

# Social media is making kids sad – and it's bad news for democracy

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Young people have been made to fear an outside world that is actually safer than the one they're exposed to online

No, the kids are NOT alright. And as our future depends on them, we have to do something about it.

This week the US surgeon general, Dr Vivek Murthy, did democracy a great favour by stating what surely must have been obvious to literally everyone for some time: social media is negatively affecting the mental health of teens.

Murthy's comments signal that the fears expressed in the Atlantic's blockbuster 2017 report that asks "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" have come true. Western teenagers are spending nearly five hours a day on social media on average and a third were staying up until midnight on weeknights on their devices, Murthy said. Is it a coincidence then that the recent world happiness report found that young people in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are now the unhappiest age group in their communities? Have a look at the nearest teen's phone and consider the relentless barrage of precision-targeted consumer manipulation, platformed bullying, gross sensationalism and naked propaganda they're exposed to and form your own view.

Adults can barely cope with this stuff; the very existence of the word "doomscrolling" proves the breadth of the problem. You don't have to write a book about QAnon to see how this madness can afflict and radicalise the educated, the mature, the experienced. Just give your own personal social media feeds a glance and you'll no doubt see "GLORY TO THE MARTYRS!" declarations or anti-vax conspiracies. Wasn't the take-home lesson of Australia's failed Indigenous voice to parliament referendum the true extent of homegrown online whackadoo?

Murthy's concern is that allowing children to use social media is like giving them medicine that is not proven to be safe. He also said the failure of governments to better regulate social media in recent years was "insane". You can read all his insights here.

Or you can read similar concerns about it here, from me, back in 2018, about the discovery that Instagram was making girls hate themselves and their bodies. Or from me again a few weeks ago about kids being conned by TikTok influencers into a consumer obsession with products that aren't safe for them. Or when I begged for all smartphones to be smashed here. Carla Wilshire's little book *Time to Reboot* puts the decades of research into a terrifyingly gendered context. Nina Jankowicz's *How to Lose the Information War* about the reach of disinformation operations should be on every democracy-enthusiast's bookshelf. And Talia Lavin's *Culture Warlords* makes it clear just how extreme online extremism really is.

There are hundreds of books, thousands of articles and a rising mountain of scholarly consensus. Now the US surgeon general is ringing the alarm and still – still – governments are acting powerless in the face of the corporate might of overcapitalised platform behemoths. Ruthless platform regulation is imperative. Not in piecemeal "anti-doxx" legislation, but root and branch reform. Firstly, because our children are unhappy and fixated on screens that make

The Guardian March 2024

<https://www.theguardian.com/media/commentisfree/2024/mar/24/social-media-is-making-kids-sad-and-its-bad-news-for-democracy>

them so. Combined with the social devastation imposed by the pandemic, a generation has been made terrified of an outside world that is a much safer and nicer place than the world they're told about online.

The more time people spend in the illusion, the more it becomes their reality. Young people were deprived of learning social traditions and customs because they were cut off from their peers and elders by lockdowns that not only shrunk the confidence of the homebody generation to engage society but shrunk society to screens – a place where the real is easily manipulated and the unreal can convince too quickly.

This all has serious political implications.