

Q&A: Social media is a lot like junk food. Here's how to make healthy choices

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Last week, Colorado joined more than 30 other states in a [landmark lawsuit against Meta](#), the parent company behind Facebook and Instagram. The states alleged, in part, that the social media juggernaut

"ignored the sweeping damage these platforms have caused to the mental and physical health of our nation's youth."

Annie Margaret is a teaching assistant professor in the ATLAS Institute at CU Boulder and a "big fan" of the lawsuit. Margaret has spent years interviewing [young people](#) about how social media affects their [mental health](#) and has challenged many of her own students to go on social media "detoxes."

"If nothing else, the lawsuit is drawing national attention to the fact that this is a problem," Margaret said. "People are upset, and we're not going to stand for it anymore."

Margaret spoke with CU Boulder Today about why social media is a lot like food, and how educators can help kids embrace healthier online habits.

The states argue that social media has had a serious impact on mental health and self-esteem among young people. Do you think that's true?

In that age group, teens and tweens, [self-esteem](#) has been an issue since before social media existed. Self-esteem is always a challenge when you're a 13-year-old.

However, when I was 13, I did not have access to information about how many likes my selfie got compared to every other child in my class. I had an [eating disorder](#) when I was that age, and I can't imagine how much worse it would have been today. You can watch a fitness video on Instagram because you're trying to have good form on your pushups, and a small number of reels later, you're seeing pro-anorexia videos.

Why do you think social media has such a pull on our lives?

I've done tons of interviews with 12- to 16-year-olds for my research. Some are setting alarms to wake themselves up in the middle of the night to check social media because they're worried about going to school the next day having not seen something, and then someone might be upset with them.

We are social primates, and we desire that feeling of belonging and connection so deeply. I also think that the quantification of that, and the degradation of what is true connection into a like count or the number of messages in your DMs, is really sad.

Do you think social media companies like Meta are complicit in that degradation?

I've been working on these questions since 2017. I think there was a time earlier when you could have said, 'Well, maybe Meta, or Facebook at that time, didn't know what their design features were doing.'

However, that time is now over at least since 2021 when a whistleblower named Frances Haugen released internal documents from the company. We now know that Meta or Facebook knew that their products were harming the mental health of young people, and they chose not to make changes.

Meta might say something like, 'We've released over 30 tools to help with this problem. We're on the same team here.' There are timers, for example, that turn off the apps after a certain hour. Then why are those tools add-ons and not the default settings?

What have you learned from your own work with young people?

My work started with college students. I would have them do a four-week social media detox. Generally, there was a story arc: First, they'd be really mad at me. Then around week two, they'd realize they had a problem. And by week four, they were so grateful because they recognized their new ability to be present in their own lives, their ability to manage their time, their decreased stress.

But social media is also almost inescapable today. Do you agree?

It's really interesting to think about the way that these tools are so integrated into our lives. In 2017, it was reasonable to ask people to get off social media for a few weeks. Now, a great percentage of my students say, 'I can't because I manage the account for my lacrosse team, or all my group projects are on Snapchat.' They have real reasons why they can't leave.

Which makes checking Instagram different than, say, smoking cigarettes, right?

I'm frustrated with the way the media is rampantly using the big tobacco metaphor to talk about social media. In some ways, that metaphor does make sense—in the way that big tobacco knew its products were harmful but continued to target people.

But our jobs are on social media—the way we run our businesses, the way we organize our lives. To me, it feels more reminiscent of the way we need to regulate the food industry. We need to think about what

media we're consuming and what's the nutritional value of the [media](#) we're consuming.

Beyond government regulation, what do you think we can do to make sure kids are avoiding that kind of media junk food?

I don't think we're too far gone. I think we need to create a cultural shift to emphasize these really important skills of emotional regulation, of encouraging a culture of stronger boundaries around technology. We can teach kids to have these conversations and to say, 'If you send me a text after 9 p.m., I'm not going to respond until the next day.' And that should be OK.

Are you feeling hopeful for the future?

I look forward to seeing a future where all the benefits that come from [social media](#), like connection and collaboration, organization and allowing businesses to thrive, are possible. At the same time, the harms for young folks have also been mitigated both through regulation and education.

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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