

## Invitation for Letters of Inquiry Tech and Society Challenge: *Youth Voice in the Digital Age*

By investing in an ecosystem of anytime, anywhere learning, the Susan Crown Exchange (SCE) works to prepare youth to thrive in a rapidly changing world. SCE primarily funds organizations that operate in out-of-school time, prioritizing nonprofits that work in social and emotional learning and digital learning. What unites all of SCE's partners is their commitment to creating opportunities for young people. Through its Exchange Philosophy, SCE strives to undo the power dynamics of traditional grantmaking relationships, providing avenues for mutual dialogue and learning alongside financial support in order to elevate our partners' outstanding work.

As part of our new [Tech and Society program](#), SCE is launching a Challenge: "Youth Voice in the Digital Age." Responses to this Challenge should address the following question: **How can young people inspire their peers to use technology in healthy ways and make digital spaces better for everyone?**

### **Background:**

We live in the Digital Age. Technology touches nearly every aspect of our lives. And its effects are particularly amplified for youth. The current generation of under-20-year-olds is the first generation to grow up in a fully digital world—a world in which the internet is ubiquitous and opportunities to connect are everywhere.

*Yet youth's relationship with technology is complicated.* Young people use technology for civic engagement, entertainment, self-expression, information, and countless other activities. And they are more likely to say that it has a positive effect on them than a negative one.<sup>1</sup> But unfettered access to technology also presents unique challenges. Youth largely feel no expectation of privacy online.<sup>2</sup> Fifty percent express that they feel addicted to their phones.<sup>3</sup> Sixty-eight percent feel that social media negatively impacts their peers. Seventy-two percent believe they are manipulated by technology companies.<sup>4</sup> Fifty-six percent do not feel confident identifying truthful information.<sup>5</sup> And while 43% have witnessed incivility and conflict online, 39% believe it's acceptable, while 32% elect to withdraw from the conversation.<sup>6,7</sup>

Digital life is a deeply personal and highly complex experience for young people. *But when it comes to making digital spaces more welcoming or community-oriented, youth state that they remain largely on their own.* They feel unable to act, lack the proper resources to do so, or—at worst—are left out of the conversation entirely.<sup>8</sup>

Several emerging efforts are exploring how best to promote healthy digital environments and technology use for young people. However, these adult-driven efforts largely fail to incorporate youth voice, involve young people in the process, or address the real needs of youth. This is a major problem. Given that young people predominantly look to their friends for guidance and support, any program seeking true impact must put youth at the center of designing their own solutions.<sup>9</sup>

### **Opportunity:**

SCE envisions a world where the Digital Age enhances, rather than hinders, individual and collective well-being; a world that fosters connection instead of division. *Through this initiative, we will support approaches that spark youth agency and help young people develop the mindset, skills, and knowledge to thrive in the Digital Age.*

The purpose of this Challenge is to surface a group of potential partners who are serving youth ages 12-18, from whom we will request more detailed grant proposals. We expect to award grants at two tiers: 1) prototype, experimental, or early-stage grants of up to \$50,000 per year (up to two years), providing new

innovators the space to stress test their assumptions, elevate best practices and pilot their initiative; and 2) implementation grants of \$100,000–\$250,000 per year (up to two years) to organizations with established records and detailed plans who want to scale their work.

### **What we're looking for:**

We are seeking to support programs, initiatives or campaigns that respond to the following Challenge:

***How can young people inspire their peers to use technology in healthy ways and make digital spaces better for everyone?***

Informed by our initial partnerships with [Center for Humane Technology](#), [Chicago Ideas](#), [Common Sense Media](#), [DoSomething.org](#), [Harvard University's Project Zero](#), and [University of Wisconsin's Social Media & Adolescent Health Research Team](#), we seek to support initiatives that address this question by empowering youth and elevating their voices. Please consider responding to this Challenge if your program, initiative, or campaign addresses one or more of the following five elements:

- **Awareness** of how technology is designed, what its motives are, and how it may affect a person directly or indirectly (e.g. algorithms, business models, tech ethics, short-term connection vs. long-term notion of friendship/relationships)
- **Rights and Responsibilities** that are broadly known and upheld by each community member (e.g. right to free speech, right to privacy, responsibility to use civil and constructive language)
- **Beliefs and Dispositions** that guide our behavior and shape how we use our knowledge and skills in online spaces (e.g. slow down and reflect, recognize implicit bias)
- **Skills and Competencies** to leverage technology to achieve specific objectives (e.g. engage in civil discourse, become civically engaged, identify truthful information, acquire career-related skills, etc.)
- **Personalized Digital Balance** that adapts to meet your individual needs and goals (e.g. managing screen time and digital habits on an ongoing basis)

While we are open to any submission that promotes youth agency, we particularly encourage you to apply if your solution leverages peer-to-peer and near-peer approaches. Similarly, while we welcome submissions from both researchers and practitioners, we are particularly interested in funding research-practice partnerships.

### **How to apply:**

We invite submissions from 501(c)(3) organizations that address the following:

- Estimated budget for project (if multiyear, include a complete estimated budget by year)
- Requested grant amount from SCE
- Project description: What kind of work do you seek to have funded?
- Project alignment: How does your program, initiative or campaign help young people identify and develop any of the five elements listed above or other relevant issues we may have missed?
- Youth agency: How does your program, initiative or campaign promote youth agency and/or peer-to-peer or near-peer learning?
- Participating organizations: Names of the participating organization(s) and bio and contact information for program lead(s)

Submissions will be considered on a rolling basis until the deadline of 5:00 PM Central Time on January 31, 2020. We will follow up with the most promising applicants to request a formal grant proposal.

**Please submit your initial application [via our Foundant portal](#).** You may direct any questions to [challenge@scefdn.org](mailto:challenge@scefdn.org).

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<sup>1</sup> Social Media, Social Life. Common Sense Media, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Knight, Lindsay. Digital Citizenship: Rights & Responsibilities. Chicago Ideas, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Common Sense Media. (2016). Dealing with devices: The parent-teen dynamic. San Francisco, CA.

<sup>4</sup> Social Media, Social Life. Common Sense Media, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Common Sense Media. (2016). Dealing with devices: The parent-teen dynamic. San Francisco, CA.

<sup>6</sup> Middaugh, Ellen. "Social Media and Online Communities Expose Youth to Political Conversation, but Also to Incivility and Conflict." London School of Economics, Aug. 2016, [blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2016/08/26/social-media-and-online-communities-expose-youth-to-political-conversation-but-also-to-incivility-and-conflict/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2016/08/26/social-media-and-online-communities-expose-youth-to-political-conversation-but-also-to-incivility-and-conflict/).

<sup>7</sup> Hodgin, Erica. "Educating Youth for Online Civic and Political Dialogue: A Conceptual Framework for the Digital Age." Youth & Participatory Politics Research Network, 16 June 2016, [ypp.dmlcentral.net/publications/297](http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/publications/297).

<sup>8</sup> Knight, Lindsay. Digital Citizenship: Rights & Responsibilities. Chicago Ideas, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> *DoSomethingXSCÉ Wrap Report*. DoSomething.org, 2019.