

Meta and YouTube head to trial over harm to children after TikTok settles

Warm-up question: Do you think technology companies should be legally responsible for how their products affect children's mental health? Why or why not?

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MICHEL MARTIN, HOST: Social media apps have long been **accused** of harming kids. Now a jury will hear those claims for the first time in a trial kicking off in a Los Angeles courtroom today.

STEVE INSKEEP, HOST: A key question is whether tech companies **deliberately** built their platforms to addict young users. How the jury decides could reshape the tech industry.

MARTIN: NPR's Shannon Bond is following the case, and she's with us now. Good morning.

SHANNON BOND, BYLINE: Good morning, Michel.

MARTIN: So tell us more about how we got here. What are the details of this trial?

BOND: Yeah. So this case in California state court is being brought by a teenage **plaintiff** known as K.G.M. She says she started using social media at age 10, and she says her excessive use led to mental health problems, including depression and **body dysmorphia**. Now, the defendants in this case are Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok, and so this trial is going to be a rare look inside how some of the most popular and powerful social media platforms operate. Jurors are going to be presented with thousands of pages of internal documents. That includes research the companies themselves have conducted on children. They're going to hear from expert witnesses. They're going to hear from K.G.M. herself. Here's Matthew Bergman, K.G.M.'s attorney.

MATTHEW BERGMAN: The public is going to know for the first time what social media companies have done to prioritize their profits over the safety of our kids.

BOND: And tech executives are also expected to **take the stand**, including notably Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Instagram and Facebook owner Meta, and Adam Mosseri, the head of Instagram.

MARTIN: So that's quite a list. But, Shannon, I'm thinking that we have heard these kinds of claims a lot. Are there other cases like this?

BOND: Yeah. This case is actually just the first in a wave of lawsuits against social media companies. They've been brought by more than a thousand individual plaintiffs, hundreds of school districts and dozens of state attorneys general. And I should note Snapchat recently settled with the plaintiff in this first trial, but it's also named in these other lawsuits. Now, broadly, in these cases, the plaintiffs are accusing these companies of designing features like infinite scroll and auto-playing videos, frequent notifications that they say make these apps nearly impossible for kids to put down. And they say in some cases, this has led to depression, **eating disorders**, self-harm - even suicide. And the plaintiffs are seeking monetary damages, as well as changes to the way these social media apps are designed.

MARTIN: And what do the companies say?

BOND: Well, as you'd expect, they dispute these **allegations**. They say they've worked to make their platforms safer for kids. They argue there's no clinical diagnosis of addiction to social media, and they say a direct link between using social media and mental health problems in kids has not been proven. Now, the companies also say that federal law, including the First Amendment, protects the decisions they make about content, including the design of their platforms. I spoke with Eric Goldman, who's a law professor at Santa Clara University. And he says if juries end up siding with plaintiffs, these cases could really change how not just social media but the larger internet works.

ERIC GOLDMAN: If the plaintiffs win, the internet will almost certainly look different. And probably it will be a far less conversational one than we have today.

BOND: He's **wary** of courts or regulators getting involved in these design decisions.

MARTIN: Shannon, before we let you go, you said there are more than a thousand plaintiffs bringing similar cases. How does that work?

BOND: Yeah. Because there are so many, these cases have been combined into two big buckets - one in state court here in California, one in federal court. And depending how juries decide a handful of initial cases, including this one starting in LA, the parties could enter **settlement** talks that involve all of the plaintiffs. You know, and eventually, this could wind up similar to landmark settlements reached with the opioid manufacturers and tobacco companies, which led those industries to pay out billions of dollars to victims. That's certainly what the plaintiffs are hoping for.

MARTIN: That is NPR's Shannon Bond. Shannon, thank you.

BOND: Thank you.

Vocabulary and Phrases:

1. **Accuse:** To claim that someone has done something wrong or illegal.
2. **Deliberately:** Intentionally; done on purpose rather than by accident.
3. **Plaintiff:** A person who brings a legal case against another party in court.
4. **Body dysmorphia:** A mental health condition in which a person has an unhealthy obsession with perceived flaws in their appearance.
5. **Take the stand:** To testify as a witness in court.
6. **Eating disorder:** A serious mental health condition involving unhealthy behaviors related to food, weight, or body image.
7. **Allegation:** A claim or accusation that has not yet been proven.
8. **Wary:** Cautious or hesitant because of possible risks or dangers.
9. **Settlement:** An agreement to resolve a legal dispute without continuing to trial.

Fill in the Blank

Use the correct word or phrase from the vocabulary list.

1. Several tech executives are expected to _____ during the trial.
2. Parents and schools have _____ social media companies of harming children.
3. She reported struggling with depression and _____.
4. Some lawsuits link social media use to depression, self-harm, and _____.
5. The companies deny each _____ made against them.
6. Depending on early verdicts, the parties may enter _____ talks.
7. The lawsuit claims the platforms were _____ designed to be addictive.
8. Some experts are _____ about courts deciding how platforms should be designed.
9. The teenage _____ says her mental health suffered after years of social media use.

Comprehension Questions:

1. Who is bringing the first lawsuit against social media companies, and what are her claims?
2. Which companies are named as defendants in this trial?
3. What evidence will jurors be asked to consider during the case?
4. What kinds of design features do plaintiffs argue are harmful to children?
5. How do the tech companies defend themselves against these claims?
6. Why could this case influence many other lawsuits involving social media companies?

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you believe social media platforms can be addictive, even without a formal medical diagnosis? Why or why not?
2. Where should responsibility lie for children's online behavior—parents, companies, governments, or users themselves?
3. How might changes to social media design affect how people communicate online?
4. Are court cases an effective way to regulate technology, or should laws be updated instead?
5. Can you think of other industries that were forced to change after major lawsuits?
6. If large settlements occur, do you think they will meaningfully improve child safety online? Why or why not?