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The verdict against Meta and Google carries sinister implications

di George F. Will

The most sinister idea in modern politics has received a [California jury's endorsement](#), and much applause. It contradicts democracy's foundational belief in individual agency.

This concept presupposes that individuals can, in common parlance, “make up their minds.” They can assemble and edit their beliefs and convictions. When this idea is diluted, government expands its ambition to curate the public's consciousness.

As Congress did when banning Chinese-owned TikTok, ostensibly for “national security” reasons. For the first time, Congress targeted a specific speech forum because of conjectural harms that might result from what a [congressional committee called](#) “divisive narratives.”

The California jury weighed the claims of a now 20-year-old woman who began using YouTube at age 6 and Instagram when 9. She says her many emotional and social problems were caused not by her troubled family life but by those platforms. (Although one of her analysts said she did not talk about them.)

The jury agreed with her claims. It said, confusingly, that Meta and Google were negligent *and* deliberate in designing algorithms and other devices that make the platforms' content “addictive.”

Reporting and commentaries about this case have employed a credulous vocabulary of approval. The jury held YouTube and Instagram “[accountable](#)” for engineered “[addiction](#).” Social media “[survivors](#)” have survived being “[hooked](#)” — a term often used concerning heroin — by the platforms' algorithms. (Although they do not deliver, as cigarettes do, an identifiable addictive ingredient.) An algorithm that directs content according to the scroller's past behavior “[can feel like a puppet master](#).” The [Social](#)

[Media Victims Law Center](#) will now no doubt facilitate a tsunami of litigation more lucrative than coherent.

Nowadays, some college students are unashamed about, even proud of, their brittleness. They demand “safe spaces” to protect them from being “triggered” by the “trauma” of “microaggressions.” Note how linguistic inflation is a gateway to the coveted status of victim.

Many beneficial technologies and popular social developments are misused by small portions of their users. People drive aggressively, consume alcohol excessively and gamble recklessly. Fast-food chains profit from heavy — in several senses — users. Some people derive from such behaviors pleasure so powerful that their brain chemistry causes in them supposedly irresistible cravings for dangerous repetitions. Medicalizing this by terming it “addiction” gives a scientific patina to what is a contestable political-philosophical stance of helplessness.

The California plaintiff’s lawyer compared Instagram and YouTube to the free tortilla chips that some restaurants give customers. Thereby creating, what, a fleeting mealtime “addiction”?

The plaintiff blamed large corporations for her adolescent sadness, body dysmorphia (dismay about her appearance) and other consequences of her obsessive consumption of the corporations’ products. Such blaming flows from this toxic idea: Individual agency is so flimsy and attenuated that accountability for an individual’s behavior must be located beyond the individual. This infantilizing premise leads to paternalism, then to domestic authoritarianism.

If human beings are soft wax, passively shaped by the promptings of the culture in which they are situated, then controlling the culture becomes an imperative and encompassing political project. Government must guarantee the wholesomeness, as government defines this, of everything said, read, heard, thought and taught.

A few years ago, a Senate committee approved legislation empowering government officials to force social media platforms to remove material that could “harm” minors. Harm, however, has become an elastic and metastasizing concept: Minors are said to be harmed by content that makes them “anxious.” Reducing the anxiety of adolescents will keep government busy.

Exaggerating the precarity of children is not new. In the 1950s, it produced [a moral panic](#) about 10-cent comic books, scores of millions of which were sold weekly. Then, as now, causation was casually asserted, not rigorously proven. A 400-page bestseller, “[Seduction of the Innocent](#): The Influence of Comic Books on Today’s Youth” (1954), fueled anti-comic crusaders who said comics caused juvenile delinquency. Batman and Robin? Homoerotic tendencies. Superman’s light-on-due-process crime fighting? Crypto-fascism. [Betty and Veronica](#) of the “Archie” comics soon were drawn with looser-fitting blouses.

Days after the California jury reached its social media verdict, the New Civil Liberties Alliance [reached a settlement](#) concerning the federal government’s — the Biden administration’s — attempts, often successful, to suppress what it called “misinformation” about the coronavirus pandemic. Much of this speech was true; all was constitutionally protected.

It is prudent to assume that the government, under whichever party, will remain determined to curate the internet for the purpose of social control. Bandyng accusations of “addiction” and other hypothetical “harms,” it will build upon what the California jury did.