Helping young people be discerning digital citizens

Optus is <u>committed</u> to empowering the next generation to reach their full potential in the digital age.

Our <u>Digital Citizenship Blog Series</u> shares insights into how parents, teachers and youth advocates can help young Australians to thrive in the face of rapid technological advancements.

Insights are drawn from the latest research into digital citizenship, contributions from subject matter experts, and our experience running the award winning <u>Digital Thumbprint program</u>.

With the <u>'rise and rise' of fake news</u>, our <u>trust in the media has fallen</u> to record lows, and our kids are growing up in an environment where the average person is <u>unable to distinguish quality journalism from speculation</u>.

Perhaps even more concerning is the fact that hidden bias in search engine algorithms can be used to shape opinion, mislead or manipulate, unbeknownst to the digital consumer.

So how can we protect young people from bias in the digital age?

In a world where we are always 'online', it is not feasible to shield young people from these biases by simply removing them from the internet.

As the eSafety Commissioner reflects, "In the analogue age, we weren't coddled quite so much as our parents knew that the way we could cope in the real world was to fall down, brush ourselves off, learn from our mistakes and move on. We need to provide kids with solution-focused coping strategies to ensure they can bounce back from tough situations—online and offline."

Below, we offer three strategies that may be used to help young people discern whether information they see on the internet is trustworthy.

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1. Make the invisible visible

At the most obvious level, our children and students should continue to be educated about hidden bias in digital spaces.

Unless young people are made aware of the problems inherent in the internet, they can never work to overcome them. While the internet is often perceived to be an open space free of bias, it is not as it *appears* to be. Rather, digital spaces closely reflect existing biases and hierarchies of the physical world. This is represented in the website Wikipedia, which is often thought to be a neutral and objective resource. Yet, research has found that a majority of the content on Wikipedia is edited by only 1% of its users. Reinforcing biases in the physical world, contributors are predominantly Western men and according to the Harvard Business Review, less than 10% of edits come from women.

Given the increasing involvement of robots in the day-to-day lives of humans, it is also important for us to shed light on the strengths and limitations of artificial intelligence. AI is now being used by some companies to help remove human bias from decision making. In response to the uncomfortable finding that a woman has statistically no chance of being hired if she is shortlisted for a job alongside three men, The Behavioural Insights Team recently launched the online recruitment software Applied. This tool aims to promote fairness by helping recruiters to hire without unconscious human bias. While this is an example of the tremendous potential AI has to encourage equality, there are some that warn that "AI algorithms are only as unbiased as the people who programmed them". This recently became clear after Amazon ditched their AI recruitment tool after it started to discriminate against female candidates based on the way its programmers taught it to rank job applications.

Perhaps by sharing some of these examples with young people today, we can take the first step towards introducing them to the bias inherent in digital spaces.

2. Balance digital skills with critical thinking skills

Once biases inherent in digital spaces in brought to light, we as parents, teachers and mentors can then equip young people with skills of net-savviness and critical evaluation to help them discern fact from fiction.

The 2017 report _News and Australian Children_ shows that while young Australians may be highly skilled technically, many have low critical thinking skills in digital spaces. According to results from this national survey, two thirds of young Australians felt ill equipped to tell fact from fiction in news stories, only 20% had received lessons at school in how to do so, and more than 50% don't question the legitimacy of news stories they encounter online.

While resources from the NSW Department of Education and the youth centered ABC news program Behind the News are working to tackle this issue, it seems like there is still room in digital citizenship education to develop greater critical digital thinking skills in young people. Perhaps we can take inspiration from The Global Digital Citizen Foundation's Critical Thinking Cheatsheet, which provides a series of questions young people can ask when they encounter new information.

For example:

- **Who** benefits from this?

- **What** is another perspective?

- **Where** can we get more information?

- **When** should we ask for help with this?

- **Why** is this relevant to me/others?

- **How** do we know the truth about this?

3. Empower young people to reshape digital spaces

Young people not only need education in how to spot and critically evaluate bias, but also training in how to _reshape_ digital spaces to combat bias when they encounter it.

While critical reasoning skills are crucial, for lasting change to occur for generations to come, young people need to be taught how to remove prejudice from online spaces. Through focusing on technical training of how websites are built and how algorithms work, we have the opportunity to move the youth from being _reactive_, and towards proactively restructuring digital spaces so that these platforms can be fairer and safer for all.

While it may not be possible for young people to change the entire online ecosystem, they certainly have power to neutralize the prejudice they encounter on an individual level. Algorithm expert Marc Zao-Sanders from Filtered advises digital users to take on the following practical steps to increase their chances of finding "factual, unbiased, broad based" information on the web. These include changing settings to allow randomized recommendations, intentionally 'following' individuals on social media with views different than your own, browsing privately and being discerning about what search engines you use.

Embracing the inherent bias in AI may also be a helpful step towards promoting equality in the digital age. As long as AI is programmed by humans, it will continue to reflect human bias. Rather than shying away from this, Hanna Wallach of Microsoft notes that it gives us the opportunity to "really think about what values we are reflecting in our systems, and whether they are the values we want to be reflecting in our systems". Treating AI as a 'mirror' instead of a 'crystal ball' could give us a clear view of the bias that exists in human programmers. In doing so, it may nudge us to rethink what our prejudices are, and whether they are reasonable.

3 conversations you can have with young people today

1.

When using search engines or scrolling through social media, how do you know what information to trust?

2.

What are the different things you can do to increase your chances of finding accurate and unbiased information from the internet?

3.

Do you think artificial intelligence has the same kind of biases that humans have? Why? Why not?

Resources for parents, caregivers and educators

Optus supports digital citizenship education in Australian schools so that young people can be safe, responsible and positive online. Digital Thumbprint with Kids Helpline is an early intervention and awareness program for primary school students. Within secondary schools, our Digital Thumbprint program focuses on positive behavioural change.

Additional resources and information:

- The Digital Thumbprint Parent Resources were designed to help parents have structured conversations with their children about digital topics. You can access these free discussion guides here.

- The eSafety Comissioner also has a range of information to encourage safer, more positive experiences for young Australians online. You can access this information here.

Digital Thumbprint with kidshelpline Anytime Any Reason

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