

Verdicts against Meta, YouTube validate concerns long raised by parents, child safety advocates



Lori Schott, center, is embraced as she holds up a photo of her daughter Annalee Schott, after the verdict in a landmark trial over whether social media platforms deliberately addict and harm children at Los Angeles Superior Court, Wednesday, March 25, 2026, in Los Angeles. (AP Photo/William Liang)

BY **BARBARA ORTUTAY**

For years, [parents](#), teenagers, pediatricians, educators and [whistleblowers](#) have pushed the idea that social media is detrimental to young people's mental health and can lead to addiction, eating disorders, sexual exploitation and suicide.

For the first time, juries in two states took their side.

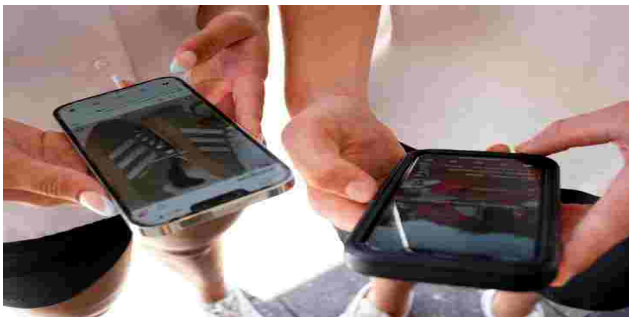
In Los Angeles on Wednesday, a jury found both [Meta and YouTube](#) [liable](#) for harms to children using their services. In [New Mexico](#), a jury determined that Meta knowingly [harmed children's mental health](#) and concealed what it knew about child sexual exploitation on its platforms.

Tech watchdog groups, [families](#) and children's advocates cheered the jury decisions.

"The era of Big Tech invincibility is over," said Sacha Haworth, executive director of The Tech Oversight Project. "After years of gaslighting from companies like Google and Meta, new evidence and testimony have pulled back the curtain and validated the harms young people and parents have been telling the world about for years."

While it's too soon to tell if this week's outcomes will lead to fundamental changes in how social media platforms treat their young users, the dual verdicts signal a changing tide of public perception against tech companies that is likely to lead to more lawsuits and regulation. For years, they have argued that the harms their platforms cause to children are a mere byproduct, unintentional and inevitable consequences of broader societal issues or bad actors taking advantage of safeguards. They pushed against the notion that psychological harms could be the result of social media use and downplayed research that showed otherwise.

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When asked about whether people tend to use a platform or product more if it's addictive during his testimony in the Los Angeles trial, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg said "I'm not sure what to say to that. I don't think that applies here."

The verdicts show the public's growing willingness to hold the companies responsible for harms and demand meaningful changes in how they operate. What's not apparent, at least not yet, is whether the companies will take heed. Both Meta and Google said they disagree with the verdicts and are exploring legal options, including appeals.

Arturo Béjar, a former Meta engineering director who raised alarms about Instagram's harms inside the company for years before [testifying in Congress in 2023](#), said jury trials "level the playing field" for these trillion-dollar companies. But he cautioned that it will take actual regulation to rein them in.

“One thing that I saw working inside the company that effectively led to behavior change was when an attorney general or the FTC stepped in and required things of the company,” he said. “Both New Mexico and Los Angeles and all the attorneys general that are part of this process have really an extraordinary opportunity and the ability to ask for meaningful change.”

While both cases focused on harms to children, there are key differences between the two. New Mexico’s lawsuit was filed by state Attorney General Raúl Torrez in 2023. State investigators built their case by posing as children on social media, then documenting sexual solicitations they received as well as Meta’s response. The jury was asked to determine if Meta violated New Mexico’s consumer protection law.

The Los Angeles case had a single plaintiff, who goes by the initials KGM, against Meta, Google’s YouTube, TikTok and Snap. TikTok and Snap settled before trial. The plaintiff in this case argued that the platform design features of the two remaining defendants, Meta and YouTube, were designed to be addictive, especially for young users. Because thousands of families have filed similar lawsuits, KGM and a handful of other plaintiffs have been selected for bellwether trials — essentially test cases for both sides to see how their arguments play

out before a jury, eventually leading to a broader settlement reminiscent of the Big Tobacco and opioid trials.

By focusing on deliberate design choices and product liability, the lawsuits were able to sidestep [Section 230](#), which generally exempts internet companies from liability for the material users post on their services. Past lawsuits, which have focused on how the platforms distributed content, often failed on these grounds.

“For the first time, courts have held social media platforms accountable for how their product design can harm users,” said Nikolas Guggenberger, an assistant professor of law at the University of Houston Law Center. “This is a new legal territory that could reshape an industry long shielded by Section 230. Platforms will have to rethink their focus on engagement at any cost, which has outlived itself.”

The final outcome of the cases could take years to resolve pending appeals and settlement agreements, but experts say the shift in the public’s sentiment and understanding of social media’s dangers is already happening. In a 2025 Pew Research Center poll, for instance, 48% of teens said social media harms people their age. In 2022, only 32% said the same.

Amid social media's reckoning, however, artificial intelligence chatbots are emerging as the next frontier in the fight to make technology safer for young people.

"You can ban today's harm, but how do you know what tomorrow is going to bring?" said Sarah Kreps, a professor and director of Cornell University's Tech Policy Institute. Whether it's another social media app, AI or some other new technology, she added, new things will crop up.

"And people will flock to those because where there's demand you will see a supply come to meet that demand," she said.

The historic verdict that will change social media forever

Ruling is likely to reshape how America's legal system treats Silicon Valley's tech giants

James Titcomb

For decades, social media giants have enjoyed near-total immunity from the impact their services have on users' lives.

A landmark legal verdict handed down on Wednesday in a Los Angeles courtroom changed all that.

After more than a week of deliberation, a jury found Meta, the owner of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp – as well as Google-owned YouTube –

to be [liable for addictive design features](#) blamed for leading a teenage girl to depression and anxiety.

The verdict is likely to reshape how America's legal system treats Silicon Valley's tech giants and the content that is posted on their platforms.

The story of the plaintiff, known as Kaley GM, is hardly unique.

From the age of six, she became a heavy user of social media apps with feeds that go on forever, recommendation systems that surface the most compelling content and autoplay functions that stop users from switching off.

Kaley, now 20, said social media apps sent her spiralling into body dysmorphia and self-harm. In one day, she spent 16 hours on Instagram.

It is a pattern familiar to many concerned [parents trying to limit screen time](#) or attempting to get their kids off their phones.

But until now, there seemed little that would compel the companies to change their behaviour because of a landmark law which effectively shielded them from taking responsibility for their output.

In 1996, the US passed a law known as Section 230 that allows social media companies to run their sites without being held responsible for what users post there.

Since then, the legislation, called the law that built the internet, has acted as a get-out-of-jail-free card for tech companies. Only in extreme cases, such as when their services were used for sex trafficking, were companies held liable.

Accountability has arrived'

The California lawsuit turned this defence on its head.

It focused on the way that Instagram and YouTube were designed, rather than the content on them.

Meta and Google may not be responsible for what gets posted on their platforms – but they can certainly be held to account for how their apps work.

Over the last decade, social media has mutated from a way to share updates to something that is mostly consumed.

Instagram is no longer a feed of your friends but an endless stream of one algorithmically recommended post after another.

That has meant more eyeballs.

But at the time, the more that tech companies choose what content to load on to a screen, the harder it becomes to evade responsibility.

Kaley's lawyers had argued that Meta and Google had known these features were [harmful to children](#) but introduced them anyway, knowing it would keep them on their services for longer.

Adam Mosseri, the head of Instagram, who gave evidence in the trial, denied that the app was clinically addictive, comparing it to a good TV show. The plaintiffs had said it was more like cigarettes or gambling in a casino.

The jury ordered Google and Meta to pay damages to Kaley of \$3m (£2.3m), an irrelevance for companies of their size.

But further punitive damages may follow and there are thousands of similar cases pending trial in California alone.

Avery and Lori Schott, [whose daughter Annalee took her own life at the age of 18](#), were among the parents who watched the five-week trial play out.

Annalee Schott took her own life at the age of 18

The ruling emerged after Meta was ordered to pay \$375m for misleading users about child safety on its apps earlier this week, another legal blow for the tech sector.

Both companies have pledged to appeal, and their share prices barely registered the verdict. But the legal shield the companies have enjoyed for 30 years now seems vulnerable.

"This verdict is bigger than one case," Kaley's lawyers said on Wednesday. "Accountability has arrived."