

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

BEHIND THE SCREEN: AI SLOP, YOUNG CHILDREN, AND THE PROFIT
PROBLEM
GENERATION AI STARTS EARLY SERIES

Thursday, July 16, 2026

This is an automated transcript that has been minimally reviewed. Please check against the recording for accuracy. If you find any significant errors of substance, please let us know at events@brookings.edu

PANEL DISCUSSION:

MODERATOR: SWETA SHAH

Fellow, Center for Universal Education, The Brookings Institution

RACHEL FRANZ

Program Director, Young Children Thrive Offline, Fairplay

DAVID LOWENSTEIN

Chief Executive Officer and Co-Founder, Lionstone Consulting Group

Former Senior Director, Ready to Learn and Grants Strategy, PBS Kids

DR. JENNY RADESKY

David G. Dickinson Legacy Professor of Pediatrics, Associate Professor of Pediatrics, and Division Director of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, University of Michigan Medical School

* * * * *

SHAH: Everyone, good morning, good afternoon, and good evening. My name is Swetha Shaw, and I'm a fellow here at the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution. And welcome back to the Generation AI Starts Early series. This is the third of our webinar series that's gonna explore what AI means for young- for our youngest children from birth to eight years old.

So today's conversation is called Behind the Screen: AI Slop, Young Children, and the Profit Problem. So in our previous two webinars, we asked what AI means for raising young children in an AI era, and our second looked at what it means specifically for babies, toddlers, and families. So today we're turning to a topic that we've gotten a lot of questions about, and that's children's media because this is where many families are already encountering AI in their everyday life, often without realizing it So we're looking at what children are watching, how content reaches them, and what incentives are driving that.

So here's what we know. We know that AI-generated media for young children is flooding numerous platforms, including YouTube, which many of you may know about, and it looks like any other video that's fun for kids, especially if a parent or educator is not really paying attention and is just looking. It just looks like any sort of normal video, but it was made by an algorithm in seconds and without any educator or child development expert supporting its design.

And this is what now increasingly in the media is being called AI Sloth. So it's not a fringe phenomenon. It's really becoming really prolific, and it reflects incentives that reward speed and scale over developmental quality. So the question that we're asking today is, who's profiting from what young children are watching, and what we can do about it?

So before we begin, I know this topic can be very, can feel very overwhelming for many adults, and particularly for parents that are out there. So I'm a mom myself, so I get it. You know, we're already stretched between, like, trying to work raise kids. Screen time is often what can buy us maybe 20 minutes to make dinner or to, you know, do something for ourselves.

And so I'm not here to add to the guilt because I also need a break sometimes so I can be a better parent for my children. But I'm here because parents, educators, and others deserve to know what's actually in the video queue of what their children are watching. And parents and educators need guidance and advice, and we need to find solutions to ensure that high-quality media is more readily available than low-quality media.

So I'm joined here today with three fantastic guests. First, I have Dr. Jenny Radesky, who's a developmental behavioral pediatrician and an associate professor at the University of Michigan Medical School, and one of the country's leading researchers on how digital media design shapes early childhood development.

Hi, Jenny.

RADESKY: Hi, excited to be here.

SHAH: And next we have Rachel Franz. She's the Young Child- Ch- Young Children Thrive Offline program director at a nonprofit called Fair Play, where she works to hold companies accountable for manipulative digital practices. So she brings the sharper accountability lens where platforms are potentially failing children and what stronger standards could look like.

So hi, Rachel.

FRANZ: Hi. Thanks so much for having me.

SHAH: Yeah. And then lastly, I'm so excited to have David Lowenstein. He's the CEO and co-founder of Limestone Consulting Group, and a senior advisor to organizations including PBS, Sinking Ship Entertainment, and more. He's a former PBS Kids executive, and he brings decades of experience working in children's media.

So hi, David.

LOWENSTEIN: Hi, Sweta. Thank you for having me.

SHAH: Yeah. So thanks so much for all three of you joining us over the summer when I know there are so many other competing things happening, including vacations and World Cup and other things. So, just glad that we could have this conversation. So we're gonna move through a set of questions first three segments, and then we're gonna open it up to audience Q&A.

So some of you have already sent your questions when you registered, but for those that wanna submit more questions, submit it to events@brookings.edu. So let's just jump right into the questions. So firstly, Jenny, I'm gonna start with you because I think a lot of people may not know exactly what is AI slop.

So what are we actually talking about here, and can you paint us a picture of what this looks like?

RADESKY: Yeah. So AI slop is, you know, a, a term that we're using very colloquially to describe, it's AI-generated visual content, so usually videos, usually short-form vertical videos that are very visually engaging, but they're often meaningless.

They just seem like they are, as my kids would call, brain rot or something that is really, you know, clearly some sort of clickbait trying to get your attention. If any of you use Instagram or TikTok, like you may have seen AI-generated you know, photos of Taylor and Travis's wedding. You know, there's lots of AI-generated stuff on social media right now, but we started to see it aimed towards kids a year or two ago.

So my lab studies kids' YouTube use. We ask parents of toddlers to copy and paste the links on YouTube that their kids watched, and then we watch those and code them for quality. And we were starting to see some of these, you know, there's always been c- computer-generated cartoons that seem a little bit- vacuous and mesmerizing, but some of them started to just become nonsensical.

And we got contacted by a New York Times reporter, Arianna Laica, who was doing a deep dive into this. She had found YouTubers who had videos saying, "Hey, here's how to make tons of money off of kids' attention. It's so easy. You just use AI and you make these," what they call faceless videos, which means the YouTuber's face doesn't need to be there.

It's just a bunch of little animals or kids and ABCs and nursery rhyme songs. And they said, "Just make them at scale and something will trend, and you'll make some money off of this." And we found this really offensive because children's attention is such an important resource, and you can't just mine it for ad dollars.

And so, you know, I really encourage, there's been attention to this. Karla Engelbrecht is another one who has a Substack talking about what these AI slop videos look like and how many channels exist, and the tons of volume that they are putting out. Because like you said, AI, it can generate these videos ins- you know, really, really quickly compared to all the care and time it takes for other children's content.

SHAH: So can, can you tell us you know, so YouTube has had low quality videos, maybe low quality from our perspective as- Yeah ... child development people for a long time. What makes, like, these AI ones different?

RADESKY: So yeah, I'm gonna show a few slides for a second it, to kinda illustrate some of the videos that we have seen.

Some of these, if people attended a, a previous Brookings event on AI and little kids, you may have seen these before, 'cause Dr. Munzer, who I work with had also shared some of these. I just took some screenshots to kind of dissect the attention grabbing features of these AI slot videos. So here we have an ice cream cone that turns into a baby animal accompanied by that baby animal's parents, but the mom animal is pregnant, and then something explodes and ice cream goes everywhere.

So what we see here is wish fulfillment and vicarious pleasure. These are common features of YouTube videos. It could be toy unboxing, it could be watching someone play with slime. Here it is watching this ice cream cone being made, and watching something explode and get really messy is, is part of that vicarious pleasure.

You also see a lot of fast-paced, like, sparkles everywhere that captures visual attention. You see somewhat bizarre images, like a pregnant belly on a vulture, which grabs your attention, and sometimes you're like, "What is that? I can't look away," because ... And we often see that in YouTube thumbnails of, like, what we

call this bizarre images that YouTubers sometimes put up because it really captures your attention.

This is another one where, again, we have bizarre features, like a very, very large duck with a tiny little cat, and then the surprise egg. So this, a surprise egg is a classic kind of chance-based design that is in little kids apps and games and toys, but you open it, you have no idea what's gonna be inside.

And this Old MacDonald Had a Farm video has a surprise egg roll out of a barn, and poof, you get all these rainbows and sparkles against, again, attention capture. And then the horse has two arms as well as four legs, so it's kind of bizarre in that same way. And then finally, you get, we found this one was interesting because it's, it's pseudo-educational.

It has ABCs and animals and colors, so often YouTubers will just put some of that shallow educational content, and they can, they put it in their title that it's educational just 'cause it has ABCs and colors. But we found, you know, sometimes they'll use something that's trending, like the Olympics, to put that in their video, too, because they know if they include the different things that trend, they may be more likely to just hit the algorithm right and be able to show up in more feeds So that's your little lesson 101 on attention capture in YouTube.

SHAH: So Jenny, has there been any research done, like, you know, looking at those videos, they're totally, as you said, nonsensical, and like how, why would a child be interested in that? Like, d- do you have any thoughts on why- Oh, sure ... like have you studied that? Yeah, why- Yeah ... would a child be interested in something so...

And I would say not only children, probably also- Yeah ... adolescents and adults.

RADESKY: Right. We all have things that cap- flashy objects that capture our attention. Yeah. But when you are a young child, you have especially weak attention regulation, and what that means is that your brain is really attracted to whatever is flashy and novel.

And that's adaptive because I study this when I'm in you know, or infant clinic that when I show infants different new objects, their eyes go right to it because they need to take it in and encode it in their brain and remember it, and then they move to something else. And so when you kind of, you know, hijack that with just bells and whistles, you can get a lot of engagement.

You can get kids staring and looking at the screen. But y- it- it's a shallow sort of engagement where we g- You know, I like Kathy Hirsh-Pasek's, you know, five pillars. The way she's thought about the science of learning around kids technology is you can be on autopilot with very shallow kind of learning compared to minds-on learning, where when you have better quality content, as David will talk about, you can really discern and think and struggle a little bit and, and follow a storyline.

And, and the other thing, the other problem I have with just all of this glut of lower quality content is that on the feed, it's gonna crowd out the higher quality content. And so at the same time you're getting more views for the lower quality slop, you're getting fewer views for the people who've worked really hard to try to put something good out there.

And so I'm, that's where we need to think about the business model and the tech design as much as we're thinking about the actual, you know, AI slop in front of kids.

SHAH: Well, as little kids, like, start watching more of these low-quality videos that, you know, you rightly mention, like, there're more of them, so they're crowding out kind of the higher quality, developmentally, like, what concerns you about that for- Well-

the birth to eight age group?

RADESKY: Yeah. We, there's lots of research that high quality educational media is correlated with better language outcomes, and if you're watching lower quality, it's more, it puts kids at higher risk of behavioral problems, sleep problems. So if you are, my message to parents is always, if you're gonna spend some time, you know, online or kids watching videos, make it the high quality stuff that's actually worth your kids' time and attention.

And because there's two reasons here. One is, I don't want kids, little kids, to be habituated, meaning to get used to, "Oh, I'm just gonna passively follow the feed. I'm just gonna watch all this slop and let it wash over me. I don't need to care." I want kids to think a little bit. You know, of course, I want kids- Yeah

to be calm and quiet too, just like any parent, but I also want them to be engaging mentally with, with whatever story is in front of them. And that's what, you know, kids media, when you think back to the '70s and '80s and you had, like, really good media and research on Sesame Street and Mister Rogers and everything, what was, the important ingredients was the storytelling and the characters being really important.

Mm-hmm. And a really good curriculum. When you have that longer form content, you get meaning making. You get a human writing a story and trying to pass some sort of meaning or lesson along to a kid. If you have a computer just, like, regurgitating attention capturing designs and mish-mashing them up into a video, it may get ad dollars, but it is not gonna be meaning making.

It's not going to tell a meaningful story that's gonna resonate the way when you hear your child who maybe has watched Daniel Tiger and then they sing that song, you know, to help them know that grownups will come back when you're going out on a date or something. Like, that's so meaningful that they've seen Daniel Tiger go through it, and then they can handle it better when they're separating from you.

That sort of meaning making is not happening with slop, because AI doesn't know meaning. It doesn't have wisdom. It just has little bits of data.

SHAH: Great. So David, I'm gonna turn to you. I think Jenny's already set you up a little bit to this, but so when you compare, you know, you've worked in children's media and particularly PBS, which is nonprofit, for many years.

So when you compare AI slot videos to good screen media, like what particular differences would a person see, and how do you know it wasn't made using a child development lens? So I know Jenny has already started talking a little bit about that, but what would you add to that with your, based on your expertise?

LOWENSTEIN: No, thanks, Sweta. And yes, I, and I could listen to Jenny all day. I love, I love what she has to say. I, I think the biggest difference is that one is made, i- it's not that actually one is made with AI and the other isn't, it's that one is designed around child development or what we call d- developmental intentionality, and the other is, you know, typically designed around algorithms and, and maybe I c- I'll explain with a story.

So my mother was a, a p- pioneering educator in the 70s and 80s, and when I was a kid growing up in the, in the 1980s, I had a, a guilty pleasure of watching a very misogynistic show on television called The Dukes of Hazzard. And looking back at it it contained plenty of sexist portrayals of women. But interestingly, my mom did not ban me from watching it, and instead she turned it into a mi- a media literacy lesson.

So she explained what sexism and misogyny w- were, and then she gave me a challenge. She said every time I noticed a sexist comment or portrayal, I had to stomp my foot or snap my fingers. And suddenly I wasn't just watching television, I was, I was analyzing it, and she taught me to see something that, that had been invisible to me before.

And I think that's an opportunity that we have with AI today. It's not just to protect children from every piece lo- you know, of low-quality content, it's to help them become thoughtful viewers, which I think Jenny was, was also alluding to. And so, you know, during my career at PBS Kids, and before that through the pioneering work of Sesame Workshop, we built children's media very differently from the way, you know, much of the AI content is being produced.

And so Sesame actually developed what became known as the Children's Television Workshop Model, or now we call it the Sesame Model. And it was bringing together writers and producers and developmental psychologists, educators, researchers, essentially as equal partners and, you know, from the, from the beginning.

And before anyone wrote a script, you know, we, the, we would establish some very clear learning goals, like what do we want kids to understand? H- how do we want them to think or to feel or to grow with this content? And so every creative decision served developmental goals. And at PBS Kids, you know, Sara DeWitt, who's the

just, still there, and Linda Simensky, who, who was there when I was there, they, we all wrote a book together in 2019 called Getting Ready to Learn.

And in Sara and Linda's chapter, From Mission to Screens: The PBS Kids Approach to Content, we followed that, that same Sesame Workshop model philosophy. Start with research, work alongside the child development experts and educators, test unfinished content with kids and families. And if children become confused or lose interest or weren't learning what we intended, we changed the content, right?

We didn't ask children to a- adopt, adapt to the media. We, we adapted the media to kids. And so I think that's, that's a fundamentally different production process than, than generating thousands of videos that are optimized primarily to, to maximize clicks or, or watch time. And, and I'll just end y- my, my answer, long-winded answer, saying, you know, I think there's an opportunity, and we'll get to this later, but for parents and teachers and even kids to, to learn to recognize the difference between the AI slop and the quality media, and we can make it a game.

You know, watch a thoughtfully designed PBS Kids or Sesame Street clip alongside an AI-generated video and just ask, "What do you notice? Does the story have a beginning, middle, and end? Do the characters solve a problem or learn something?" Are there moments to think about and reflect? Or, or is it constant stimulation?

Does it spark conversation, imagination, or does it encourage you to keep watching? And I think those are the types of questions that, that children d- where, where children could discover the difference for themselves.

SHAH: Yeah, and I love how both of you kind of mentioned, like, meaning making, critical thinking, imagination, because those are skills that we want children to develop.

And so good media can do that. And I'm gonna come back to you, David, about, like, you know, the profit and the business side of it, but I'm gonna go over now to Rachel because y- at Fair Play you've been tracking these types of videos for a while. And so, you know, there are audience members that are wondering, like, how widespread is this?

Is it just really YouTube, or is it, you know, Jenny also mentioned TikTok and others. But how widespread is this, and where are kids mostly accessing AI slop? Is it at home? Is it at school? Is it maybe at a friend's house? Can you shed some light on that for us?

FRANZ: Yeah. Well, you know, given how bizarre some of these AI videos are, we might expect that they live on this weird little corner of the internet and you'll have to go looking for them, but unfortunately, that's not what's happening.

So, you mentioned in the intro that AI-generated videos can be produced at a speed, a scale, and also a low cost that we've never really seen before. And some AI video

channels can pump out thousands of videos a month compared with a traditional animated studio who might put out a few videos a month, right?

And so YouTube is becoming flooded with this kind of content, and it's not just YouTube, it's TikTok, it's Instagram Reels, it's any kind of, like, short form video platform that we're really seeing this take over. And so we have a massive amount of content being uploaded onto these platforms, and then they're paired with these powerful algorithmic recommendation systems.

So it's not just that AI slop exists, it's that these platforms are recommending the content to kids over and over again. And Jenny mentioned the investigation with The New York Times. They found that after watching popular preschool shows like Cocomelon on YouTube, 40% of the recommended videos that followed contained AI-generated content.

In 2025 researchers from Capwing found that about 20% of all new users recommended AI YouTube Shorts contained AI slop. So it's really becoming a default viewing experience. And from Fair Play's perspective, that's what tells us that it's not a parenting issue, right? Children and families can't reasonably avoid this content.

There's no setting that turns it off. There's no filter even on YouTube Kids, which is supposed to be a safe place for kids to view media and especially not on YouTube Shorts, which are highly attention hijacking. And, and you know, when these platforms flood their services with AI-generated content and then recommend it to children by default, parents aren't really being given a choice in the matter children can really access this content wherever their devices are.

We see that the most YouTube watching kind of happens at home and, you know, potentially at a friend's house where they're watching it at home. And different families have different values and policies and practices around screen time, right? But we also see you know, because this is not necessarily flagged as problematic or anything, schools that haven't blocked YouTube can easily give children access to to seeing lots of, lots of AI slop if they're, if they're logging on.

SHAH: Yeah, and I think that's a really important point to bring up, 'cause we've gotten a number of questions and I know there's a number of places around the country where there's a movement to get like, you know, YouTube and, and things off of, like, school devices, and so we did get some questions around that.

So I'm really glad that you brought up that most of the viewing happens actually at home or at, like, a friend's house, that it, it does ha- it can happen at school, but it can also, a lot of it happens at home. And I'm glad that both, like, you and Jenny brought up TikTok because, you know, initially as I've been myself learning about this topic, I didn't really realize that it was so prolific even, like, with teens and, like, young adults.

So the other, like, last week I was talking to my recently turned 18-year-old who I said, "Yeah, I'm doing this webinar on AI slop," and she's like, "Well, Mom, is that, like, the fruit videos on TikTok?" And I was like, "Fruit videos on TikTok." Because you are going to look at it and it's, it's really nonsensical and, you know, and she said, "Oh, it's really funny."

So clearly, like, that flashy thing, you know, flash and all that, the nonsensical stuff, Jenny, that you mentioned that is capturing the attention of little kids is also capturing the attention of older kids and young adults. And so, you know, even though this webinar is specifically focused on young children, I think a lot of the lessons and the points that are gonna come up, and recommendations are gonna be really relevant to children of all ages.

So I just wanted to bring that up. Ab-

RADESKY: absolutely. I mean, I think there's a point where teens especially, like, I have a 16-year-old, my son was like, he'll just call things AI slop because he thinks it's unbelievable, right? Or they're, they're having trouble with this kind of a, a truth crisis around what is real online and what isn't, and knowing that especially around really high-stakes events, you're gonna get a lot more AI-generated content.

And so I think it's a conversation to be having with grandparents too with, with all generations about how to discern this. And then hopefully we'll talk about some solutions that the platforms could do too, to give people a way to opt out. Because, you know, a lot of the, the drivers behind putting AI slop you know, out on social media is to get engagement, and engagement translates into data collection and ad dollars.

And so this is a, a really good opportunity for people to be you know, having that discernment, having a little bit of that like, "No, no, no, I'm not just gonna sit back and, and keep scrolling when I'm seeing things like this."

SHAH: Yeah. So I mean, that is a perfect segue into kind of talking about the business model that's really, you know, supporting this.

So Rachel, I want to turn to you. You know, you've been looking at the business model. For a lot of our audience members out there, they don't maybe necessarily know about this business model. So can you tell us a little bit about this business model that's really supporting AI slop getting out there?

FRANZ: Yeah. I'll turn to AI slop in a moment. Yeah. But you know, I want to say that it's important for us to understand that even if AI slop didn't exist, YouTube's business model i- is really problematic because its goal is to endlessly capture children's attention, and that's how they make their money.

So the longer children stay on the platform, the longer they're engaged, right? The more videos they watch, the more ads they watch, the more data YouTube can

collect on their users to help recommend more content, and the more money they make. It's why YouTube has features like autoplay, so there's no like clear starting or stopping point with your watching, which we know that especially young children need natural starting and stopping points in order to disengage.

It's why families struggle so much to get their children off of YouTube. And they have this sort of powerful algorithm that recommends videos to kind of keep- Us all glued. And so what we've seen historically is that YouTube really measures their success by this engagement and not whether children are learning or thriving, despite how many videos on YouTube, including AI slop videos, are marketed as educational.

And this is really important because we all know that excessive screen time in itself can be harmful regardless of content because it displaces experiences that they really need to thrive, like play and socializing and using their senses. Now what AI slop does is it kind of supercharges this model.

So again, they're super che- they're super cheap, they're super fast to produce, so they flood the platform. And then many are designed to, like, in their content capture attention, as Jenny mentioned earlier, even to kind of mesmerize and zombify and make children extra passive when it comes to what they're watching, right?

And so the incentive to create the most engaging content is the priority as opposed to creating the best content for children when it comes to AI slop. One thing that's really especially concerning to me as someone who has a background in early childhood education and child development, is that a lot of AI slop content's actually aimed at babies and toddlers.

These are the very children who are the most vulnerable to the harms of excessive screen time, the least able to distinguish high-quality content from low-quality content, and we've actually seen that Google is investing in AI channels that produce content for babies and toddlers. So this suggests that, right, the- their business model really prioritizes scaling AI content and engagement rather than what's developmentally appropriate.

Some good news is that, you know, throughout the last several decades of advocacy we've seen some important protections kind of be put in place including protections through the Children's Online Privacy and Protection Act that make it so that YouTube can't use children's personal information or behavioral data to, like, advertise and recommend to them.

It's why we see the Made for Kids videos or, like, the comments are turned off on YouTube. And actually, those videos don't make as much money because personalized advertisements are, like, where the money is. So you know, those changes actually haven't in- changed that incentive to maximize engagement because the platforms are still encouraged to focus on producing kind of endless streams of really engaging content that keeps kids watching.

And you know, I have more to say about this later, but we really believe that it's unfair that families are parenting up against this business model that these platforms are really profiting by designing these systems that keep kids watching for as long as possible, especially when those systems increasingly recommend low-quality AI-generated content that families have no choice in to avoid or you know, keep their kids away from when they choose to use YouTube with their kids.

SHAH: So David, I wanna turn to you now because, you know, we've been talking about kind of how the profit model kind of makes it difficult. It, it enables a lot of content to get out there. And you know, Jenn made mention that we're now seeing AI a lot more than kinda higher quality. And some of that higher quality, as you mentioned earlier, it takes a bit of time to do that.

So, I mean, can you tell us a little bit about, is there a way that we could change that dynamic? Is there a way that we can get more higher quality content out there knowing that it costs more, so we have, like, that, the cost piece there?

LOWENSTEIN: Yeah. Swati, you hit it, you hit it on the head. I mean, I, I think I...

What, what I'd like to add to what we've been talking about and what you just alluded to is that high-quality children's media isn't just creatively more difficult, it's, it's economically difficult, right? It takes time, it takes research, you know, multiple rounds of development. It takes listening to children.

I'll say that again. Listening to children- Yeah ... right? And, and families. It takes testing, revision, and all that costs money, right? And but, and what's interesting is none of these things are necessarily visible on the screen. When you watch, you know, Jenn talked about Daniel Tiger or, or Molly of Denali or Sesame Street, you don't see...

You watch a 10-minute, you know, or a 11-minute story, you don't see the, the months of developmental research or the curriculum design or the- Sure ... educator input or the listening sessions with kids and families that made those 11 minutes possible, right? You're seeing the product of an enormous investment in children's development.

And so, you know, that's one of the great strengths of public media, is that it begins with mission rather than market, right? But we also recognize that- success or impact, you know, is, is an equation, right? Learning and engagement, right? If you, if, if you're missing one of those parts of the equation, you're not gonna have impact, right?

You could have the most engaging content, but if it's not rooted in the learning sciences and child development, it's not gonna be effective. On the, on the other hand, go to, to the extreme and have the most, you know content that is, is steeped in the learning science, but if it's not engaging, you're not gonna have impact because no one wants to watch it, right?

And so at PBS Kids, we, we try to, to balance that. But we always ask ourselves you know, is someone gonna watch this or play this game and become more curious? Do they im- improve their early literacy or mathematical thinking? Do they strengthen executive function or social emotional skills? Do they ask more questions?

So, those are different success metrics than maximizing watch time or advertising revenue, as Rachel talked about, right? I also want to be careful 'cause I, I don't think this is necessarily a nonprofit versus a for-profit story, right? I think many commercial companies have created extraordinary children's media.

But the issue is incentives, right? If companies are rewarded primarily for engagement, they're gonna naturally optimize for engagement. If they're rewarded for developmental impact, they'll optimize for developmental impact. So, you know, there's an old saying, it's true, what, what gets measured gets designed for, right?

And so I believe we need to begin measuring developmental outcomes with the same seriousness that we measure clicks and retention. And if we do that, I think products will start to look different. And this is where I become somewhat optimistic about AI. I think many conversations focus on AI replacing creators, and that's, that's concerning.

But I think a better question is, you know, how can AI help more kids benefit from the very best of what we've already learned about how children develop, right? I mean, PBS Kids, Sesame Street, 50 years plus of building extraordinary evidence, right? And universities and developmental sciences. We know a great deal about how children learn.

And, but, and I, I think AI gives us an opportunity to scale that knowledge in ways that we've, we've never been able to do before. And, you know, imagine AI helping teachers adapt stories to individual reading levels or creating, you know, high quality versions in dozens of languages while preserving the ed- educational intent.

Making educational experiences more accessible for, for kids with disabilities, or rapidly prototyping ideas so that they spend more time refining the learning experience. I mean, these are just... You know, you could take an educational framework like Sesame Workshop's Alan Simpson and make it culturally relevant with research-based content that's available to kids all over the world at a fraction of today's cost.

And I'll end by saying, you know, there's a, a friend and mentor of mine, Jim Shelton- He has recently talked about AI in a, in a really interesting way, and he talks about, and this is in the space of economic mobility, but he talks about how, you know, probably three-fourths of, of, of the decline in economic mobility can, can be traced to the public and private policy decisions that get made, right?

And he says that in the AI era, the same technology that's threatening to leave millions behind can also be embedded into institutions and social enterprises that determine where oppor- opportunity is won and lost. And I, I think children's media is

one of those institutions. And so the goal shouldn't necessarily to, to use AI to replace relationships.

It, it should be to strengthen the relationships that matter between kids and parents, kids and teachers, kids and communities that are helping them learn. So, you know, I don't see the future as AI versus human creativity. I, I really see it as, you know, combining the developmental science and crea- cr- you know, human creativity and artif- and artificial intelligence in service of kids

SHAH: Yeah, I love that, you know, you're talking about AI as additive, like how can it add to the conversation.

I also wanted to bring, like elevate another point that you brought up around child voice, because that actually is a comment that we got just now live around children's voices and how critical they are. And it's good to know that, you know, in developing the, in your experience, developing media has always included child voice as part of that.

And I'll just say that in the new initiative that we have at Brookings, we're also planning to integrate child voice into a new piece of research that we're doing. So, we're not in the Q&A part, but it came up and it just felt right to integrate it here. So child voice, like, I think is really great that, I'm really glad that you brought that up.

So Jenny, I wanna go to you now because there's also an equity dimension here that I really wanna name. Research suggests that children in lower income families tend to have higher screen time and fewer alternatives when it comes to quality content. So what does that mean for who bears the cost of AI slop?

RADESKY: Yeah. Yeah, some of the research we've done when we track young kids' devices or we ask parents about their YouTube viewing habits, we have found that families who are lower income, where the parents identify as Black or Hispanic, where they don't have access to high quality childcare, those kids are more likely to be regular YouTube viewers and watch them for, watch YouTube for longer every day.

We have a a paper I'm about to submit to a journal actually. It's not peer reviewed yet, but we looked at the total quality scores along the YouTube histories that kids had watched recently, and it was the lowest for Black families, and then it was just a little higher for Hispanic families, and the highest content quality score was for white families.

It was this total gradation of... And that frustrates me. It's not about what the parents chose, because so much of on YouTube is what the algorithm chose, right, and put in front of that family, and how some kids might be, you know, their, their interests are being inferred in some way and then they're being given a stream of content that might be lower lower in quality.

So I also, you know, I always wanna make sure that when we're talking about inequities in, in access to high quality media, that it's not a blame on the parent at all. We've, at the American Academy of Pediatrics, talk about media has just filled a void and, and is filling in for a lot of opportunities that low income families or marginalized families don't have access to.

So if you don't have childcare, if you're ex- an exhausted parent wor- you know, working two jobs and long hours, when I'm talking to families in clinic, they say, "That's where YouTube fills that void. It's just a constant stream of videos that I can work remotely while my kids who don't have childcare are occupied," right?

So think of it as this easy button, 'cause it's pre-installed on smart TVs and on, on your phones, and it's just something that parents reach for because they're exhausted. And so there's gotta be coupling of more parent supports with better access to high-quality media. And so we tell families, like "If, if YouTube is filling that void for you, just really focus on high-quality content and find ways to kind of chip away at some of the time that kids are spending, and getting them outside, getting them into different ways of playing," just so that families feel like we're being realistic with them and we understand the limitations that they're facing and, and the function that media is serving in their families.

But we haven't yet looked at whether AI-generated content is being consumed more often by lower s- income families, but it's, it's highly likely based on the patterns that we're seeing so far around content quality.

SHAH: Yeah, and I've been thinking a lot about also, you know, we need to think about looking at this from a socioeconomic and racial lens because that's gonna, that's gonna be potentially different guidance that's given to different people.

So I'm really glad that, you know, you've been thinking about this and your lab's been kind of looking at this as well, and it's something that at Brookings we've been thinking about that I personally have also been thinking about. I've also been thinking, you know, about Pope Leo's encyclical. So just to say that I'm not Catholic and I'm not here to, like, plug a religion, but particularly I've been thinking about, because we've been talking about, you know, all these IDET products that are for profit and just thinking a lot about, you know what was mentioned about AI being a public good.

I don't know if that's ever gonna happen given that we're a capitalist society. But you know, just s- something I've been reflecting on is could it be more powerfully used to support humanity if it was a public good versus just something that was sold or something that was used for ad dollars? So it's just my own personal reflection and maybe some food for thought for everyone else.

But now let's jump into kind of the practical piece of this because I think many people are here today because they wanna know the practical side. So Jenny, I'm gonna go back to you because you started already talking about advice that you give to

parents in your clinic that you see. Is there anything else that you would add that maybe you didn't have a chance to kind of mention about advice to parents?

RADESKY: Yes, and excuse me while I'm letting my dog out of my office so she doesn't bark. I always start off by telling families, like, "This is a lot right now. You are, you know, trying to navigate especially profit-driven media, media that is very automated, that has lots of user-generated content in it."

It's so much harder to navigate than just traditional, you know, the, like, channels that I had on my TV when I was growing up. You know, I had Saturday morning cartoons where I had, like, two channels with options of what cartoons I could watch. And, and parents are navigating a really different ecosystem.

So first, just empathize with the fact that, like, this is a lot. It's a lot of work. It's not your fault. Second is to say, "Why can't we flip the script and instead of saying what do I need to do better as a parent, like, what could these platforms be doing better? What could YouTube be doing better to give a more customized interface so parents could turn off the feed if they want to?"

They could really kind of make designs that help them parent around this better. For example, you could have a, a little toggle that says no AI-generated content, and you could have watermarks on AI-generated content to say so that you can discern more easily, "Okay, we're not watching this. I do wanna watch this."

I also tell parents you know, I say, "Listen, I talk to lots and lots of parents about the way they parent around media." Some decided to give up on YouTube altogether. They got to a certain point where they were like, "We're done. This is too hard." So I have told them, like, that's normal and okay, and if you wanna use it very intentionally to just, like, access it when you want to for very intentional purposes, that's okay.

I love this pattern I'm hearing around parents, especially you know, some of the Black and Hispanic parents I've been talking to. They're like, "I use it to find The Backyardigans or the, the, the show that I watched as a kid that I loved and had characters that really resonated with me, and I'm just gonna use it to watch Little Bear or find these very, like, things that are more meaningful to me, and therefore, I am more likely to co-view it with my little kid."

And then for parents who wanna keep YouTube in their v- you know, kids' media diet, I say watch it in a public place, like, so you can monitor. So they're in the living room or some other place, not with headphones on, just so you can listen in on what's being recommended. Use a supervised account so you can block, or, or YouTube Kids, you can block things more easily.

And it's a lot of work, parents tell me, but you're, can kind of, like, say, "We are not watching that YouTuber. We are just staying in this, you know, more narrow place." And then, and then give very clear time limits that are consistent at a consistent time of day. Like, if we're watching it, it is just for this amount of time, you know, while I'm

cooking dinner or while you know, some other regular pattern so kids don't start asking for it just whenever they're bored or whenever they wanna fill some downtime.

And last thing is just when you can hide the Shorts, just hide them. Exit out and give the message to YouTube that you don't really want Shorts on your interface, and that, again, hopefully will continue to, to show the platforms that people want more control over, you know, the, the platforms that are just kind of b- profiling them and then feeding them based on what they think you're gonna pay attention to.

SHAH: really great practical tips, things that I didn't even know about. So now I'm gonna go on YouTube and see what I put those things in place. So David, I want to turn to you now. If you were advising, I mean, you already advise media companies, but if you were, you know, if a company came up to you and said, "Hey," like, "I really want to do, I want to do some good," what would you advise them?

LOWENSTEIN: Yeah. Well, I actually think it, it's, it's less about telling companies what, what not to do and more about helping them discover what's possible, right? So if I were advising a media company that genuinely wanted to improve, my, my first piece of advice would be don't start with the technology, start with the children, right?

Spend time with developmental scientists, spend time with educators, spend time listening to families, and spend time to listening to children themselves, right? We have, like I said before, more than 50 years of research on how children learn, and so we need to use AI to bring that knowledge to life in new and more powerful ways, right?

And I think one initiative that has given me a great deal of hope is the Joan Ganz Cooney Center Sandbox for Literacy Innovations, which is supported by the Walton Family Foundation. And that's brought together researchers with educators, designers, entrepreneurs, technologists, and investors to explore how AI and other emerging innovative technologies can strengthen children's literacy in ways that are rooted in the science of learning and shaped by the voices of children and families.

And to me, that's, that's the kind of innovation ecosystem we need. And I don't know that we could expect companies to figure this out in isolation, right? We should be creating more opportunities for researchers and creators and technologists and, and parents and kids and educators to design the future together.

And I don't think this is a nonprofit versus for-profit story. Like I said, I think some of the most influential children's media in history has come from nonprofit organizations, of course, like Sesame and PBS, but, but there are also ex- inspiring examples in the commercial sector. So Alan Gershenfeld is one of my favorites.

He helped build Activision into a m- multibillion-dollar gaming company, and then he became a father, right? And, and asked a different question and said, "What if games could be just as commercially successful while also helping young people grow?" And so through Eli Media, he helped pioneer an entirely new genre of, of

games that are commercially successful, culturally authentic, and intentionally designed to generate both a financial return on investment and a social impact return on investment.

So to me, that's proof that, that purpose and profit don't have to be at odds. And, and I'm equally encouraged by the remarkable network of Sesame Workshop alum who've carried those same child-centered values into leadership roles across the private sector, right? We have leaders like Makeda Mays Green at Paramount Nickelodeon, Jane Park and Jen Kotler Clark, who are now at Google, Nico Bolton, who's at Mighty Picnic.

They're, they're helping shape products and experiences that are engaging, but also grounded in, in child development and designed to help young people grow in very, you know, positive pro-social ways. So that's encouraging 'cause it shows that the Sesame model isn't confined to Sesame Workshop, right? Its influence is, is spreading across the broader media and tech ecosystem.

So is this a market problem or a governance problem? I, I think it's both, but, but I'd add a third dimension. It's an innovation ecosystem challenge. You know, markets by themselves are not gonna reward developmental impact consistently, and governments by themselves are not gonna invent the next generation of children's learning experiences.

So we need an ecosystem where philanthropy and universities and public media, tech companies, investors, families work together to reduce the risk of innovation while r- you know, raising the standard of quality. And, and I think that's how Sesame happened, that's how PBS Kids and the Ready to Learn initiative that I helped direct for many years helped create and study some of the most effective educational media in the world.

And I, and I think that's how we're gonna build the next generation of AI-powered learning experiences. You know, we, we, we've proven that learning science and creativity belong together, and I think now we just need to prove that learning science, creativity, and AI can belong together. And, and so, yeah, I'll leave, I'll leave it there.

SHAH: No, I love that. I love that advice about collaboration, you know, because working together you get all the expertise. And, you know, when you mention kind of the for-profit companies can also, you know, design good media, and it just made me think personally of, like, my kids my younger daughter lo- I don't know if you guys remember this cartoon, but Octonauts.

It's about, like, sea animals. So my daughter, through that, like, she used to watch it when she was, like, toddler. She's 12 now, and she wants to be a marine biologist because of that show. We don't know if that's gonna stick, obviously. But you know, similarly, I, I know that, like, Dora the Explorer I don't know if you remember that cartoon where a little girl, African American girl is, once is a doctor, a doctor of animals.

I know it's, like, gotten a lot of little girls into, like, you know, wanting to be doctors. So I, I totally, really great points about how even for-profit companies can create good media and, you know, we need to see how we can work in that ecosystem to collaborate. So Rachel, I wanna turn to you now. You know, given that this content is here, it's at scale, it's profitable, what's the realistic ask of industry, and what are you guys at Fair Play asking?

FRANZ: Yeah. You know, I really would love to live in a world where it's a realistic ask for companies to put children's well-being first. Everyone benefits when we center children in our world, and so that's kind of what we're asking, put kids ahead of profit. I think David's examples of companies that parallel kids' well-being with profit, it's a great start, right?

And just acknowledging that companies have choices about the products that they build, the content they amplify, and the safeguards that they put in place. With regard to AI slop back in April, we actually led a coalition letter to YouTube and Google calling on them to take some common sense steps to protect kids online, and Jenny worked really closely with us on this.

It was signed by 230 experts and organizations from around the globe. And really what we asked is that they don't host AI slop on YouTube kids or made-for-kids videos. We believe that they should give families that toggle switch that that Jenny suggested, and that it should be on by default, and ultimately don't algorithmically recommend AI-generated content to users under 18.

And we had a few other asks, but those are really core to kind of trying to address that business model and change some of the incentives to kind of keep pumping AI slop onto the platform.

SHAH: So I've, I've kind of already been integrating advanced questions that have come from the audience into this conversation, so we're kind of blending into the Q&A section.

But I do want to ask because there have been a number of questions. This is for all three of you, whoever wants to answer this. There are a number of people who've asked about what could schools and school districts or even states do. So any thoughts for you on that?

RADESKY: You know, I've talked with some school districts who are looking into just having the educator-only version of YouTube on school-issued devices because that is just something where the educator can pick if they have certain scientific videos or, you know, meditation videos or something else like that that they intentionally want to use.

But then it blocks the rest of the whole YouTube corpus from, from what kids have been accessing on their school devices. So that is the kind of easiest- Oh, yeah ... approach to that. I know there's been lots of policy talk about ways to improve the filtering and blocking of social media and distractions on kids' school devices.

But from what I hear from my patients, what I have seen in my children, is that YouTube is the number one distraction that they're getting into.

SHAH: So Rachel or David, do you want to add to that, either, like, tips for our educators out there or school districts, or even, like, generally around policies?

Like, what kind of state level or federal level policies should we be trying to push forward?

FRANZ: Yeah. And you know, in, in our long history as an organization, we've rarely seen substantial meaningful changes come from companies voluntarily. So when we're thinking about what would support kids in schools, what would support kids overall, we really think that these companies need to be regulated.

And so we've been over the past several years really supporting safety by design approaches that would require companies to have a duty of care as it's called, right? They would need to consider children's best interests and developmental appropriateness when they're designing and operating their products, and not have it as an afterthought.

And those are existing in real forms in proposed legislation like the Kids Online Safety Act right now. It has bipartisan support and there's a lot of potential to see that happen not only federally, but on the state level as well. We really believe that you know, when we implement these types of regulations, it can really help the ego-ecosystem of children's media and really bring back the power in the hands of, of families and children who should be in control of, of what's happening in their families around media.

SHAH: David, did you want to jump into any of this? Or I can also go to the next question that's come from the audience.

LOWENSTEIN: Well, real quick, I'll, I'll just say one of the things that I've been most impressed with one of my mentors, Dr. Brian Brown at Stanford University and his postdoc, Dr. Faye Marie Vassell, have a concept for an AI community of practice for schools and school districts.

And I think, you know, I'm happy to share more about that, but essentially it would be having schools produce their own online AI academies that include guidance on teaching and learning and academic integrity and family and student support and engagement and all around responsible AI use, and getting local communities to help shape what, what those, those policies and governance are.

So I, I, I think those are the types of things that could be really powerful for schools and school districts to get behind. So, here's a little, you know, shout-out to Brian and Faye for the, for the work that they're doing.

SHAH: Fabulous. So we have many more questions that have come in, but I think unfortunately, we won't be able to reach all of them.

But I hope those of you in the audience have heard in some form your question being integrated into the conversation. And, you know, we're always ... Like, keep sending your questions even after this event to events@brookings.edu, because your questions actually inform the topics that we choose for these webinars.

So this particular topic even came because there were a number of questions that came up, you know, from audience. So, you know, please keep sending your questions. So I just, you know, before closing, I want to say thank you to David, Jenny, and Rachel for this really illuminating conversation. I wish I could keep talking to you longer 'cause isn't so interesting, and I've been sitting here taking notes and so many, like, amazing quotes and ideas from all of you.

But I think before we close, you know, I, a few things that I want to name, you know, is that we're all parents here or have children in our lives. So this topic is really personal for, for really all of us here, for many of us, I would say. And we've been reflecting and looking at the research on this as professionals, but also as parents and caregivers, like many of you.

And as you s- heard from today's webinar, none of us here are anti-tech or anti-AI, but we all believe that the products out there should be designed to support children's learning and development. And as David mentioned, you know, with his vast experience, there are really, there are ways to do that, and to, you know, not necessarily be, like, anti-AI, but really be additive to that.

You know, we know that AI swap has for-profit incentives, and that shortcuts the design process. You know, in an effort to make quick and cheap videos, we get low-quality videos. That's just the way it is right now. And that many platforms that have AI videos are not necessarily villains, but it is the ecosystem, as David mentioned, that, you know, there are structural challenges and that we need to really think about and collaborate together to really solve some of those structural problems that for-profit companies have.

So they can keep making profit, but at the same time, have higher quality product. And, you know, here's something that gives me hope, is that through this conversation, I feel like, It's not inevitable. Like, we can build toward a media landscape where our, what, what our kids are encountering is additive and supporting, you know, where it's gonna add to their growth and their curiosity, their creativity their sense of the world, instead of simply, you know, pulling them away from relationships and connections, which we know relationships and connections are critically important.

And I know a lot of parents and educators out there are thinking when kids are on videos, they're not playing and they're not connecting with another child. So how can children's media then be additive to that rather than taking it away? So I wanna thank you all for coming today, for spending this hour with us.

And please stay tuned for our next conversation in our Generation AI Starts Early series. Have a good rest of your day. Bye.