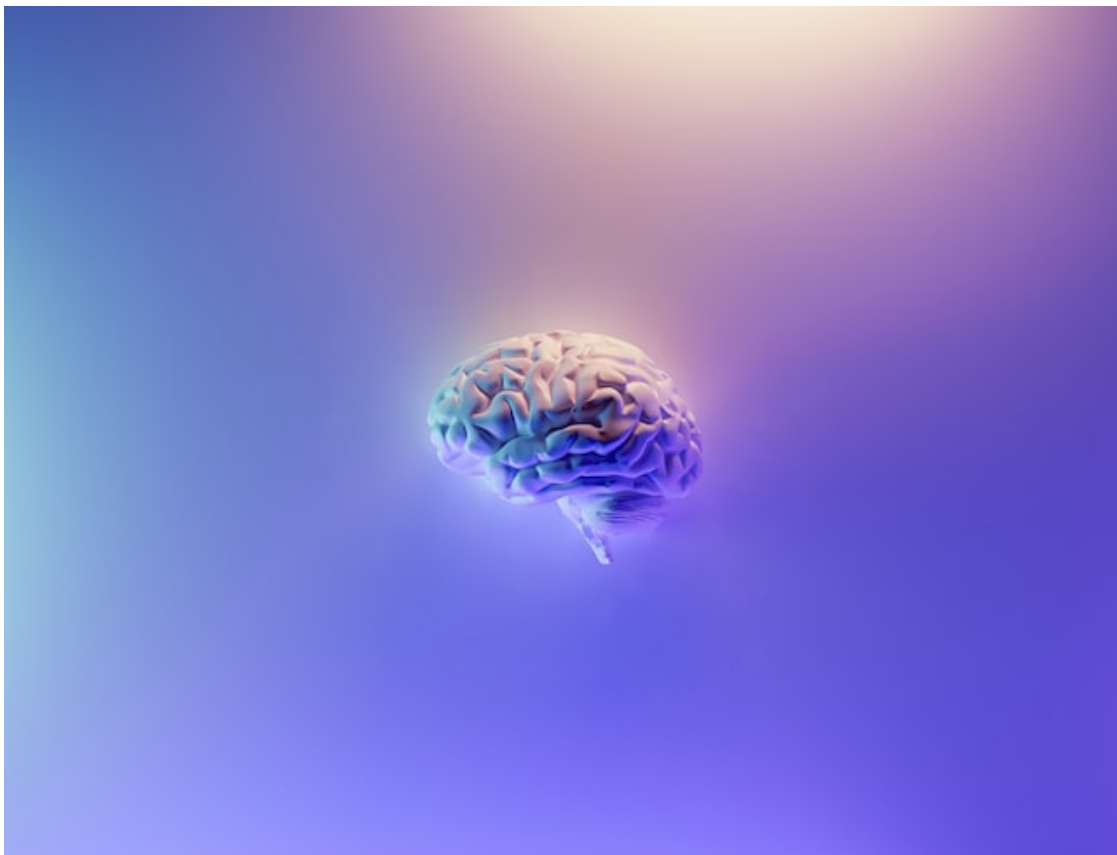# UNFIN'SHED

February 3, 2023

Welcome back to our weekly newsletter, where we explore the intersection of tech, ethics, and social impact.

*Unfinished supports **Project Liberty** in engaging diverse voices to build the critical digital infrastructure that catalyzes change.*

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The legal battles are heating up

This week, we're exploring key pieces of legislation in the US and around the world at the intersection of technology, teen mental health, and the future of the web.

Social Media and Mental Health

Psychology professor **Jean Twenge** of San Diego State University and **Jonathan Haidt** of NYU have been sounding the alarm for some time about the linkage between social media usage and declining teen mental health.

Both Haidt and Twenge have concluded that there's a causal link between social media usage and teen mood disorders. They have partnered to create a **270-page (and growing) Google document** that captures the latest published research on mental health and social media, where they invite scholars to contribute to this emerging field of research.

But there are still questions...

A separate **meta-analysis of the research** has found that most academic research only shows "weak" or "inconsistent" evidence linking social media usage to declining mental health, while a few show "substantial" association.

Jacqueline Nesi, a psychologist and researcher at Brown University studying teen mental health and social media, points out that even though the correlations may not be strong, even small effects at a population scale are meaningful.

In summarizing the research, she has thus far concluded that social media, *by itself*, does not cause teen mental health issues. What matters more, she argues, is specifically how **teens engage with and use social media**: "To understand how social media impacts teens' mental health, we need to understand who they are *outside* of social media, and how their use of social media intersects with their strengths and vulnerabilities."

As we featured a few months ago in this newsletter, **teens are also using social media** in positive ways to build affinity groups and reduce the stigma of mental illness.

Some newer research looks beyond behavior to examine brain development. A **recent study in a pediatric journal** found that habitually checking social media in early adolescence is linked to rewiring of the brain around the anticipation of social rewards and punishments. Fortunately, new studies are underway, and we'll be sharing more research as it's published.

The legal wave

Lawmakers are taking notice of this research. Last year **US President Biden promised** to "hold social media platforms accountable for the national experiment they're conducting on our children for profit."

Here are a series of bills, laws, and court cases in the US and around the world that aim to protect humans from online harms.

Think globally, legislate locally

- **The Seattle Public School system is suing social media companies** TikTok, Meta (Instagram and Facebook), Snapchat, and Youtube claiming that their platforms have contributed to the teen mental health crisis.
- California will soon decide **if social media firms need to pay for the damage done to Americans' mental health**. The case argues that social media algorithms are a defective product that encourages addictive behavior, under the state's product liability laws.
- A new state bill **announced this week in Utah** would require social media companies to obtain the consent of a parent or guardian before Utah residents under age 18 could maintain or open an account.
- There are 28 states in the US that have passed laws around data privacy on social media platforms, according to **University of North Carolina's Center on Technology Policy**

At the national level

- The US Supreme Court is **considering hearing two cases** that would make it illegal for social media platforms to block or hide content, even if the posts violate the companies' terms of service for objectionable content. Both cases argue such restrictions on content amount to censorship.
- In February, the **US Supreme Court will hear two cases** that will re-examine the cornerstones of how information is published and policed on the web. The cases center on Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act, which keeps tech companies and websites from being considered publishers of content that users post on their platforms. The upcoming cases will determine if Section 230 has gone too far in protecting tech companies from the harmful and misleading content allowed online.

Around the world

- In the UK, the Online Safety Bill is a new set of laws to protect children and adults online. **UK.gov explains how it will make social media companies more responsible** for their users' safety on their platforms. Recent efforts to toughen the bill mean that tech executives **could be jailed** if their platforms fail to protect children from online harm.
- The **EU passed the Digital Services Act** last year that makes digital spaces safer and protects user data by restricting content and defining "illegal speech" shared on digital platforms.

- In 2021, **China tightened previous restrictions** barring children and teenagers from playing online games on school days, and limiting gaming hours to one hour a day on nights and weekends, out of concern for physical and mental health.

The path forward

"Making the internet and social media safe for children and adolescents is no small feat," says **Constance de Leusse**, Executive Director of Project Liberty's **McCourt Institute**, and expert in internet policy. "Our role at the Institute is to support interdisciplinary research and to develop actionable governance solutions to address this pressing issue. Through collaborative work including all stakeholders—academia, governments, business, and civil society—our goal is to advance ethical technology."

Indeed, it will take a coordinated effort to make real change. **Tech(nically) Politics** is a youth lobbying and advocacy group that pushes for social media regulation, which was started by two teens (who also lead up **Log Off**, a youth-led movement dedicated to rethinking social media). The nonprofit **Common Sense** has equipped 124 million families to make more informed choices about what content they consume, and **Fairplay**, an advocacy group fighting against excessive screen time and child-targeted marketing, is working to limit the influence of big tech in the lives of children.

📰 Other notable headlines

🏛 **The Legal Crackdown on Social Media**. Social media companies in the US brace to battle an onslaught of legal challenges from school districts to new state bills to US Supreme Court cases. **Mackenzie Ryan reports in The Guardian** that the majority of US state legislatures have introduced or already passed bills attempting to reform how tech companies moderate their content and improve security for users.

🤖 **Generative AI**. Generative AI chatbot, ChatGPT, is creating as much hype and hand wringing as it is creating content. **Joe Pompeo of Vanity Fair** surveys the latest: the risk of ChatGPT taking jobs, how ChatGPT is unknowingly plagiarizing work, and what it means for disinformation campaigns like we saw in the 2016 US Election.

🔍 **TikTok as the new Google Search**. 40% of young internet users are side-stepping Google and turning to Tiktok and Instagram for online searches. **WIRED Journalist Lauren Goode** spent a week using only TikTok for search and found that TikTok is both surprisingly helpful and unsurprisingly challenging as a tool for searching the web.

📱 **Instagram co-founders launch a new app.** Instagram's co-founders have launched **Artifact**, an app with a tailored news feed powered by artificial intelligence that is designed to filter our misinformation. The fundamental

question, according to an article by **Casey Newton in The Verge**, is whether personalized recommendations for news articles and blog posts can drive the same viral success for Artifact that video has for TikTok.

🗣️ Partner News

📒 New Book from Ashoka

The United States is living through a period of polarization and upheaval. We hunger for answers, yet too often turn to the same people and institutions, expecting different outcomes. Ashoka's new book *America's Path Forward* takes a different angle. It features award-winning social innovators from all walks of life with decades of experience working in and with their communities across America. In twenty-two deep, idea-packed conversations, they share their analyses, practical insights, and policy recommendations—on how to gain common ground, get the country unstuck, and increase prosperity and well-being for all. Use the code **TGUF for a 30% "friends and family" discount**.

💬 Tech for Social Cohesion Conference
February 23-25, 2023 at San Francisco Fisherman's Wharf
This conference explores a new generation of tech products that offer design affordances and algorithms optimized for prosocial content. Learn more and secure your ticket **here**.

💸 Get $400,000 to start your own news organization

American Journalism Project is launching a **local news incubator**. The program is intended to support entrepreneurs who want to launch a new nonprofit local news organization to serve their communities. This 18-month incubator will provide both startup capital and expert counsel. Founders will receive $400,000 to pursue their startup full time and receive support for researching, developing an editorial strategy to fill the local news and information needs they identify in a given market, fundraising, coalition-building and preparing to launch an organization. The deadline to apply for the cohort is Feb. 15, 2023. **You can learn more and submit your application here**. If you have any questions, please reach out at **incubator@theajp.org**.

Thank you for reading.