

Kids' Content Is Deeply Broken. A New Platform Wants to Fix It

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Videos targeted at children on the platform are often filled with bizarre and hyperstimulating content that's AI generated. Not all of it is age-appropriate. These videos autoplay on endless, algorithmically curated streams punctuated by ads.

Maka, a new streaming app for kids aged 0 to 6, is positioning itself as an antidote to that concern. The platform has zero ads and doesn't allow autoplay or endless scrolling, and its algorithms intentionally do not maximize watch time.

The company's cofounder and chief product officer, Tanyella Leta, tells WIRED the platform is purposely abandoning the mechanisms that "turn children's media into an engagement machine."

Maka's CEO and cofounder Isabel Sheinman adds that a lot of the streamers were built to serve adults, not children. "Kids were really the afterthought," she says. Sheinman wants to set a much higher bar for what quality looks like in children's media, which she says has been warped by harmful incentives. "Maka was built with child development science and children's behavior first and foremost."

Launching today, Maka's programming slate is a mix of licensed content from global studios and independent creators. It features 25 shows in its curated catalog, including Franklin, The Wiggles, Pocoyo, Vida the Vet, and Sesame Street. The platform runs on a subscription service, with a \$15 monthly plan and a \$107 annual plan.

It was during the Covid pandemic that Sheinman and Leta became obsessed with thinking about how to redesign kids' media. The solution? Every episode streamed on Maka is evaluated by child development experts through Imprint, a framework created with researchers at the Yale Child Study Center. The evaluation process, which examines everything

from scene cuts to how fast-paced content is, maps child development across seven core domains. It looks for things like emotional regulation, kindness, how child-caregiver relationships are modeled in a story, and how a story might support critical thinking or language development.

AI-generated content has only added a new wrinkle to kids' entertainment: videos are incoherent, have no plot, or contain outright misinformation but are packaged to look like learning. Some of it, as WIRED has previously reported, is disturbingly sexualized, featuring gore and other fetishes.

Michael Robb, head of research at the media literacy nonprofit Common Sense Media, says that on a platform like YouTube, slop videos that have the veneer of education sit side by side with carefully designed educational shows. Robb believes YouTube and other kids' streaming platforms have not done enough to distinguish educational content from slop, which has only made filtering content harder for parents. "Platforms have taken steps to reduce kids' exposure to age-inappropriate content, and that matters. But 'not inappropriate' is a very low bar. There's a big gulf between that and media created intentionally with kids in mind."

A 2020 study by Common Sense Media on YouTube videos watched by young kids found 75 percent had "weak or no educational value." Kids also frequently ended up watching ads and content intended for older audiences.

According to its policy for YouTube Kids, which lets parents approve specific content themselves, YouTube excludes videos that are "deceptive, sensational, or clickbait" but acknowledges that not every video has been manually reviewed. YouTube also makes clear that automated filtering cannot guarantee every video will be appropriate. "There's a chance that your child will find content that you don't want them to watch," the company notes in its support docs.

Earlier this year, in an effort to encourage better digital literacy among kids, the American Academy of Pediatrics updated its guidance beyond screen time recommendations, urging children to avoid "AI-generated content," "AI chatbots," "short-form videos," and "highly sensationalized content or clickbait." The guide prioritized quality content and covieing with parents rather than passive watching.

Tiffany Munzer, a developmental-behavioral pediatrician and digital media researcher at the University of Michigan, was the lead author on Academy of Pediatrics's "Digital Ecosystems, Children, and Adolescents" policy statement, and tells WIRED in an email that the proliferation of low-quality content has led kids to "miss out on important, slower learning opportunities

that promote critical thinking, generate new ideas, and practice stretching their attention spans.”

In April, child advocacy group Fairplay sent a letter, signed by more than 200 organizations and individual experts, asking YouTube to address the spread of AI videos on its platforms, saying AI slop “harms children’s development by distorting their sense of reality, overwhelming their learning processes and hijacking their attention.”

A YouTube spokesperson tells WIRED that on YouTube Kids, which is meant for kids 12 and under, AI content is limited to a small set of high-quality channels, and parents have the option to block channels entirely. The platform has stricter standards for content made for younger viewers, the company says.

For Maka’s business model to succeed, its shows will need to entertain and educate kids while also establishing confidence in parents. “The value that parents want is relief, knowing that what their child is seeing has been vetted by child development experts and everything on Maka they can trust is good for their kid,” Sheiman says.

Yalda Uhls, a former film executive at Sony and MGM who is now a researcher at UCLA focusing on how media affects the social learning of young children, worries that as AI revolutionizes kids’ streaming content, people who study child development are being left out of the process. “When I was a studio executive, every story meant for children passed through layers of accountable adults,” she says. “But today, algorithms, anonymous creators, and AI tools shape what kids see, and people who study child development are rarely in the room.”

“The gatekeepers have been replaced by a metric: minutes watched,” Uhls says. “Nobody in that chain is required to ask what a child is actually learning.”

One of Maka’s core features is a timer that parents set at the start of every viewing session to help the child wind down off the screen. As the show concludes, a character Maka developed named Scoot appears on the screen to get the child ready to detach from their device. Features like that are the difference between capturing a child’s attention versus earning it, Sheinman says. “So it becomes less of a moment of tension in a family and a moment that the child is prepared for.”

The founders ultimately want Maka to help change the perception of kids’ relationship to screens.

“We’re seeing a really big challenge around the judgment of parents,” says Leta, explaining that one problem with screen time is the demonization of parents who rely on it. “We have all judged parents who bring out the screen on the train or at a

restaurant. Let's be real, most parents will reach for the screen at some point. We don't think that they should be judged for that choice."

Whether any of this will work is unclear. One question at the core of Maka's mission is whether it can build a successful streaming company without adopting the same incentives that created the problems it is trying to solve.

Robb from Common Sense Media calls competing with YouTube a Herculean task. "YouTube is free and already on the devices within their homes. Moving them away can be tricky," he says. The real test for Maka, Robb says, "will be whether it can grow with kids and stay sustainable without being pulled back toward the engagement metrics that drive the rest of the industry."

Leta, one of Maka's cofounders, admits that it's easy to be cynical when it comes to children and screens. "But TV also gave us Sesame Street. It gave us Fred Rogers, who believed that the space between the child and the screen was sacred ground."

"One of the dads in our beta told us that with other platforms, when his kid is watching, it feels like 'a race to the bottom of my kid's brainstem,'" Leta says. "It doesn't have to be like that."