

The Eyes Beyond the Screen: Digital Media Policy and Child Health

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Background

Modern communication technology and digital media have provided society with a foundation for instant messaging. Pictures, videos, and texts connect individuals with families, friends, and the world. Consequently, digital media has accelerated exposure to risk in which children and adolescents are most vulnerable. This project's objective is to 1) congregate and highlight current knowledge about the impact of digital media on child health, and 2) underline deficiencies in related laws and regulations as well as offer solutions in digital media policy.

Methods

A systematic literature review was conducted through the JAMA Pediatrics database with keywords such as "digital media," "social media," "screen time," "cyberbullying," "child sexual abuse material," "online exploitation," "sextortion," and "child privacy" to accumulate information from relevant studies and articles elaborating on adverse child health outcomes in relation to digital media use. Only peer-reviewed full-text publications between 2018 and 2021 were selected and 10 articles were obtained. The impact of digital media on child and adolescent health was synthesized, as shown in the results section. Furthermore, review of national digital media law was conducted through Congress.gov, and potential policy solutions are elaborated in the conclusions section.

Results

(1) Screen time through social media use, gaming, and television among children and adolescents has dramatically increased, as charged by the COVID-19 pandemic, and is associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, hyperactivity, inattention, and conduct problems. (2) Reduced social contact with friends, peers, and teachers increases the risk of loneliness and helplessness which correlate to mental health harms. (3) Targeted advertisements attract young adolescents to increase screen time, establish brand allegiances, and form spending habits. (4) Time spent online is associated with increased risk of cyberbullying, sextortion, genuinely threatening messages, psychologically threatening messages, and intentional misinformation which has a strong correlation to negative mental health symptoms. (5) The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reported over 21.7 million submissions of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) in 2020, a 106% increase since 2019. (6) Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act protects social media sites from being sued over posts from their users, resulting in poor filtration of inappropriate material.

Conclusions

Children and adolescents require modern media literacy to battle potential negative mental health symptoms heightened by the growing dependency on technology. The national government must enact legislation to hold social media companies accountable by straining their sites from harmful and inappropriate material. Proactive legislative measures such as negating targeted advertising for minors and an opt-out function from biased algorithms in social media apps prioritize lowering screen time over increasing business revenue.