Community Solutions to Controversial Content Online

*In the second of the series on responses to controversial online content this FOSI Brief examines the ways that the Internet community can respond to online challenges and help create a better Internet for all. The **first Brief** looked at technical responses and concluded that while technical advancements promise much in the fight against objectionable, but legal content, on their own technical solutions are not enough.*

Whether it is on social networks, newspaper comment pages, television fan chatrooms, or online video games, users have a vital role to play in ensuring that conversations and behaviors remain civil. Visitors, of all ages and genders should be able to use the service, express their opinion, and access content without fear of harassment. This does not diminish the responsibility of technology companies to strive to protect and encourage user safety, rather it is the duty of all members of the Internet community to stand up for others and to conduct themselves in accordance with the golden rule of treating others the way you wish to be treated.

It is important that children from a young age learn the being online comes with rights and responsibilities. This has long been referred to a 'digital citizenship'. Parents, grandparents, other caregivers, and schools should start conversations early and continue those discussions throughout childhood and into the teenage years. The content of these conversations will vary based on the age and experience of the child, but ultimately children should know what to do when they access upsetting content on the Internet.

Young people come across confusing content every day, in real life and online. **Hate speech**, bullying on social networks, and even the news can cause children to question their place in the world and even their own safety. It is imperative that they know that there are trusted adults that they can speak to about what they have found online, without overreaction or judgment. Moreover, as children mature it is vital that they know how to protect themselves and their friends online. Empowered children are safer children online and offline.

However, these are lessons that need to be learnt by all Internet users, not just children. While cyberbullying may be a phenomenon that is primarily experienced among the younger generation, adults grapple with harassment and the sharing of non-consensual intimate images, or revenge porn, among other troubling behaviors. The message that users should endeavor to be an upstander and not a bystander to harmful online behavior applies across generations. All too often users look the other way when they see bullying on the Internet, behavior that would be unacceptable on the street should not be acceptable online. A supportive Tweet, a well-placed 'like' or a private message could be all it takes to turn a negative interaction online, into something more positive.

Nuance can be difficult to convey over the Internet, so all users should carefully think about what, how, when, and why they are posting a comment or a picture, and whether it could be misconstrued. Thinking and pausing before you post, not Tweeting in anger, and resisting the urge to upload a nasty photo will

contribute towards making the Internet a nicer and more positive place for all members of the community.

Being a responsible member of the Internet community involves educating oneself about the reporting functions on the various services that are used. The majority of platforms work hard to provide users with the ability to report content that breaches their terms of service, which usually includes a requirement to be civil in all interactions. Everyone needs to take responsibility for the online environment that we are building. This includes reporting unacceptable behavior and content to the platforms, fully utilizing the tools they provide such as blocking and muting functions where available, and helping other members of the community when necessary.

Young people are also acknowledging that they have a role to play in making the Internet a better place for themselves and others. As an example, the '**Think Before You Type**' campaign focuses on encouraging others to take positive steps online to have a real-world impact in promoting self-esteem and kindness. **HeartMob** is a project to prevent online harassment, it allows victims to request assistance immediately from a supportive community who are able to counter some of the hurtful comments or harassing behavior.

The Guardian newspaper in the United Kingdom conducted research and wrote a series of articles entitled '**The Web We Want**.' The research examined over 70 million comments left on their articles since 2006, and used those results to help them host better conversations online. This included limiting comments on certain topics, and working with human moderators to explore where conversations go awry.

Engaging in discourse with people from an alternative point of view is certainly not discouraged, rather it is often cited as a possible counter to some of the most harmful content on the Internet. **Extremism** and radicalization in all of it forms can be tempered by

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the posting of thoughtful, knowledgeable alternative positions. Supporting someone who is being harassed on the Internet can make all the difference, and reporting an inappropriate image can provide immeasurable help to someone who is the victim of revenge pornography.

Internet users of all ages have a responsibility for their own online experiences, but that does not negate the role of policymakers to craft necessary legislation, nor does it detract from the duty of technology companies to strive to ensure that their users have the safest possible interactions on their platforms through the use of technical advancements and strong terms of service that are actively enforced. But it does suggest that online, as offline, individuals have a role to play in their own safety and the safety of their wider community.

The community solutions to controversial content require human empathy and the acknowledgment that the privilege of exploring the online world does not come free from responsibilities. This is not just about protecting children from 'bad things,' on the Internet; rather it is about allowing and encouraging a woman to post on a newspaper comment board free from fear about possible harassment and threats. It is about showing that there are two possible interpretations of a piece of religious text through polite, productive debate. And it is about countering 'fake news' with facts. This is a task for which we all have a role to play, and it is not an overstatement to say that the future of the Internet may depend upon it.

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