

March 31st, 2014

John Podesta, Counselor to the President
Nicole Wong, Deputy Chief Technology Officer, OSTP
Big Data Study, Office of Science and Technology Policy
Eisenhower Executive Office Building
1650 Pennsylvania Ave. NW.
Washington, DC 20502

Dear Mr. Podesta and Ms. Wong:

We, the undersigned, are organizations concerned about the proliferation of marketing of unhealthful foods and beverages that targets children and adolescents. We are dedicated to eliminating harmful food marketing—particularly marketing aimed at those who are most vulnerable to obesity and other nutrition-related diseases—by actively identifying, investigating, and advocating changes to marketing practices that undermine health.

As organizations concerned about the youth obesity epidemic in the United States, we urge the OSTP, in its forthcoming “Big Data” report to the President, to recommend safeguards to ensure young people are protected from data-driven marketing practices that could adversely affect their health and potentially undermine the progress the country has achieved so far in addressing obesity.

As you know, children and adolescents are growing up today in an era where they are always connected online—especially with mobile devices. Contemporary marketing relies on a set of “Big Data” practices that can target youth across media platforms and devices, creating digital profiles on their behaviors, location, interests, race, or ethnicity. Food and beverage companies are at the forefront in the use of an array of these powerful practices, which target young people on social networks, online videos, mobile phones, and games. We are concerned that without proper safeguards to address this new era of marketing to youth, the initial promising progress the country has made addressing the obesity crisis could be undermined.

We know the Administration, in its 2012 Consumer Privacy Bill of Rights blueprint, acknowledged that children and adolescents should receive special protections against unfair data collection practices. The Federal Trade Commission, in its own 2012 privacy report, also noted the need to ensure adolescents receive appropriate protection. As public health, child advocacy, research, and consumer organizations, we commend the Administration for this important inquiry into the impact of the use of personal information by the commercial sector. We respectfully urge the Administration to incorporate the following principles designed to protect the welfare of young people:

Recognize children’s and teen’s data as sensitive information requiring special safeguards - The Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act and the proposals to treat teen information as sensitive data should be reflected in the White House report.

Ensure data collection minimization– Food and beverage companies should be encouraged to collect and use the least amount of data if they market to children and teens. They should make all their data collection practices transparent, permitting parents and other stakeholders to assess the scope and potential impact of these techniques.

No “Big-Data” oriented marketing of nutrient-poor foods and beverages - Companies should not use current data practices to promote unhealthy foods and beverages.

Safeguards on predictive analytics used to profile and target youth – Big Data has offered companies incredible insight into the preferences and intent of consumers. The use of these powerful analytic tools on children and youth is unfair and takes advantage of many of their developmental vulnerabilities. Food and beverage companies should confirm that they will not use predictive analytics to profile and target youth.

Sincerely,

African American Collaborative Obesity Research Network
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
American Academy of Sports Dietitians and Nutritionists
Berkeley Media Studies Group
Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood
CANFIT
Center for Digital Democracy
Center for Global Policy Solutions
Center for Science in the Public Interest
ChangeLab Solutions
Children Now
Common Sense Media
Consumer Federation of America
Consumers Union
Eat Drink Politics
Food Sleuth, LLC
Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility
Momsrising
National Consumers League
Northwest Coalition for Responsible Investment
Partnership for Prevention

The Praxis Project
Prevention Institute
Public Citizen
Public Health Advocacy Institute
Salud America!
Shape Up America!
Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity