STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES

VICTIMS OF GLOBAL TECH CORPORATIONS SPEAK OUT

How social media’s toxic algorithms are harming children and their families
SumOfUs is a people-powered campaign organisation, fighting for a world where mega corporations are not able to ride roughshod over ordinary people’s lives.

Our members care passionately about the fight for a better internet, and for legislation that truly protects people from the rapacious business model of the global tech giants.

That this work is both urgent and necessary is clear from the real harms being inflicted on children and young people by profit-seeking social media algorithms. To highlight the extent of the problem, we asked our members to share their own experiences of harmful content online.

The responses we received detail the impact of disturbing and dangerous content being foisted on young people at a crucial stage of their emotional and social development -- everything from eating disorder propaganda to suicide material, frightening ads to warped, violent cartoons.

In our view, these stories and messages reflect a broad trend of harm, both to individuals and wider society, inflicted by corporations allowed to grow so large they now monopolise the attention of billions of people. They also indicate widespread exasperation with the unchecked power of these platforms, and a desire to end a system where billionaire executives can freely profit off of mis/disinformation and hate.

These stories are particularly distressing for the fact they centre on children. They demonstrate the ease with which the interests of even the most vulnerable among us are set aside for the sake of corporate growth. For policymakers, the lesson is clear: no one, not even our children, will be safe until social media companies are forced to put people before their own bottom line.

Here is a sample of the testimonies we received. Where appropriate have been translated from their original language.

Emma Ruby-Sachs
Executive Director, SumOfUs
During the last 12 months I watched my now 14 yo daughter spiral into depression, anxiety, self-harm, drug-use and suicide attempts - all turbocharged by social media. Through Instagram she was trapped in a bubble that fed her content that fuelled her anxiety and self-harming, fixated her on illegal drugs and ultimately allowed her to connect with drug-dealers who supplied her with MDMA and ketamine. She was also targeted by sexual predators who attempted to connect with her and her friends.

- Anonymous

My 13 year old daughter has been exposed to extremely disturbing footage of children and adults committing suicide, despite having parental controls set on her phone and the apps in question. This kind of content is extremely distressing and causes long term psychological trauma. My daughter was already suffering from trauma induced depression. The platforms in question are Tiktok & YouTube predominantly but other platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat that have questionable content at times.

- Felicity

Hi ..... I'm a GP and have watched both of my kids grow up and be wrongly influenced by adverts / stories on social media.

My daughter has been bombarded with pictures of overly thin girls and advice in weight loss at a highly impressionable age while my son has seen pictures he should never have seen at his age of decapitation and other horrific events.

I regularly speak to teenagers who have had their teenage years ruined by pressure from social media and parents distraught because of it.

- Hannah
My daughter who was bullied on social media tried to commit suicide by throwing herself from a building (defenestration).

My nephew, also like my daughter with social media on his iPhone, wants to commit suicide by ingesting strong drugs recommended online!!

This is unacceptable, and as parents we remain completely helpless.

- Parisse Dominique
My daughter has watched kids YouTube, there was an Elsa video with swearing half way through. I have also seen violence on Minecraft where a mother was murdered in front of her children, the kids were crying for their Mum. This really upset my child. I have banned YouTube as my daughter questioned a lot. YouTube is bad enough yet alone social media for kids. The future scares the life out of me. The effects it is having on our young is terrifying. They need to be kids for as long as poss.

- Hellene

YouTube algorithm ended up recommending sexualised videos of the Five Nights at Freddie’s game. A creator ended a video with a threat for my son to write a dirty letter that I would find, or else something would come and get him. It ultimately instructed/guided him on to a porn site looking for porn videos of the bunny character. I tried to find the video myself but they are very hard to watch and there’s so many of them that I struggled.

- Leo

My child informed me this Summer of an “inappropriate” ad she’s being shown on YouTube, which is for a game which simulates social settings. The ad in question talks about how your boyfriend is in another room “moaning” with another woman. She showed me the ad, and there’s no way to even express that she dislikes the ad, never mind preventing her from seeing it again.

There’s no accountability for Big Tech when it comes to our children, and it’s got to stop.

- Leah
My stepchild has been severely affected by cyber-bullying and toxic only/social media content.

Particularly with pandemic conditions they have become deeply depressed, live in the cyber world and their self-esteem is so damaged that they don’t even want to be seen in public.

As parents we have tried so hard to manage their screen addiction for years, but without in-person activities available as a safe distraction (immune-compromised household), the screens have won.

- Anonymous

My daughter told me on the way home from school that two boys who sit just behind her in school love looking on their phones at pornography and laughing and showing it around the class when the teacher isn’t looking or is out of the room.

I am beyond horrified that my child’s first experience of porn is in a classroom setting in a totally unlicensed & uncensored fashion and I hold Big Tech responsible for enabling children of this age and often much younger to access & download extreme material.

- Rebecca
My 16 year old told me over his cornflakes that he had clicked on a video on a site he followed because it often had funny videos. He had found himself watching people being murdered in the Christchurch Terrorist attack. He realised what he was watching was real and stopped it playing.

- Samantha

My son started to rely on the internet to distract himself from social difficulties. He circumvented parental limits, using instructions available online. He would lie in order to play video games all night long. He refused to go to school (in spite of excellent grades and a gifted designation). Family relationships became severely strained, he was isolated, and his self-esteem suffered.

He attempted suicide and spent several weeks in hospital. We have been trying to heal together ever since.

- Katherina

My son loves watching videos on Youtube and many are good. But a great deal are scary or inappropriate.

The advertising is every few minutes and varies greatly in content. He has been scared sometimes when advertising for a zombie film has come up. A dilemma for all parents today; how can our kids take part in the fun good parts of technology but not be fed tons of advertising and brainwashing? It worries me and we try limiting what he sees and does as long as we can.

- Malin

My son of 11 has daily screen time. It is hard to control where he goes and what he does exactly because social media is very eager with algorithms to make the users addicted. So even by searching something innocent pornographic or violent options can arise which should absolutely not be the case! Also after that the algorithm remembers it and will send such content again!

The main thing they lose is innocence which is very sad. Big tech should take responsibility.

- Angelique
I was mentally ill as a child and saw cruel behaviour online, with poor supervision and no good examples. I repeated this behaviour and hurt people’s feelings, also made my mental health worse, had unhealthy romantic relationships and was bombarded with harmful right wing media.

Websites and apps such as G+, Tumblr, DeviantArt, Instagram, Yubo and YouTube have poor monitoring systems that are harmful to children like I was 8 years ago. Still as an adult I see this when browsing such sites.

- Jessica

My child finds YouTube extremely addictive and becomes a different child while glued to whatever he’s found to watch on YouTube. The fast-paced but low-quality clips keep him hooked.

He’s become lured into playing minecraft and trying to keep up with his friends and YouTubers. I have to use a lot of persistence to manage his screen time. He’s definitely a victim of an industry that are benefiting more than he is.

- Anonymous
I work with children and young people. I have witnessed a range of suffering caused. Examples include paranoia and unhealthy focus on body image -some going to extreme lengths, self-harm, consequences of sleep deprivation and distraction, seeing shocking scenes not fit for such ages, bullying, division...

It is entirely unacceptable. Big tech have a moral obligation and social responsibility to reign this in now. What agenda drives them not to have addressed this already?

Serious damage has been and is being done. At a great cost to society, individuals and health services.

Nobody wins-except for those that profit out of misery and suffering.

There is no place for that in this world.

- Anonymous
17 My 12 year old daughter showed me a video that was on facebook of a woman lying on a table with a horse above her penetrating her. The image has never left my mind. I hate to think what else my innocent daughter has seen.

She and her friend spoke about it saying they’d see others like it. I complained to Facebook and it was removed - it was several years ago.

- Anonymous

18 My 12-year old little sister receives pornographic links and pedophile messages everyday on Instagram. And Instagram rules her life, her tastes, what she wants. Everything revolves around Instagram, she wants to try every fashion trend shown, buy all the products she sees on it, and wants to imitate influencers by taking pictures of herself using filters to look older.

- Anonymous

19 At 10 she was still into my little pony and would go on YouTube to find content. One day her search threw up porn in the guise of my little pony content which was really very traumatising for both the child and her mother.

- Anonymous

20 My 12-year old daughter has ADHD and finds it very difficult to regulate her internet use in any way. Although we try to help, she is extremely susceptible to the ‘addictive-by-design’ nature of games and social media sites. Constant stimulation has further damaged her ability to focus and learn.

Also, recently she has seen inappropriate content on Tiktok that was forwarded to her by peers. She had no desire to see sexual content at her age and now she can’t unsee it. This is very sad.

- Belinda
She is 15. It took 16 months of psychological counseling to get her out of an anorexic episode. She’s been bullied on Instagram for being a few pounds too heavy (nothing excessive). Fortunately, it had no major impact on her schooling, but she spent 1 year as a social outcast.

- Anonymous

My 7-year old daughter has a habit of getting on her tablet when she’s at my parents’, and as she was looking for kid-friendly videos to watch, she landed on videos of cartooncat and siren head. She still talks about it, and draws them. Now, every time she hears a siren she thinks of those characters. I don’t even know what those videos are, or how she ended up finding them...

- Anonymous

We have 4 daughters and all 4 have had problems on social media and other online games. Even though these are 4 girls who are excellent students, supported by parents who are both teachers and well aware of the precautions to take in this area. One of them unwittingly purchased something through an online game. Another, despite parental controls, saw pornographic content on social media. And another was a victim of cyberbullying by her “friends”.

- Laetitia
About a friend of mine’s eldest daughter:

It started at recess at her private middle school, and then it continued on Instagram. She is of mixed-race, average beauty. She got teased, laughed at, then insulted by teenagers she thought were her friends. She got depressed. Her parents heard about it and reported the social media cyber-bullying. The five teenagers simply got off with a warning.

The girl had to change schools, and continued to be teased, although more discreetly.

- Paternostre

My nephew spends almost his entire life staring at screens. During lockdown, his addictive behavior literally exploded. He was white as a sheet, and we couldn’t understand anything he was trying to say as if he’d become completely incapable of formulating words/sentences that were socially comprehensible.

Of course, every aspect of his life fell to pieces, school, friends, health, family relationships… I worry so much about him, and other young people who are left to their own devices.

- Anonymous

My boy who is 13 years old was contacted on Instagram by an old man who told him he liked his profile and offered him money “to keep him company”. We reported it to the police but nothing more could be done to prevent this man from soliciting other young minors.

- Anonymous
When I was young, at 14, some girlfriends who were older than me got me to sit with them on a video chat with a stranger who asked us to take our clothes off; I only took my top off but the others went further. The guy threatened to send the video to our school if we didn’t keep going. I was so scared I deleted all my accounts, and fortunately I didn’t go all the way. But the other girls…

- Anonymous

My daughter is addicted to social media and has had to create an imaginary life so she wouldn’t become a victim. She confuses her virtual life with reality, she suffers from attention deficit, lack of judgement, poor self-confidence, social phobia, withdrawal, and has suicidal tendencies. Parental control has not been enough. Big Tech’s only goal is to profit from monopolizing our children’s available brain power. This has to stop.

- Mestdagh

When I was a teenager I was trapped in a social media bubble where I was taught to eat less, how to workout, how to get a slimmer, “nicer” body. It took over my life. I was miserable. My loved ones were miserable for me. Never again. Let’s protect our children!

- Anonymous
My daughter became obsessed with fitness and got an eating disorder which led her to mental decline. She eventually was watching videos on self harm and was cutting herself until eventually she tied a cord around her neck and passed at 17yrs old.

My daughter was bright and got excellent grades. If she could have not accessed this material (that should be banned) then she would still be alive today.

Please do not let this happen to other kids and parents and ban this extremely harmful material.

- Anonymous
For more information on our work to hold global tech corporations to account, please contact disinfo@sumofus.org