

Chapter 14

Encouraging Digital Civility: What Companies and Others Can Do

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ABSTRACT

The internet, the landmark invention of our lifetime, has brought us great benefit, but along with it, risk and antisocial behavior, including online bullying, hate speech, extremist content, and other ills. Prevention lies in promoting digital citizenship—safe, responsible, and appropriate use of technology and services—and a newer concept, digital civility—online interactions rooted in empathy, respect, and kindness. And, while no one entity can combat these issues alone, internet companies can play their part, as exemplified by the robust tools and resources offered by Microsoft and others. A collective focus, however, is needed to help raise awareness and change behavior, and the responsibility must be shared among the technology industry and government policy makers as well as everyone who uses the internet, including parents and caregivers, educators, and young people. This chapter explores these ideas.

INTRODUCTION

The internet is nothing short of the landmark invention of our lifetime. It has changed forever the way we work, communicate, learn, play, and grow. It has quickened productivity, expanded global commerce, enabled new opportunities for social interaction, and sparked the creation of online communities. Yet, like all public places, the online world is not without its risks and bad actors.

Online bullying and harassment, as well as the digital proliferation of hate speech, extremist content, child sexual abuse imagery, and non-consensual pornography, are just a few of the “parade of horrors” that cross the web on a daily basis. All have garnered significant attention in recent years, highlighted further by the risks associated with live-streaming—the ability of people to broadcast live on the web what they may be doing at any particular moment. While many people, especially active teens, chronicle day-in-the-life updates like selfies, family jokes, or shopping tips for friends, others are broadcasting assaults, rapes, suicides—even murders. Media concentration on the most severe and tragic cases has triggered widespread concern among parents, policy-makers, and civil society.

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While internet companies cannot be responsible for the online behavior of all individuals, nor be expected to police all corners of the web, the public rightly has an expectation that industry will do its level best to help make the internet safer and more secure for all. If businesses fail or only half-heartedly attempt to meet these expectations, certain groups may shy away from online interactions, abuse and harassment could grow, the promise of a global, connected society will falter—increasing the likelihood that individuals will distrust digital products and services and perhaps even the technology companies themselves.

This public expectation elevates the importance and relevance of the concepts of *digital citizenship*—safe, responsible, and appropriate use of technology and services—and *digital civility*—online interactions rooted in empathy, respect, and kindness. It is essential that internet companies, and indeed all organizations with an online presence, self-assess that they are doing their part to embrace and promote digital citizenship and digital civility among their users. In fact, a collective focus is needed to help raise awareness, educate, and change behavior, involving all internet participants.

Approaches range from philosophical reflections in the emerging field of technoethics (Bertolotti, et. al., 2013 and 2017) to more policy-oriented approaches, such as efforts in the EU, New Zealand, and the United States. In December 2016, the European Commission and Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, and YouTube announced a Code of Conduct¹ to counter illegal online hate speech. New Zealand enacted the Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015,² which includes a range of legal measures to prevent and reduce the impact of “harmful digital communications.” And in the United States, 38 states and the District of Columbia have enacted laws criminalizing the distribution of sexually intimate images of individuals without their consent, often referred to as non-consensual pornography or more commonly, “revenge porn.”³

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the steps that Microsoft, a key actor in the technology industry, has taken in its effort to promote online safety, and to offer suggestions for how everyone—the technology industry and policy makers, nongovernmental organizations and academics, as well as internet participants including educators, parents, and young people—can encourage digital civility and citizenship. The paper seeks to demonstrate the business and ethical considerations helping to guide Microsoft’s response to some new, topical issues and thereby stimulate additional engagement within the sphere of technoethical studies.

MICROSOFT RESEARCH ON DIGITAL CIVILITY TODAY

As access to the transformational power of technology grew around the world, societies were transfixed by the promise of a truly connected world. Today, however, we find ourselves increasingly aware of the misuse and abuse of online services and their users, as well as physical-world horrors being streamed online for all the world to see. This awareness has led to increased caution, eroding people’s confidence in technology as a trustworthy tool and force for good.

In an effort to understand and quantify evolving online social norms, Microsoft conducted research about the state of online interactions and the perceived level of digital civility among users. On Safer Internet Day 2017,⁴ we released the results and our first-ever Digital Civility Index—a new measure of people’s safety online and their exposure to a defined set of risks.

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