

Tech industry could be target for state legislative backlash

By Ty Tagami
Capitol Beat News Service

Big tech has reached so far into the lives of children that some Georgia lawmakers want to push back.

After legal missteps in an effort to restrain the industry, the state Senate got new recommendations this month from a study committee that heard grim stories about the impact of social media and other platforms.

Among those who testified were parents of children who died by suicide after extensive use of social media and experts

who spoke of an escalating mental health crisis after the merger of two technologies.

"Smartphones and social media, they take the person who is vulnerable, who is struggling mentally, and further isolate and distance them from real human relationships," Dr. Stan Sonu, a medical director at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, told the senators at a hearing at the state Capitol in November.

He described a patient who had become withdrawn over the past year, burying his head in TikTok videos. He said the

boy had high scores for anxiety, depression and thoughts of self-harm despite a calm demeanor.

Sonu said he initially dismissed the changed behavior, ascribing it to teen angst. Then, the 12-year-old disclosed what had been bothering him: other boys had made him watch sex videos in the school cafeteria, bullying him afterward because of his discomfort.

Sonu said the boy had been using social media to self-medicate.

"Social media is, and I don't say this lightly, it is legalized digital heroin," Sonu told the senators.

"By leveraging neuroscience to grab a hold of our attention, it promotes this powerful illusion that your real-life problems can be pushed aside."

The committee is picking up the pieces after the tech industry torpedoed the General Assembly's last attempt to rein in social media.

The Protecting Georgia's Children on Social Media Act sailed into law with broad bipartisan support last year, but an advocacy group for tech companies sued.

A federal judge for the Northern District

of Georgia ruled in June that the plaintiff was likely to prevail on claims that the law violated the First Amendment's speech protections. She issued a preliminary injunction against enforcement.

The law required social media companies to make "commercially reasonable efforts" to verify users' age, and it mandated parent consent for those under 16. It also banned advertising to children.

It had been a priority for Lt. Gov. Burt Jones, a Republican who is now running for governor.

Jones authorized the bipartisan committee — co-led by a Democrat and a Republican — that issued new legislative recommendations in late December.

The committee proposed a prohibition on addictive platform design, stricter data privacy and making artificial intelligence platforms subject to product liability laws.

The committee also backed measures to empower parents, such as a proposal that social media companies secure parent consent before letting minors access their platforms.

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“ He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. ”
Isaiah 40:29 NIV

Strength to Carry On

Accounts of people surviving for long periods of time in the wilderness or lost at sea are amazing, and often uplifting. The will to live is strong, and you don't know how far you can go until you are forced to do it. There are accounts of polar explorers surviving for years because their ships were "iced in" or stuck in the ice, such as the Franklin expedition, which left England in 1845 seeking the Northwest Passage and was icebound until 1848, when the crews left their ships and tried to walk to safety (they never made it). The Donner Party was a group of migrants going to California who spent the winter of 1846-1847 in the Sierra Nevada mountains and resorted to cannibalism to survive. More recently, in 1972 a group of Uruguayan rugby players travelling by plane crashed in the Andes and survived by eating some of the remains of passengers who had died. The decision to eat human flesh to survive is surely one of the most difficult and horrific one can imagine, and yet it shows the strength of our will to live. These stories of survival also show that human beings, when pushed to the limit often find ways to push beyond the limit. The phenomenon of a "second wind," where we find reserves of energy hitherto untapped is familiar to every endurance athlete. What we seldom hear about, however, is that there can often be a third or a fourth wind, that is, we can almost always dig deeper to find further untapped reserves. And what is more, when the reserves within have truly run dry, we can sometimes tap into sources from without, and one of the greatest is the divine energy coursing through all of nature. So the next time you're feeling wiped out and that you can't go another step, look for that second wind, and ask God for strength to carry on.

-Christopher Simon

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