CHALLENGES
FOR CHANGE

How can Consumers International create positive change for consumers in the digital world?

CONSUMERS INTERNATIONAL

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INTRODUCTION

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THROUGH CHALLENGING OUR OWN THINKING, WE WILL SPARK THE CONNECTIONS AND CO-LEARNING THAT WILL LEAD TO THE EMPOWERMENT OF CONSUMERS AROUND THE WORLD

As part of a strategy review, we wanted to seek out fresh and challenging perspectives. We invited a small number of international experts and opinion formers to produce a challenge piece on how Consumers International, and the global consumer movement, can best respond to the challenges and opportunities facing us in the digital world.

We spoke to individuals from leading digital NGOs, global market and opinion specialists, digital designers and academics and asked them how Consumers International could work with members and partners around the world to create positive change for consumers in the digital world.

We also asked them to constructively challenge us to be more effective, and to think as creatively as they could. These external perspectives have stimulated much debate and have helped to inform future strategy and priorities for action.

We are now publishing the whole set of contributions as a valuable resource for anyone working for positive outcomes in the digital economy and society.

Through challenging our own thinking and that of others, we will continue to spark the connections and co-learning that will lead to the empowerment of consumers around the world.

KEY THEMES

THE CHALLENGE IN CONTEXT

Much of the contributors' responses were shaped by a recognition of the increasing reach of technology into all aspects of our lives as we move towards a world in which technology has a ubiquitous presence in our lives. Rather than interacting with web-based services where we can choose the terms of when and how we engage, we are entering a phase where our entire experience of the world we live in is shaped by digital devices and services.

As more and more devices become internet enabled and can communicate with each other and external data holders, the internet will become a ubiquitous physical environment that is continually collecting, analysing and using personal data to predict our behaviours and shape our lives, in ways we may be oblivious to and are too complex to fully engage with.

But these are not yet challenges for everyone. Despite the world reaching 50% global internet penetration in 2017, almost half the world's population remain offline. As digital technology continues to develop at an incredible pace, digital inequality is expected to widen and those without adequate internet access are at risk of being left behind.

INFLUENCING THE DIGITAL ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

Many contributors commented on how the fast pace of digital innovation forces policymakers to play catch up - reacting to gaps in policy as they are exposed, rather than pre-empting problems before they happen. This is added to by a lack of technological literacy in most policy making circles – including advocates. As digital processes cross borders, the discrepancy in levels of protection against various digital issues has become a major problem.

Between them, the authors also picked up on other issues created by this lack of speed and co-ordination. For example, appropriate responses to more systemic issues like digital privacy are even harder to craft, as multiple stakeholders are motivated by different incentives, and will respond to different interventions. This means cross border approaches to protection and security are required. Others thought the lack of an effective and joined up policy response has meant that large technology companies have become hugely influential in setting trends and common practices that small operators tend to follow.

WE ARE ENTERING A PHASE WHERE OUR ENTIRE EXPERIENCE OF THE WORLD WE LIVE IN IS SHAPED BY DIGITAL DEVICES AND SERVICES

CHALLENGES TO CONSUMER ORGANISATIONS

There were calls for a much broader concept of 'consumer' than consumer organisations might currently work with, moving beyond traditional consumer issues such as 'does this product or service work as expected?' and towards a wider consideration of the role consumers play in the business models of tech companies and the value their data generates.

And technical knowledge must be improved. In an interconnected and highly digitalised world, issues such as cybersecurity, data protection, and data ethics are beginning to dominate the global policy agenda. Consumer organisations will need to develop a more informed understanding of these trends and establish new partnerships to continue to influence and shape policy.

But as well as thinking about future work, there was a challenge from some not to forget the fundamentals which are still not adequately covered, for example doing more to educate and raise awareness on the privacy implications of targeted advertising. Most thought it was still essential to continue to lobby for strong consumer protection, mobilise consumers to demand high levels of protection, and to use things like the ambitious European General Data Protection Regulation as a way to raise the base level of consumers rights across the world.

COLLABORATION WITH OTHER STAKEHOLDERS WILL BE KEY TO FINDING THE BEST SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS CONSUMERS FACE IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

As well as working with legislators and international processes, the importance of an open dialogue with businesses was stressed by many.

MAKING THE MOST OF OUR GLOBAL REACH

Everyone thought collaboration with other stakeholders was key to developing a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of technology and finding the best solutions to the problems consumers face in the digital world.

A diverse selection of stakeholders was mentioned, with some recommending being open to engaging in new conversations and more constructive debates with businesses on things like data privacy – showing that services can champion privacy without compromising user experience. Others suggested working with developers to use the power of technology to solve consumer problems, for example developing digital applications that can detect unfair practice or using online platforms to build closer relationships with consumers.

Others focused more on making the most of our global reach, balanced out by a clear understanding of local approaches and actions, and supporting local, country-based coalitions with stakeholders from private industry, the public sector, and civil society. And, for consumers in countries that need more access, the new trend witnessed in many authoritarian states of shutdowns or network disruption must be urgently addressed as a both a consumer and a citizen issue.

A digital design specialist felt we could use our position at the heart of the consumer advocacy community, to lead the way in building and connecting the pieces of a new digital infrastructure.

CONSUMERS INTERNATIONAL CAN USE ITS POSITION TO LEAD THE WAY IN BUILDING AND CONNECTING THE PIECES OF A NEW DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE