TECH'S EXPLOITATIVE RELATIONSHIP TO CHILDREN IS A PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE

The Disrupted Childhood Report sets out how 'persuasive design'* practices deliberately keep children online to collect their data for commercial gain.

Baroness Beeban Kidron, founder and Chair of 5Rights Foundation, and report co-author says; "The tech industry needs to look at their stratospheric share prices, then our children, and decide which is more important. Children need a new deal".

The Disrupted Childhood Report, released today by the 5Rights Foundation, the charity advocating for children's rights online, outlines the damaging effects of 'persuasive design' on childhood, including emotional, physical and educational development of a generation of children.

The 24 recommendations set out today call on the tech sector to make seismic changes to the design of products and services in order to meet the needs of children. It calls on government to add 'compulsive use' to its current list of harms in all policies and set up a centre of expertise for policy and research where it intersects with childhood.

The report sets out how the strategies exploit human instincts, how they are deployed, why they are habit-forming and what the impacts are on children.

Consolidating research from academics; including EU Kids Online, Oxford, Harvard, Stanford and LSE, American Psychological Association, and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers; and a roll call of dismayed tech insiders; Tim Berners-Lee, Tristan Harris, Jaron Lanier, Nir Eyal, Sean Parker… and the voices of children, who themselves ask for fairer treatment.

"Scrolling forever gives me a sick feeling in my stomach. I'm so aware of how little control I have and the feeling of needing to be online."
Young person's feedback in the Disrupted Childhood Report

The report points out that designing services to be compulsive, and then asking kids to put their phones down is not the answer. Access to digital services for entertainment, socialising, learning and citizenship is crucially important to children, young people and the future of society as a whole. What is required is access - but on terms that meet the needs and rights of children.

Recommendations include:

That industry recognise the effects of persuasive design as a public health issue and redesign services by;

- Undertaking childhood impact assessments of all existing and future services and products and acting upon them.
- Designing services to make it as frictionless to get offline as it is to get online, for example, by making all notifications, buzzes, read receipts and other alerts default off, offering regular time out and time off, stopping targeting notifications at bedtime, redesigning endless feeds, offering an off switch for auto-suggestion.
- Clearly informing children (and parents of younger children) when persuasive design features are being used, and outlining potential impacts, including sleep deprivation, loss of concentration, educational outcome and impacts on emotional state and behaviour.

That government policy recognise children's compulsive use as a harm, and therefore:
- Include it in all policy, including the upcoming Internet Safety Strategy white paper.
- Ensure the next generation of teachers, social workers, health and legal professionals have appropriate training and broad understanding of the opportunities and risks, including compulsive use of digital services.
- Mandate that computer studies and PSHE in schools, and computer science degree courses include modules on persuasive design as part of a holistic broad-based digital literacy and competencies curriculum.
- Ensure that the Age-Appropriate Design Code is fully resourced, applied and enforced.
- The report also calls on the government to create an independent, overarching centre of excellence research and policy for all interventions relating to children in the digital environment. It should have powers and resources to compel attendance and demand accountability and be a voice for children in all areas of government, including Health, Justice, Education, Home Affairs and Digital.

The report calls on institutional and individual shareholders to follow the example of Apple investors; JANA Partners LLC and The California State Teachers Retirement System,[1] and demand that the companies you invest in design devices, services and products, that accommodate the needs and rights of childhood, as outlined in the Disrupted Childhood Report.

A link to the report with full set of recommendations can be found in **Notes to Editors** section**.**

Baroness Kidron, Chair of 5Rights Foundation, said: "The unfettered use of persuasive design practices is a symbol of the tech sector's cavalier disregard for childhood. Children urgently need a better deal. Government knows there is a fundamental problem. The desire for the next Google campus or Facebook donation to digital education must not obscure the need for society, and not Silicon Valley, to set the rules. It is hard to overestimate the importance of digital devices in a child's life, but there must be a balance between what technology gives young people and what it takes away".

Jenny Afia, Privacy lawyer and co-author, said: "Struggles between parents and children over screens are the result of a far deeper conflict between a system designed to be compulsive, worth billions of pounds to shareholders, and the needs and legal rights of children."

Alexandra Evans, Report co-author said: "At 5Rights we spend a lot of time with children, they want help to break out of a cycle of personal anxiety and social aggression that they feel is affecting their education, emotional health and wellbeing. Children want to be online, in ways that give them autonomy and strength, but increasingly feel it is designed to exploit or hurt them."

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Link to The Disrupted Childhood Report:
https://5rightsframework.com/static/5Rights-Disrupted-Childhood.pdf

*What is persuasive design?
Persuasive design practices manipulate innate human behaviour. The Disrupted Childhood Report highlights how digital services routinely deploy persuasive techniques with the specific intent to collect personal data for commercial use. A third of all users globally are under 18. Examples of persuasive design include:
- **The rush**: design features built around rewards and anticipations, such as Likes, hearts and comments, which create expectations, elicit dopamine hits and fuel the need for the next response - all to extend the time spent on digital services.
- **The popularity contest**: design features which exploit the fear of not appearing popular, such as public counts of friends, followers, Likes and retweets. Measuring friendship numerically creates an arms race for more interaction, more friends - and as the research shows - denudes the quality of relationships.
- **The summons**: alerts that play into our innate response to movement, noise and light, such as the buzzes, pings, vibrations and notifications coloured red.
- **Losing time**: design features built to remove the need to make a conscious decision to keep using a digital service, such as auto play, auto suggestions, infinite scrolling and games with no save option. In the name of 'personalisation' these techniques pull children into a bubble of suggestion and activity with no end.
- **The social obligation**: design features built to exploit the human need to be social, such as SnapChat streaks that can trap young people in multiple relationships that they find time-consuming to maintain, and hard to get out. And 'online now' status, typing bubbles, read receipts… scores of tiny obligations that build into an overwhelming struggle for a child's attention.
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"Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google…are caught in a zero-sum race for our finite attention, which they need to make money. They point AI-driven news feeds, content, and notifications at our minds, continually learning how to hook us more deeply – from our own behaviour."
Tristan Harris, former Google Design ethicist

Impacts of persuasive design on children include:
- **Sleep deprivation:** bedtime use of media devices more than doubles the risk of poor sleep in children[2]. Sleep is essential for growth and human development. In war they use sleep deprivation as a form of torture, here we are allowing a generation to go without.
- **Anxiety and social aggression:** elevated levels of depression have been linked to social media use[3]. In terms of experiencing aggression, girls are disproportionately affected, with almost half of girls aged 11-18 having experienced online harassment or abuse on social media[4].
- **Diminished quality of relationships:** excessive internet use affects an individual's self esteem and can lead to social withdrawal, self-neglect, poor diet and family conflict[5]
- **The Opportunity Costs:** what are you not doing? The cost of excessive use includes the loss of memory, creative play, educational opportunity as well as social and familial development[6]

"God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains."
Sean Parker, co-founder of Facebook

QUOTES FROM AUTHORS

The Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, said: "I welcome this new edition to the growing literature about this issue, and applaud the great contribution 5Rights plays in articulating the rights and needs of children in the digital environment. In publishing the Disrupted Childhood Report, it continues to lead the way. It is everyone's responsibility to ensure that this interaction is positive and healthy, rather than negative, destructive or dehumanising."

Shirley Cramer, Chief Executive of Royal Society for Public Health, said: "To improve the mental health and wellbeing of our children we need to urgently mitigate the negative impacts of social media. The new Age-Appropriate Design Code should be urgently implemented and rigorously enforced."

QUOTES FROM CHILDREN

"*My phone is very addictive as I am on my phone during the night and this can affect my sleep. Also, it affects my homework time as I get distracted by my phone*".
AGED 15

"*You can also lose precious time with your friends and family that you can never get back.*"
AGED 13

"*It is hard to live in a technological society and not get trapped in social media...after a while you are addicted and miss out on things in life, such as sleep and education.*"
AGED 15

"*Social media interferes with education and social time. It controls and takes over the minds of anyone who signs up to social sites.*"
AGED 16

About the 5Rights Foundation
5Rights exists to ensure that children's rights are upheld online, as well as off - taking the existing rights of children and articulating them for the digital environment. We work closely with children and young people and articulate their views to policy makers and industry.

5Rights celebrates the rapid growth of the digital environment. We believe it must be on terms that better meet the needs of children and young people, so that *every* child can access the digital world **creatively, knowledgeably** and **fearlessly.**

About Schillings
Schillings is an issues and crisis law firm specialising in threats to privacy. Schillings has worked with the Children's Commissioner and 5Rights to better safeguard the privacy of children online. In 2017, Schillings re-wrote the terms and conditions for major social media companies to make them more transparent, so that children could better understand them.

[1] https://thinkdifferentlyaboutkids.com/
[2] Association between portable screen-based media device access or use and sleep outcomes, JAMA paediatrics, 2016
[3] Problematic smartphone use: a conceptual overview and systematic review of relations with anxiety and depression psychopathology, Journal of Affective Disorders, 2017
[4] Survey of 1,002 11-18 year olds by Plan International UK in August 2017
[5] Lost Online: Advances in Psychiatric Treatment, 2007
[6] Association between portable screen-based media device access or use and sleep outcomes, JAMA paediatrics, 2016