

24031 Meta boss Mark Zuckerberg apologises to families in fiery US Senate hearing

BCC news, Feb 1st 2024

Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg has apologised to families who say their children had been harmed by social media, during a fiery hearing in the US Senate. Mr Zuckerberg - who runs Instagram and Facebook - turned to them and said "no-one should go through" what they had.

He and the bosses of TikTok, Snap, X and Discord were questioned for almost four hours by senators from both parties. Lawmakers wanted to know what they are doing to protect children online.

Legislation is currently going through Congress which aims to hold social media companies to account for material posted on their platforms. Wednesday's hearing was a rare opportunity for the US senators to question tech bosses. Mr Zuckerberg and TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew voluntarily agreed to testify - but the heads of Snap, X (formerly Twitter) and messaging platform Discord initially refused and were sent government-issued subpoenas.

Behind the five tech bosses sat families who said their children had self-harmed or killed themselves as a result of social media content. They made their feelings known throughout, hissing when the CEOs entered and applauding when lawmakers asked tough questions.

While the hearing mostly focused on the protection of children from online sexual exploitation, the questions varied widely as the senators took advantage of having five powerful executives there under oath. TikTok CEO Mr Chew was asked whether his company shared US users' data with the Chinese government, which he denied.

But it was Mr Zuckerberg, chief executive of Meta, who came under the most scrutiny, as he testified before Congress for an eighth time.

At one point, Republican Senator Ted Cruz asked, "Mr Zuckerberg, what were you thinking?" when he showed the tech boss an Instagram prompt that warns users they may be about to see child sexual abuse material, but asks if they would like to "see the results anyway".

Mr Zuckerberg said the "basic science behind that" is "it's often helpful, rather than just blocking it, to help direct them towards something that could be helpful". He also promised to "personally look into it".

Ahead of the hearing, Meta had announced new safety measures, including that minors will now, by default, be unable to receive messages on Instagram and Messenger from strangers.

Social media industry analyst Matt Navarra told the BBC he thought the hearing resembled many similar showdowns with "lots of US political grandstanding" and a perfect photo opportunity provided by Mr Zuckerberg's apology.

406 words