

User empowerment and media competence:

Combining protection and education

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Families are going online . . .

The Internet is diffusing rapidly through society

Europe today is witnessing a rapidly expanding domestic market as well as a significant educational market for the Internet. Today, families are going online for the first time. Schools are increasingly incorporating use of the Internet into the curriculum. For many adults, the workplace is a transformed ICT-mediated environment. Everywhere the Internet is hyped as indispensable to business, vital to communication, a unique link to a world of information of every kind. At the same time, the growth of online pornography and racist hate sites, and the increasing commercialisation of the Internet, generates fears for its harmful consequences.

Today, attention must broaden to encompass questions of Internet use

Public attention so far has concentrated on questions of access and, particularly, inequalities in access.¹ Figures for actual *use* remain rare. In the UK, around half of all adults have used the Internet at some time, and the figure is rising all the time. The gender gap is beginning to close, but age still matters. Most particularly, as one poll showed,² 84% of UK 7-14 year olds used the Internet in the previous month, twice the figure for adults. As children and young people are one of the groups who attract most interest and concern in relation to their use of the Internet, it matters that many more of them are using the Internet than the adults around to support or guide them.

Little is yet known of *how* people are making use of the Internet at home. Does this medium mark the end of the mass audience sharing a common understanding, as everyone follows up their individual interests online, or are new forms of communality

being sustained? Is the digital divide in access now translating into a digital divide in use? What are the risks which people run in using the Internet? What, more positively, can we hope for in people's use of the Internet?

A focus on children and young people going online at home

My own background is as a social psychologist interested in media audiences and users. My recent research has focused on how children and young people are using the Internet at home and in school. Thus in this presentation my focus is on children and young people. I draw on my in-depth research project with 30 families in which we made a series of open-ended visits to children at home to observe their Internet use in everyday contexts.³

Given the limited space available, I will make the following points in order to introduce the themes of user empowerment and media competence.⁴

- the importance of being realistic about the risks of going online
- the value of being both ambitious and concrete about the opportunities
- education as a route to both ensuring safety and opening up opportunities
- the necessity of balancing protection and education, safety and literacy

I shall end by noting some challenges for the implementation of policies to improve user empowerment and media competence.

Being realistic about the risks

What is known about the nature and scale of the dangers of the Internet? Setting aside the technological risks (viruses, computer crashes, filling up the hard drive, etc), those risks which occasion most concern are *social*, falling into what Childnet International has categorised as 'contact, content and commercialism'. I need not here review the nature or incidence of these risks, whether of sexual solicitation, pornography, commercial exploitation, and so forth.⁵

I would like to stress, however, how very little we still know of the risks that people, especially children, are facing when they use the Internet, because:

1. research is patchy - covering only some countries, some vulnerable groups, some risks;
2. the evidence is best for the hard cases, where criminal activities have been pursued through legal means, but is worst in terms of epidemiology, i.e. knowing the spread and incidence of actual risks;
3. the situation is changing all the time – arguably the users are becoming less expert (less early adopter, more mass market) and the perpetrators (both paedophiles and commercial bodies, if I can put them thus together) are becoming more expert;
4. the link between risks, incidents, and actual harm is genuinely tenuous – not all risks taken result in worrying incidents, and not all incidents result in actual or lasting harm.

But some do. I am not here arguing against the claims of the Internet as a risky or even dangerous place for its users, especially children, but rather that we know far too little.

We suspect that the cases of harm which come to light and are pursued through the courts are merely the tip of the iceberg, but we do not know how big is the iceberg itself.

Being ambitious about the opportunities

As a society we lack a concrete vision to guide and inform our expectations for Internet use. Most public discussion centres on what the Internet should *not* be than on what it is or could be. But neither unbounded hype nor sceptical doubts nor a sole focus on the dangers will foster creative and empowering conditions for Internet use. Rather, an imaginative but well-grounded debate is needed to map the actual prospects for improving and transforming people's education and leisure.

Most would agree that user empowerment means that children, for example, should be educated to develop an informed, responsible attitude towards computer and Internet use within and beyond the school environment, allowing them to take full advantage of the benefits of the Internet while empowering them to protect themselves from harm.

Where we remain unclear, and require more discussion and evidence, is in determining:

- For *education*, does the Internet primarily offer a more expanded, convenient, motivating and accessible resource for teachers and pupils to enhance education and improve pupils' chances of future employment? Or does it represent a more radical challenge to traditional, print-based, linear, hierarchical models of pedagogy, posing new hypertextual, visual, heterarchical and democratic alternatives to stimulate and challenge the learning process?
- For *cultural expression*, we have a more articulated expectation of what television can and should offer to children and young people, than we do for the Internet. The internationally-endorsed Children's Television Charter⁶ specifies not only that children's programmes should be non-exploitative and free from gratuitous sex and violence, but also that children should have high quality programmes made specifically for them in order to support the development of young people's potential, providing a means through which they can hear, see and express their experiences and their culture so as to affirm their sense of community and place. Shall we claim the same for the Internet?
- Empowerment depends on *literacy*. If the Internet offers opportunities to transform children's education and cultural participation, it is crucial that they have the competencies to take advantage of these opportunities. But we have not yet defined these skills and competencies. What is Internet literacy? I suggest that it includes:
 - The *Analytical Competence* in understanding the formal qualities of the Internet (including how web sites are constructed, how hypertext links work, the symbolic codes of the web, etc) - a prerequisite for effective use of the Internet.
 - The *Contextual Knowledge* to understand the broader social, cultural, economic and political contexts in which Internet information is produced and consumed – essential for a critical evaluation of the Internet.
 - A shared frame of reference among users, which we might term a *Canonical Knowledge* of 'classic' web sites and an understanding of why they may be considered to be important, reliable and useful.

- The *Production Competence* to produce Internet content as well as interpret, consume and enjoy it (including creating web pages, productive searching, participating in mailing lists, chat groups and email) – all central to expressing one's identity through producing and communicating content.

Others may disagree or modify this definition. But my point is to promote a debate and clarification over this key term, whether it is labelled literacy, or human or cultural capital, or competence, or skills, etc.

The importance of education in addition to technical and legal solutions

Thus far I have argued that we need a public debate to identify the opportunities opened up by the Internet, including an analysis of Internet literacy, and we need to know more of the safety risks children face when using the Internet.

Literacy is obviously a matter of education. But safety can be addressed both in educational terms and as a technical/legislative matter. As yet, technical solutions to ensure online safety don't work well, encountering persistent practical difficulties. While these difficulties are being actively addressed, not least by an industry concerned to maximise the public's use of the Internet, these can at best they provide only part of the solution; at worst they engender a false sense of security.⁷

Significantly, technical and legislative solutions tend to trade freedoms against safety, while education allows for a both/and approach, guiding children towards valuable uses of the Internet while also teaching them safety awareness.

Literacy and safety also pose somewhat different educational policy challenges. For the former, we are not yet clear what the curriculum should contain, though work on this has begun. For the latter, the curriculum is now being developed by a variety of agencies, but it is the mode of delivery and evaluation of its effectiveness which requires further work.

Comment on educating for online opportunities

These are early days in establishing a 'culture of use' for the Internet. Yet, by contrast with the optimal skills and competencies mapped out above in the definition of Internet literacy, it seems that there are considerable discrepancies between what children claim to know and what they can actually do, and adults should be cautious in assuming the contrary.

- In relation to 'analytic competence', many lack basic skills in searching, evaluating, integrating and rendering accessible the wealth of information potentially available.
- Moreover, the Internet literacy of most children and young people at present does not cover 'contextual knowledge' (or 'critical evaluation') as yet.
- Their 'canonical knowledge' is often narrowly delimited, being heavily focussed on commercial/global sites and brands.
- Their skills include 'production competence' mainly in relation to peer-group communication, but rarely in relation to other kinds of content creation.

While children are undoubtedly delighted that they have gained access to the Internet at home, it is also the case that – at least in the UK - many are under-using, and often disappointed by, the Internet. At present, children and young people are persevering,

and their growing interest as more and more of their peers go online carries them through, though few stay online for more than half an hour or so. And few can be said to be creatively engaging with much of the vast potential of the world of information and fun that the Internet offers.

Comment on educating for online safety

Many children have, by now, encountered some material on their own which parents and teachers may worry about. They know how an innocent search can produce porn, some have experienced difficulties in getting rid of pornographic images, and for some, porn is mischievously enjoyed. They may well also have engaged in chat with suspect strangers. From the limited information available, it seems that few take any kind of action, rarely discussing such occurrences with parents or others.

Yet it is also the case that few claim that they are upset by such occurrences, posing an interesting problem. So, what are the aims of safety education? Is it in order that the tiny minority of very serious cases – primarily of sexual contact - are prevented, or is it in order that the majority of perhaps more minor cases – primarily of pornographic content - are prevented?

Balancing literacy and safety, protection and education, is crucial

Getting the balance right between opportunities and dangers is not easy. In regulating children's Internet use, we risk two failures – the failure to take up opportunities, and the failure to protect against dangers. Only the combination of literacy and safety can provide the conditions of exploration, experimentation and creativity required if children are to use the Internet as freely and fully as possible.

At present, and perhaps inevitably, children's freedoms are being compromised to ensure their safety, as illustrated by the recent debate over whether pupils should be provided with individual email addresses as well as by the widespread informal banning of chatrooms by parents and schools. Everyone knows the headline message that the Internet is a risky place, but few are sufficiently informed about the nature of dangers posed by the Internet or about what action to take when problems are encountered. The result of such incomplete knowledge is a climate of anxiety that leads many parents to heavily restrict their children's use.

In my research, I have observed many instances of parental fears of the risks – whether technical, sexual or commercial – resulting in children fearful of, or not allowed to, download files, use email, answer dialog boxes, use file attachments, go to chat rooms, etc. One perhaps unintended consequence is that children's use of the world wide web is often very conservative and/or rather risky.⁸

In short, the promotion of Internet literacy, by encouraging children to explore freely and imaginatively, without a parallel improvement in safety awareness, will increase the risk of dangers through haphazard and ill-informed exploration.⁹ On the other hand, 'negative' regulation aimed at protecting children, even if pursued through the promotion of safety awareness, is pointless if there is no clear or imaginative vision aimed at ensuring children gain from Internet access. Rather, safety awareness without a parallel education for Internet literacy, will create a climate of fear, encouraging anxious parents to restrict or prevent their children's use, while children's use will become cautious and narrow.

Only when a good understanding of the opportunities of the Internet is combined with an informed awareness of its dangers, can we see the conditions for creative, managed use in which the benefits from the Internet are maximised through confident and free exploration while the risks of danger are minimised through forewarning and guidance.

What is at stake is not just whether children participate but also the manner of their participation. Children's activities online, just like their activities offline, set out to be free, creative and expressive often precisely in ways which contravene adult notions of propriety – they want to flirt, make up identities, swear, send photos, gatecrash adult chatrooms, go places their parents don't know about, be private.

In seeking to protect young people from risks, we must ask about the costs as well as the benefits of our protective strategies.¹⁰ So, if walled gardens are advocated, one must assess their costs and benefits, just as we must decide whether to make the streets and countryside safe for children to roam (offline) or rather whether we should to build them more parks to play in safely.

Key issues of implementation

Whose responsibility is it to encourage empowerment and competence?

Perhaps because of the difficulties of regulating the Internet nationally and internationally, many organisations advocate devolving responsibility onto users, here parents. Surely, they argue, the burden of understanding and managing this new technology should fall squarely onto parents' shoulders, since they brought it home.

Although no parent denies their moral responsibility for supervising their child(ren), and in terms of access at least they have clearly accepted this responsibility by investing in expensive technology at home, this remains an unsatisfactory solution to the challenges of Internet regulation. It is also a task for which many parents feel ill-equipped and insufficiently supported. Crucially, there are issues of expertise and resources, as well as questions of responsibility, at stake, and as a result, depending on parents raises prospects of generating new inequalities in the quality of Internet use.

Public policy regarding children's safety awareness and literacy should not generate a new burden of responsibility on parents by drawing in additional key agencies to work with children and young people, drawing into partnership with parents the range of community-based agencies – schools, libraries, youth clubs, community centres, etc.¹¹

Here let us pose the question of best practice: where, across Europe, can we find best practice in, for example: (1) networking local 'gurus' or sources of informal ICT advice; (2) capitalising on pre-existing community foci for young people's activities; (3) drawing on the ICT (and youth) expertise of community centre workers, youth club leaders, librarians, further education teachers, etc; (4) effective home-school links, etc.¹²

Public information and education is now vital

Perhaps most pressing is designing and implementing a cross-platform *public information campaign*. This should be followed up with more sustained guidance for both adults and children, whether delivered through schools or other community loci.

There have been many calls for a campaign, particularly one which stresses literacy and safety as a dual message. Children – indeed, all users, could benefit from:

- ❑ A positive *literacy* training for effective searching, finding good sites, problem-solving, and meeting specific interests or needs;
- ❑ A protective training for *safety*, recognising and reacting appropriately to potential and actual harms, learning to judge the nature and purpose of sites visited or communications encountered.

Beyond these key features, however, more work is required in formulating a 'curriculum' for Internet literacy or competence, much as for any other education curriculum.

In delivering this - whether as a one-off campaign or a more sustained training - strong co-ordination is required, capitalising upon the joined-up nature of people's lives, to deliver the same message across homes, communities and schools, through multiple sources and drawing on the same or directly comparable materials.

A last word regarding moral panics

I cannot be alone in observing an increasing frustration, irritation even, among many outside the community of those concerned with children's vulnerability to online harms. Here the argument for safety is taken as (1) easily resolvable – through a mixture of legal and parental regulation and hence (2) persisting as an issue only because it represents a pawn in the politically-motivated strategy to legitimate online regulation and controls over the otherwise free Internet.

Significantly, it is often those advocating the latter view who can themselves offer the most ambitious vision of the potential of the Internet as a free, heterarchical, even anarchic, world of opportunities. A clear response to these voices of opposition to 'user protection' is required.

In relation to public debate more generally, anyone concerned with this domain faces a further difficulty. Rhetorically, the more one argues that the risks are both serious and sizeable, the more likely are policy-makers to act constructively in developing policy to address those risks. But at the same time, the more one may fuel the ever-ready moral panics which lead to knee-jerk policy, to a curtailing of people's online freedoms, to panic among the public which impedes positive uses of the Internet. On the other hand, the more one acknowledges the equivocal nature of some of the evidence in legitimating policy responses, the more one undermines any action at all. Thus, in developing practical policy objectives one must rebut these objections,¹³ in the process which objections cannot, after all, be rebutted as easily as supposed. And this too will surely be constructive in advancing the debate.

Endnotes

¹Recent surveys suggest that one third of the UK population is now online, and similar surveys in other countries are charting the growing access to the Internet across Europe, figures in some countries being higher and others lower than the figures for the UK. These averages mask considerable variation by region, socio-economic status, and other indicators of social inclusion, though interestingly households with children tend to 'lead' in these, as in other new communication technologies. See www.nua.ie/surveys/how-many-online/; see also www.statistics.gov.uk.

² www.statistics.gov.uk, BMRB's Access to Youth Survey (see *Media Week* 20/7/01 and www.bmrb-interactive.co.uk).

³ Sonia Livingstone and Moira Bovill. *Families and the Internet: An observational study of children and young people's Internet use*. Research Project funded by BT, 1999-2001. See Livingstone, S. (2001). *Children on-line: Emerging uses of the Internet at home*. *Journal of the IBTE* (Institute of British Telecommunications

Engineers), 2(1), 57-63. Livingstone, S. (in press) *Online freedom and safety for children*. London: IPPR/Citizens Online Research Publication No. 3.

⁴ We should note, at the outset, that user empowerment, a clumsy and over-hyped term perhaps, directs our attention to the positive *goals* which Internet use may facilitate, by contrast with any potential or actual harms which interfere with or undermine these goals; and media competence, more often termed media literacy perhaps, directs our attention to the *means* by which people may achieve these goals.

⁵ For further information, see www.pewinternet.org/reports; <http://jama.ama-assn.org/issues/v285n23/abs/jbr10028.html>; www.Chatdanger.com; www.childnet-int.org/publicat/sydney.html; <http://www.Internetcimeforum.org.uk/chatwise-streetwise.pdf>; www.net-consumers.org/safer.htm; www.iwf.org.uk/safe/index.html; www.safewiredschools.org; www.cme.org/children/privacy/coppa_rept.pdf; www.asc.upenn.edu/usr/iturow/PrivacyReport.pdf; www.media-awareness.ca/eng/webaware/teachers/thome.htm.

⁶ C. von Feilitzen and U. Carlson (1999) (Eds.). *Children and media: Image, education, participation*. Gothenburg: Unesco/Nordicom.

⁷ See evaluations and critiques of filtering, for example, at www.pin.org.uk/filtering/index.html, www.iwf.org.uk/safe/which/total.htm, www.getnetwise.org, and www.aclu.org/issues/cyber/burning.html.

⁸ Commonly, they spend much of their time with a small number of commercial sites whose brands are familiar and hence trusted, notwithstanding the commercial purposes of such sites. As communication online becomes increasingly integral to society, these practices significantly limit children's social participation. Perhaps much of it is 'just chat', but it also includes the Indian boy in London joining an Indian diaspora chat room, the worried teenage girl sharing experiences of puberty, and so forth.

⁹ My research suggests the following. (1) If parents' (and society's) understanding of the opportunities of the Internet is low, and their awareness of its dangers is also low, their children are likely to make *haphazard, risky use*: of the Internet, resulting in suboptimal use of the Internet while also running some risk of dangers. (2) If parents' (and society's) understanding of the opportunities of the Internet is high, but their awareness of its dangers is low, we will see *confident but risky exploration* by their children, who are likely to explore the Internet freely and creatively but will be exposed to a range of risks they are ill-prepared for. (3) If parents' (and society's) understanding of the opportunities of the Internet is low, but their awareness of its dangers is high (the present state of affairs in many families today), we will see *cautious, narrow use*, with children being cautious, even fearful, online, tending to restrict themselves to a narrow range of activities or sites and with insufficient opportunity for spontaneous learning. (4) The fourth option, all too rarely in evidence as yet, is when parents' (and society's) understanding of the opportunities of the Internet is high, but so is their awareness of its dangers, providing conditions for *creative, managed use*: among children, where the benefits from the Internet are maximised through confident and free exploration while the risks of danger are minimised through forewarning and guidance.

¹⁰ One response is to distinguish 'at risk' groups more subtly. Of the various safety strategies currently proposed for 'children', most are more appropriate for younger children rather than for teenagers (e.g. establishing walled gardens, locating the PC in the living room so as to monitor use unobtrusively, or banning chatrooms or downloading or personal email). The nature of the safety message, the degree of literacy expected, the acceptability of a protectionist or restrictive strategy, the importance of supporting values of civic participation and privacy, all these and many other issues in enhancing literacy and minimising risks must be addressed in an age-appropriate manner.

¹¹ One should note here the very considerable cross-national variation in Internet provision and use at present: in the UK, children's use of the Internet is all but confined to school and home, but in several other European countries, use in libraries, youth centres etc is far more widespread. As the range of opportunities for using the Internet grows, one may suppose – though here again we lack research – that user empowerment and competence is also the greater, though so too may be the difficulties in implementing a coordinated policy of Internet safety restrictions.

¹² Given that children mainly use the Internet at home and at school, problems remain in co-ordinating these sites. For both parents and teachers, the home-school link is proving difficult to implement. Few schools communicate effectively with parents electronically, or have opened up their ICT resources for community or leisure use. Few parents feel informed about how to support their child's education at home, or know where to turn for information, especially offline. Meanwhile children may gain some rules and guidance at school, but then have fun, often unsupervised, at home.

¹³ For example, that children are more sophisticated than their teachers and so need little literacy training; that warning of dangers only encourages people to seek out forbidden sites; that the risks are being greatly exaggerated; that the freedom of the many is being sacrificed for the safety of the few, and so forth.