CHILDREN’S RIGHTS AND DIGITAL BUSINESS DURING COVID-19 AND BEYOND

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Ten Core Messages
INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is reinforcing the extraordinary significance of online tools, systems and platforms in multiple ways important to the lives of children. These range from the infrastructural — facilitating education, healthcare, and food reaching plates — to the social – children and families connecting to learn, to play, and to stay in touch with family and friends.

Digital technology has been called ‘the hidden hero of this unprecedented global crisis’, and there are signs that many digital businesses may emerge from the pandemic with their role as major social actors consolidated and strengthened by long-term changes in consumer habits. Intensified use of digital services is likely to be a lasting part of the ‘new normal’. The centrality of digital services and underlying systems reinforces the importance of ensuring that they respect and support children’s rights during COVID-19 and beyond.

This brief identifies 10 key child rights issues thrown up by child engagement with and within the digital world that appear particularly pressing in the context of the ‘new normal’. It offers business and policymakers one core message on each and points towards further sources of information and issue guidance.

None of the issues highlighted here are necessarily new. However, the pandemic has thrown the social responsibilities inherent in doing business into sharp focus and reinforced the need for action. The policy and practice actions taken today will create impacts on both the present and the foreseeable future. Measures put in place now will help shape the realization of children’s rights and the consequences of the social and economic changes inherent in recovery and building back.

THE NEW NORMAL

- As of June 14, 2020, 124 countries have nation-wide school and university closures, impacting more than 1.1 billion children and young people.
- More households are becoming accustomed to digital solutions to everyday needs – from grocery shopping to workplace meetings.
- Internet usage has increased by 50% in some regions, causing several platforms and services to struggle with the sudden increase in demand.
- Messaging on Instagram and Facebook has gone up by more than half in many countries.
- According to one survey, children in the USA report that their screen time has increased by 50% compared to before coronavirus started.
When used safely and in balance with studying, offline activities and physical exercise, digital services and platforms — including online games and social media — can provide children with excellent opportunities for social interaction. They can support the rights to education, freedom of expression, information, association, leisure, and much more besides.

Equally important are rights such as the right to be safe and protected, the right to privacy, the right to not be discriminated against, and the right to be protected from economic exploitation. It is not news that the digital environment contains risks relating to all of them.

Both States and digital business have a significant opportunity to build respect for children’s rights in ways that will underpin the digital environment in a new and better future. As the pandemic continues to unfold, there is an opportunity for profound and visionary measures.
But it is equally important to remember that respecting the human rights of children is not optional: the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights define the State duty to protect rights and the business responsibility to respect them. Digital business is not exempt. The Children’s Rights and Business Principles also call on businesses to ‘meet their responsibility to respect children’s rights and to commit to supporting the human rights of children.’

The issues highlighted here relate to the digital aspects of digital business. But digital companies should also be mindful of the children’s rights impact of other aspects of their business operations, including their role as employers.

Family-friendly policies and other good workplace practices play a vital role in supporting parents and caregivers to parent well. Employment and income protection, paid leave to care for family members, flexible working arrangements and access to quality emergency childcare are all important measures that enable workers to protect and care for themselves, their children, and their relatives. UNICEF, the International Labour Organization, and UN Women have compiled a set of key recommendations on good workplace practices that all employers, including digital companies, can adopt in the context of the pandemic.

1 Ensuring Access and Equity

According to the World Bank, only half of the world’s population uses the internet. The implication is that many children in countries with school closures are now facing the challenge of continuing their education while cut off from access to information online and from the virtual guidance of teachers. Without reductions in the cost of access globally as well as increases in service quality to narrow this digital divide, the pandemic threatens to cause a widening of the gap in educational attainment as well as socioeconomic inequality both within and between countries. Several companies have recognised the need and started making support available for customers and the general public, although much more must be done to ensure equitable access globally.

TAKING ACTION

- In line with the Broadband Commission’s Agenda for Action for Faster and Better Recovery, industry should ensure connectivity and network continuity, increase bandwidth capacity, and provide network resilience and security, including for vulnerable populations in LDCs and in refugee camps.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- The ITU’s Global Network Resiliency Platform (REG4COVID) is designed to help industry players and other actors ensure that networks are kept resilient and telecoms services are available to all, to the maximum extent possible.
- UNICEF Innocenti’s research brief on Digital Connectivity during COVID-19 provides further insights and analysis on the importance of closing digital divides during the pandemic and beyond.
Rights-Respecting Education Technology and Content

Over one billion children and young people are currently being impacted by school and university closures worldwide. In many parts of the world, it remains unclear when schools will be able to return to pre-coronavirus teaching arrangements. The result has been a widespread move towards education technology, with significant consequences for children lacking access (see 1 above). Digital companies have an essential role to play in building widespread availability of education technology that is respectful of children’s rights (particularly the right to privacy) as well as high-quality educational content.

TAKING ACTION

• Digital companies should seek ways of supporting wider access to remote learning in coordination with national education ministries and systems, while ensuring that platforms provide high standards of data privacy for students.

FURTHER INFORMATION

• UNICEF has collated examples of how children around the world are continuing to learn through COVID-19 here.
Keeping Children Safe Online

Europol has reported that the COVID-19 crisis has resulted in a surge in online distribution of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), partly because travel restriction and other measures have likely prevented offenders from travelling and so have shifted their focus to the exchange of CSAM online. It also reports that conversations specifically about the COVID-19 pandemic are appearing on child sexual exploitation boards on the dark web. Additional child online protection concerns during COVID-19 and beyond include cyberbullying, online risk-taking behaviour, and exposure to potentially harmful content. As the creators of the platforms where children interact with each other and adults online, digital companies have a critical role to play in ensuring that their online environments are safe for children.

TAKING ACTION

- As recommended by a recent technical note on the implications of COVID-19 for protecting children online by UNICEF and partners, companies should incorporate increased safety features (such as effective reporting and referral mechanisms), and instruct parents and caregivers on how to activate these features.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Businesses can refer to the Child Online Safety Assessment Tool along with a variety of additional resources on child online protection for industry available on UNICEF’s Children’s Rights and Business Website.

Fighting Misinformation and Spreading Facts

Research conducted by UNICEF illustrates how children, particularly older children, look to the internet for information and news. However, the proliferation of misinformation, particularly on social media platforms, poses significant challenges for young people and can generate lack of trust, create knowledge poverty, and undermine faith in institutions and values. The problem of misinformation around COVID-19 is severe, with potentially serious health consequences for children and their communities. While more remains to be done, companies can and are taking immediate steps to counteract the spread, such as prominently linking to authoritative sources or removing videos spreading false remedies. In addition to fighting misinformation, however, platforms can proactively spread evidence-based public health facts.

TAKING ACTION

- Digital companies should enhance efforts to tackle misinformation in ways that are congruent with other rights, including freedom of expression. They should also leverage their platforms to spread accurate messaging from reliable and authoritative national and international information sources and institutions.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Companies can refer to the World Health Organisation’s ‘myth busters’ website for clear messaging to promote in order to counteract common pieces of misinformation around COVID-19.
Children’s Data Protection and Privacy

The collection and processing of children’s personal data can have serious and long-lasting impacts on their lives, including within high-stakes domains such as access to finance and employment. As children, parents, and educators increase their reliance on digital services or adopt new ones, the responsibility to protect children’s right to privacy is ever more pertinent.

Without proper safeguards, data collected now may have impacts that are felt long after the end of the pandemic. These concerns extend to services not originally designed for children, as they may now be adopted by a younger audience seeking new ways to remain connected and engaged.

**TAKING ACTION**

- Data collection and processing practices should be transparent, responsible and reflective of national/international laws and regulations. These practices should minimize or avoid sharing children’s data with third parties and should delineate clear purposes for collection and use. Data protection impact assessments should also be completed by companies to appropriately assess the impacts of new digital initiatives on children.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

- For more detail, this industry toolkit on children’s online privacy and freedom of expression developed by UNICEF with inputs from wide range of stakeholders in the public and private sectors, civil society, and academia, offers businesses questions and further recommendations to support their assessment of child rights impacts.
- The discussion paper on privacy, protection of personal information and reputation also developed by UNICEF provides further analysis of the child rights implications of data privacy.

Infection Control and Surveillance

Several governments have turned to the power of digital technology to help protect the right to health and to help control the pandemic. For example, location data is being used to track people’s movements, monitor compliance to quarantine, and trace coronavirus contacts in various countries. Misused or extended beyond their intended scope, these interventions also pose risks to children’s rights. While technological surveillance may provide a promising tool in the pandemic response, many rights experts including the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, have raised alarms about the potential long-term impact of these measures.

**TAKING ACTION**

- Governments as well as digital companies should explicitly consider the short- and long-term child rights implications of deploying technological solutions to pandemic control efforts, particularly with respect to responsible data collection and processing. As part of this, ensuring that these tools are deployed with transparency and accountability mechanisms in place is key.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

- UNICEF Innocenti’s Research Brief on Digital contact tracing and surveillance during COVID-19: General and Child-specific Ethical Issues provides further analysis on these issues along with key messages for companies and governments.
7 Responsible Commercial and Digital Marketing Practices

As children spend more time interacting with digital services during COVID-19, their exposure to digital marketing and monetization techniques will increase. Digital marketing can result in economic exploitation of children and other negative rights impacts, including invasions of privacy to facilitate behavioural targeting or the promulgation of gender and other stereotypes. The marketing of certain products can be particularly harmful. For example, there is extremely compelling evidence of the link between childhood obesity and digital advertisements of foods high in saturated fat, salt and/or free sugars, highlighting the importance of preventing such exposure. Companies should also ensure that other monetization practices, including in-app purchases, recognise that children may be exposed. For example, children may not understand the real monetary value of online transactions, which can leave them prone to overspending.

TAKING ACTION

• Marketing to children online should respect children’s rights in the design, procurement, buying and executing of digital marketing; when selling advertising inventory; and when making decisions about the timing, placement, context and form of digital marketing.

FURTHER INFORMATION

• With inputs from experts and industry, UNICEF has developed analysis and guidance on child rights and digital marketing. Guidance for companies wishing to examine and improve their marketing practices with respect to children’s rights impacts can be found in this industry toolkit. A deeper analysis of the key risks and responsibilities associated with digital marketing and advertising can also be found in this discussion paper.

• In April 2020, UNICEF and UN Women issued a set of considerations for companies on Promoting Positive Gender Roles in Marketing and Advertising in the context of COVID-19.

8 Cybersecurity for Children

COVID-19’s impact on cybercrime has been striking, with cybercriminals adapting quickly to take advantage of peoples’ anxieties and fears. For example, Google reports it is blocking 18 million coronavirus scam emails daily. Theft of personal information and financial data can have serious consequences for victims, including identity theft. Children are not exempt from being targeted by these campaigns. Likewise, parents who fall victim to phishing can find offenders making use of stolen information against them and their families.

TAKING ACTION

• Digital companies should prioritise ensuring that their services and devices including connected toys are secure for children, and by extension all users, particularly as increased use during the pandemic may reveal security vulnerabilities. It is also important to support children and parents to protect themselves from scams by providing child-friendly information about how to identify and avoid them.

FURTHER INFORMATION

• The Council of Europe provides further information on resources regarding cybercrime during the time of COVID-19.
Supporting Play and Participation

With well over 100 countries having restricted movement in attempts to control the spread of COVID-19, children around the world are relying more on screens to enjoy their rights to play and participation. For example, Steam hit a record number of users over a weekend in March 2020, with more than 22 million players logging on. As more and more children are exposed to online gaming, there is an urgent need for careful consideration of the child rights risks and opportunities presented by the industry. In addition to supporting the right to leisure, play, and recreation, digital platforms including social media sites can also support civic engagement by young people during lockdown and beyond.

**TAKING ACTION**

- Digital companies can support children and families to find a good balance between online and offline activities during lockdown and to create positive habits that can outlast the crisis, including by promoting positive messages on this issue through their platforms.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

- Online gaming companies wishing to examine their child rights impacts and identify areas for improvement can refer to these UNICEF Recommendations for the Online Gaming Industry on Assessing Impact on Children, created with extensive consultation with the online gaming industry. Further analysis of child rights opportunities and challenges generated by online gaming can be found in this UNICEF discussion paper, which also benefitted from contributions from a wide variety of stakeholders.

- The UNICEF article on Rethinking screen time in the time of COVID-19 offers a brief overview of the available evidence on the impacts of screen time and a summary of key issues. The implications of COVID-19 for participation and youth activism online can be explored further here.
Innovating to Support Children’s Rights

Technology undoubtedly has a role to play in helping countries overcome the pandemic – indeed, the crisis has already spawned a number of innovations designed to stem the spread of infections. Despite global efforts, however, it is unclear when the pandemic will be over, or how quickly life can return to ‘normal’ for children and their families around the world. During this unprecedented time, many digital companies may have the resources and capacity to create new online tools that can support children’s enjoyment of their rights, particularly as they may be cut off from in-person services such as counselling and other mental health support or access to frontline social services and staff.

**TAKING ACTION**
- Digital businesses should seek ways to help children continue to benefit from key services remotely by creating new tools using child-centred design methodologies. These should include respect for children’s rights at their core, including appropriate privacy and safety features.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**
- Within the area of innovating for health, some key considerations for designing digital tools that respond to people and the systems that surround them can be found [here](#). The principles defined can be applied in multiple fields.

**ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS AND TOOLS**

Given the complexity of navigating the digital environment, it is important for digital companies to support children and parents to confidently navigate their services with regards to safety, privacy, and security by providing accessible tools and information. This is particularly important in the case of newly developed services or those attracting more children during the course of the pandemic.

Finally, as recommended by the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, human rights due diligence, with particular attention to children’s rights, is a core strategy for identifying, preventing, mitigating and accounting for impact on children. In light of the considerations highlighted above, the results may reveal new priorities for action within specific organisations as they adapt in the long-term. The following tools created by UNICEF can be used to support in these processes.

UNICEF provides guidance on [children’s rights in impact assessments](#) designed to guide companies in assessing their policies and processes as they relate to their responsibility to respect children’s rights and their commitment to support children’s rights. This tool should be used as part of ongoing assessments of human rights impacts, as outlined in the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. The criteria it offers can be used to review critical areas of potential or actual impact on children’s rights, based on the Children’s Rights and Business Principles.

This [tool](#) offers guidance to companies on engaging stakeholders on children’s rights as part of enhancing their standards and practices at both the corporate and site levels. Engaging stakeholders on children’s rights can inform the development of company policies, and human rights due diligence processes (assessing actual and potential human rights impacts, integrating and acting upon the findings, tracking responses and communicating how impacts are addressed), and the development of grievance and remediation mechanisms. Stakeholder engagement can also feed into a company’s broader sustainability strategy and long-term goals.
ENDNOTES


4. Wakabayashi D et al.


15. Global video games industry rises to COVID-19 challenge to entertain, connect, educate, donate and communicate public health messaging. ISFE (2020).


