**Committee on the Rights of the Child**

**Concept Note for a General Comment on**

**children’s rights in relation to the digital environment**

Submitted by

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Mozilla’s recent report on the health of the internet circa 2019 paints a bleak picture[[1]](#footnote-1). Interestingly, the report starts with these words: “*Let’s ask more of AI”.* Why should a report about the internet begin with this request?The fact is that the *real* concern today is artificial intelligence (AI) and the associated training data that AI needs to learn. AI is a package of algorithms and machine learning, networked data and metadata, cloud storage, and more. These elements collectively shape our digital tools, one of which is the internet. AI is ubiquitous across many platforms, from toys to cars, and not just the internet. That is because we live in an algorithmic culture.

I am a researcher and over the past fifteen years I’ve been working with young people, exploring how they navigate the digital side of life. In the early years of my work, there was a clear distinction between “online” and “offline”. Kids searched the Web from a school computer or the (one) desktop computer in their home, and then they went and did something else. Then came Web 2.0. Things got messy and young people were told how to deal with cyberbullying and to be careful about what they said online and who they talked with. The idea that they were creating a digital footprint emerged and young people eagerly constructing digital avatars of themselves. Yet, it still seemed possible to control technology, maybe turn it off, even if that would be an isolating experience.

Today, the lines between the digital and analog are interwoven. In the current algorithmic regime, it is not possible to disentangle oneself from data. In the global north, a child’s digital footprint is established before they are born, with their mother’s first sonogram (ultrasound). Their schools use learning analytics. Their media behaviors are tracked. Their mobile devices record their physical movements (even with geolocation turned off) and may be listening to them. In this world, young people are “configured as algorithmic assemblages” for the benefit of powerful others.[[2]](#footnote-2) They have been datafied, their lives turned into the training grounds for algorithms that learn from data.

To address issues around young people, data, and informal education, my research project *Exploring Data Worlds* was launched[[3]](#footnote-3). The significance of the datafication of childhood really hit home one day when I asked a group of fifteen-year old girls about their data footprints and privacy. One teen, projecting herself as an older and wiser person, said, “being the grandmother, the inner grandmother that I am, I would much rather not have any of this… I think it kind of makes us less human in a way”. The sense of weariness in her expression was visceral.

I don’t build technology nor am I in the policy business. I cannot suggest specific technical solutions or regulatory structures. What I do know is that young people *feel* the effects of their data subjectivity quite deeply. And secondly, they have the capacity to understand the effects that AI and datafication have on their own autonomy and sense of agency. But they lack the power to control these effects.

We need public education around AI and data. This is a new liberal art, a new cultural literacy. Yes, discrete skills in computer programming, statistics, and math are important entry points to data science, but we desperately need a much broader perspective about AI and data in education. Young people need to learn about the social consequences of platform infrastructures, about data flows and algorithms, machine learning and metadata, and critically, their rights and responsibilities as data subjects. The purpose of such an education would be to open the black box of algorithmic culture and empower young people to take the pieces out and examine them. Article 28 of the UNCRC states that young people have the right to an education. This includes learning about the algorithmic culture in which they live.

May 15, 2019

1. Mozilla, *Internet Health Report* v.1.0 2018. CC BY 4.0 [link: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lupton, D., & Williamson, B. (2017). The datafied child: The dataveillance of children and implications for their rights. *New Media & Society*, *19*(5), 780-794. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In the first phase of the *Exploring Data Worlds* project, we investigated teen perspectives. Findings were reported on aspects related to data awareness, data creation, ownership, and affective states. Amelia Acker and Leanne Bowler, “What Is Your Data Silhouette? Raising Teen Awareness of Their Data Traces in Social Media”(International Conference on Social Media and Society, July 28–30, 2017, Toronto); Amelia Acker and Leanne Bowler, “Youth Data Literacy: Teen Perspectives on Data Created with Social Media and Mobile Device Ownership” (Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences [HICCS], January 3–6, 2018, Waikoloa Village, Hawaii); Leanne Bowler, Amelia Acker, Wei Jeng, and Yu Chi, “ ‘It Lives All Around Us’: Aspects of Data Literacy in Teen’s Lives,” *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 54, no. 1 (2017): 27–35; Yu Chi, Wei Jeng, Amelia Acker, and Leanne Bowler, “Affective, Behavioral, and Cognitive Aspects of Teen Perspectives on Personal Data in Social Media: A Model of Youth Data Literacy,” in *Transforming Digital Worlds: 13th International Conference, iConference 2018, Sheffield, UK, March 25–28, 2018, Proceedings*, ed. Gobinda Chowdhury, Julie McLeod, Val Gillet, and Peter Willett (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018), 442–52. More information about the Exploring Data Worlds Project can be found at the project web site: <https://www.youthdataliteracy.info/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)