FROM THE COMMUNITY / DATA, DIGITAL AND TECH   7 min read · July 5, 2019

4 ways to end cyberbullying — without quitting the internet

Opinion: Limiting children's screen time won't make the problems go away

SHARE

This opinion article was written by Dr. Maja Popovac, PhD in psychology and cyberbullying expert, University of Buckingham.

With constant technological advances and the impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on our daily lives, it is increasingly clear that digital literacy and online safety efforts should be a top priority.

This is particularly important when we consider the impact that ICTs have on younger users and their social and emotional development. While ICTs, such as smartphones and the internet, provide a vast range of benefits, they are also the tools through which children experience or perpetrate cyberaggression and cyberbullying.

Boost digital skills — not the moral panic

These issues are of particular concern due to their potentially serious and long-term psychological, emotional, behavioural and educational effects, with implications for mental health, wellbeing and educational outcomes.

In a recent study among adolescents in the UK, 43% reported having experienced cyberbullying. Of these, 41% reported being hurt or made to feel sad, 31% felt scared or worried and 27% did not want to go to school on some days due to something that was said or done to them online. More specifically, research has shown links between cyberbullying and depression, anxiety and social difficulties, low self-esteem as well as substance abuse, delinquency and school problems.

Online safety efforts at present are generally limited in their scope, tend to be fear-based and moral-panic driven through reactions to reports in mainstream media and are applied intuitively rather than being based in empirical evidence.

Working towards a coordinated multi-level approach to online safety that targets children and adolescents, parents and teachers, as well as service providers, organisations, charities and support services is key in ensuring comprehensive and impactful responses to the changing digital environment.

To this end, both prevention and intervention strategies are urgently needed that target young users of ICTs that:

- Educate them about potential risks and the associated negative effects.
- Enhance their skills, confidence and resilience in managing potential online risks.
- Foster positive values centred around empathy and respect online and socialising young people into responsible digital citizens.

Calling all adults

Educating and training adults is critical to achieve these goals, and further work in terms of building knowledge, resources and collaborations with community organisations and support services working in this area is key. Policy makers are central in achieving a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to online safety.

Based on our current academic knowledge, priority areas can be summarised into four key recommendations, namely:

1. Developing appropriate (i) policies and laws, (ii) providing clear guidelines on roles and responsibilities, and (iii) ensuring accountability measures are in place

Governments should make sure that there are clear policies and laws relating to online risks, including cyberaggression and cyberbullying. These should form part of and be linked to wider violence prevention efforts, to make use of existent strategies already in place (where possible).

In my own research, I found that 35.3% of bullying victims had experienced both online and offline forms of bullying in the past 12 months, and given that research globally has shown links between online and offline aggression and bullying (see for example Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder & Lattanner, 2014 and Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve & Coulter, 2012), current laws and policies should be extended to clearly link to experiences that occur in online environments.

Technology providers such as Apple and Facebook, schools and other relevant stakeholders should also have clear guidelines in place from policy makers relating to their responsibilities and rights.

This will make it clearer what the different responsibilities are for ensuring online safety and outline the roles of different stakeholders. At the same time, the different stakeholders need to be held accountable and demonstrate the steps they take to ensure the safety of users online.

The efforts towards greater accountability should also include specific suggestions from government, and should ideally involve all stakeholders in developing reporting mechanisms and other measures that can be taken when cyberbullying does happen, which will facilitate more standardised engagement with online safety.

For example, in the context of schools, clearer guidelines on staff responsibilities and school provision, such as reporting mechanisms and support channels, will ensure that all schools have some level of engagement on online safety efforts as a minimum.

These are important in instilling confidence and trust in children who then know that they can report incidents to adults, and that appropriate actions will be taken when they do so.

2. Prioritising the issue of online safety in the public domain

Informative-educational campaigns and media literacy strategies are crucial in drawing public attention to key issues relating to online safety.

Examples could be information about cyberaggression and cyberbullying, policies and laws linking to these issues, tips on managing online risks, and raising awareness about the support services on offer.

> Some strategies are dead ends: everyone in this field should shift away from strategies aimed at limiting ICT exposure and stop relying on fear-based messaging

Collaborations between organisations, charities, service providers and researchers working in this area can help develop appropriate campaigns that raise awareness. In addition, education surrounding online risks, digital citizenship and digital literacy should also be introduced into school curriculums for children of all ages, and at both primary and secondary school level, thereby providing continuous engagement with online safety issues at key developmental stages.

3. Enhancing training and support services

Policy and government efforts to tackle cyberaggression and cyberbullying has been insufficient so far in almost every country around the world. Government should actively engage with organisations, charities, schools and other relevant stakeholders and support them in tackling online safety issues more effectively through appropriate training, upskilling and investments.

For example, creating quality online safety education and training school staff, not only enhances the knowledge and confidence in being able to engage with young people on specific issues, but also has the potential to increase early detection of serious incidents and more prompt referral to support services which can mitigate potential harms.

In addition, further support and collaboration with organisations and charities working in this area can facilitate partnerships within communities and makes it easier to access support services for both victims and perpetrators of cyberaggression and cyberbullying.

4. Funding evidence-based intervention and prevention efforts

Because new ICTs are constantly being put on the market, the places where online aggression can happen and be perpetrated also expand and change all the time.

Due to the constantly-developing technological landscape, it is increasingly important to fund evidence-based interventions and preventions. Interventions related to online safety can focus on a number of approaches such as digital literacy, peer support, conflict resolution and bystander intervention, and it is important to examine the most effective combination of strategies at particular developmental stages.

Investment in research that assesses interventions, as well as research that examines factors that underpin cyberaggression and cyberbullying behaviours, is important in informing best practices on a larger scale.

Although some steps in the above areas have already taken place, more critical engagement is needed on a number of points and policy makers are in a position to strengthen and improve coordination of current action on cyberaggression and cyberbullying.

Some strategies are dead ends: Everyone in this field should shift away from strategies aimed at limiting ICT exposure and stop relying on fear-based messaging and, instead, move towards training and support that coordinates strategies to enhance digital literacy of both children and adults.
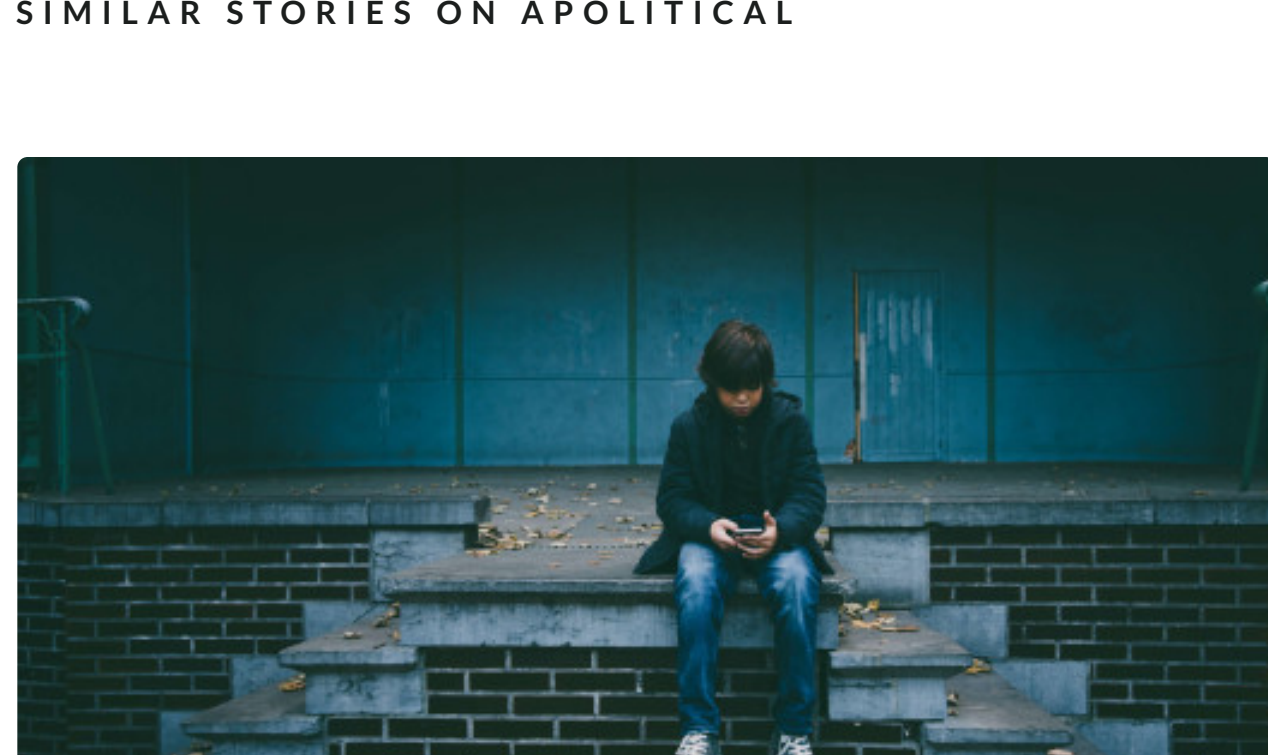
This ensures that children are able to navigate the online environment effectively and safely and are socialised into becoming confident and responsible media consumers in the digital age. — *Maja Popovac*

(Picture credit: Death to the stock photos)

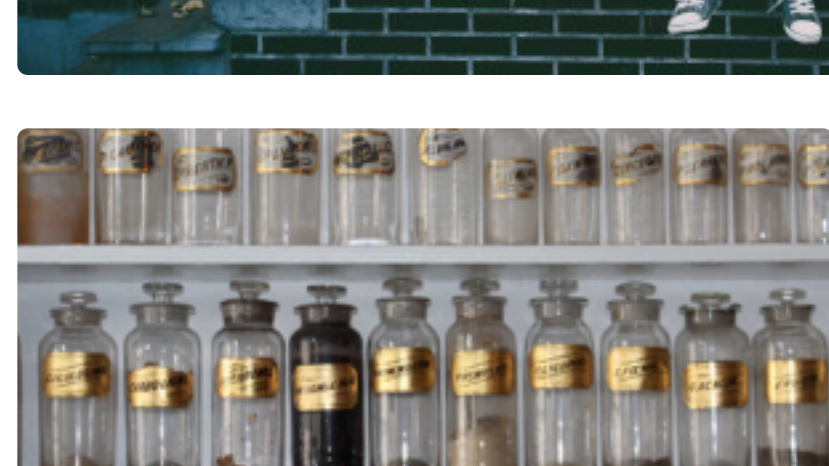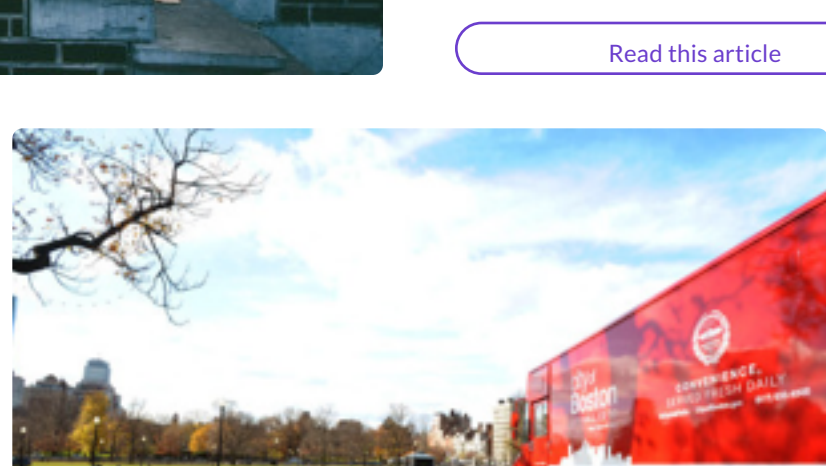## SIMILAR STORIES ON APOLITICAL

ANALYSIS / EDUCATION AND CHILDREN

Schools are enlisting students to stop cyberbullying

Digital natives can be crucial allies when fighting online abuse
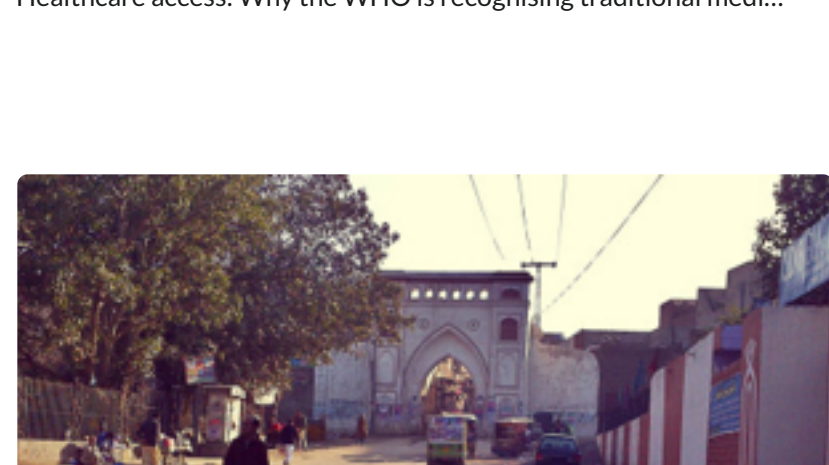
Read this article

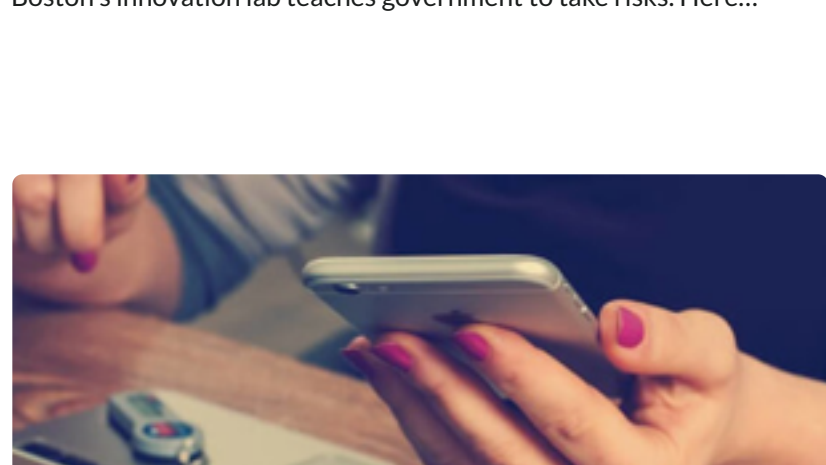Healthcare access: Why the WHO is recognising traditional medi...

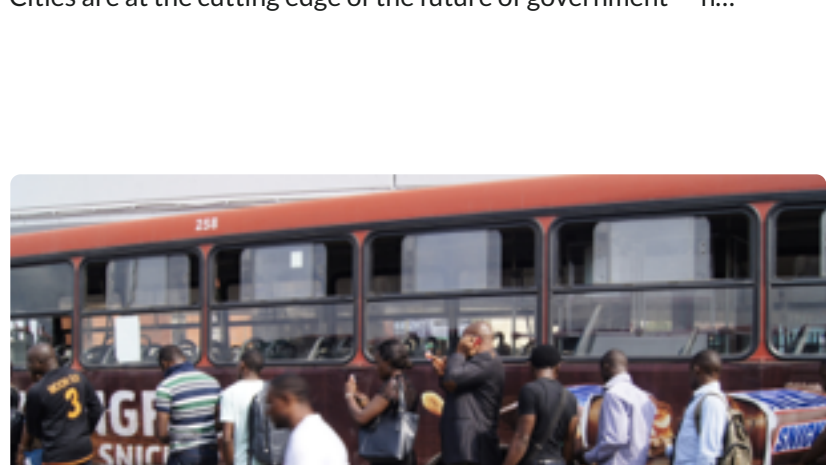Boston's innovation lab teaches government to take risks. Here...

Cities are at the cutting edge of the future of government — h...

Pakistan's anti-viral app fights dengue fever and corruption

Will open banking help or hurt the poorest?

How to do big data the low-tech way

EXPLORE MORE STORIES

apolitical

COMPANY
Our story
Meet our team
Careers
Partner with us
Get in touch

PRODUCT
Events
Courses
Q&A
Articles

CONTACT
UK ADDRESS
PUBLIC HALL
1 Horse Guards Avenue
London, SW1A 2EP
United Kingdom

BERLIN ADDRESS
Torstraße 220
Berlin 10115
Germany

PHONE
+44 203 608 2241

FOR PLATFORM SUPPORT
concierge@apolitical.co

FOR BUSINESS INQUIRIES
hello@apolitical.co

WRITE FOR US
Our members contribute opinion articles on the best new innovations in government. Reach out to us to hear how you can share your insights.

Find out how

LEGAL
Privacy policy
Terms & Conditions
Cookie policy

DATA PROTECTION OFFICER
dpo@apolitical.co

EU DATA PROTECTION OFFICER
dpo.apl@apolitical.foundation

Copyright © 2022 Apolitical Group Limited