

Meta, Google run multi-million dollar corrupt lobbying fight to kill online child safety bills

By

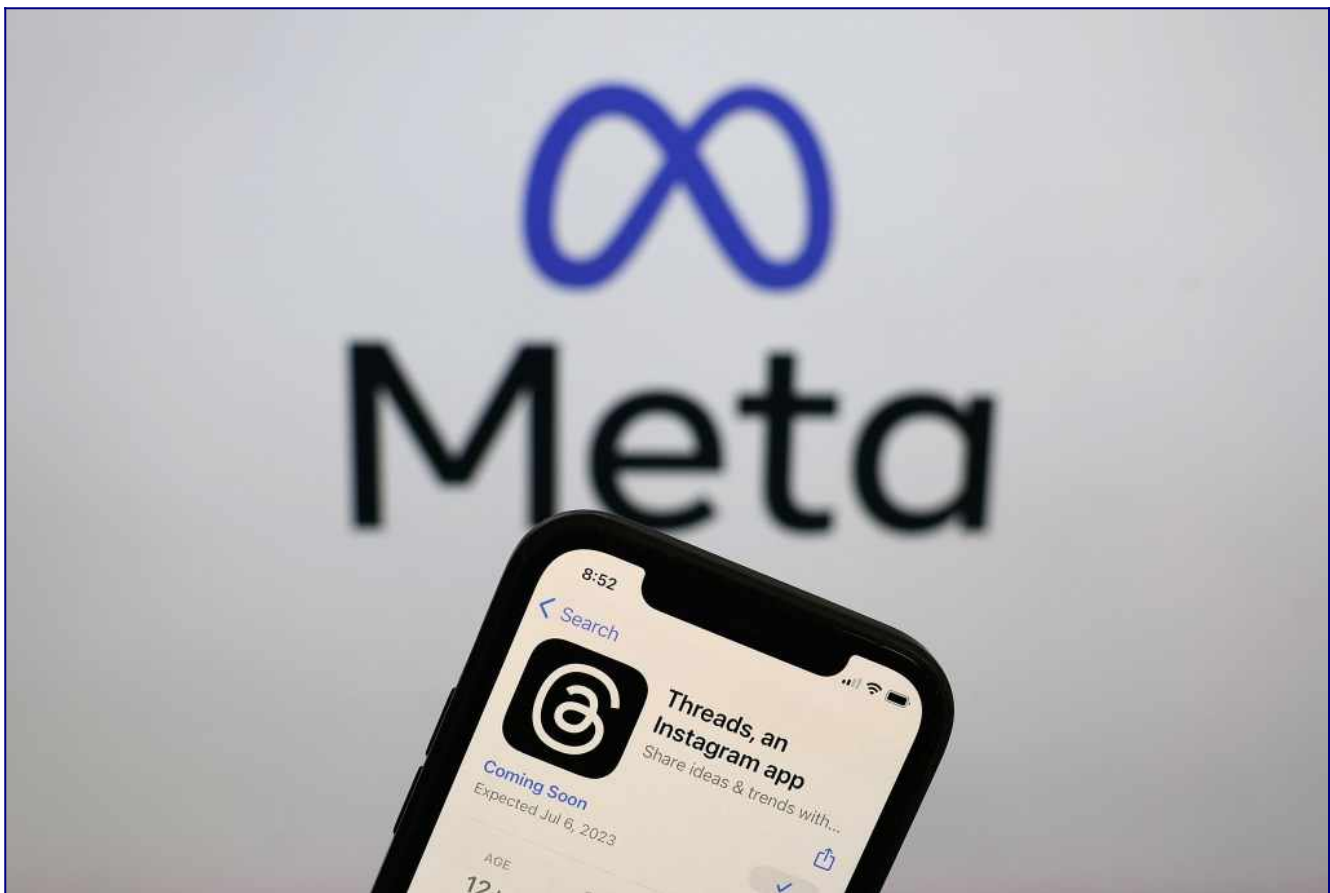
Thomas Barrabi

Google and Meta are spearheading a fierce push to kill New York legislation aimed at protecting children online — and the controversial lobbying battle is poised to surpass \$1 million in spending, The Post has learned.

A group of Big Tech firms, advocacy groups and companies from other sectors have spent \$823,235 lobbying Albany lawmakers through mid-March as two high-profile bills – the Stop Addictive Feeds Exploitation (SAFE) for Kids Act and the New York Child Data Protection Act – advance toward votes, according to recent public disclosures.

“This is an astonishing amount of money to be spent to kill two reasonable bills,” said one longtime Albany insider who requested anonymity to discuss the lobbying push.

The SAFE Act would crack down on addictive recommendation algorithms used by social media apps by requiring them to provide default chronological feeds for users 18 or younger unless they receive parental consent. It would also allow parents to impose time limits on social media use and in-app notifications.



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The Child Data Protection Act would block apps from collecting or selling the personal or location data from users under 18 unless they consent. Kids under 13 would need a parent’s consent.

The disclosure forms show each firm’s total spending on legislation on the agenda in New York – including the online safety bills – and do not reveal their stances on specific bills.

The true scope of Big Tech’s spending to derail the legislation is difficult, if not impossible to pin down – but it is expected to surpass the \$1 million mark when the next round of disclosures surfaces next month, sources said.

“This could be considered ‘historic’ in the sense that the bills are relatively low impact for the state compared with other issues that get a lot of lobbyist attention,” said Danny Weiss, a Capitol Hill veteran and chief advocacy officer at Common Sense Media, which supports the bills.

The cannabis industry [spent millions of dollars over a period of several years](#) in a bid to get marijuana legalized in New York. In 2022, a group of landlords and their advocates [reportedly spent \\$1.4 million to lobby against passage of new protections for tenants.](#)



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“They are spending a lot of money to oppose these bills, as if they pose an existential threat to New York,” Weiss said of the blitz from Big Tech.

Both bills were endorsed last fall by Democratic New York Gov. Kathy Hochul as well as State Attorney General Letitia James. During a January press conference, Hochul described social media as “a silent killer of our children’s generation.”

The two bills are expected to move through committee in the state assembly as soon as this week, which would be followed by a floor vote. The state senate is also expected to vote on the bills in the near future.

More than 25 other groups, including Mothers Against Media Addiction and the New York State United Teachers Union, have also expressed support for the bills.



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Tech firms have hit back, citing fears that the legislation would stifle freedom of speech, online privacy for teens, limit internet access for migrants and other underserved communities, and essentially disable algorithms that help to crack down on hate speech.

State Sen. Andrew Gounardes, who co-sponsors the bills, said opponents have funded an aggressive “whisper campaign” in Albany to delay or defeat the legislation.

“It certainly makes the job a lot harder, because these companies, with limitless resources, are able to hire armies of lobbyists who just camp out in the capital all day,” Gounardes said. “Legislators come and go and these folks are whispering in everyone’s ear.”

Facebook and Instagram parent Meta – which already faces a massive federal lawsuit over allegations that it has profited even as its apps fuel a teen mental health crisis – spent the most on lobbying related to the tech bills and other items on the state agenda, the disclosures showed.

A Meta spokesperson said the company supports federal legislation that would require app stores to get parents’ approval when kids under 16 download apps, rather than a state-by-state solution.



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Robert Miller

“Teens move interchangeably between many websites and apps, and different laws in different states will mean teens and their parents have inconsistent experiences online,” a Meta spokesperson said in a statement.

“As we continue working with New York lawmakers, it’s crucial that we avoid quick fixes and, instead, support legislation that actually empowers parents and supports teens online,” the spokesperson added.

Other top spenders include Google and TikTok – the latter of which filed a federal lawsuit to block a divestiture bill that would sever its ties to Chinese ownership over national security concerns.

Despite stiff opposition, the legislation appears to be making progress toward approval. The SAFE Act has 94 sponsors in the state assembly, including 81 Democrats and 13 Republicans. In the state senate, it has 25 sponsors, including 21 Democrats and four Republicans.



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Gounardes said there is “significant bipartisan support for both bills in the Senate.”

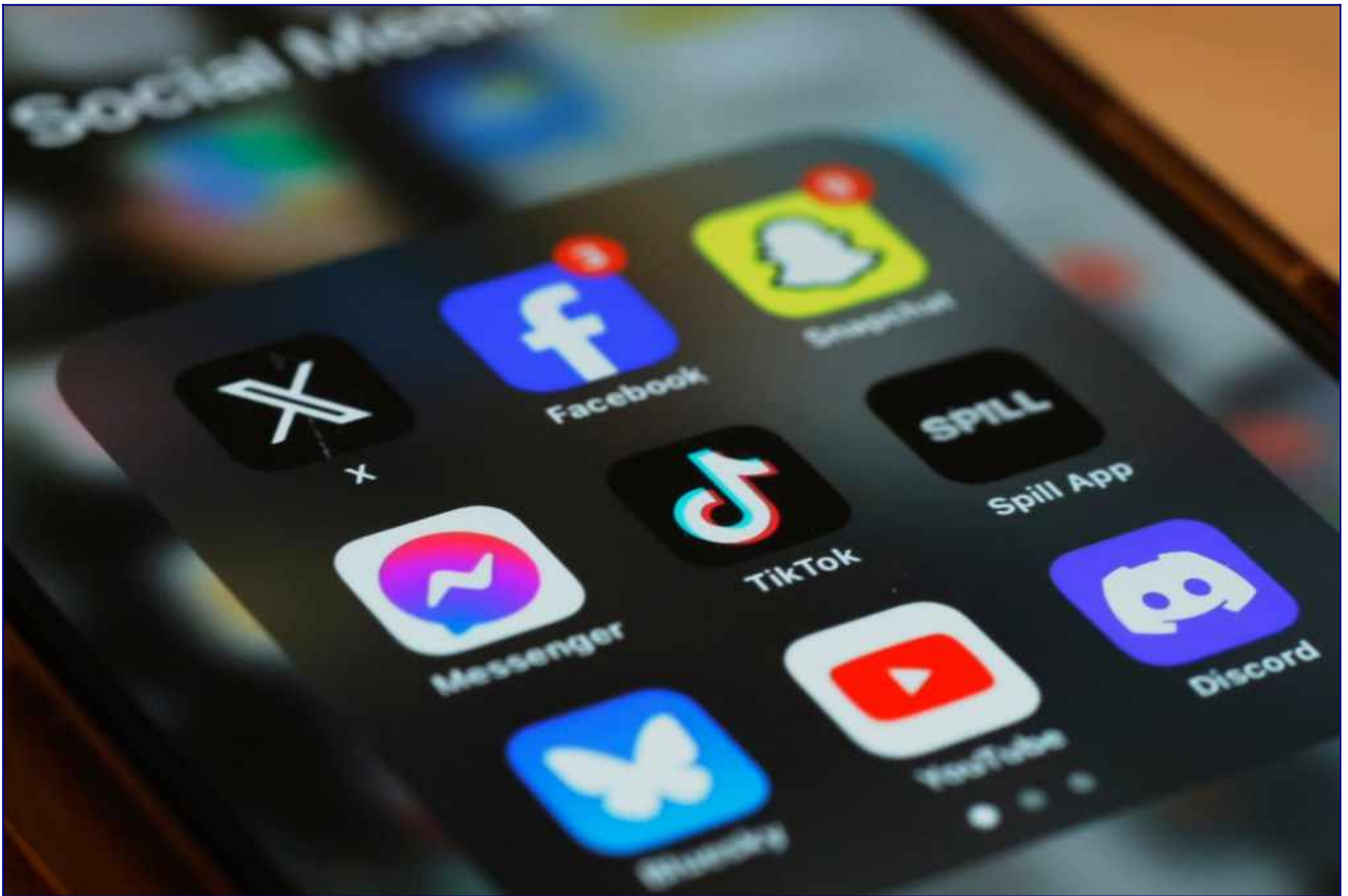
“At this point, I feel reasonably confident that we are going to be able to do something significant for kids on social media this legislative session,” the state senator said.

Additionally, tech giants that disclosed lobbying on one or both of the bills include PayPal, Roblox, Snap and Block.

A Roblox spokesperson said the company supports the intent of the two bills but declined to elaborate. A representative for eBay, another firm that showed up on the filings, said the company has not yet taken a position on either bill.

A Block spokesperson confirmed the company has lobbied on the Child Data Protection Act and said it supports the bill with some modifications.

Other key opponents lobbying against the bills include influent trade groups such as Tech:NYC and TechNet.



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In a February memo viewed by The Post, Tech:NYC asserted that the two bills have “inconsistent” age verification policies and argued that common methods used for verification, such as ID or credit card scanning, would fuel data privacy concerns.

“We continue to have productive discussions with lawmakers and community groups about these bills, as we all want to find a path forward that protects families, preserves the ability to access useful and supportive information online, and does so without reordering a huge part of our economy,” said Julie Samuels, president & CEO of Tech:NYC.

Participants in the PR campaign to kill the bills also include traditional white-shoe lobbying firms as well as so-called “astroturf” groups, which present themselves as grassroots initiatives but are actually funded by Big Tech money, according to critics.

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One such example is a group called New York Inclusive Internet Coalition, which is backed by Tech:NYC and shares the same spokesperson.

A Tech:NYC spokesperson pushed back on claims that it is running an astroturf offensive, asserting that working with local community groups is core to its mission.

Another key proxy is Chamber of Progress, a Big Tech-funded advocacy group that pushes the industry's agenda at the national and state level.