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Meta executive warned Facebook Messenger encryption plan was 'so irresponsible', shows court filing

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The logo of Meta is seen at Porte de Versailles exhibition center in Paris, France, June 11, 2025. REUTERS/Gonzalo Fuentes [Purchase Licensing Rights](#)

Summary Companies

Meta execs feared encryption would hinder child exploitation reporting

Meta's safety and policy execs expressed dismay over encryption plan

Company says worked on safety features before launching encryption in 2023

NEW YORK/SAN FRANCISCO, Feb 23 (Reuters) - Meta ([META.O](https://www.meta.com)) executives proceeded with a plan to encrypt the messaging services connected to its Facebook and Instagram apps despite internal warnings that it would hinder the social media giant's ability to flag child-exploitation cases to law enforcement, according to internal company documents filed in a New Mexico state court case.

"We are about to do a bad thing as a company. This is so irresponsible," wrote Monika Bickert, Meta's head of content policy, in one internal chat exchange dated March 2019 as CEO Mark Zuckerberg's public announcement of the plan was being prepared.

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The filing, which was made public on Friday but not previously reported, contains emails, messages and briefing documents obtained in discovery for a [lawsuit brought by New Mexico](#) Attorney General Raul Torrez that shed new light on what the company assessed the impact of the plan would be and how senior policy and safety executives viewed it at the time.

Torrez alleges Meta allowed predators unfettered access to underage users and connected them with victims, often leading to real-world abuse and human trafficking. A trial began this month and is the first case of its kind against Meta to reach a jury.

The information comes as Meta is facing a wave of [litigation](#) and [regulatory threats](#) globally linked to the welfare of young users on its platforms.

In addition to New Mexico's lawsuit – which focuses on the company's alleged failure to address child predation – a coalition of more than 40 attorneys general are pursuing claims that the company's products broadly harm youth mental health.

Some school districts are also suing the company, while Zuckerberg testified last week in yet another case brought by attorneys representing a teenager [allegedly harmed by its products](#) in Los Angeles County Superior Court.

The latest filing in the New Mexico case specifically accuses Meta of misrepresenting the safety of its plan to implement default end-to-end encryption on its Facebook-connected Messenger service, which it first announced in 2019 and later expanded to include Instagram direct messages.

HEIGHTENED RISK

End-to-end encryption – in which a sender’s message is transmitted in a format that only the recipient’s device can decode – is a standard privacy feature of many messaging apps, including Apple’s (AAPL.O) iMessage, Google (GOOGL.O) Messages and Meta’s WhatsApp.

But child safety advocates, including the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), have argued that the technology poses a heightened risk when built into public social networks that readily connect children to people they do not otherwise know.

The New Mexico filings show senior Meta safety executives expressing that same fear. Even as Zuckerberg claimed publicly that the company was addressing the plan's risks, top safety and policy executives internally expressed dismay, with Bickert, the head of content policy, saying the company was making "gross misstatements of our ability to conduct safety operations," the documents show.

“I'm not very invested in helping him sell this, I must say,” Bickert wrote of Zuckerberg’s efforts to promote encryption on privacy grounds. With end-to-end encryption, “there is no way to find the terror attack planning or child exploitation” and proactively refer those cases to law enforcement, she added.

In an email from February 2019, a Meta briefing document estimated that the company’s total reporting of child nudity and sexual exploitation imagery to the NCMEC the previous year would have fallen to 6.4 million from 18.4 million if Messenger had been encrypted, a 65% drop.

A later update to the same document said Meta would have been “unable to provide data proactively to law enforcement in 600 child exploitation cases, 1,454 sextortion cases, 152 terrorist cases [and] 9 threatened school shootings.”

ADDITIONAL SAFETY FEATURES

Meta spokesperson Andy Stone said in response to Reuters queries that the concerns raised by Bickert and Antigone Davis, Meta’s Global Head of Safety, led Meta to work on additional safety features before the company launched encrypted messaging on Facebook and Instagram in 2023.

While messages are encrypted by default, users can still report objectionable messages to Meta for review and possible referral to law enforcement.

"The concerns raised in 2019 represent the very reason we developed a range of new safety features to help detect and prevent abuse, all designed to work in encrypted chats," Stone said.

Among the company's efforts were the creation of special accounts for underage users which prevent adult users from initiating contact with minors they do not know.

Safety executives specifically raised the specter of children being groomed on the company's semi-public social media platforms and then exploited on its private messaging services.

"FB [Facebook] allows pedophiles to find each other and kids via social graph with easy transition to Messenger," wrote Davis in a 2019 email assessing the plan's risks.

By contrast, she wrote, Meta's existing encrypted messaging service WhatsApp was not directly connected to a social media platform and therefore did not carry the same risks.

"WA (WhatsApp) does not make it easy to make social connections, meaning making Messenger e2ee (end-to-end encrypted) will be far, far worse than anything we have seen/gotten a glimpse of on WA," she said.

Reporting by Jeff Horwitz in San Francisco and Katie Paul in New York; Editing by Muralikumar Anantharaman

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