Families, Not the Government, Should Regulate Big Tech

I watched *The Social Dilemma* with my 12-year-old son this week and it couldn't be more timely.

A Netflix original docu-drama that was released last fall, *The Social Dilemma* emphasizes how the underlying algorithms and business models of social media companies keep us hooked and could contribute to polarization.

Most of the film features former social media executives and programmers who describe how features as benign as the social media "Like" button, intended to spread goodwill, may have the opposite effect. When we don't get enough "Likes" we can feel deflated. This may be particularly true of teenagers and pre-teens, who have experienced increasing rates of anxiety and depression in recent years, although research suggests this trend has little to do with social media usage.

There is an anti-capitalism sentiment that also pervades the film (*profits over people!*) and appears alongside some moral panic about how technology could destroy us all. Throughout the documentary, it becomes more clear that the filmmakers believe government regulation of social media and Big Tech is the answer. Indeed, this is something that both major political parties support, and it is gaining new momentum in 2021.

But is government regulation really the answer?

Riots, Bans, and Moral Panic

It was particularly interesting to watch *The Social Dilemma* after the recent attack on the Capitol, a horrific act of violence following peaceful protests. As FEE's Jon Miltimore and Brad Polumbo eloquently wrote last week: "Political protest loses moral and constitutional legitimacy as soon as it becomes destructive or violent. All Americans have the right to speak out and make our case in the public square. But the moment the first brick is thrown or a window is smashed, it crosses the line between exercising rights and violating the rights of others."

It has been widely claimed that social media, and particularly the small conservative Twitter competitor Parler, are to blame for the Capitol riot, despite well-regarded journalists such as Glenn Greenwald reporting that it was actually on Facebook and YouTube where most of the incitement took place. A Parler executive told Greenwald that none of the people arrested for the breach of the Capitol appeared to be active users of the platform.

Parler, nevertheless, was stripped of its Amazon cloud-computing services and removed from both the Apple and Google app stores, causing the platform to be at least temporarily inaccessible. Meanwhile, President Trump's Twitter account has been permanently suspended, and he has been blocked from using his other social media accounts. Other voices have been similarly purged.

Even Ron Paul, the longtime libertarian advocate of peace and non-violence, saw his Facebook page temporarily suspended, a move that Facebook representatives later said was a mistake.

Watching *The Social Dilemma*, it's easy to think that social media and Big Tech have caused our social strife and must be urgently regulated by government officials, who can allegedly make them kinder and gentler. The film makes it seem that this is a moral imperative, lest we destroy ourselves and our civilization. Historically, new technologies have caused similar fears about our demise.

"We shall soon be nothing but transparent heaps of jelly to each other," a writer once lamented about a new technology that was overtaking society and causing widespread concern and disruption. What was this high-tech curse?

The telephone.

What Can We Do As Individuals and Families?

This is not to say that we shouldn't be concerned about the ways social media and technology could influence our lives and our perceptions, and particularly the minds of our children and teens. The film does a good job of illustrating how artificial intelligence and social media algorithms keep us engaged, and in some cases perhaps even addicted, to checking our smartphones and browsing our Instagram feeds. Understanding the subtle ways in which these technologies and platforms work is important so that we can choose our actions more wisely.

Individual human action, not government regulation, can help us maximize the benefits of technology and social media while minimizing their drawbacks.

"Human action is purposeful behavior," economist Ludwig von Mises wrote in *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*. "Or we may say: Action is will put into operation and transformed into an agency, is aiming at ends and goals, is the ego's meaningful response to stimuli and to the conditions of its environment, is a person's conscious adjustment to the state of the universe that determines his life."

Here are five ideas for turning action into agency regarding Big Tech and social media:

1. **Understand the Algorithms.** Recognize how social media algorithms work to keep us on these platforms and to select what we see and don't see, and talk about these processes with our kids. Understanding how we are being influenced can help us take more control of our social media usage.

2. **Be Discerning**. As consumers, we can pick and choose from a variety of different social media platforms and give our time and attention to those we most value. For example, after President Trump was banned from Twitter, the company's stock price plummeted, as conservative users fled the platform. If we don't like a company's practices, we can leave. Our consumer actions are significant.

3. **Explore (And Invent!) Alternatives.** Despite claims that Big Tech is monopolistic and therefore must be regulated, there are already many alternatives. TechCrunch reported this week that social networks such as MeWe and CloutHub are booming. Entrepreneurs continue to invent new social networking products and services that meet changing consumer demand. Government regulation of Big Tech could actually stifle competition. For instance, executives at large social media companies like Facebook are asking to be regulated, setting up roadblocks for smaller companies to enter the market.

4. **Set Guidelines and Limits**. We can establish healthy parameters for our own use of technology and social media, and help our children to do the same. Psychologist and author Jonathan Haidt recommends that parents wait until their children are high school-age before they get access to social media. On the other hand, I find the argument made by psychologist and author Jordan Shapiro more compelling. He suggests that it can be better to introduce technologies to children earlier when parents have more influence over our children and can help them better navigate these tools. Parents are, of course, the ones who know their children best and can decide what technology approach works well for their children and teens.

5. **Prioritize In-Person Interaction**. Lockdowns and pandemic policies have cut us off physically from each other and could contribute to some of the social unrest of the past several months. Prioritizing in-person interactions for ourselves and our children and teens is crucial, whether that is prioritizing family time, eating dinner together, gathering with friends, or taking a walk with neighbors. Researchers have found that during lockdowns nearly half of young adults show signs of depression, and younger children's mental health has deteriorated "substantially." Parents can encourage their children and teens to see friends in person rather than only on screens.

We can take personal action to manage Big Tech and social media concerns through our choices and behaviors. Empowering the government to regulate technology companies and social media will only exacerbate division and unrest. As FEE's Hannah Cox writes: "We now have a gigantic federal government that involves itself in everything from healthcare to education to marriage to social media. This is the root cause of our division."

We should reduce the power of the federal government to regulate our lives, while taking

individual action to ensure that the relationship we and our children have with social media and technology is as healthy and productive as possible.

The government doesn't need to protect us. We can protect ourselves, and our children, by better understanding how social media influences us and by taking action as individuals and families. As the journalist H.L. Mencken warned, "The urge to save humanity is almost always only a false-face for the urge to rule it." Self-regulation, not government regulation, is the solution to social media and Big Tech woes.

If you watch *The Social Dilemma* with your kids, you should also watch FEE's excellent two-part Out of Frame analysis of the film: