

Toward the end of Thursday's hearing on Facebook and teen mental health, Senator Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska) alluded to the Chinese government's recent decision to impose strict limits on kids' video game time. "They have told teenagers to take a real break," he said, addressing Facebook's head of global safety, Antigone Davis. "Do you think the United States government needs to look at doing something like that?"

The moment was revealing. A law like China's would be unthinkably draconian in the US. Yet Sullivan seemed almost wistful. Can you imagine? A country that *actually regulates its technology sector*?

You can see where Sullivan was coming from, because we sure don't live in that country. Congress has been hauling in Facebook executives to testify since early 2018, during the height of the Cambridge Analytica scandal. In those three and a half years, it has passed precisely zero laws significantly regulating the conduct of social media platforms. Instead, with some [notable exceptions](#), it tends to do what it spent most of the latest hearing doing: browbeating the companies into fixing things themselves.

Thursday's hearing was prompted by a series in *The Wall Street Journal* based on a trove of leaked internal research, and [one story](#) in particular: "Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show." The hearing was styled as a cross between Watergate—what did Facebook know, and when did it know it?—and the corporate exposés of yesteryear. In his opening remarks, Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-Connecticut) accused the company of hiding its own research and lying about what it knows. "Facebook," he declared, "has taken Big Tobacco's playbook."

In fact, the research about teen mental health was hardly revelatory. Facebook sits on a massive trove of data about its recommendation algorithms, policy enforcement, and user behavior that is inaccessible to outside researchers. Some of the documents leaked to the *Journal* appear to contain just that sort of data. One article in the series [revealed](#) that millions of people around the world are subject to white-glove enforcement through Facebook's "XCheck system," leading to high-profile users getting away with flagrant and shocking violations of the platform's policies. Another article [described](#) researchers' findings that certain changes to the NewsFeed algorithm had inadvertently rewarded "misinformation, toxicity, and violent content," and that Mark Zuckerberg had resisted fixing the problem. Yet another provided [horrifying detail](#) about Facebook's underinvestment in platform safety outside the US—a choice that potentially affects 90 percent of the company's 3 billion users.

That's the kind of internal research that provides fresh insights into Facebook's effect on the world. The teen mental health research, not so much. The documents, which the *Journal* [made public](#) the night before the hearing, aren't based on data that only Facebook has access to. The company simply surveyed teens on their views of how its product affects them. That's something anyone can do, and which indeed has been done [too many times](#) to [count](#). It's also not very revealing. While the *Journal's* headline stems from troubling statistics—most notably, one-third of teen girls who struggle with body image issues said Instagram makes those issues worse—the top-line finding of one document is that most teens say Instagram *improves* their mental health. Either way, people's subjective accounts of their experiences are unreliable, and many of the teens surveyed were surely aware of the argument that Instagram is bad for

them, which might have affected their answers. As Robbie Gonzalez [noted](#) for WIRED in 2018, even big-picture correlations between social media use and mental health outcomes don't prove anything about causality.

It's genuinely unclear whether the senators at Thursday's hearing understand how pedestrian Facebook's data on teen mental health is. Senator Ben Ray Luján (D-New Mexico) repeatedly pressed Davis on whether Facebook would release "the data set, minus any personally identifiable information," on which the research was based, as if Facebook had been studying individual users rather than conducting polls and focus groups.

Why did the Senate choose to focus on a subset of the leaked Facebook documents that add little to what we already know and that the members didn't seem to understand particularly well? Perhaps because "Think of the children" is a tried-and-true way to get both legislators and the American public to pay attention—whereas, say, human trafficking in Arab countries, tragically, is not.

It's also clear enough why Thursday's hearing focused so heavily on what Facebook has done, is doing, and will do, and so little on what Congress itself could do to protect kids online. This is a legislative body that, thanks to Republican intransigence, [cannot](#) reach an agreement to prevent the country from defaulting on its debts. It needed an [emergency agreement](#) just to avoid a government shutdown. Legislating is not the legislature's strong suit.

And browbeating tech companies does work, at least to a point. Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have all made extensive changes in response to sustained criticism about their treatment of misinformation and abuse on their platforms. Earlier this week, after the uproar over the *Wall Street Journal* series, Instagram CEO Adam Mosseri [announced](#) that the company would pause the rollout of its much derided Instagram Kids product.

As some of the nation's most perspicacious observers have [noted](#), self-regulation is a crucial component of fixing what's wrong with social media. But it's no excuse for Congress failing to wield its own power. Some Facebook critics have accused the company, perhaps [hyperbolically](#), of behaving as if it were a nation-state. Save some criticism for the real nation-state. If Congress won't govern, Big Tech will.

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Source: [The Senate Is Mad as Hell at Facebook—Again](#)