



## AN OPEN LETTER TO UNITED STATES POLICYMAKERS

Dear Policymakers,

July 19, 2018

We are the Council for Digital Good, a cohort of teenagers from across the nation selected by Microsoft because of our common interest: to promote digital civility. Despite our differences in age, gender, and background, we are united by our similar experiences in the online world. We have all seen that, although the Internet brings many benefits, it can also cause a great deal of harm. Many youth, who use the Internet are subsequently often faced with issues such as cyberbullying and online sexual harassment. As young people who have encountered some of these problems firsthand, our goal as the Council for Digital Good is to provide strategies, solutions, and resources for other young people in these situations. For our sake and for that of future generations, it is imperative that we amplify discussions about making the Internet a more productive, civil, and safe place.

Issues like cyberbullying – or repeated, hurtful behavior that occurs online – stem from a new online “culture” where users are able to conceal their identities, attack others maliciously, and disappear without a trace. For numerous users online, cyberbullying has become a societal norm faced every day. In response, the concept of digital civility is gaining momentum. This movement encourages all online users to be responsible for their actions and to be considerate of others online. Educating users can prove to be an influential factor in the spread of online positivity; so, in schools nationwide, we would like to see online safety and behavioral education supported and prioritized. This can be achieved through social and emotional learning programs, as well as additional cyberbullying prevention training and resources for school personnel to share in their districts.

A greater need for awareness among youth can also be applied to complex problems such as online sexual harassment, which can be related to other issues such as “sextortion” and “sexting.” Sextortion in particular involves manipulating victims to send sexually explicit content by utilizing guilt, shame, and fear, with 71% of victims being minors, according to The Brookings Institution. It is thus essential to remove the current stigma surrounding sextortion and sexual harassment by opening up conversations about sexual consent and how to identify a perpetrator. In order to solve cases involving sexual harassment, we need victims to have a welcoming and safe atmosphere, as well as an unwavering support system. By raising awareness and expanding youth’s education on these issues, more young people can avoid being exploited, and victims can feel comfortable knowing who to reach out to. But this will not be possible without cross-platform collaboration. The government, organizations, and companies from varying sectors should work together to bring about change, whether it be refining legal recourse through appropriate legislation, combining resources to create tools and programs to identify cases, or by hosting campaigns to spread a message of awareness. Sextortion is not contained within a single application or website, and this is evident in the research of organizations like Thorn, which found that 45% of victims of sextortion were contacted by perpetrators on more than one online platform. Thus, interdisciplinary efforts are needed to tackle this grave issue.

As our lives become more entangled in the digital world, we need mandatory, comprehensive, and practical educational programs integrated into curriculum throughout elementary, middle, and high school. For instance, users of computer applications and websites need to understand what they are signing up for when they agree to Terms of Service, what the features of the sites entail, and what the underlying outcomes may be when they register. Now more than ever is the time to spread awareness and educate people on these issues and encourage movements for progress. Now is the time for action, and we need your help in the push for change in online culture. If we gain the ability to always harness the Internet in a positive and productive way, we will be able to use our generation's signature swiftness, effectiveness, and global platform to make a difference. We hope that all of you as representatives will heed our words and attempt to modernize the law to protect our youth, ensuring prosperity for all in the time of the Information Age to come.

Sincerely,

The Council for Digital Good