*Hurling verbal spitballs won’t protect your kids*

My older son Kyle, who has always been rather direct, calls it “Crackbook.”

Don’t get him started, or you’ll likely hear a rant about people walking around in a daze staring at the phone in their hand. Living for “likes” and getting emotional if their “friends” are slow to comply. Not to mention filtering pictures that make people look like Casper the friendly ghost.

That’s just Facebook. Look, I’m way too old to keep up with all this, but I’ve at least heard of Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok and X (aka Twitter). No doubt there are more where the young and hip hide out from the old and ornery.

At its best, social media is just kind of silly, a place where people hang out and show pictures of their food and pets. And grab their 15 seconds of fame by dancing around, cavorting with pals or some other inane but innocent activity.

The much darker side involves addiction, bullying and sexual exploitation. Congressional hearings were held last week on such topics and how harmful social media can be when abused, with or without the tacit approval of companies and people who make an economic killing in the industry.

Here’s Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Missouri, lambasting Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook: “Your job is to be responsible for what your company has done. You’ve made billions of dollars on the people sitting behind you here. You’ve done nothing to help them. You’ve done nothing to compensate them. You’ve done nothing to put it right. You could do so here today and you should.”

At which point Zuckerberg stood up, turned to families in the gallery, and said he was sorry. He did not reach for his wallet.

Good theater from Zuckerberg. And Hawley. Then everybody went home.

Meanwhile, the phones are still in the hands of the addicts and the weirdos. The addiction pushers at the companies continue to rake in all the money.

One is reminded of the old saying usually attributed to Mark Twain, but really originated by Twain’s friend, essayist Charles Dudley Warner: “Everybody complains about the weather, but nobody does anything about it.”

Don’t expect Hawley – the fist-pumping, mob-fleeing hero of January 6 – to do anything, either. He and his congressional colleagues may speechify and preen for the cameras, but they have avoided for years taking action to rein in Big Tech in the only effective way – by hitting them in their wallets.

Instead, tech companies hide behind section 230 of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, which shields them from liability for harmful material on their sites. The federal law was passed in 1998, at a time when the internet as we know it was more of a dream than reality. It was believed entrepreneurs attempting to blaze a trail to the digital future needed some protection from lawyers and liability. Probably true. But those conditions have dramatically changed. Today’s tech giants sit on mountains of cash. They spend generously to grease the wheels in political circles.

Color me cynical, but maybe that has something to do with why politicians strut and babble in front of the cameras, while doing nothing to regulate the industry and hold the billionaires legally accountable for harm occurring on their platforms.

The harm, by the way, is not limited to bullying and exploiting vulnerable young people. It also includes what can only be called propaganda – be it left or right – meant to fool voters. Studies have shown social media platforms, as a business plan, steer more propaganda toward users who show an appetite for viewing such disinformation. It doesn’t require much tech understanding to see the link between that targeted content and America’s rapidly increasing disunity.

Now, throw in AI, or artificial intelligence, with all its Terminator-like possibilities. This mess is not going to fix itself.

With legacy media – newspapers and television, for example – there are bright lines of legal accountability. Producers know false, harmful content can be costly. Ask Fox News, after the network lost a defamation case and agreed to pay Dominion Voting Systems $787.5 million.

Congress could expose digital companies to similar standards and make them liable for harmful content on their platforms. Of course, they will claim it’s too hard to police such matters. Apparently, though, it’s easy enough for them to know if you are looking for a certain pair of shoes and flood your feed with offers.

Tech billionaires may be the bad guys here, but they’re not alone. Congress can’t (won’t?) get it done.

Follow the money, folks. You’ll find out who owns these political show ponies. Then maybe, when elections roll around, give somebody else a chance to do the right thing.

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