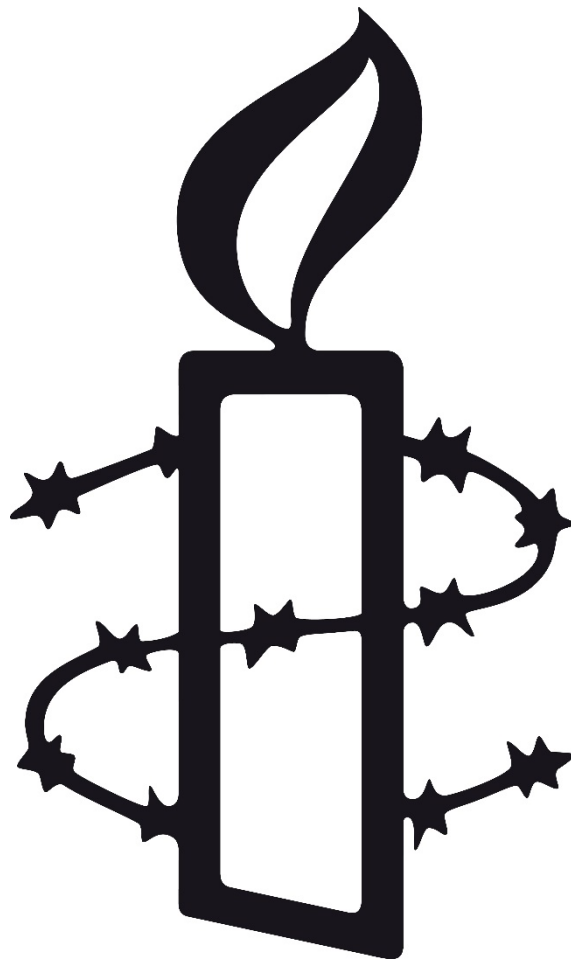


DIGITAL EDUCATION AND PROTECTION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

SUBMISSION TO THE UN OFFICE OF THE HIGH
COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS



AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



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This is a submission to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in response to its call for input to inform the High Commissioner's study on the solutions to promote digital education for young people and to ensure their protection from online threats.

INTRODUCTION

Amnesty International submits this document in response to the call for input¹ to inform the High Commissioner's study on the solutions to promote digital education for young people and to ensure their protection from online threats to be presented at the 57th session of the Human Rights Council in September 2024.

1. CHALLENGES YOUNG PEOPLE FACE IN ACCESSING DIGITAL EDUCATION

The challenges young people face in accessing digital education are multifaceted, particularly for marginalized and vulnerable groups. These challenges are deeply entrenched in socio-economic disparities, infrastructure limitations, and educational inequities, which collectively hinder the effective reach and impact of digital education initiatives.

The 'digital divide' conveys how access to the internet and technology is evidently unequal. This gap is particularly pronounced in low-income countries, rural areas, and among populations facing socio-economic marginalization. The absence of reliable internet connectivity and the lack of necessary devices (such as computers, tablets, or smartphones) are significant barriers. This digital divide not only limits educational opportunities but also perpetuates cycles of poverty and exclusion, as digital literacy becomes increasingly essential for participation in global economic and social affairs.

Even when technology and internet access are available, socio-economic factors can still limit the effectiveness of digital education. For many young people, especially those in vulnerable situations, there may be competing demands on their time, such as the need to work or care for family members, which can limit their ability to engage with digital education. In many places, mobile phones are the primary means to access the internet, and internet data plans can be costly.

Access to technology does not automatically translate to effective learning. Digital literacy for both students and teachers is essential for the success of digital education. Teachers need training and resources to effectively integrate digital tools into their teaching, while students require guidance on how to use these tools for learning. Without adequate support, the potential of digital education to bridge educational gaps and fulfil the right to education for all remains untapped.

2. STEPS BEING TAKEN TO ENSURE DIGITAL EDUCATION IS ACCESSIBLE AND PROMOTED AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

There are some positive examples of government efforts around the world meant to make digital education accessible to young people. In Brazil, the National Strategy for Connected Schools aims to make the internet available in all public schools by 2026, including by investing in infrastructure expansion into rural areas.² In Finland, the national core curriculum for primary and lower secondary education, introduced in 2016, embeds digital literacy into all of its overarching seven competence

¹ OHCHR, Call for inputs on the solutions to promote digital education for young people and to ensure their protection from online threats, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2024/call-inputs-solutions-promote-digital-education-young-people-and-ensure-their>

² International Telecommunication Union, Brazil's new strategy aims for Internet in all schools, 22 November 2023, <https://www.itu.int/hub/2023/11/brazils-new-strategy-aims-for-internet-in-all-schools-2>

areas.³ In Kenya, the Digital Literacy Program has provided access to technology for primary school students for over a decade with a long-term goal of increasing national digital literacy levels.⁴

These types of national programs are fundamental to effectively promoting digital education. Government-sponsored initiatives are often critical in laying down the infrastructure and basic framework for digital education for youth. But they don't always promote a holistic educational experience. Government-run programs often focus predominantly on technical skills and access. Human rights education, meanwhile, is not often a priority, and it is not frequently a core component of national curricula.⁵

3. STEPS BEING TAKEN TO ENSURE YOUNG PEOPLE CAN REALIZE THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS ONLINE IN A SAFE, EMPOWERING AND INCLUSIVE WAY

Some governments have made efforts to ensure that young people are able to realize their human rights online. In the United Kingdom, the Age Appropriate Design Code set out 15 standards that online services need to abide by to protect children's privacy.⁶ In Australia, they established the world's first government agency for online safety, headed by the 'eSafety Commissioner'.⁷ Part of their responsibility is education and outreach programs for young people, as well as a complaints system for instances of cyberbullying.

Governments have a prominent role to play, particularly through regulations that prevent human rights abuses by technology companies. But in order for young people to realize their human rights online, more is needed than strong regulatory environments. Preventing abuses is at the minimum of what should be expected. Young people must also have the opportunity to learn about their human rights. When they understand what their human rights are, as well as who bears duties and responsibilities in relation to them, they have a much better capacity to defend those rights themselves and demand action and change going forward. A child rights lens prioritizes this agency of young people to claim and defend their rights and rightly recognizes it as key to ultimately realizing their rights.

This is why non-governmental programs and interventions are so crucial. In the absence of a robust international landscape of accessible human rights education in public education curricula, accessible digital resources provided by non-governmental actors are invaluable resources in expanding the breadth and relevance of digital education efforts. Amnesty International provides a digital learning platform for human rights education to a global audience of learners through its Human Rights Academy.⁸ The website provides free human rights courses on a wide range of topics in more than 30 languages, with a focus on accessibility and inclusivity. Various UN agencies provide e-learning portals, including courses on human rights topics.⁹ Human Rights Education Associates provides a large resource hub on an extensive array of human rights topics.¹⁰ Human Rights Watch provides easy-to-read reports designed for an audience of young people, and it publishes high-quality

³ International Literacy Association, Carita Kiili and Sirpa Eskelä-Haapanen, Digital Literacies in the New Finnish National Core Curriculum, 28 August 2015, <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/blog/literacy-now/2015/08/28/digital-literacies-in-the-new-finnish-national-core-curriculum>

⁴ International Labour Organization, Peter L Barasa, Digitalization in teaching and education in Kenya: Digitalization, the future of work and the teaching profession project, 2021, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---sector/documents/publication/wcms_783665.pdf

⁵ Amnesty International, The state of human rights education 2022, (Index: POL 32/7160/2023), 19 September 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol32/7160/2023/en/>

⁶ International Association of Privacy Professionals, Children's privacy laws and freedom of expression: Lessons from the UK Age-Appropriate Design Code, 13 November 2023, <https://iapp.org/news/a/childrens-privacy-laws-and-freedom-of-expression-lessons-from-the-uk-age-appropriate-design-code/>

⁷ Office of the eSafety Commissioner, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/>

⁸ Amnesty International, Human Rights Academy, <https://academy.amnesty.org/learn>

⁹ UN Regional Information Centre for Western Europe, Sharpen your skills with UN e-learning courses, <https://unric.org/en/sharpen-your-skills-during-lockdown-with-united-nations-e-learning-courses/>

¹⁰ Human Rights Education Associates, Online Resource Centre, <https://hrea.org/resources/>

educational videos regularly.¹¹ These are just some of the free international resources available for young people to learn about their human rights online—many others cater to regional or national audiences.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, digital education platforms acted as an educational safety net, demonstrating the potential to provide continuity in learning amid unprecedented global disruptions. This safety net cannot catch those without the means to access the internet or digital devices, so digital access initiatives by the government remain vital. And efforts to promote digital education opportunities for young people need to encourage governments to step up and provide access to technological devices and the internet. But for the more than 60% of the world’s population that currently enjoys online access, this safety net is practically *always* available. So we must also marshal these accessible digital human rights education resources in order to empower young people with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to claim and defend their rights—online as well as offline.

4. GAPS AND CHALLENGES TO YOUNG PEOPLE’S PROTECTION FROM ONLINE THREATS IN LAW, POLICY AND PRACTICE

Amnesty International’s research has shown how TikTok’s content recommender system and its invasive data collection practices pose a danger to young users of the platform by amplifying depressive and suicidal content that risk worsening existing mental health challenges.

Amnesty International’s two reports—*Driven into the Darkness: How TikTok Encourages Self-harm and Suicidal Ideation (Driven into Darkness)*¹² and *“I Feel Exposed”: Caught in TikTok’s Surveillance Web (I Feel Exposed)*¹³—highlight the abuses experienced by children and young people using TikTok, and the ways in which these abuses are caused by TikTok’s recommender system and the underlying business model.

The findings of a joint technical investigation, with our partners—the Algorithmic Transparency Institute (ATI) at the National Conference on Citizenship and AI Forensics—show how children and young people who watch mental health-related content on TikTok’s ‘For You’ page are quickly drawn into “rabbit holes” of potentially harmful content, including videos that romanticize and encourage depressive thinking, self-harm and suicide.

Driven into Darkness details how TikTok’s relentless pursuit of young users’ attention risks exacerbating mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety and self-harm.

I Feel Exposed shows how TikTok’s rights-abusing data collection practices both underpin and are sustained by the harmful user engagement practices.

Amnesty International’s research shows that TikTok’s very business model is inherently abusive and privileges engagement to keep users hooked on the platform, in order to collect evermore data about them. TikTok then uses this data to create profiles of users and draw inferences about them, which allows it to cluster users in groups to target them with highly personalized content to keep them engaged. These groups and categories are also made available to advertisers so that they can target users with personalised ads.

¹¹ Human Rights Watch, Human Rights Education, <https://www.hrw.org/students-and-educators>

¹² Amnesty International, *Driven into Darkness: How TikTok encourages self-harm and suicide ideation*, (Index: POL 40/7350/2023), 7 November 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol40/7350/2023/en/>

¹³ Amnesty International, *“I feel exposed”: Caught in TikTok’s Surveillance Web* (Index: POL 40/7349/2023), 7 November 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/POL40/7349/2023/en/>

To the extent that TikTok has put in place policies and practices to ensure greater respect of children's rights, they differ from region to region, leaving children and young people in some parts of the world exposed to exploitative data collection in others.

This report adds to Amnesty International's previous research that shows that Big Tech companies are either unwilling or incapable of addressing the negative human rights impacts of their surveillance-based business model in the absence of effective regulation. The failure of TikTok to put in place adequate policies to respect the rights of children makes it clear that stronger laws and regulation on data protection and algorithmic amplification of content on social media, and effective enforcement of such laws and regulation, are needed in order to keep children safe from the harvesting and exploitation of their personal data for profit.

It also requires a complete transformation of the business models on which TikTok, and other social media companies, have built their businesses. The internet does not need to depend on mass surveillance. Indeed, the widescale abuses of rights to privacy and freedom of thought and opinion are not inherent to online services. Rather, they arise from deliberate design decisions which are aimed at enabling TikTok to grow its user base and profits.

5. STEPS BEING TAKEN TO ENSURE THAT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE PROTECTED FROM ONLINE THREATS

Despite some positive signs that national and regional lawmakers are looking to rein in Big Tech and ensure stronger protections for children on social media platforms, even the EU's General Data Protection Regulation and Digital Services Act do not go far enough to address the underlying abusive business model. Given the irrefutable evidence of harms experienced by children as a result of the invasive practices and highly personalised algorithmic recommendation of content of TikTok and other social media companies, it is essential that states move quickly to introduce and enforce comprehensive laws to rein in their surveillance-based business models and associated business practices.

Amnesty International is a movement of 10 million people which mobilizes the humanity in everyone and campaigns for change so we can all enjoy our human rights. Our vision is of a world where those in power keep their promises, respect international law and are held to account. We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion and are funded mainly by our membership and individual donations. We believe that acting in solidarity and compassion with people everywhere can change our societies for the better.

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