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POLITICS

Mothers Power New Drive to Make Social-Media Firms Accountable for Harms

Group of women push Congress for laws forcing internet platforms to protect minors from harmful content



Kristin Bride, wearing gray, Tracy Kemp, in white jacket, and other mothers during a meeting with senators in November last year.

PHOTO: SENATE DEMOCRATIC MEDIA CENTER

By *Ryan Tracy* [Follow](#)

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WASHINGTON—Silicon Valley has for years brushed back attempts to make internet platforms more accountable for harm to young people. Online safety advocates are hoping to turn the tide with a new force: Moms.

Mothers who say social media devastated their sons and daughters are stepping up efforts to pass legislative remedies, including by making personal appeals to lawmakers and working with congressional aides to fine-tune legislation.

The power of the lobby of mothers was demonstrated in November, when about 10 women walked into Sen. Maria Cantwell's (D., Wash.) office, demanding to know why they hadn't been able to secure a meeting with the chair of the Senate Commerce Committee.

Kristin Bride, 56, of Mesa, Ariz., clutched a picture of her late 16-year-old son as she approached the reception desk. Several more mothers followed, holding their own

photographs of children whose deaths or struggles they blame, in part, on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat.



Sen. Maria Cantwell asked her staff to push for online safety provisions for children in a spending bill after meeting with a mothers' group.

PHOTO: CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES

Ms. Cantwell “needs to come out here and tell these mothers whose children are dead why their children don’t matter,” Tracy Kemp, 34, of Lubbock, Texas, who is one of the mothers, recalls saying.

Ms. Cantwell’s staff set up a meeting the next day. The senator sat with the mothers for an hour, participants said, hearing about young people who made connections with drug dealers and predators via social media apps, or who suffocated after attempting a viral “blackout challenge,” in which users film themselves choking and passing out.

“Every day that continues without any sort of checks on this industry, there is going to be more kids dying,” is how Ms. Bride described her message to Ms. Cantwell and other lawmakers. Her son died by suicide in 2020, Ms. Bride said, after receiving what she said were a series of anonymous, abusive messages on social media.

Soon after the session ended, Ms. Cantwell directed her staff to push to include online safety provisions for children in a year-end omnibus spending bill.

That last-ditch attempt ultimately failed, but supporters said the encounter showed how effective the mothers can be as various organizations regroup for another legislative battle this year.

“The whole conversation and tenor of what we were trying to do changed when these moms showed up,” said Josh Golin, executive director of the advocacy group Fairplay, one of the groups pushing for new guardrails on social media.

Aides to Ms. Cantwell said she always supported an online safety law and that she agreed to meet the mothers as soon as she was aware of their request.

“Parents need to know that lawmakers aren’t just listening. We want to take action,” Ms. Cantwell said in a statement.

Mothers’ advocacy groups have taken up other issues before. In the 1980s, Mothers Against Drunk Driving emerged as a force shifting both laws and cultural attitudes. Parents of mass-shooting victims have organized to push for tougher gun-safety laws.

The child-protection measures being sought by Ms. Bride and other mothers now are being driven by a growing awareness of the downsides of social media, fueled in part by disclosures by news organizations including The Wall Street Journal, which reported in 2021 on documents leaked by former Facebook employee Frances Haugen showing that parent company Meta Platforms Inc. knew its platforms were riddled with flaws that cause harm.

The mothers’ group that met with Ms. Cantwell is rallying behind the Kids Online Safety Act, which was introduced in 2022 by Sens. Richard Blumenthal (D., Conn.) and Marsha Blackburn (R., Tenn.). It would require online services to take reasonable measures to prevent and mitigate harms to minors. Tech companies would have to allow young users to limit direct messages, location-data collection, and autoplay or other potentially addictive features.

The bill stalled last year amid opposition by the tech industry and some liberal advocacy groups.

The Computer & Communications Industry Association, a trade group whose members include Meta Platforms, which owns Instagram and Facebook, and YouTube owner Alphabet Inc., shares the goal of creating safe space online, said its president, Matt Schruers.

“The only question is what is the most effective way to reach it,” he said. Tech companies already limit features for young users, he said, but the original legislation would have effectively required platforms to collect more personal data to verify users’ ages.

The American Civil Liberties Union and groups representing gay and transgender people also opposed the legislation, saying it could give state and federal officials a tool to hold tech companies liable for promoting any content related to transgender issues, on grounds it could harm children’s mental health.

“It’s perfect for frivolous, bully-pulpit lawsuits,” said Evan Greer, director of the progressive advocacy group Fight for the Future, which helped organize the opposition.



Sens. Richard Blumenthal and Marsha Blackburn, who introduced the Kids Online Safety Act, discussed social-media regulations with mothers in November last year.

PHOTO: SENATE DEMOCRATIC MEDIA CENTER

Mr. Blumenthal said he has met with representatives of the transgender community, and a new version of the bill will be introduced soon to allay those concerns.

“We’re going to do everything we can to forestall any unintended consequences,” he said.

The House remains a question mark, as many lawmakers there want to give priority to privacy protections for users of any age. Even so, the Senate Commerce Committee is likely to

pass some version of children's' online safety legislation—a goal supported not just by Ms. Cantwell, the committee chair, but Sen. Ted Cruz (R., Texas), the top Republican on the panel.

The mothers who appealed to Ms. Cantwell and other members of Congress last fall are gearing up for the new push.

The mothers in early 2021 started a working group that is part of the Screen Time Action Network, a coalition of advocates organized by Fairplay. The working group meets monthly and now numbers about 40 people, including mothers of victims and others who support tougher social media restrictions.

Some of the mothers have given feedback to congressional staffers on draft legislation. Others are lobbying states to follow a law California passed last year that created a so-called age-appropriate design code for online apps.

The strategy of mothers telling stories of how their sons and daughters were hurt by social media has been particularly effective, participants say, although it takes a toll on the women who must constantly relive their child's tragedy, said Shelby Knox, campaign director for ParentsTogether Action, one of the advocacy groups that is organizing the mothers' lobbying efforts.

She recalled pulling some of them aside between meetings and asking, “Hey, that meeting looked hard. Do you want to go to the next one?”

They always did, she said.

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