House Energy and Commerce Committee [hearing](#) with the CEO of TikTok featured an intense focus on the potential for children to be exposed to inappropriate content. (This is somewhat odd since the hearing was supposed to be focused on the threats to U.S. security and personal privacy posed by TikTok. This got little attention.) As Josh Levine points out in his latest [piece](#), this is hardly a one-time event: “House and Senate lawmakers [plan to re-introduce](#) several bills intended to protect children’s safety online, key among them the Eliminating Abusive and Rampant Neglect of Interactive Technologies Act and the Kids Online Safety Act.” What’s more, “policymakers are considering the more sweeping Making Age-Verification Technology Uniform, Robust, and Effective Act introduced by Senator Josh Hawley in February.”

Levine reviews each approach in detail, but a common theme emerges: These doses of legislative medicine certainly have their side effects and may be worse than the disease. For example, the MATURE Act would preclude those under the age of 16 from creating an account and would require users to provide a scan of government-issued identification. As a result, MATURE would require invasive data collection from anyone seeking access to a wide array of websites, not just large social media platforms.

Similarly, some of the bills would disincentivize the use of technologies such as end-to-end encryption. That might seem an appealing way to expose those trafficking in child sexual abuse material, but encryption also ensures minors can communicate with friends and family without fear of their information being exposed online. None of the proposed bills is without serious tradeoffs.

What might work better? Levine offers two ideas. The first is a federal data privacy law that would establish a common foundation for how websites handle, collect, store, and use consumer data. “This approach would also nudge developers to [design](#) products with privacy in mind, protecting consumers, fostering trust between users and platforms, and promoting innovation without compromising individual privacy. With a federal privacy law, platforms would have strong incentives to better manage and protect children’s information, limiting the risk that nefarious actors could use such information to harm children.”

Second, he argues that “lawmakers should evaluate the [benefits](#) of [existing digital literacy](#) programs and consider potential improvements. Some [research](#) has shown that [minors](#) with higher digital literacy skills were [better prepared](#) to [deal](#) with online harms, avoid harmful experiences, and [cope](#) with negative emotions related to digital interactions. The [Department of Education](#), [several state](#) and [city](#) education departments and [organizations](#), and [international organizations](#) have [resources](#) for students, parents, and educators related to digital literacy.”

Online safety is an issue that simply is not going to go away. Congress needs to coalesce on workable solutions to address the problem.