



Behind the Screen

The hidden life of youth online

by Kay Withers with Ruth Sheldon

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Foreword

The generational divide between children and young people and their parents is perhaps most widely seen in their views and approaches to the internet and media literacy. With this in mind, how do we ensure that children and young people are safeguarded from harm in way that is not over the top in principle and draconian in style, while at the same time maintaining the internet as a place for freedom, expression, creativity and socialisation?

What this report has recognised is that only through the participation of children and young people in any policy creation and implementation can we hope to achieve best outcomes for those who are deemed to be the most vulnerable internet community.

In its recommendations, this report calls for collaboration and support from peers, youth services, teachers and parents, rather than top-down restrictions and rules dictated from central government. The role of media literacy must be fully explored through informal and formal educational structures involving both young people and the older generations to enable use of the internet to be a safe and enjoyable process for all.

Only through working together with the active involvement of children and young people as an integral part of the process can we best ensure that those who need it are protected from the dangers of the online community, and that their exploration of self identity, their place in community and their role in society are fully supported.

Alex Farrow (19)

The National Youth Agency

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ippr, 30-32 Southampton Street, London WC2E 7RA. Tel: +44 (0)20 7470 6100 E: info@ippr.org
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About the authors

Kay Withers is a research fellow in the directors' research team at ippr. Before that she worked as a researcher to Brian White MP, and was policy adviser to the Internet Services Providers Association. Her previous publications include the *Changing Nature of Society and the Role of Television* (for Channel 4 2008), *Public Innovation: Intellectual property in a digital age* (ippr, with William Davies 2006) and *Intellectual Property and the Knowledge Economy* (ippr, 2006).

Ruth Sheldon is a research assistant in the people and policy team at ippr, where she has designed and carried out qualitative research projects using a range of methodologies. She has conducted research with refugees, people who are out of work, young people and residents living in social housing. Prior to joining ippr, Ruth worked as a researcher for a public policy communications company, the BBC and with two academic sociologists. She has also worked as a volunteer for a community history charity and for a charity working with young people in Tower Hamlets.

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The views expressed in this report remain solely those of the report authors.

Executive summary

More and more, policymakers need to address the opportunities that new technologies present for young people to engage with each other through media, rather than issues simply relating to how the internet and the content it hosts impacts on young people. This is a new area for government – and one that will require a new approach, and new evidence, to enable it to be successfully negotiated. While we have a range of statistical information relating to access to and ownership of new media devices, there have been few attempts to delve deeper than top-line figures and statistics to really draw out the ways in which young people engage with content, and with each other, online.

Without a sound evidence base and understanding, policy wavers precariously between over-regulation and no regulation at all, with neither approach likely to satisfy.

This report, drawing on landmark qualitative research with young people and original empirical analysis, aims to develop a policy agenda that would allow government, parents, corporates and internet providers to address growing concerns about child safety online while ensuring that the opportunities the internet offers to young people are not restricted.

A rapidly changing media experience

Young people inhabit a vastly different world to that experienced by their parents and the current crop of policymakers in their youth. In just over 25 years, we have moved from a media world of just three terrestrial television channels to one that offers an abundance of content, available on a choice of platforms. For young people, the internet and the opportunities it offers are not novelties but are part of everyday life. It is difficult for adults, parents and policymakers to fully comprehend this: they can likely remember life before constant connectivity, before broadband access in every office and before mobile phones were considered an everyday essential.

Young people now have access to a sophisticated range of new media tools at increasingly young ages, with four in five 5- to 15-year-olds having access to the internet at home. Young people report using the internet for several hours a night, primarily to socialise with friends using Instant Messenger and social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Bebo.

Access is typically unsupervised. While the computer may be placed in a communal room of the house, young people tend to access the internet alone. This has implications for the extent to which they are able to engage in social and commercial activity unsupervised in ways that could not have been imagined 20 years ago.

These trends, the changing nature of access, and the generational divide between parents and policymakers and young people, raise huge questions as to how capable parents are to make informed decisions about their children's internet use – for instance, considering the short-term impact of this interaction on their immediate well-being, and its longer term affects on their psychosocial development.

Understanding how young people negotiate online risk

In order to make sure any policy developed is effective and appropriate, it is crucial that we gain an understanding of how young people use the internet, and their attitudes towards online activity. The points below summarise ippr's new findings in this area:

- **Young people have contradictory attitudes towards the internet** Young people describe many aspects of internet use as both positive and negative. For instance, while they describe the increased opportunity to socialise with friends as a benefit, they also express concern at the 'addictive' nature of the internet. The sum of time spent online, and the importance placed on 'constant connectivity' has implications for young people's well-being and psychosocial development, theories of which emphasise the need to spend time alone.
- **Attitudes to privacy and safety are extremely contradictory** Young people experience a tension between a strong dislike of strangers looking at their social networking profiles, and a

sense that a major benefit of having a social networking site (SNS) profile is the opportunity to self-advertise. Young people emphasise the need to add photos and detail on their online profiles in order that people will want to become their friends. This process is regularly referred to as 'self-advertising'. They also reject the notion of making their profile private, as this would stop it being viewed widely.

- **Attitudes to meeting new people are contradictory** For example, young people are well aware of 'stranger danger', and tend to use the internet to socialise with people they already know. There are also strong norms against using the internet to meet new people. Nonetheless, young people do use the internet to communicate with 'friends of friends' – people with whom they have some connection, no matter how tenuous – for example, someone who was linked through a social networking site or copied into the same chain email.

When young people do meet up with 'friends of friends' they have met online, they have a number of mechanisms they employ in order to ensure their safety. For instance, they place more trust in a webcam than a photo in establishing identity, as there is recognition that photos can be fake. They also tend to meet people with a group of friends rather than alone.

- **Cyberbullying is not a recognised concept** Young people do not tend to use the term 'cyberbullying', and there are strong norms towards 'seeing the joke' where online behaviour is concerned. The context of offline relationships is crucial in deciding whether certain actions online are acceptable or not – for instance, posting 'joke' or embarrassing photos or videos of friends or acquaintances online. The particular implications of online exposure are not significant for young people. They often do not distinguish between doing something embarrassing or harmful to someone and putting an image of this online.

Ultimately, the attitudes and behaviours of young people online lead us to two clear conclusions.

First, young people conceptualise risk in terms of immediate, quantifiable consequences of behaviour. Young people's concepts of risk are largely formed through the stories in the news media and were negotiated in terms of the likelihood of a negative consequence, including being caught. So, for example, where activities such as plagiarism, activities equating to adult definitions of 'cyberbullying' and lax attitudes to privacy are concerned, young people feel relatively free from consequence, and therefore do not consider such activities to be 'risky'.

Second, young people do not reflect on their online behaviour. This extends to young people's lack of awareness of the implications of online exposure of themselves and others, a limited concept of the audience who may be viewing their activities online, and the extent to which they are willing to take information accessed online at face value.

Overall, these findings suggest that young people's technical expertise can often exceed their understanding. This is the gap which policy must bridge to ensure that young people are not needlessly putting themselves at risk online and instead can get the most out of what the internet has to offer.

How can public policy respond?

In order to truly protect young people online, public policy must begin to address the more complex problems of how young people use media technologies to engage with each other, rather than simply focusing on the negative impact that content may have on children and young people. This means understanding and taking account of the active role that young people themselves play in formulating their own experiences.

Ultimately, we must aim to achieve a collaborative approach that engages a range of organisations and individuals, including parents, educators, government and industry, but that also includes users themselves. It is important to recognise that there is a limit to what public policy alone can achieve: the internet is never likely to be an entirely risk-free environment, and the actions of users themselves will be just as important as regulation in the years to come. Nonetheless, public policy can establish a framework to allow us to react in a sensible, appropriate and timely fashion to changes to media users'

attitudes and behaviours. Without this in place, we will continually be in reactive mode and negligent in a duty to protect and prepare young people sufficiently for the digital world they are left to navigate.

Recommendations

1. Charge Ofcom with producing an annual report detailing the effectiveness of existing self- and co-regulatory regimes

Ofcom currently has a duty to promote self- and co-regulatory schemes. In order to make sure action where internet content and use is concerned is coordinated and comprehensive, Ofcom should produce a dedicated annual report detailing the effectiveness of schemes and identifying where there are gaps in provision. Government can then take a view of where industry should take further action. If this is not forthcoming, government should consider alternative regulatory approaches.

2. Give responsibility for media literacy to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)

The Government's current media-literacy agenda is unambitious and under-performing. It has suffered from lack of engagement from DCSF, despite the fact that this department is the one that largely has to deal with the consequences of a lack of media literacy of young people and adults. DCSF should be given lead responsibility in this area in order to drive a comprehensive media-literacy programme forward, engaging relevant deliver agents such as schools, youth services and others.

3. Drive forward consultation on the extent of corporate social responsibility to youth in the new media world

The DCSF should lead the agenda in terms of understanding the role of corporate social responsibility where raising youth is concerned. This means considering the roles not only of internet service providers, mobile operators and others to whom we regularly attach the term 'industry', but also of a wider range of commercial interests who seek to engage with young people in social spaces that are largely unmediated by adults. The DCSF should seek to drive forward policy in this area, in consultation with the corporate sector, consumer organisations and representatives, parents and – most importantly – young people themselves, and should task the corporate sector with drawing up a definition of corporate social responsibility that can be applied to engagement with young people in the digital media space.

4. Ensure that age-restriction mechanisms become more robust and used more widely

Industry should continue to work on improving the safety of their offerings to young people and, in particular, should look at strengthening age-restriction mechanisms where these are employed. Industry players should also ensure they are fully engaged with current safety initiatives, such as the Internet Watch Foundation, and support their work.

The industry – including service providers, social networking sites and commercial entities engaging with youth online – should cooperate with government in developing new codes of rights and responsibilities and ensuring greater code compliance in order to enhance good behaviour and the positive experiences of young people online.

5. Revitalise the media-literacy agenda and deliver it through the Extended Schools programme

Recent advances in government policy – particularly the Extended Schools programme – presents a huge opportunity to introduce media-literacy teaching in a more innovative and exciting way than ever before. Rather than treating media literacy as an information and communication technology (ICT) skill set, to be taught in a traditional lesson format, young people should be encouraged to create media texts – an activity that is likely to prove popular and be beneficial in terms of other outcomes such as school achievement. Creating their own media will enable young people to build greater critical skills towards information they access and create and learn more about the consequences of their actions online.

Such a programme of work could be delivered by linking the activity currently ongoing in the

community media sector with that of schools, utilising the knowledge and skills of media practitioners.

6. Make information and learning opportunities available to parents, through existing initiatives such as Sure Start and the Extended Schools programme.

Reaching parents remains a difficult challenge. However, the Government's agenda for supporting parents outlined in the Children's Plan provides an opportunity to ensure that information is available for parents when and where they want it. Media-literacy initiatives aimed at encouraging parents to engage in supportive online activities with young people should be delivered through existing initiatives such as Sure Start and the Extended Schools programme.

1. Introduction

All change: the brave new media world

The media has consistently played an important role in civilised society. From the invention of the printing press in the 17th century to the advent of television and radio and finally, the emergence of the internet, the media has served to communicate ideas and information, to provide space for public discourse, and to entertain and educate citizens around the globe.

We rely heavily on the media – for information, for entertainment and for access to the public sphere – and it has therefore long been thought of as a powerful force, capable of influencing the attitudes and behaviours of its consumers. The role of the media in propaganda campaigns – particularly during the first and second world wars – shows how real and powerful that influence can be (Herman and Chomsky 1988, MacKenzie 1984).

Is there a problem?

Along the way, many have voiced fears of the potential for negative influence by media messages – particularly on children and young people. The presumed power of the media juxtaposed with the vulnerability of young people, has led to public panic whenever a new media form is introduced. In the 1950s, there were widespread concerns about the impact of violent images in comics (Nyberg 1988). The 1960s brought fears that popular music would encourage young people to shed traditional values and behave badly as a result (Savage 1988). In more recent decades there have been similar concerns about the impact of violence in films and video games, and these continue to this day.

Innovations in digital technologies have resulted in an abundance of content and choice, as users can access a mind-bogglingly wide range of material at any time, day or night, through vastly increased access to media devices. This, combined with the fact that internet content is not subject to the same standards that we apply to traditional broadcast content, means that parents and guardians are increasingly worried about how to stop young people coming into contact with content deemed unsuitable – for example, content depicting extreme violence or of a graphic sexual nature.

These fears draw on a long trend of analytical work that seeks to assess the impact of individuals engaging with media by accessing content through various devices to retrieve information or for entertainment. For example, does viewing violent content encourage violent behaviour? Does increased consumption of sexual content encourage promiscuity, or does it cause viewers to form certain attitudes towards women (or men)?

These questions remain relevant, and play an important role in our understanding of the internet. But convergence of new media technologies such as the internet with traditional media forms such as television and radio begs a new question: for how long can the regulatory distinction between broadcast (which is increasingly taking on the characteristics of on-demand, multimedia content) and internet content (which is increasingly taking on the characteristics of broadcast material), remain salient in terms of standards of content?

Possible solutions

As the divergence between the concerns of parents and public policymakers and the current media regulatory framework becomes more striking, we are faced with a problem. And as the news stories reporting internet scandals become more frequent, there is a strong and growing sense that something must be done.

But what? While the UK has a strong history of state intervention in media provision, as we have moved away from an analogue age means that the principles and policy levers we once relied upon are threatened. In the past, governments have been able to impose public obligations on broadcasters to deliver material that meets certain social objectives in return for access to spectrum – a scarce commodity – to broadcast television. Because of bottlenecks in distribution of broadcast content, it has been possible to impose strong editorial control on anything that is delivered to audiences through television. However, the internet removes these technical limitations and thus reduce the

bargaining tools available to regulators to continue regulating.

The new forms of media mean there is a new issue: for young people today, engaging with the media is a two-way process. As opposed to being passive recipients of media messages, today young people play an active role in contributing to the very media that they consume. For young people, the most important features of digital media technologies, and the ones they have embraced most enthusiastically, are those that allow increased socialisation with their peers – for example, social networking sites (SNSs), instant messaging (IM) services and text messaging (Mante and Piris 2002).

This raises a different set of issues. Perhaps most prominent has been the threat to young people from adult sexual predators online. Parents are now not just concerned about inappropriate content but also inappropriate approaches. This fear was perhaps at its highest when the use of chatrooms reached its peak during the late 1990s and into the early millennium, but it has emerged again more recently with the rise of social networking sites.

The threat posed by adult predators, the potential harm caused by viewing inappropriate content, and the typical policy responses to these threats, which centre on protection, for instance by limiting access to the internet, suggest that young people are still being seen as essentially reactive – responding to the media they consume. However, in the emerging digital age, this is far from the truth. Where content consumption is concerned, young people can no longer be seen as a passive audience ready to receive whatever content broadcasters put out. Increasingly, they are building their own entertainment experience by selecting content to view online using video-sharing websites such as YouTube, or by downloading content via commercial services such as iTunes or offerings from traditional broadcasters such as the BBC's iPlayer, or Channel 4's 4OD service.

But perhaps the starkest change is where online socialisation is concerned. Young people are using the internet to socialise and explore their identities in ways that could not have been imagined 20 years ago. The internet is increasingly becoming a platform on which emerging social trends are played out: increased levels of unmediated socialisation of young people with peers, increased autonomy from parents, and an earlier transition from childhood to adulthood – particularly where sexual and commercial activity is concerned. While the Government grapples with how to begin to consider the problem of the regulation of internet content, the more complex problem of how to regulate the way people engage with it looms large in the background.

Aims of this report

This report combines the findings of our own qualitative research with a review of existing evidence and literature, to explore how regulation should respond to the changing media landscape and the behaviour of users.

In the face of growing concerns from politicians and parents alike, the option of simply 'doing nothing' in response to the interdependent issues described above is unlikely to be politically palatable. But there is an equally strong message coming from young people themselves: that they should be able to control their own experiences. Where government does make a move, it runs the risk of alienating younger generations by appearing outdated, imposing top-down regulations and acting like a parent.

Common sense would suggest that the adult world is duty-bound to judge how safe and resilient younger generations actually are, in comparison with how they perceive themselves to be. However, if we are to develop appropriate policy responses, then it is essential that we gain a nuanced understanding of where the internet fits in to young people's everyday lives, and their attitudes, behaviours and expectations in relation to the content and opportunities it offers. While we have a range of statistical information relating to access to and ownership of new media devices, there have been few attempts to delve deeper than top-line figures and statistics to really draw out the ways in which young people engage with content, and with each other, online.

Without a sound evidence base and understanding, policy wavers precariously between over-regulation and no regulation at all, with neither approach likely to satisfy.

This ippr report aims to address this gap, maintaining that a regulatory regime fit for future media citizens must come from a starting point of first understanding the practices, behaviours and expectations of younger generations. It aims to develop a progressive approach to media regulation in which we seek to understand the interplay between young people's use of media, social change and social behaviours in order that we can effectively identify the role for public policy.

Our recommendations are aimed at keeping young people safe in the context of rapidly shifting boundaries and changing opportunities and behaviours. But it is important to recognise that the role for policy is minor in relation to the roles of young people themselves, parents and society as a whole, as we increasingly understand the more deeply rooted consequences of new media.

The debate over how to approach protecting young people online is divided and often veers from one extreme to another. There is a policy vacuum, which government must take steps to fill sooner rather than later. Our recommendations, taken across the piece, present a progressive account as to how we move forward on a collective, society-wide basis, to fulfil both the expectations of parents and guardians and the desires of young people.

This is not to suggest that regulation should seek solely to adapt to young users as consumers, nor that regulation in this environment should be limited to merely facilitating consumer choice in a communications marketplace. The media continues to play an important role in early socialisation and in moving towards active citizenship and, despite the shift from analogue to digital, it is clear that continued intervention in young people's media experience continues to be necessary. So, while we aim to listen to young people and learn from their experiences, we also seek to influence their choices and curtail them where necessary.

Research methods

In order to gain a perspective on young people's use of the internet, we sought to consult with young people as much as possible. We held three deliberative workshops with young people and also conducted diary research. Through these methods, we sought to explore the following key issues:

- What do young people use the internet for, and how do they use it – particularly in relation to social networking sites?
- What are young people's attitudes towards privacy and safety?
- What are young people's attitudes towards, and experience of, so-called cyberbullying?
- How do young people use the internet to find out information?

Participants were recruited from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. All had broadband access and mobile phones. This was partly to ensure that no participant felt excluded, but also because the focus of this research has been on use of the internet rather than access to it. We deliberately used an approach with young people at its centre in order to avoid imposing adult concepts of risk and vulnerability. Instead, the purpose was to understand how young people experienced new technologies, and the positive and negative aspects of these technologies as perceived by young people themselves.

The research largely focused on the use of social networking sites, instant messenger and video-sharing websites as young people themselves identified these as being the most popular sites. A summary is available in the box 'Young people's favourite sites and services', next page.

A full outline of the research methodology is contained in Appendix 1, with a breakdown of group participants available in Appendix 2.

Structure of the report

The remainder of this report is divided into five chapters:

- **Chapter 1** gives a broad overview of the changes to the media landscape that have taken place recently, and identifies the drivers of these changes. It outlines how young people have responded in terms of the time spent with media, and highlights changing patterns of access, including increasing levels of unsupervised access.

- **Chapter 2** looks at the challenges presented by the changes set out in Chapter 1, outlining the results of our qualitative research in areas including safety, privacy and cyberbullying. It then considers other current areas of concern, including access to harmful content and exposure to advertising.
- **Chapter 3** outlines the current regulatory framework and explores the difficulties involved in extending formal regulation to the internet environment. It also looks at the different roles of self- and co-regulation.
- **Chapter 4** emphasises that we cannot expect regulation to do everything, and that the reality of the internet is such that a partnership approach is not only welcomed but necessary. It argues that parents, educators and users themselves must take steps to build their capacity to manage their own experience. It then explores the current media-literacy framework, and provides recommendations for pushing this forward.
- **Chapter 5** sets out the recommendations and conclusions to this report.

Young people's favourite sites and services

Social networking sites

There are huge numbers of social networking sites (SNSs), and they are popular among internet users. For instance Facebook (www.facebook.com) has over 66 million active users (source: Facebook press room, accessed 3/3/08) while MySpace (www.myspace.com) hosts well over 100 million accounts (Register 2006). In the UK, almost three quarters (72 per cent) of children have visited an SNS, and over half of these have set up their own profile (Ward 2008).

Online communities have always been a strong feature of the internet, and SNSs are a natural progression from these. But whereas previous examples sought to link people around a shared interest, SNSs allow people to connect through existing social relationships.

While each SNS differs from the next, they share a number of common features. First, the user builds a personal profile. They are asked to supply certain information about themselves in order to generate a 'profile': essentially, the public face of their existence in the community. They add details such as their name, age, date of birth and home town, as well as favourite music, television programmes, books and films, alongside photos, to create an individual account.

Having created the profile, the user can start to build their network by inviting others on the site to be their 'friend', and by responding to friend requests received by existing members. Users peruse the network, looking at friends' profiles and friends of friends' profiles and so on.

On SNSs, interaction between members most obviously takes place in the form of comments and testimonials written by 'friends' and added to the users' page. There are also facilities for posting items of interest, promoting forthcoming events and advertising items such as spare rooms.

On MySpace, these items are added to bulletin boards, which are visible to each individual within the poster's network. They are then often copied by other individuals within that network, re-posted to the bulletin board in order to reach members of the secondary posters' networks, and so on. Using this facility, social networking sites have been heralded as an effective way of mobilising people around an issue. In the US, for example, school children organised a wide-scale protest against new developments in immigration law through MySpace.

SNSs also offer communication tools such as email and instant messaging, so that members can hold private conversations with other members, although SNSs are largely public spaces in which the majority of activity is visible to all members.

The majority of SNSs – and certainly those that are most popular with young people – are free

to use. However, although income is not generated directly from users, they have a very high commercial value. MySpace was sold to NewsCorp for nearly US\$600 million in 2006, while in 2007 Microsoft bought a 1.6 per cent stake in FaceBook for US\$240 million. Such figures are representative of the value of paid-for advertising on the site, which is seen as a key growth area.

Instant messaging tools

Instant messaging (IM) is one of the most popular ways for young people to communicate. It is used far more often than email, for example – partly because it can more closely resemble a conversation, offering real-time communication in contrast to the ‘letter’ format of email, which is considered much more formal. It can facilitate ‘conversations’ between several parties at once, and the young people interviewed in our research stated that they sometimes participated in conversations featuring as many as 20 people.

Large number of young internet users use IM to chat to friends. A recent survey showed that 82 per cent of IM partners were friends from school, in comparison to 48 per cent who had met online (Greenfield *et al* 2006). There is also evidence that the closer a teenage lives to an IM partner, the more frequently they will communicate with them over IM (Boneva *et al* 2003).

To use IM, the user must have a working internet connection. They simply download a free program from an IM provider and select an IM name – which can be their real name or a nickname. Users communicate by typing short sentences into the application. These are sent and received almost instantaneously by the respondent. The most popular IM application, AIM, has over 100 million registered users and 53 million active users across the globe.

It is possible to limit the levels of communication on IM – for instance by marking in your settings that you are ‘offline’ and therefore unable to communicate. As with email, users are also able to block other users from contacting them.

Video-sharing websites

Video-sharing websites give young people the opportunity to both watch and upload videos, and also to share elements of other SNSs – for example, allowing users to comment on videos, build their own profiles and link up with other users.

The most popular video-sharing website, YouTube, was launched in 2005, and in 2006 was acquired by Google for US\$1.65 billion, indicating the level of expected future commercial revenue that will be generated from the site’s users.

One does not have to be a registered user of the site to watch videos, but some level of personal detail must be supplied in order to upload content. Users who contribute content ‘tag’ their videos with relevant phrases, making it easier to search for material. Depending on which video you are watching, links to related content appear on the screen. These are determined by the tags applied by the person who uploaded the content.

YouTube has played an increasingly active role in public life, with debates for the 2008 US presidential race posted on the site, and the UK Foreign Office recently announcing it would develop its own YouTube channel. However, despite the obvious benefits that the site can provide, it has never been very far from controversy and outrage. The site has been the centre of concerns around issues such as so-called ‘happy slapping’ (in which physical attacks are filmed on a mobile phone then shared online), violence among young people, and cyberbullying both of pupils and teachers. The site has been blocked in several countries, including Thailand, United Arab Emirates and Iran, due to anti-government messages or the presence of adult content deemed unsuitable.

Since its inception, YouTube has proved phenomenally popular, and an estimated 65,000 videos are uploaded daily (Cha *et al* 2007). The site has also resulted in the creation of a number of ‘YouTube celebrities’ – for instance ‘LonelyGirl15’, which was presented as a videoblog of a normal 15-year-old girl but was later discovered to be the creation of a New Zealand actress and film producers.

1. From consumption to engagement: living life online

The media landscape has recently undergone a drastic change as we shift from analogue to digital. Just 25 years ago, British television viewers had a choice of three channels – BBC 1, BBC 2 and ITV. In the quarter century since the introduction of Channel 4, the number of channels has multiplied to more than 400 (Ofcom 2007b).

It is worth remembering this in order to emphasise how vastly adolescent experiences of media have changed – particularly when we contrast the experiences of today’s generation of adults (and policymakers) against the experiences of youth today. As well as increased content and choice, digital technologies offer opportunities for a more interactive experience, in terms of engaging both with content and with other users. The distinction between consumer and producer is rapidly blurring, as are distinctions between public and private, as conversations and socialisation increasingly take place online and encompass content of an audio-visual nature.

For young people today, the internet (and the opportunities it offers) is not a novelty but part of everyday life. It is difficult for adults, parents and policymakers to fully comprehend. It is likely they can still remember a time before broadband access was near universal, and before the mobile phone was seen as an essential part of everyday life. As such, there is a tendency for adults to react to children’s experience of technology in one of two ways (Buckingham 2005a).

The first of these is to romanticise or over-emphasise young people’s technological expertise, giving them labels such as ‘the MySpace Generation’ or ‘digital millennials’ and presuming that young people show ‘natural’ adaptability to new technological developments. Indeed, this is a common feature of politicians’ speeches. For example, speaking in 1999, Tony Blair admitted that his children were far more proficient in using the internet than he was and that he often felt a sense of ‘mild, sometimes not so mild, humiliation’ watching them surf the web (Blair 1999).

The second tendency is to depict young people as being made more vulnerable by digital technologies, under increased threat from predators and therefore in need of much greater protection. A recent parliamentary debate suggested the internet should offer ‘two choices of content, one for adults and one for children’ by blacklisting certain sites to be updated hourly by an ‘internet standards authority’ (Hansard 2008). Often, these two contradictory attitudes are held simultaneously.

Often, adults fear for young people’s safety precisely because their expertise means they are able to manipulate technologies in ways that few adults comprehend. This generational divide raises huge questions as to how capable parents are to make informed decisions about the potential impact of this interaction in the short term – for instance, in considering the impact on young people’s immediate well-being and longer-term psychosocial development. As a result, we must consider whether and where public policy should fill this gap in the interim. But from a longer-term perspective, we should also question the extent to which such intervention will continue to be necessary. Once the current generation of youth moves into parenthood, the present generation gap may become less stark, and the role for policy may well be different.

Nonetheless, at present it is important that public policy is formed without relying on the basis either of romantic notions of young people’s competence or on fear of the unknown – in this case, young people’s activities online. To avoid these traps, we must seek to understand when, where and how often young people access the internet, the environmental and social circumstances in which they do so, and how this activity changes over time as young people enter different life stages. This will enable us to judge where young people are likely to encounter the greatest risk, and where risks are minimal.

Young people and the media

The relationship between young people and the media has experienced two significant changes over the past few decades that relate to concerns regarding children and young people’s vulnerability and well-being. These relate to:

- Increased access to media devices

- Increased time – and increased unsupervised time – spent accessing media.

We will now look at each of these in turn.

Access to media devices

Young people now have access to a sophisticated range of new media tools at increasingly young ages. Mobile phones are particularly pervasive among young people. It is estimated that just over half of ten-year-olds and 70 per cent of 11-year-olds own a mobile phone (YouGov 2006). Meanwhile, 80 per cent of 12- to 15-year-olds have one (Ofcom 2006a). Of course, access to a mobile phone now affords more than just the ability to call or send text messages. Phones now come with digital cameras or video cameras attached. Many can also provide access to radio, TV and the internet.

Four in five 5- to 15-year-olds have access to the internet at home (DCSF 2007). Home broadband connections have now overtaken dial-up connections in the UK, enabling faster access to more sophisticated audio-visual content (Ofcom 2007b). However, the home computer is not the only place through which the internet can be accessed: schools, libraries and internet cafés provide places of access while the internet is becoming increasingly mobile, with wireless access, doing away with the need for connections fixed to a particular place. Neither is the computer the only device through which the internet can be accessed: this is now possible via digital TV, mobile phone and videogame consoles.

Box 1.1 illustrates the extent of young people's potential access.

Time spent accessing media

Official figures state that young people spend on average of 25.5 hours a week consuming audio-visual media (including television, DVDs, radio, internet content or using games consoles). The majority of this time is spent watching television, while young people report they spend an average of 6.2 hours a week on the internet (Ofcom 2006a).

It is worth noting that this figure is both self-reported, and was calculated prior to the social networking revolution that has recently taken off in both the US and UK. Since then, young people have reported that they visit social networking sites and use Instant Messenger services at least once a day, and spend an average of one hour each night using instant messaging technology (Lenhardt *et al* 2007). In fact, our research indicates that young people spend between three and four hours a night online using these services.

Young people also have increasing opportunity to access media unsupervised, which has raised concerns about their ability to access age-inappropriate material. This reflects wider trends in socialisation, with young people in the UK spending less time involved in 'family' activities than previously (Margo *et al* 2006).

Box 1.1: Young people's access to media devices

Access to media devices (ages 8-15)

80% have access to the internet at home

72% have digital TV at home

65% have their own mobile phone (49% of 8-11s and 82% of 12-15s)

50% own a games console, a further third (34%) one belonging to the household. (Sources: DCSF 2007, Ofcom 2006)

Access outside the home (ages 9-19)

99% of UK schools have an internet connection

92% have used the internet at school

64% of children have accessed the internet outside home or school. Of these, 17% have accessed the net via mobile, 6% via game console and 4% via digital TV.

Source: Ofcom 2006

Ofcom's media-literacy research reports that 73 per cent of 8- to 11-year-olds have a television in their bedroom. Across all children aged 8-15, almost one quarter (23 per cent) say they mostly watch television on their own. This figure is higher for 11-15 year olds (Ofcom 2006a). Viewing is not restricted to pre-watershed times, even among younger age groups: 28 per cent of 6- to 8-year-olds and 49 per cent of 9- to 11-year-olds claim to watch TV in their rooms after 9pm (Livingstone 2002). A recent survey claimed that one in four teenagers fall asleep while watching television late at night in their bedrooms (Sleep Council 2007).

In comparison, only 13 per cent of 12- to 15-year-olds and just 3 per cent of 8- to 11-year-olds have internet access in their bedroom (Ofcom 2006a). Instead, the home computer tends to be placed in a communal area, such as the living room. Nonetheless, two in five (40 per cent) of 8-11s and over two-thirds (71 per cent) of 12-15s say they mostly use the internet on their own at home.

While access is unsupervised, this does not mean it is without restrictions. Three quarters (73 per cent) of parents of 8-15 year olds say they have rules about their child's TV, video and DVD viewing. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the figure is much higher for the internet: 95 per cent of parents of 8-11 year olds and 78 per cent of parents of 12-15 year olds say they have rules in place regarding their child's access. These mostly relate to what content they can access (Ofcom 2006a).

But these results directly contradict with evidence provided by young people themselves. In ippr's own research, the majority of young people reported no parental restrictions on their use of the internet whatsoever, and many claimed that their parents did not understand their online activities:

'Some things they don't understand and they ask me to explain it to them but they still don't understand.' (*Girl, 13, ABC1*)

'My mum will ask sometimes "Is it safe?", but she doesn't really know.' (*Girl, 16, ABC1*)

The only restrictions recognised were limits to the amount of time young people were able to spend online, because of competing claims from other members of the family wanting to use the computer.

A similar picture emerges when we consider access at school. Despite the presence of filters and other safety mechanisms to restrict access to selected internet content, young people reported side-stepping these restrictions with relative ease. School restrictions were largely seen as challenges to overcome, rather than being in the interests of young people themselves:

'We have restrictions at school but we can just get an administrator's account and take them off.' (*Boy, 14, C2DE*)

'Restrictions stop you going on bad sites, like games sites and stuff. If you take them off you can go on anything.' (*Boy, 14, C2DE*)

The disappearance of any semblance of a 'watch with Mother' culture has, of course, raised concerns. Despite the fact that television content is heavily regulated, protection of young people has always relied to some extent on parental supervision, and on rules about appropriate consumption being applied in the family home. 'Bedroom culture' and the individual nature of internet access means that this part of the system is breaking down in many homes, with parents feeling concerned but finding themselves unable to identify an appropriate response.

Drivers of current trends

A number of factors have driven the current trends in young people's use of media. These include perceptions of the educational benefits of new technology, use of technology to increase young people's safety, and economic factors.

Educational benefits

While society may be bemoaning the dominance of media in young people's lives, it is worth remembering that these figures have been driven by factors other than simply young people's desire

1. See Appendix 3 for definitions of social group abbreviations

for new technologies. The Government has promoted the educational benefit of information and communication technology (ICT), surrounding this claim with 'knowledge economy' rhetoric (Selwyn 2003) and a financial commitment to the tune of £6 billion to ensure that all schools have broadband connections to escape the 'technological dark ages'.

ICT is presumed to improve learning in two ways: first, by equipping learners with skills that are becoming increasingly necessary for employment (Sutherland *et al* 1999) and second, by enabling them to access the internet and thus to a repository of information and a wide variety of learning resources. In discussions about the educational benefits of the internet, a vision of the internet as a 'library' of resources is dominant (Sandvig 2006) and underlines much of the rationale behind public provision – for example, in libraries themselves as well as UK Online Centres situated across the country, which encourage users to find information about their local public services.

The actual educational benefit of the internet is the subject of much debate. There are fears, but little evidence, that extended use can cause attention deficit disorder (Prensky 2007), while research is just beginning to consider the long-term impact of internet use on our ways of learning (Deal and Sharples 2007). With information readily available at the click of a mouse, the need to commit certain facts to memory is waning. For example, some young people are now disbelieving of an age in which people actively recalled phone numbers rather than quickly accessing them on one's mobile phone SIM card (Prensky 2007).

Meanwhile, information is beginning to be delivered increasingly through visual means. So far, there has been no subsequent drop in literacy rates, but there is evidence that enjoyment of reading is declining (National Literacy Trust 2006). Information, delivered more quickly and concisely than ever before, is now accessed from a patchwork of sites and sources, often without the contextual framework that longer texts can provide (Hansard 2006). This has raised concerns not only about young people's tendency to accept information at face value (Facer *et al* 2003) but also about its potential impact on their capacity to develop resources such as critical skills and problem-solving abilities (Moncke 1998).

However, the notion of ICT as a tool that provides young people with essential educational benefits is one that is strongly recognised by parents, the majority of whom believe access to a computer will help their child achieve better educational results (Livingstone and Bober 2005). Indeed, parents often cite education as the central benefit of the internet (Buckingham 2002), and this extends to children under six years old: 72 per cent of parents of infants and toddlers said that they think that the computer helps with their children's learning (Rideout *et al* 2003).

Safety

A second important driver of the take-up of technological devices among young people is the view that they can increase safety. For example, while the majority of young people own a mobile phone, they do not, by and large, pay the bill (Ofcom 2006a). For the most part, mobile phones are introduced into young people's lives by parents and guardians, for safety reasons. Ownership of mobile phones increases dramatically at the time when young people begin secondary education – a stage at which they are likely to travel to and from school without parental supervision and are given increasing freedom to stay out later and longer (*ibid*).

The mobile phone is now seen as a key monitoring and supervision tool in parenting, with parents feeling that young people are significantly safer with one than without one (Devitt and Roker 2007). This is despite concerns relating to mobile phone theft, happy slapping and text-bullying and the impact of mobile phones on individuals' health.

The role of the media and communication devices in keeping young people safe is not limited to mobile phones. The predominance of TV in young people's lives is often seen as a direct result of a move towards a more risk-averse society. Parents report that they believe the safety of their child's environment has changed significantly since they themselves were young, and that as a result they have curtailed the freedom they give their children (DCSF 2007). Today, children have fewer opportunities to play outside, and the TV is increasingly used as a time-consuming substitute or 'baby

sitter' that keeps children occupied and safe from harm while requiring minimal adult supervision (Livingstone 2002).

In relation to the internet, the safety debate has been a controversial one. On its first introduction, there was some discussion of the role that new technology could play in 'bringing the outside in' – for example, providing 'virtual reality' access enabling young people to experience situations within an environment of relative safety, and subject to parental supervision. However, as the internet moved towards stronger use as a social tool, concerns began to mount regarding children's vulnerability when they accessed online spaces.

Economic trends

Finally, economic trends have driven a further fundamental change in children's media experiences, and within household practices. Media goods and access to the internet have become more affordable. For instance, the price of a broadband connection fell by 57 per cent between 2003 and 2005 (Ofcom 2006b). Competition in the market is likely to drive prices lower still over the coming years.

Computers have been subject to a similar decline in price, while the saturation of the mobile phone market has led mobile phone operators to develop cheaper consumer offerings than ever before. Pre-pay and contract options now regularly include incentives such as free evening and weekend calls, and free text messaging.

Impact on social capital and well-being

Policymakers have begun to realise the importance of securing emotional well-being among young people above and beyond delivering outcomes commonly considered as being within the responsibility of the state (for example, good health, education and safety) (DCSF 2007, Margo and Sodha 2007).

The debate around the relationship between media and young people's well-being has tended to focus on the possibility of content causing harm or distress. With the internet and digital media, this continues to be a concern. However, increasing levels of media use have raised additional concerns that the amount of time spent using media can itself have a negative effect – both directly, in terms of consequences such as childhood obesity, and indirectly – on the assumption that time spent consuming media takes place at the expense of other activities, particularly face-to-face interaction (Kraut *et al* 1998, Nie *et al* 2002). This is sometimes called 'the displacement hypothesis'.

However, a contrasting theory suggests that internet use can actually be beneficial for young people's well-being – for instance, by helping to consolidate and cement social relationships, and by providing opportunities to expand knowledge and confidence about particular issues or activities (for example, sexuality or disability). This theory has gained prominence during recent years as internet use has become more and more directed towards socialisation – particularly for younger generations, and is sometimes known as 'the stimulation hypothesis'.

Below, we examine the merits of both the displacement hypothesis and the stimulation hypothesis, in order to consider how different aspects of internet use affect relationships with friends and peers and, ultimately, impact on young people's well-being. We then take a longer-term perspective, to consider the impacts of sustained internet use and constant connectivity on the psychosocial development of young people and the transition from childhood to adulthood.

The displacement hypothesis

The displacement hypothesis states that time spent with media takes place at the expense of other social or community activities, therefore increasing isolation and having a negative impact on social capital and well-being.

Television has been viewed as the chief culprit in the context of declining social capital (Putnam 2000), and indeed there are strong associations between time spent in front of the television and levels of isolation and disengagement from civic life (*ibid*). It has also been blamed more widely for a retreat from the public towards the domestic sphere, further contributing to a decline in 'public culture' (Sennett 1977).

Where television is concerned, these arguments have been hotly contested (for example, Norris 2001, Dahlgren 1996). Nonetheless, early research saw similar thinking transferred to the internet: it was argued that the individualised nature of internet access, along with the ability to contact people from across the world, would encourage the formation of new, weak ties at the expense of existing, stronger ones (Granovetter 1973). The implication is that this would have a negative impact on community and well-being, because weak ties are presumed to provide less social support (Krackhardt 1992, Wellman *et al* 2001).

These fears were frequently addressed by early literature on the subject, with Kraut *et al* (1998) identifying the so-called 'internet paradox': the irony that a technology designed to make us more connected than ever before actually increases our isolation.

There is some evidence that levels of use that could equate to compulsive internet use may have this effect. According to research on adolescent MySpace users (Rosen 2006), the average teenage user spends about two hours a day on the site, five days a week. Internet use of this intensity has been shown to correlate with low self-esteem and higher levels of depression (Ko *et al* 2007). Several research exercises have found young people describing the addictive qualities of the internet and these sites in particular (Chou *et al* 2000, Young 2004, Johansson *et al* 2004). This is backed up by our own research, where group participants commented:

'It's good and it's bad, like there's good aspects about it but it can get annoying after a while, like it can just get really addictive.' (Boy, 18, C2DE)

'I want to spend less time 'cos what I do on it is just really pointless – like MySpace is just really addictive.' (Girl, 17, C2DE)

There is also evidence that internet use is negatively related to adolescent perceptions about quality of family relationships (Kraut *et al* 1998). However, further studies have either found no direct link between internet use and well-being (Gross *et al* 2002) or have contradicted the displacement hypothesis altogether (Valkenburg and Peter 2007).

A major reason for differing outcomes is that earlier studies often treated the internet as a one-dimensional variable and neglected to consider the variety of uses to which the platform could be put. What is more, the most prominently used functions of the internet have changed over time, from primarily entertainment in the 1990s (Valkenburg and Soeters 2001) to the dominance of interpersonal communications today (Gross 2004, Lenhardt *et al* 2007).

Thus, while Mesch (2003) finds a link between internet surfing – that is, just looking at sites rather than actively engaging through chatting and commenting – and negative well-being, the same study also identifies a positive link between well-being and using IM.

The stimulation hypothesis

The stimulation hypothesis argues that the internet can be beneficial to well-being by helping to consolidate or promote relationships. Following the dominance of the displacement hypothesis, later research led to the adoption of a second theory. The stimulation hypothesis argued that internet use – particularly if this involves interpersonal communications – can have a positive impact on well-being, and can also serve to heighten the well-being of people who are feeling lonely, by allowing them to socially compensate through use of online connections (Valkenburg and Peter 2007).

The stimulation hypothesis and the displacement theory are based on arguments that are essentially the same as one another. Both state that online communication affects adolescent well-being by affecting the time spent with existing friends (for displacement theorists this time is thought to decrease, while for stimulation theorists, it is thought to increase) and the quality of these friendships.

An important dimension of well-being in young people is the quality and strength of relationships with family and peers (UNICEF 2007) and the quality of one's social network has been shown to be one of the most important statistical predictors of well-being (Pinquart and Sorenson 2000). Adolescents with high quality friendships are more socially competent, self-confident and happier than adolescents without such friendships (Hartup and Stevens 1997).

There is some evidence that internet use may be negatively related to adolescent perceptions about quality of family relationships (Kraut *et al* 1998). However, more recent research shows that time spent online can negatively impact time spent with families but does not negatively impact family communication (Lee and Chae 2007). There is also extensive evidence that communication tools such as IM and social networking sites largely serve to consolidate local, existing relationships (Livingstone 2004) and are used primarily to keep up with close friends and family members (Gross *et al* 2002).

Use of IM dominates time spent online: ippr's own research has indicated that young people are spending at least a couple of hours on the internet every evening, using social networking sites or IM in order to maintain contact with friends – both those living locally and others some distance away.

However, internet use also increases the likelihood of communicating with strangers online: in a survey of adolescent IM users, 58 per cent reported that they at least sometimes communicated with people they only knew on the internet, and 45 per cent reported that they at least sometimes talked with people on the internet who they did not know at all (Gross *et al* 2002). This behaviour was typically carried out by 'lonelier' individuals, and was related to negative well-being.

So, while enabling close friends to stay close, the idea that the internet can enable lonely individuals to socially compensate for life offline is flawed. While loneliness can prompt communication with strangers (Gross *et al* 2002), and people who feel less valued in face-to-face communication are more strongly motivated to communicate online (Papacharissi and Rubin 2000), these activities do not deliver results in terms of life-satisfaction and well-being.

For adolescents, this is a particularly important factor. Adolescence has been characterised as a time of increased loneliness, during which levels of self-esteem and well-being are extremely volatile and most likely to be affected by environmental influences (Valkeburg *et al* 2006). It is also a particularly difficult time for adolescents in the UK: according to recent research, UK children have worse well-being than their peers in 20 other industrialised countries in the developed world (UNICEF 2007).

Significantly, the UK scores lowest when it comes to children finding their peers 'kind and helpful': just over 40 per cent do so, placing the UK firmly at the bottom of the table (*ibid*). This factor alone could raise the importance and individual value that young people place on internet communications – in turn raising fears about their growing influence, but also providing opportunities to offer a popular route to trusted information, counselling and support where the right services are offered.

Long-term effects of constant connectivity

Erikson's model of psychosocial development (Erikson 1950) identifies eight phases of psychosocial development (outlined in Table 1.1, next page). Each phase is characterised in a 'psychosocial crisis', which must be resolved before the child can move on to the next development phase.

As can be seen from Table 1.1, during adolescence, the 'psychosocial crisis' takes the form of identity versus role confusion – a time when young adults are beginning to derive an independent identity, developing a sense of self, independence and control while simultaneously being very concerned about how they appear to others and preoccupied with 'fitting in'.

The media and communication tools play an important role in meeting both these needs: first, by underlying young people's transition towards gaining autonomy from their parents and enabling formulation of independent relationships with peers (Mante and Piris 2002), and second, by enabling young people to participate in and identify with a group of peers. IM is a very important tool in this respect: a large part of its appeal is the sense that it creates of being part of a large community of friends. Research suggests that it is the quantity of relationships formed on IM, rather than their quality, that teenagers value most.

But identity formation is presumed to require some degree of 'alone time' (Csikszentmihalyi *et al* 1993), and spending time alone is also a developmental necessity and a key feature of progression to the next stage in psychosocial development: young adulthood (Erikson 1950, Buchholz and Chinlund 1994). Aloneness and solitude can have positive effects on other areas of life too. Csikszentmihalyi *et al* (1993: 90) postulated, 'talented students are more able to tolerate solitude and are therefore alone

Table 1.1: Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development

Stage	Ages	Basic conflict	Important event	Summary
1. Oral-sensory	Birth to 12-18 months	Trust vs. mistrust	Feeding	The infant must form a loving, trusting relationship with the caregiver, or risks developing a sense of mistrust and insecurity.
2. Muscular-anal	18 months to 3 years	Autonomy vs. shame/doubt	Toilet training	The child's energies are directed toward the development of physical skills, including walking, grasping. If not encouraged and supported, the child risks experiencing shame and doubt.
3. Locomotor	3-6 years	Initiative vs. guilt	Independence	The child continues to become more assertive and to take more initiative, but may be too forceful, which needs to be handled sensitively.
4. Latency	6-12 years	Industry vs. inferiority	School	The child must be helped to meet demands to learn new skills or risk a sense of inferiority, failure and incompetence.
5. Adolescence	12-18 years	Identity vs. role confusion	Peer relationships	The teenager must achieve a sense of identity in occupation, sex roles, politics, and religion.
6. Young adulthood	19-40 years	Intimacy vs. isolation	Love relationships	The young adult must develop intimate relationships or suffer feelings of isolation.
7. Middle adulthood	40-65 years	Generativity vs. stagnation	Parenting	Each adult must find some way to satisfy and support the next generation.
8. Maturity	65 to death	Ego integrity vs. despair	Reflection on and acceptance of one's life	The culmination is a strong sense of agency and fulfilment.

Source: Adapted from Erikson 1950, 1958, 1964, 1968, cited in Margo *et al* 2006

more often. It is also likely that the motivation to develop talent-related skills requires that they be alone'. Without solitude, learning, thinking and innovation may suffer (Moustakas 1989, Storr 1988).

However, for young people, there is often a fine dividing line between 'aleness' and 'loneliness', and adolescents are thought to feel loneliness more keenly than people in other age groups (Goswick and Jones 1982). Individuals who are neither capable of maintaining a social network nor spending time alone are particularly likely to feel lonely (Bucholz *et al* 1999).

While there is sparse evidence to suggest that internet use (particularly communicative internet use) causes loneliness, there are early indications that the internet – along with other communication tools – can impact on young people's ability to spend time alone. For example, young people in our deliberative workshops reported high levels of use which they sometimes recognised as pointless or uninteresting, but nonetheless maintained because of what they described as the addictive nature of constant connectivity. Others admitted to leaving their mobile phones on overnight in case they received a text message during this period. This raises concerns not only because it emphasises the extent to which young people wish to remain connected at all times of the day, but also because it can interrupt sleep, an important source of restorative solitude (Storr 1988).

The impact of constant connectivity on future psychosocial development is difficult to assess, primarily because none of the longitudinal studies carried out to date have stretched beyond six months (Meerkerk 2007). Evidence from 2003 does suggest that while adolescents are by far the highest users of IM, level of use declines rapidly with age (Boneva *et al* 2003). However, we cannot conclude that today's demand for constant connectivity will necessarily decline in the same way. Internet tools have changed so rapidly during the five years preceding this research that it is unclear whether the same effect will continue to occur.

And things will continue to change. For example, at present, adolescents remain the group displaying highest levels of internet use. But evidence suggests that, in the US at least, the 2-5-year-old age group is the fastest-growing group of users (Corporation for Public Broadcasting 2003). A US survey

found that 48 per cent of children aged 0-6 have used a computer, and 30 per cent have used computer games (Rideout *et al* 2003). With constant connectivity reaching ever-younger age groups, its impact may be more dramatic in the future – particularly in terms of forcing children towards later stages of psychosocial development at ever-earlier ages.

Summary

From what we know now, we can only conclude that internet use can have good and bad effects – on self-esteem, loneliness and life-satisfaction – and that despite early techno-utopianism or doom-mongering, it is fair to say that ‘the internet by itself is not a main effect or cause of anything’ (McKenna and Bargh 2000). In the short term, it is neither a panacea for social isolation nor a direct source of problems. Instead, it is likely that the costs and benefits will be mitigated on an individual basis and will depend on the personalities of individual users, and the type of internet use.

Alongside technological changes, there has undoubtedly been a cultural shift underpinned by the rise in social networking sites aimed at all sectors of society, which suggests that connectedness is good, while solitude, or lack of connectivity is not. In the long term, these cultural shifts (caused by the increased integration of internet and constant connectivity into our lives) are likely to continue apace. But equally, we should not act as if this is not something we, as a society, are incapable of managing in order to mitigate negative effects.

The opportunities for young people to socialise online are huge, and this can have both good and bad impacts. But viewing usage in terms of positive and negative effects is misleading: the internet is an interactive, social entity within which many different experiences take place – learning, interacting, meeting, consolidating views and exploring feelings and ideas. It is time to move beyond the rather tired debate about whether the internet is good or bad. It is both, and it is very much part of life. We now need to consider how we can protect, enable and develop young people using it.

This leads us to our next key concern. For the most part, social activities are unmediated by the adult world. Socialising is an important part of psychosocial development that enables young people to begin to gain autonomy and form an identity independent from their parents. Nonetheless, in the context of the internet, unmediated social contact does raise concerns. Just as we would not be happy about young people engaging in unsuitable activities offline, being exposed to upsetting scenes or ideas without an adult present to help them navigate the issue and understand their emotional response, the same is true online. We need to think again about how to bring parents – particularly parents of the current generation, who may be uniquely ‘locked out’ of this realm of social activity – into a position of measured authority.

Although supervision of online activities should not be compared wholesale to the supervision of offline activities, parents do have a role particularly in understanding the impact of sustained, heavy internet use and in providing limits to ensure a healthy relationship with technology. At present there is clearly a huge gap in parents’ understanding of the type of activities in which young people are engaging online. While there are sensitivities inherent in any attempt by government to define good parenting, parents may well gratefully receive advice in this area – particularly given levels of parental concern coupled with their lack of awareness of what constitutes good and bad interaction online.

Where the Government can most usefully alter its own behaviour is in refraining from supporting messages that suggest that technology is unquestionably ‘good’ – particularly in an educational context. The impacts of the internet are diverse, and it is misleading to suggest to parents that internet access alone is a prerequisite for academic success.

Ultimately, we need to take a more subtle view of the ways in which the internet can impact on the well-being of young people. While content (addressed in Chapter 2) remains a salient concern, the extent of interaction itself raises questions as to how public policy should respond. Today’s youth are tomorrow’s parents, and regulatory intervention may become less necessary as time goes by. However, the current gap between the level of understanding of young people and that of their parents does suggest the need for entities outside of the family to play a role in raising youth in an online world. The challenge of encouraging such entities to engage positively with young people online is one that government should seek to tackle.

2. Managing risk: public private lives

The previous chapter focused on what recent changes, in terms of increased opportunity to use media for a wide array of tasks, and to do so unsupervised, have meant in terms of the impact on young people's well-being and psychosocial development. This chapter seeks to explore this further in terms of understanding the opportunities for young people to access harmful or inappropriate content or engaging in harmful or inappropriate behaviour, and the impact of doing so.

The issue of accessing harmful material has captured extensive public and media attention, and follows a long history of concern about the effect and influence of media on children. We briefly consider this issue – particularly because it provides insights as to how viewing content is thought to influence behaviour. This remains a salient issue when we come to consider young people themselves engaging in harmful behaviours. This is especially the case when taking into account the role of peer influences, which can now be played out in audiovisual form – for example, through videos posted on to video-sharing websites, or through information sharing within internet groups.

This issue is incredibly pertinent now, as tragedies such as the suicides taking place in Bridgend, Wales, during the past 12 months have heightened public sensitivities to the possibility of negative peer influences in online environments (Mesure 2008).

But while there may be useful conclusions that we can draw from both the effects of the traditional media and the effects of new ways of engaging with and through the media, it is nonetheless important that we continue to draw a distinction between the two. We should not expect to deal with the number of issues presented by young people's use of the internet simply by monitoring and removing or blocking content: the changing dynamic between consumer and producer demands a more sophisticated approach.

Drawing on evidence from our deliberative workshops, we take some of the most prominent challenges faced by society in this context. We outline why concerns exist, review evidence suggesting the extent to which they could negatively impact young people and, finally, set out the scale of the problem in the UK. Here, we refer both to existing research and data and our own qualitative research. Finally, we provide evidence, where available, of young people's own attitudes and perceptions, their sense of risk, and how effective they seem to be in dealing with the problem.

The influence of media content, consumption and use: changing concerns

The internet has frequently been characterised as a kind of 'Wild West' or new frontier: a dangerous, unpredictable and lawless place (Leyden 2007). In such an environment, there is a great deal of concern about the content young people may access and the impact of this on their emotional well-being and behaviour.

We spend large parts of our days consuming media of one form or another. Whether the morning newspaper, the radio on the way to work, content accessed on the internet throughout the day or the television in the evening, media content surrounds us as a near constant. It is no wonder, then, that concerns have been raised for many decades about its potential negative influence.

Initial theories of media influence assumed the media to have a strong and direct effect, and focused on the ability of media texts to 'inject' particular messages directly into the consciousness of audience members. This 'hypodermic needle' theory was formed in response to the propaganda campaigns of World War II, but was also witnessed in popular form when the initial radio broadcast of Orson Welles's 'War of the Worlds' caused several listeners to prepare for the forthcoming alien invasion, treating the play as fact rather than fiction (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955).

The theory was quickly discounted, and was criticised for affording too much influence to the media and neglecting other factors that contribute to the formation of attitudes and beliefs – for instance family, peers and other forms of interpersonal communications (Lazarsfeld *et al* 1968). It also tended to treat the audience as one amorphous mass with no individual characteristics whatsoever, each individual being expected to react to content in exactly the same way (Wright 1964).

A more sophisticated account of media influence has centred on the way in which complex media messages can frame issues and discourses and have a significant impact on setting social agendas (Iyengar and McGrady 2005). For example, evidence shows that there is a close relationship between the amount of attention the media devotes to issues and the importance that people attribute to these issues (Funkhouser 1973). Thus while we have moved away from a 'strong effects' model that argues that the media tells us what to think, 'minimal effects' theories continue to assert that the media can tell us what to think about (Dahlgren 1996).

The negative impacts of this are explored in cultivation theory, which looks at the ways in which long-term consumption of media can cause viewers to cultivate certain attitudes or views of the world (Gerber *et al* 1980). This theory has been explored heavily in relation to crime, and it has been shown that the prevalence of television detective programmes, and crime in the media generally, can cause a person to cultivate a view of the world as a threatening and violent place (Gerbner *et al* 1980).

These theories were developed in the time of mass media, and often focused particularly on television as a powerful visual medium. With digital media, many of these fears become less salient. In fact, there are concerns about the loss of the positive agenda-setting function that mass media offered – for instance, in establishing a sense of community and common identity. This is thought to be disappearing as audiences become fragmented due to increased choice.

Nonetheless, there are still concerns that young users of the internet will copy either content or actions that they see online, or that prolonged exposure to certain types of content will have a negative impact on their attitudes and beliefs. Social learning theory argues that behaviour is learned through observing and, ultimately, mimicking the behaviour of others. As Bandura (1977: 22) states, 'learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviours are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action.'

This theory has been employed to explain instances of aggression: research has shown that young consumers of media are likely to copy aggressive acts and behaviour where adults shown engaging in it are rewarded for their actions. Where violent acts receive punishment, children are less likely to copy this behaviour (Bandura *et al* 1963). With the popularity of 'stunt' programmes such as Jackass (MTV) and Punk'd (MTV) as well as similar content being found on video-sharing websites, concerns arose that young people would view this and seek to emulate displayed behaviour (Virtue 2002).

However, experiments thought to establish this theory in the media context have been criticised for focusing on short-term effects and for failing to capture what the influence of sustained exposure may be (Livingstone and Milgrave-Hargreaves 2006). Despite frequently expressed fears, we remain a long way from any kind of consensus that viewing causes behaviour.

An overt focus on this aspect at the expense of other considerations fails to take account of the massively changed context in which young people access, consume and use digital media technologies. We can no longer simply conceptualise young people as passive players on whom media exerts an influence of one kind or another. The ability to interact and socialise online, including by using content of an increasingly sophisticated nature, means that young people themselves play a crucial role in formulating rules, regulations and the limits of acceptable behaviour online.

To understand what motivates young people's actions online and how they conceive of good and bad behaviour in an online context, we now turn to consider the moral development and the potential impact the internet may have on moral action, taking particular account of peer effects.

Impact on moral and social development

Morality is considered a developmental process. Piaget (1932) divides this process into two stages:

- **Heteronomous moral thinking** in which rules are provided by adults and reinforced by punishment. At this stage (in other words, up to the age of 10 or 11), children think that rules are fixed and absolute, and tend to make moral judgements on the basis of consequences.

- **Relativist moral thinking** in which children take a more relativist perspective, and form moral judgements more on the basis of intentions (Piaget 1932). During this stage, rules are internalised but young people also act on independent moral judgements based on social experience (Bradley 2006).

Building on Piaget's work, Kohlberg (1958) extended the developmental process to six stages, during which the individual moves through three phases of moral reasoning: pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional. These stages are outlined briefly in Box 2.1.

Box 2.1: Kohlberg's six stages of moral development

Phase 1: Pre-conventional morality

Stage 1: Obedience and punishment orientation

This stage is largely similar to Piaget's first stage, with children accepting rules as absolutes and making judgements on the basis of consequences and punishments.

Stage 2: Individualism and exchange

At this stage, children begin to recognise that there is not just one, absolute view. They understand that different individuals have different viewpoints, and will pursue a course of action relative to their own individual interests. While children at this stage still talk about punishment, the context in which they do so has changed. During Stage 1, punishment proves the wrongness of the action. In Stage 2, punishment is a risk you wish to avoid.

These stages are called 'pre-conventional', as morality is still largely an external process determined by others.

Phase 2: Conventional morality

Stage 3: Good interpersonal relationships

Young people typically reach this stage when they are entering their teenage years. Morality is now viewed as more than a matter of simple deals, and there is a wider, though still limited, concept of society in moral decisions. Young people base morality on a desire to live up to the expectations of friends, family and the community by behaving in 'good' ways. In this context, good behaviour constitutes that which has good motives, and which takes account of interpersonal feelings – for instance, love, empathy, trust and concern for others.

Stage 4: Maintaining social order

Stage 4 widens the concept of society from two-person relationships (in other words, those with family members and close friends) to a concern regarding society as a whole. At this stage, moral reasoning places an emphasis on obeying laws, respecting authority and performing one's duty so that social order is maintained.

This phase sees the individual progressing to making moral decisions from the perspective of society as a whole. It is referred to as 'conventional', as it involves thinking from the position of a fully-fledged member of society. This stage is dominant at around age 16.

Phase 3: Post-conventional morality

Stage 5: Social contract and individual rights

This stage sees moral reasoning stretched beyond Stage 4 to consideration of what makes for a good society (Kohlberg 1981, Gibbs *et al* 1983). It is focused on the existence of basic rights (for instance, a right to liberty and to life) and the existence of democratic procedures for changing laws and improving society. At this stage, morality and rights can take priority over particular laws – for instance, where the right to life is involved.

Stage 6: Universal principles

This is the highest stage, where moral reasoning seeks to define the principles by which we achieve justice. Kohlberg's account of this stage is based on Kantian and Rawlsian theories of justice, with moral reasoning treating all claims in an impartial manner and seeking to define universal principles. This stage is designed by Kohlberg to be largely theoretical: even when individuals reach Phase 3, all post-conventional moral responses are considered to be Stage 5 (Colby and Kohlberg 1983).

Source: Crain 1985

Development in moral reasoning is not presumed to be a process of maturation (Kohlberg 1968). Instead, young people progress to higher stages through thinking about moral problems, and through social experience and interactions that challenge lower stages of reasoning. Thus moral reasoning can be developed only by working through situations, rather than from mere instruction.

Factors that can affect moral development include a lack of effective feedback and remoteness from harm, as well as reduced risk of detection and punishment (Wilkins 1997). Each of these are clearly present online: individuals do not always receive strong, effective feedback (in other words, one emanating from an authoritative source) about the hurtful impact of their communications or actions, while there is a significantly reduced risk of detection and punishment for activities that are illegal and much less for actions that may be merely unethical or rude.

Moral action

If the internet has an effect on moral action and whether young people act within a given morality, we must consider first whether the technological features of the internet itself encourage behaviour of one form or another, and second, whether this is predominantly due to the fact that the internet facilitates greater interaction between peers, ultimately heightening their influence.

'Bad' behaviour online occurs frequently: in online environments, individuals often act in ways that are 'disinhibited, de-individuated and self-absorbed' (Denegri-Knott 2003). Even where young people have successfully navigated stages in moral development, cyberbullying, hacking, intellectual property theft and other forms of negative behaviour indicate the extent to which some are willing to transgress from their moral code in online environments.

What can cause us to selectively disengage our moral control? Bandura (1991) identifies three causes that are relevant in an online context:

- **Moral justification** Individuals make their conduct personally and socially acceptable by saying their behaviour was carried out for moral reasons. For instance, where Intellectual Property theft is concerned, perpetrators often focus on notions that the entertainment industry is 'ripping off' consumers or artists.
- **Disregarding, minimising or ignoring the consequences** In situations where the consequences of one's actions can be minimised or disregarded, individuals can reason that there is no need for self-censure. Importantly, distance makes a person more likely to permit harm to another. When the victim is more remote, consequences are easier to ignore.
- **Dehumanising the victim** Where the victim is dehumanised, internalised empathy can no longer act as a motivational force (Hoffman 1991). Again, this has particular resonance given that dehumanisation can occur through lack of affective feedback – a particular feature of online environments.

It is clear that the technological features of the internet contribute to the ease with which consequences of actions can be minimised or ignored. Participants in our deliberative workshops commented that it was certainly easier to be 'meaner' online, and to say things they would not say in a face-to-face discussion.

Bloggers have frequently complained that people are willing to contribute highly negative comments, often amounting to personal abuse, in response to postings. The recent experience of short-lived Guardian travel blogger Max Gogarty illustrated the levels of vitriol that can be directed towards people participating online. Max contributed a blog detailing the start of his gap-year travels, to be updated throughout his trip. It was halted by the Guardian because of the level of unpleasant personal and abusive comments the post attracted. This example also shows how people strive to make moral justifications for their actions. Many people claimed that the authors of the abusive postings were merely reacting to suspicions of nepotism, as Gogarty (a relatively inexperienced writer) was rumoured to be the son of a Guardian travel writer (Behr 2008).

In everyday life, situations that call upon a moral value system are also of course heavily context dependent (Turiel 1983). While moral values are categorical and universal, social conventions are

arbitrary, and are determined by alterable social systems. In order to decide on a best course of action, young people will not only consult their sense of morality but also make reference to the social context in which the decision is going to be made (Bradley 2006).

Offline, social contexts will, of course, include peers, but alongside parents, adults and other authority figures, as well as the wider community. Online, the social context is largely formed by the community in question – which, in itself, is primarily made up of peers. Thus the role of peers is particularly important in online environments.

Evidence shows that peers can have positive and negative effects. For example, if a young person socialises with a group of teenagers who all study hard, the individual concerned is more likely to try to live up to these expectations. Conversely, research suggests that spending time with peers who think it is ‘uncool’ to study makes it difficult for the individual to break out of the enforced social norm. While this does not presume young people directly copy the actions of their peers (the ‘if you say jump...’ analogy) recent research suggests the effects of peer pressure are stronger than previously presumed (Margo *et al* 2006).

Peer influence is also complex, operating at many levels. For example, female adolescents will be more influenced by the larger peer group than by their best friends. Empirically, researchers have shown that peers in a classroom can have significant effects on the likelihood of an adolescent using drugs, drinking alcohol, smoking and dropping out of school (Gaviria and Raphael 1997). Local ‘cultural norms’ – the usual behaviour of teenagers in the local community – have measurable effects on the behaviour of all young people living there (Margo *et al* 2006): if everyone smokes behind their parents’ back, it becomes acceptable, even if the teenager believes that it is wrong or harmful.

Meanwhile, there is another dynamic going on, which is a sort of unconscious social selection: research has also shown that young people tend to gravitate towards others who share interests and views, thus making it more likely that, for instance in a classroom context, well-behaved young people will boost each other’s commitment to work, while their less-well-behaved peers will spur each other on to more disruptive behaviour (*ibid*, Kandel 1978).

This has implications for the peer effects of social networking sites, where large networks of peers can be easily coordinated, and where peers can engage in self-selection much more easily, making friends and connections with people who already share their interests. This activity means that peers often have reciprocal effects on each other (Kandel 1978).

There are already suggestions that peers online do influence each other more negatively, and in a potentially more powerful way, than in the offline world. For instance, the social networking site Facebook includes a number of pro-anorexia groups. These are set up by users themselves, and provide forums for discussion and comment. Several have in excess of 200 members. Charities working to tackle eating disorders recently condemned social networking sites for failing to remove such groups, which they claim ‘encourage people to avoid treatment or gain ideas about how to maintain their disorder’ (BBC 2008). In response, Facebook has said that it will not remove such groups because it is impossible to judge which support groups are positive and which encourage unhealthy behaviour. Nonetheless, it is clear from both sides of the debate that there is tacit acceptance that young people influence each other in these environments.

This situation poses both challenges and opportunities for public policy. On the one hand, it shows that mitigating negative peer effects will be extremely difficult – particularly in the current environment, which remains relatively free of adult mediation. On the other, it emphasises the importance of harnessing the potential of peers to create positive outcomes – for instance, by providing support and advice in areas of education, employment, health and well-being.

Issues dominating the current debate

With this background evidence in mind, we now turn to consider the following specific issues that have dominated debates on young people’s use of the internet:

- Exposure to age-inappropriate content

- Violent content
- Sexual content
- Cyberbullying
- Attitudes to safety
- Attitudes to privacy
- Exposure to advertising
- Plagiarism and web credibility.

Exposure to age-inappropriate content

There is, of course, a long tradition of restricting access to certain material for certain ages. Broadcast television is subject to the watershed, ensuring that content of an explicitly adult nature is not shown until after 9pm. Films and, latterly, video games are subject to age ratings and classifications that recommend the content only be viewed by people of 12, 15 or 18 and above, for example.

These restrictions have been workable because there are points at which they can be effectively employed. Film and video-game retailers can check the age of the person purchasing the product, while terrestrial television is broadcast along a linear schedule and subject to strict editorial controls.

However, where the internet is concerned, such restrictions either do not effectively exist or are impossible to implement. Internet content is delivered on demand from a variety of content creators and sources across the globe. Young people now have easier access to age-inappropriate content than ever before.

Concerns have chiefly focused on access to violent content or images of a graphic sexual nature and the extent to which these can ‘harm’ young individuals. The term ‘harm’ can encompass short-term harm – for instance, with content that is instantly distressing or frightening – as well as more long-term effects – for example, content that serves to cultivate certain attitudes or views of society and appropriate behaviour. There are, of course, great difficulties in providing evidence of the effect of viewing, and in understanding the extent to which other social influences have had a more significant role to play (Livingstone and Millwood-Hargrave 2006). There are also ethical problems in exposing young people to potentially harmful content in order to analyse its effect.

Assessing what content is age appropriate is not an easy task (although comment in the media and policy circles often seems to presume that it is). Young people tend to have very different perceptions from adults of what is age appropriate, and often believe that content is appropriate or at least not harmful to them even though it may be harmful for children of a younger age (Livingstone 2002).

Several commercial services offer ‘walled garden’ versions of the internet – in other words, a limited internet that offers access to certain sites that are predetermined as ‘safe’. Filtering systems also allows parents to restrict access to content based on the age of the child. Limiting access remains a difficult task that has taken on a new complexity with the introduction of video-sharing websites, which allow young people themselves not only to share content which may be deemed ‘harmful’ but also to create content that comes under this definition. Next, we look at the extent of this behaviour and the impact it may have on young people, considering both distress caused and the propensity to encourage negative behaviours.

Violent content

The possibility of young people being exposed to violent content has been at the forefront of policymakers’ minds for decades, from investigations into the effect of violent comics in the 1950s to, more recently, the impact of videogames and violent films.

Violence in the media continues to be a point of blame for people decrying increased violence in society. Most recently, use of knives in video games has been one source of blame for the increase in knife attacks in the UK’s cities (Pascoe-Watson 2008). But our concept of ‘violent content’ recently took on a new aspect as user-generated content containing violence – for instance ‘happy slapping’

videos (where a physical attack is filmed on a mobile phone then shared online) – captured press and public attention.

What impact is this new form of violent content likely to have? To understand this, it is necessary to look at four factors: scale, access, context and resemblance of reality (for a full discussion of the impact of harmful and offensive content see Livingstone and Millwood Hargrave 2006).

- **Scale** This point relates to the scale of violent content available online. It is, of course, impossible to assess how much violent user-generated content is online. The Web is forever expanding in size, with new content added daily. Any assessment is also dependent upon a definition of 'violent', which is itself dependent on the context in which violence is portrayed.

In July 2007, Panorama (BBC1) aired 'Children's fight club' – a documentary highlighting the number of videos created by users available online which featured brutal fights between young people. The number of this type of video is difficult to assess, but a quick search on any number of video-sharing websites delivers several hundred results. There are also sites dedicated to showing only brief clips of fighting and nothing else ('Pure street fights' being one such example). The most popular video at the time of writing was entitled 'Girl beat up in street'. It had been viewed almost 1,250,000 times.

- **Access** Access to violent content is now much easier than it was in the past. Whereas content accessed in an offline context was often subject to enforced age restrictions, it is striking how quickly and easily large numbers of violent videos can be accessed online. This is not content which one has to search very hard for. On video-sharing sites, typing the word 'fight' into the search bar brings up several hundred or thousand results and once one video is found it is easy to move from there to other linked videos which provide similar content. In the UK, just over one quarter (27 per cent) of young people aged between 9 and 19 report having visited websites containing 'gruesome' or 'violent' content (Livingstone and Bober 2005).
- **Context** Perhaps where this online content represents the starkest departure from violence otherwise featured in films and television shows is its lack of context. In the latter, violence usually appears within a narrative and viewers tend to respond on this basis. If the violence is not considered a necessary part of the plot, it is labelled gratuitous and the film will be rated and restricted as a result. Where user generated short videos are concerned, there is usually either no or very little provided context. We have no idea who is in the right or in the wrong, who deserves to 'win' or any of the facts at all in the lead up to the fight. The entire focus is the pure violence of the fight itself.
- **Resemblance of reality** A further factor that is often considered in determining the scale of impact violent content can have is its resemblance to reality and in particular whether the violence is of a form that can be easily imitated. The violence featured in video games, for example, has previously been deemed to have a limited impact on game players because of its dream-like, fantasy quality. In contrast, there is nothing dreamlike about the violence exhibited in user-generated fight videos. It has its very basis in reality, taking place in school playgrounds and local streets, and with none of the conventions that exist within some genres of fiction.

Concern over the impact that such content could have on young people is focused on two possible outcomes. The first is that young people may, in the short term, find such content distressing or upsetting. Research shows that unexpected or de-contextualised violence is likely to have this effect (Livingstone and Millwood-Hargraves 2006). But the second, and greatest, popular fear is that this phenomenon is actually encouraging and incentivising violence: that young people are more likely to perform such acts for filming purposes. Evidence linking imitation to viewing is sparse. However, there are studies that show a correlation between viewing violent acts and aggressive behaviour among young boys (Belsen 1978). As with much of the research of this kind, criticisms in terms of its methodology and the applicability of the findings to real-life scenarios are rife.

But, in the context of user-generated content, we must also consider the presence of peer effects, especially where content is posted within social networking environments. We can also refer back to

factors that influence moral development and action. There are a number of areas where the online context could negatively influence behaviour.

Many video-sharing sites have the facility to provide feedback on a posted item. This is effectively the mechanism by which content is monitored, since YouTube does not engage in any formal regulation of content itself – instead, leaving this process to its ‘community’ of users. Community members therefore have the opportunity to influence behaviour by providing affective feedback and moral clues as to what constitutes right or wrong action in this context.

However, while it does appear that the community is regulating itself insofar as it debates and explores content posted on the site, it does not do this in the manner intended by YouTube. Videos that are clearly in breach of community guidelines provided by YouTube (for instance, that violent, racist or copyrighted content should not be posted online) fail to be reported, despite the fact they have been viewed several thousands of times. Research shows that during a three-month period in 2007, only 0.5 per cent of videos were removed out of approximately 6 million posted (based on an average of 65,000 per day) (Cha *et al* 2007).

Further to this, the comments attached to videos tend not to be in condemnation of the acts portrayed, but instead negotiate a discussion around the ‘quality’ of the violence: whether it is fake, or ‘lame’. Positive comments are often received on the basis of the strength and brutality of the fight.

Evidence shows that comments received from social networking sites are strong predictors of young people’s self esteem. In addition, one of the most important predictors of an individual engaging in antisocial behaviour is whether their friends also engage and approve (Mahoney *et al* 2005, Wood 2005). There is a real sense, then, that adolescents can be rewarded for posting good quality fights and that within a sizeable community this behaviour is encouraged as acceptable.

What is more, the lack of formal regulation, the non-removal of content and the sheer number of videos updated daily means there is little sense of consequence and/or punishment. The ‘punishment’ outlined in the YouTube Community Guidelines includes receiving a warning notification or termination of the account and deletion of all videos. If an account is terminated, the user is prohibited from ever signing up for another account. Finally, where happy slapping and other forms of ‘cyberbullying’ are concerned, there are strong indications that young people are capable of dehumanising the victim or minimising the consequences of such actions, as we will explore in later sections.

Sexual content

Studies indicate that of the 1,000 most-visited sites, 10 per cent are sex-orientated. Meanwhile, portrayals of sexually explicit material of a violent nature on the internet have increased, and access to such material has become easier (Griffiths 2000). Pornographic sites are particularly popular among young boys (Jackson *et al* 2007).

Concerns about young people viewing explicitly sexual content or pornography are often centred on the fact that children and young people can find exposure to such content distressing (Livingstone and Millwood-Hargrave 2006). More than half (57 per cent) of young people (9– to 19-years-old) claim to have encountered sexually explicit material online (Livingstone and Bober 2005). The most common reaction to such exposure has been to leave the site quickly. Instances of this kind do not tend to be reported to parents or guardians, with only 16 per cent of parents believing their child has seen such content online (*ibid*).

Research has centred on whether viewing such content means young people develop unrealistic expectations or behaviours regarding sexual relationships, and secondly whether it could encourage more promiscuous behaviour among young people (Bragg and Buckingham 2002). A decline in the age at which young people first have sexual intercourse, along with higher rates of teenage pregnancies and concerns around the sexualisation of childhood (particularly the ‘tweening’ of pre-adolescent children), mean that there remains great sensitivity around this issue (Margo *et al* 2006).

Evidence shows that the predominance of sexual content in young people's media diet has a significant association with their sexual activity and their future intentions to be sexually active (Pardun *et al* 2005). However, online content is by no means the chief culprit. Taking websites, films, television programmes, magazines and music together, 11 per cent of 13- to 15-year-olds' media contained sexual content. The strongest associations were found with films and music (ibid).

Furthermore, there is evidence of a link between consumption of pornography and the presence of sexually aggressive attitudes and behaviours, and that exposure to sexually explicit material in online films is significantly related to beliefs – held equally by boys and girls – that women are sex objects (Peter and Valkenburg 2007). Evidence shows that the internet in particular is now acting as a 'sexual super peer', particularly for young girls who are increasingly turning to online sources for cues on how to act (Brown *et al* 2005).

Again, there are concerns about user-generated content and, in particular, photos and videos posted by young people to sites, which may feature themselves or others in revealing poses or situations. Whether such activities have long-lasting emotional effects is difficult to measure. However, it certainly raises the possibility of unwanted attention and approach from people wanting to prey on younger internet users. Alongside this, the material may be taken out of whatever limited context it has during later stages of the young person's life, if potential employers or universities search the internet for background information on applicants.

However, while raising concerns, this increased access to material related to sex and sexuality also presents an opportunity, by acting as a source of education and information. Particularly where sexual health is concerned, the media has long been a source of information for young people (Bragg and Buckingham 2002), and a growing number of young people turn to the internet for health information more generally (Kaiser Family 2002). The need for providing accessible and trusted information on sexual health online is clear.

Cyberbullying

Bullying is a key issue for young people, with 35 per cent of Year 6 (aged 12) pupils reporting bullying as a main concern. This percentage decreases with age, with 25 per cent of Year 8s reporting it as a main concern, and only 15 per cent of Year 10 pupils. Almost one third (30 per cent) of school pupils report having been bullied at school in the previous four weeks (DCSF 2007).

In the UK, evidence shows that 22 per cent of young people have been victims of 'cyberbullying' at least once, reporting having received hurtful comments via text message or having experienced abuse on forums and social networking sites. Over the past year, cyberbullying has become a key public concern, especially in the case of pupils using digital technologies (particularly video captured on mobile phones) to bully their teachers (Harrison 2007).

But despite the readiness of the media to engage the term 'cyberbullying', our research suggests that the term is not a coherent one for young people. In our deliberative work, the term was not referenced by any age group when discussing these issues directly. Perhaps this is a logical approach – the symptoms of bullying are the same online as offline, with the sole difference being their delivery through technological means.

Our research shows that online peer groups largely perpetuate existing offline groups, and that communication online – whether negative or positive – is shaped by the offline relationship. As one young person explains:

'It depends who it is. If it's your enemy, you cuss 'em down and they cuss you back, but if it's just like your girlfriend or something you just like chat.' (Boy, 14, ABC1)

While the presence of 'cyberbullying' as a byword used by the media is certainly helpful in terms of heightening awareness of the issue, it also raises the possibility of cyberbullying being seen as a problem separate and distinct from bullying. While the latter is seen as a social problem – located for instance in schools or workplaces, and with relative level of agreement of joint responsibility for

dealing with perpetrators – the suggestion that cyberbullying is a ‘new’ phenomenon brings the possibility of this coalition of responsibility being ignored in favour of blaming technology, or technology providers. These parties, of course, do have a role, but are not the only players who could be part of a workable solution.

Nonetheless, young people did say that it was easier to be unkind or offensive to people online as opposed to over the phone or face to face – perhaps because they would avoid seeing the immediate impact of their behaviour. A number of participants also said that online communication had aggravated problems and arguments with friends:

‘I have much more arguments over MSN than I have in real life... I think people feel safer on MSN so they get more rude.’ (*Girl, 15, ABC1*)

‘If you’re annoyed at a friend, you could say that on MSN. It’s easier than saying it to their face.’ (*Girl, 13, ABC1*)

Still a great deal of activity which adults may consider bullying behaviour had ambiguous connotations for young people. Young people felt that speaking online was more likely to lead to misunderstandings compared to face-to-face or phone conversations:

‘You might say something and not mean it to be angry and the person might just take it another way.’ (*Boy, 18, C2DE*)

‘The bad thing is that you can type it and think it sounds like something else.’ (*Girl, 17, ABC1*)

There were also strong social norms around ‘seeing the joke’ with regard to online activity. In fact, all the groups emphasised that putting embarrassing photos of friends and acquaintances online is fully acceptable and considered harmless. Here, young people were adept at minimising the consequences of their actions, becoming wilfully ignorant of the harm that could be caused by such unwanted exposure. Discussion of this issue prompted many participants to tell stories of similar and more extreme things that they had done or that had happened to them.

Referring to an imagined scenario of a young girl writing on another girl’s face and posting the image online, responses were:

‘I can understand if she falls asleep and they draw on her face or whatever, yeah, it’s funny, I’d put it on there.’ (*Boy, 15, C2DE*)

‘I’m the kind of person where, if someone did that to me, I’d laugh about it and take it as a joke.’ (*Girl, 13, ABC1*)

Among younger age groups (13-16), there was rarely any recognition of the further harm that may be generated by enabling wide circulation of embarrassing or hurtful images, videos and comments:

‘Someone passed out... we put a tampon up her nose and she woke up and didn’t even know, she was so drunk... she was walking around with this tampon up her nose, with writing all over her face... There was a plaster with a hanging tampon and one up her nose and she didn’t realise and we took pictures and put it on MySpace.’ (*Girl, 18, C2DE*)

‘My friend set his hand on fire and slapped X round the face and we put it on [the internet].’ (*Boy, 14, ABC1*)

Importantly, as young people in middle adolescence discussed such activities in more detail, stories moved seamlessly from activities that they had recorded, on mobile phones or digital cameras for instance, and then posted online, to activities that had taken place in ‘real life’ and not been distributed any further. Older participants were, on the whole, more conscious of the qualitative differences between online and face-to-face communication and the potential for online exposure to be hurtful to peers:

‘Sometimes you can get alienated from your friends. Like you can have one friend and say everyone starts to – like one person doesn’t like them then says to the others ‘I

don't like them' and starts bitching about them, then before you know it they can all be blocked and this one person can be like "All my friends have blocked me". That used to happen a lot in secondary school and it's like – "Get a life", d'you know what I mean?' (Boy, 18, C2DE)

Attitudes to safety

The issue of child safety online has captured the attention of parents, policymakers, industry and the press. It has largely been dealt with from two perspectives: first, seeking to curtail instances of, and access to, child abuse images online, and second, limiting the opportunities of predatory adults to reach young people online. Here, we focus on this latter issue, and of young people's experiences of unwanted sexual approaches.

Early concerns in this area centred on the role of chatrooms in facilitating such activity. Following various press stories and government and industry safety campaigns, some of the most popular chatroom providers – for instance Microsoft and Yahoo! – closed down their services (ICF 2001). Our research indicates that chatrooms now make up little, if any, of young people's online activity.

However, the new crop of internet services – particularly social networking sites (SNSs) – offer new opportunities, raising concerns that young people are yet more vulnerable to approaches from those who would do them harm. Last year, the Child and Online Exploitation Centre (CEOP) held a series of seminars considering the risks to youth from social networking sites arguing that these 'new environment[s] can facilitate new forms of social deviance and criminality', particularly in enabling 'new opportunities for sexual expression and deviance both to young people and adults with a sexual interest in this group' (CEOP 2006).

Evidence drawn from MySpace users (of all ages) in the US found that fewer than one in three had an uncomfortable experience on MySpace, with only 7 to 9 per cent approached for a sexual liaison. Nearly all of those simply blocked the requester from contacting them through their MySpace page. Those under 18 were even less likely to receive sexual solicitations than older users (Rosen 2006).

However, exposure to risks of this kind continues to be a concern, and high-profile campaigns have continued to alert young people to the possible dangers. The subject also remains a popular one to be covered by mass media. As a result, the message appears to have been successfully received by young people themselves. Our discussions with young internet users saw them repeat media-friendly phrases such as 'stranger danger' and the mere fact of conversing with, or meeting with, people met online was inexorably linked with paedophiles. In fact, when discussing risks associated with internet use, the threat posed by paedophiles was the issue most commonly raised by all groups.

We presented the groups with a scenario describing a face-to-face meeting with someone originally met online:

Scenario: Offline meeting

Darren made friends with Susan three months ago in a chat room. Susan has told Darren that she is also aged x [age changed to correspond to each group] and lives in London. Susan has asked if they can meet up in person, and Darren has said yes.

When presented with this scenario, the young people immediately emphasised the risk associated with such an action:

'Like, if you go along and they kidnap you... like, it's not really going to happen but it might.' (Boy, 14, ABC1)

But while the bare bones of the media, industry, parental and government safety messages have certainly been received, there are important caveats to recognise in terms of young people's practice as opposed to expressed attitudes. 'Stranger danger' was certainly a recognised concept. However, this does not mean that young people are necessarily unwilling to meet people who they have first had contact with online. Social networking sites offer huge opportunities for widening friendship circles at a time when adolescent socialisation is at its peak – for example, by making friends with

'friends of friends'. This phrase 'friends of friends' is particularly important, and was frequently used by young people.

As Boyd (2006) comments, 'friendship' is an expansive term – it can encompass relationships that are much more diffuse than those explained by the terms 'sister', 'brother', 'partner', 'workmate' and so on. With the rise of the social networking phenomenon, the term has been pushed even further. The concept of friendship on sites such as MySpace, Bebo and Facebook is stretched to include famous people you might admire, bands, brands and places; profiles representing these people or places may or may not have any real connection to what they represent.

A 'friend of a friend' can include people from a very wide circle and can counter large differences in age and location. The potentially tenuous nature of this link is illustrated in the following participants' comments:

'If you meet over MSN, you kind of vaguely know each other because you have to get their addy [address] from someone, so....' (Boy, 18, C2DE)

'But d'you know what people do – when you send link... chain emails, you can get the emails of other people that have been chaining to each other.' (Girl, 17, ABC1)

The idea that someone is a friend of a friend can give young people a certain sense of assurance – for example:

'I would never meet someone online, ever. I mean I wouldn't talk to people I didn't know, unless they're a friend of a friend, let alone meet up with them.' (Boy, 17, C2DE)

'If they're like a friend of a friend [I'd talk to them online], I wouldn't just look up a random person.' (Girl, 14, ABC1)

While there were strong social norms against meeting up with people you have met online – primarily because it was thought of as 'sad' or 'desperate' – members of the 15- to 16-year-old age group were willing to admit having done so, primarily to meet members of the opposite sex. This coincides with evidence regarding the developmental stages of young people's media use, and reinforces the point that it is during these middle teenage years that young people are most likely to take risks in the name of pursuing social activities. This age group tends to grasp the opportunities presented by SNSs in order to experience a sense of freedom from adult interference, but also in order to demonstrate that they have successful, mature social interactions:

'The whole point of the privacy [setting] is, like, so that people don't add you that you don't know but at the end of the day, you should be able to make your own decisions – especially at this age.' (Boy, 16, ABC1)

When it comes to talking to people they did not know well, young people favour the internet over other communicative means because it enables the user to control one's social interactions (Maddell *et al* 2007). For instance, the fact that tools such as instant messaging, text messaging and email can be used for either synchronous or asynchronous communications means that young people are given the opportunity to think about their response if desired (*ibid*):

'Cos if you don't know them very well, you might not wanna speak to them over the phone cos it might be a bit awkward whereas you can get to know them better online.' (Girl, 18, C2DE)

'You can talk to people you don't know that well without it being awkward.' (Girl, 16, ABC1)

But while individuals were willing to take risks, the group also showed evidence of efforts to maximise safety, illustrating the extent to which experience can enable young people to develop levels of media literacy without formal education (Buckingham 2005b). The 15- to 16-year-old group held extended discussions about the ways in which they would establish the identity and age of someone they met online. Webcams were seen as the most trustworthy source, while

pictures were trusted by some but not others:

‘I wouldn’t trust anyone unless they had a webcam cos then you can, like, see them but pictures – that’s a different thing.’ (*Boy 16, ABC1*)

Participants who did meet up with online acquaintances said that they would speak first on the phone. One 16-year-old girl said that she could tell by the nature of the communication if the person was an adult pretending to be her age by the types of questions that they asked, and also through a complicated method of communicating with that person using more than one profile in order to compare their answers:

‘A boy can meet a girl or a girl can meet a boy over MSN as well, take their number and meet them... you just take their number and then you talk to them yeah, you don’t have to meet them straight away, you just talk to them for about a week and you just meet them after.’ (*Boy, 14, ABC1*)

‘Like sometimes they try too hard to be in with the kids, I don’t know, like they try too hard to act like a child, but it’s obvious.’ (*Girl, 15, ABC1*)

Participants in all age groups demonstrated that they were aware of safety measures, such as being accompanied by friends and meeting in a public place:

‘If you did do that [meeting up with an online acquaintance] then you would at least go with a load of friends, but I wouldn’t do it.’ (*Girl, 16, ABC1*)

Attitudes to privacy

Closely related to campaigns around safety are campaigns encouraging young people to protect their private information and personal details online.

The Government-backed website thinkUKnow.co.uk gives advice on ‘how to stay in control’ by limiting the amount of personal details given away online. For example, the site strongly recommends only giving your mobile phone number to friends ‘you know in the real world. If your mobile number is given to people that you don’t know, they may hassle you. This is why it’s also best not to put your number on your profile of your social networking site (like Bebo, MySpace and Facebook)’ (quoted from www.thinkuknow.co.uk/11_16/control/social.aspx).

High-impact campaigns shown in cinemas have also sought to raise awareness about the difficulty of assessing exactly who you are communicating with online, and the importance of limiting the amount of personal information you tell them on this basis.

But in concepts of privacy and the personal are perhaps where young people and adults diverge the most. Anecdotal evidence points towards rapidly changing ideas of what ‘privacy’ means in a digital age (Nussbaum 2007), with young people increasingly willing to live out much of their lives, their aspirations, hopes and daily thoughts in public and online.

This does not mean that young people have no concept whatsoever of privacy: they attach particular importance to keeping some categories of information (for example, mobile phone numbers) private. Of those with profiles on SNSs, only 2 per cent include their mobile phone number as part of their profile. However, many other categories of information are given out willingly and enthusiastically: for example, the majority of teenagers include their first name and a photo of themselves (Lenhart and Madden 2007).

Disclosure of personal information is practically a requirement as far as SNSs are concerned. The purpose of such sites is to connect with friends and acquaintances, and using a recognisable moniker – whether one’s real name or a known nickname – is necessary in order that friends can find and link with you. In our research, participants generally said they used nicknames or first names to describe themselves online and, where nicknames or tag lines were used, these were often based on private jokes with friends rather than being an attempt to disguise their identity:

‘I’ve got a nickname that I use, that we picked up on holiday.’ (*Girl, 17, ABC1*)

Box 2.2: Information provided by teenagers online (figures from United States)

- 82% of profile creators have included their first name in their profiles.
- 79% have included photos of themselves.
- 66% have included photos of their friends.
- 61% have included the name of their city or town.
- 49% have included the name of their school.
- 40% have included their instant message screen name.
- 40% have streamed audio to their profile.
- 39% have linked to their blog.
- 29% have included their email address.
- 29% have included their last names.
- 29% have included videos.
- 2% have included their mobile phone numbers.
- 11% of profile-owning teens post their first and last names on publicly-accessible profiles
- 5% of profile-owning teens disclose their full names, photos of themselves and the town where they live in publicly-viewable profiles.

Source: Lenhart and Madden (2007)

‘[You have] pictures – so you know who they are. But also, like, after a while, it just starts becoming – like when you see the name come up somewhere you would be like, yeah that’s so and so.’ (Boy, 18, C2DE)

Social networking profiles were also referred to as regularly used for ‘self-advertising’. It was repeatedly asserted that users needed to make their profiles attractive in order that people would want to befriend them. In order to do this, including photographs was a requirement:

‘You’re like advertising [on Bebo] so you like put your own picture up and your own information.’ (Girl, 13, C2DE)

This idea of self-advertising was frequently referenced, and led to many young people disregarding privacy options where these would limit ‘self-advertising’ opportunities. For example, setting your profile to ‘private’, using the tools provided by the SNS itself, meant that other people could not view your online ‘advertisement’. This would negatively impact on your ability to make friends:

‘If you want to make new friends on the internet then [if you have it set to private] no one can view your profile to make friends with you.’ (Boy, 15, C2DE)

However, young people’s assessments of the balance between publicising and privacy contained some inherent contradictions. Young people expressed clear discomfort with the idea of ‘weirdos’ looking at their profiles online. But while participants did not like the thought of being spied on, they also admitted feeling competitive with regard to the numbers of people who viewed their profile, and they highlighted the importance of appearing to have a lot of friends:

‘I don’t like the idea of people going through, like they can see your display picture, obviously, but I don’t like the thought of them actually going through, like perving on you, sending photo comments and you’re just like – it’s weird people.’ (Boy, 18, C2DE)

‘I dislike that you have random people going on your Bebo and looking at your stuff and being a bit weird but I do like the way I can contact my friends free and look at my friends’ profiles and see any new stuff.’ (Girl, 13, ABC1)

Another area where young people were often lax in terms of privacy, is in responding to quizzes and questionnaires online. On MySpace, the bulletin board feature is often used to post responses to short quizzes. A recent posting from one identifiable 16-year-old female included answers to the following questions:

- do you love anyone:
- do you hate anyone:
- do you have good relationships with friends:
- do you have good relationships with family:
- which friend do you like the most:
- which family member you like the most:
- what do you value more, friendship or a perfect relationship:
- how important is sex in a relationship to you:
- are you attracted to people of the same sex:
- who was the last person you lusted after:
- do you trust people with your love:
- could you have sex with someone you do not love:
- are you a loving person:
- do you even believe in love:
- who is the most important person to you:
- have you lost your virginity:
- have you ever kissed or done anything with someone of the same sex:
- who was the last person you had sex with:

(MySpace questionnaire, uploaded 7/3/07)

She answered further questions regarding her favourite alcoholic drink, drug and so on, despite the fact that she may not have been aware that the answers she provided were visible to people using the site.

The idea is that users post the answers to these questions to the bulletin board. Other members of the poster's network are then supposed to add their own answers, re-post to the bulletin board and reach a new network of SNS users.

Despite the fact that SNS users' networks can stretch to many hundreds, or even thousands, of contacts – some of whom will be personally known to the poster but many of whom will not and will instead be captured under the elusive phrase 'friend of friend' – young users could see no risks involved in participating in such activities. Despite the fact that there have been recent press stories regarding potential employers or universities searching social networking sites to find out information about applicants (BBC 2007a, Lisberg 2008), compared with meeting up with people in real life, or giving away personal details such as addresses, this type of activity was barely discussed in a 'risk' context at all:

'Everyone does quizzes, it's not too much of a bad idea; it's only a bad idea if your teachers catch you.' (Boy, 14, C2DE)

Perhaps the clearest way to articulate the contradiction in young people's attitudes is to understand their behaviour as being made up of private conversations that take place in public spaces (Shirky 2008). To a limited extent, this is already a society-wide trend, with mobile phones enabling people to have 'private' conversations in very public places – for example on transport – on a regular basis. However, these conversations are temporary in nature and provide no lasting, meaningful trace. This is very different to the long-lasting nature of conversations carried out online, which may remain available for many years to come and can typically be linked easily to the poster, along with a whole host of other identifying information.

Exposure to advertising

A willingness to abandon privacy has strong links to young people's potential increased exposure to

advertising in online environments. There has been a long agreement that advertising to particularly young children should be limited. The advertising of harmful products – for instance alcohol and tobacco – to young people has long been proscribed, and the concept of ‘harmful’ has recently been widened to include junk food. Under new Ofcom guidelines, advertising of junk food is restricted alongside broadcast television programmes that have substantial appeal to under-16s.

However, there is also rising concern at the impact of advertising itself – over and above the products it promotes. The commercialisation of childhood has become an emerging theme for policymakers, academics and parents alike. Evidence shows that the more involved children are with consumerism, the more likely they are to experience depression, anxiety and stress-related physical discomfort (Schor 2004). In particular, these symptoms are shown to be exacerbated by poverty: children from the poorest socio-economic groups are the most interested in consumer and materialistic concerns (Mayo 2006).

Alongside these policy concerns, there has been an expansion in the children and young people’s market, as both the expenditure of young people and their influence on parental purchases has increased (Schor 2004).

Each year, young people in the UK spend an estimated £680 million of their own money on snacks and sweets, a further £660 million on clothing, £620 million on music, £400 million on footwear, £350 million on computer software, £250 million on magazines and £38 million on toiletries (Childwise 2005, cited in Margo 2007). It is no wonder that producers have sought to advertise their wares to this growing market.

Advertising to children has traditionally been limited along developmental lines. As far as broadcast media is concerned, by the age of five most (but not all) children are able to differentiate between advertisements and programming, to a limited extent. However, they still see adverts as entertainment or unbiased information.

A deeper understanding of the persuasive intentions of advertisers occurs by around eight years old. According to one study, 53 per cent of children could understand this by ages 6-7, and 87 per cent by ages 8-9. By ages 10-11, almost all (99 per cent) of children recognised that advertisements were attempting to sell products (Robertson and Rossiter 1974).

At the age of eight, young people also recognise that advertisements do not always tell the truth (Schor 2006). But research shows that the presence of scepticism does not affect the desire for the advertised product, even for 9- to 10-year-olds (Brucks *et al* 1998, Roedder 1999). In fact, longitudinal research shows that adverts have a strong positive influence on demand – especially for girls (Saffer and Dave 2003, Saffer and Chaloupka 1999).

In the UK, advertising has been regulated in light of these findings, with advertising to under-12s heavily restricted. But recently there have been accusations that advertisers are seeking to undermine agreements around age appropriateness and to develop a more sophisticated, adult-like relationship with children and young people from an earlier age (see Margo *et al* 2006 for a full discussion). In particular, concerns have been raised about the practices of advertisers in online environments – particularly those that are popular with young people, such as social networking sites.

Advertising is a huge part of SNSs such as MySpace and Bebo. Whether on behalf of a large commercial identity (the Coca-Cola ads by the band White Stripes were first shown on MySpace) or originating from an unsigned band, an individual’s clothing label or promoter of a local club night: marketing material of one form or another pops up in comments and on bulletin boards on a more than daily basis.

Such material also becomes an integral part of users’ profiles. Just as young people make connections with bands or famous people to ‘write themselves into being’ and build their online profile, flyers for club nights and other promotional material serve to illustrate the users’ frames of reference, interests and alignments that exist within their networks.

In a survey by the European Research into Consumer Affairs (ERICA), 48 per cent of children said they had seen something online that made them want to make a purchase, and one quarter of those

surveyed had bought items online (European Research into Consumer Affairs 2001). Research also suggests that children can be confused by the blurring of advertisement and content on websites. Young people who are quite critical of mainstream advertising are much less likely even to be aware of such practices (Seiter 2004). 'Advertorial' content regularly features on brands' own websites, where it of course not subject to the same guidelines that apply to advertisements in paid-for online spaces.

Marketers can create more meaningful relationships with consumers online than they can offline, offering levels of interactivity that are impossible with broadcast adverts. This has been used to great effect on social networking sites – particularly Bebo, which features brand profiles on the front page of the site. Young people can become 'friends' with these brands, submitting their own content to the profile page, adding comments and engaging in a variety of interactive activity. Concerns around this practice were raised recently when it emerged the 'Skittles' brand of confectionary had paid Bebo a six-figure sum to feature heavily on the site and to recruit young people from aged 13 upwards to be its 'brand ambassadors'.

Brand identity of young people in Britain is already significantly higher than other developed nations, including in the US (Mayo 2005). By entwining brands even further with young people's online identities, the practices of advertisers on social networking sites are likely to further exacerbate the problem.

Plagiarism and web credibility

The internet has undoubtedly revolutionised the way we access and share information. The educational benefits of information and communication technology (ICT) have long been heralded by policymakers, and young internet users regularly record going online to complete their homework tasks. However, concerns have arisen regarding the extent to which the internet facilitates a 'copy and paste' culture, in which young people are relatively unquestioning about the veracity of information accessed online and equally prepared to present it as their own work.

It is, of course, difficult to assess the scale of the problem, and the extent to which plagiarism has drastically increased with the emergence of the internet. Copying entire paragraphs from books or study guides was not unheard of in a pre-digital age – however, there are now several sites on the web that offer essays to download, either for free or for a small fee. Added to this, there are translation sites that can translate foreign-language texts into English or vice versa, as well as information resources such as Wikipedia from which large swathes of text can be copied and pasted into an essay.

Throughout ippr's deliberative workshops with young people plagiarism was described as extremely common, and a large number of participants in all the groups admitted to cutting and pasting information from the internet and using it in school work. The only limiting factors were seen to be practical, in terms of the consequences of being caught. To escape this, respondents detailed the ways in which they had honed their plagiarism skills in order that it would not be detected:

'If I've got an English essay, I'll go on Google, type in what the essay's about and copy and paste it – it's done.' (Boy, 15, C2DE)

'I wouldn't download a whole essay because they'd find out but I'd download a lot of it.' (Girl, 14, ABC1)

'It's alright, you can edit it and do some spelling mistakes or it's gonna look too good.' (Girl, 13, C2DE)

It is this more sophisticated use of work that teachers themselves admit is problematic in terms of identifying instances of plagiarism. While older age groups (17- to 18-year-olds) did recognise plagiarism as a moral issue, discussions around this were very limited and implicit rather than overtly tackled. For example, they were more likely to try to justify their decision to cut, paste and re-word online information in their school-work:

'For course work, it's all about individual research, and it is research in a sense, you're just re-wording it.' (Boy, 18, C2DE)

Related to the issue of plagiarism is the extent to which young people are willing to accept what they read online at face value. Facer *et al* (2003) argue that young people tend to accept information online as immediately authoritative, while Bevort and Breda (2001) found that children did not question the credibility or trustworthiness of websites.

Young people interviewed for this research project placed a large amount of trust in the search engine Google, indicating it was the first step in attempting to find information online. It was also praised as a reliable website. Nonetheless, it still presented some difficulties in sifting through information to find what was required:

‘Google is quite reliable except that sometimes when you type things in it comes up with quite a lot of websites so you don’t know who to trust.’ (*Girl, 13, ABC1*)

They also expressed trust in large and established traditional media brands – particularly the BBC – partly because it was a known brand, but also because information was easily found on it:

‘If we want to find out news quick, we just type in BBC, that’s what we know, that’s what we see on TV.’ (*Boy, 14, ABC1*)

In assessing the reliability of information online, young people tended very much to trust their instincts, judging by such factors as how the website looks, its format and layout, as well as whether the website was ‘official’.

Where efforts had been made to tailor information and content to young people, reactions from young people themselves were mixed, and for the most part websites too obviously geared towards ‘young people’ were seen as patronising.

For instance, when discussing the Number 10 website aimed at young people, participants commented:

‘It makes you feel like a kid, like ‘kid’s news’ but you could just go on the BBC News like everyone else goes on. This is a bit, like, it’s trying to be cool.’ (*Boy, 14, ABC1*)

‘I hate it when they try to make it interesting for our age group cos it never works and they always make you feel really just stupid.’ (*Girl, 16, ABC1*)

The most popular websites were the ones that were most interactive – for example, websites that included the opportunity to listen to music, watch videos or engage through MSN, as the following young people explained in relation to the BBC Blast website, which offers a creative forum for young people:

‘That’s much more attractive because that’s got videos and it’s got games. That’s much better.’ (*Boy, 15, ABC1*)

‘It’s kind of like MySpace in a way cos it’s got message boards and video.’ (*Girl, 17, ABC1*)

In contrast to young people’s willingness to accept information at face value, there were strong levels of distrust where it came to financial matters, with many participants relating stories of ‘hacking’ and being ripped off financially. However, given young people’s limited means to engage in financial transactions online, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about how this will influence their behaviour in later years. What is interesting is that the link between privacy and personal information and financial safety was not drawn. The concept of identity theft, rather than financial risk in immediate, monetary terms, was not raised.

Summary

Our concerns around the effect of media must progress from simply considering the dangers of young people accessing age-inappropriate content. Restricting access to content on the basis of age is extremely hard to get right and, where the internet is concerned, has tended towards a ‘blanket 18 and under’ and ‘18 and above’ approach. However, there are clear differences in maturity and development between a 12-year-old and a 17-year-old.

What is more, adult assessments of content that is age appropriate are often misguided. Reactions to the Number 10 website, aimed at young people, show how quickly organisations risk alienating young people if they get the tone wrong.

It is important that we take proper account of the social context in which young people interact online – particularly since this is likely to have a strong effect on their behaviour and choices. Our evidence shows that young people are capable of learning through experience and developing their own strategies for dealing with some of the challenges that navigating a digital media landscape raises (for instance, developing safety constructs which determine whether or not to trust online).

However, there remain clear areas that present real concern, and that policy must begin to consider how to address – for instance, the prevalence of violence and the culture that surrounds this on video-sharing sites, the lack of distinction that young people draw between exposure in online and offline contexts, and the willingness to take information found online at face value.

This last point raises particular concerns where the scale of increase of online advertising is concerned. There is a strong sense that the opportunities afforded to young people online are exceeding their understanding – particularly when we consider situations in which judgments of a moral nature are required.

A common thread through each of these concerns that pervades young people's activity online is a lack of reflectiveness. There is very little sense of the invisible audience who may be witness to a young person's activities, or that information or content may be taken out of the social context in which it is made available and judged on different criteria. In attempting to address this, we must take peer influences seriously – especially given the lack of heed that young people pay towards other limits, such as legal restrictions. Tackling this is obviously a difficult area for public policy, as it involves changing behaviour within communities rather than introducing top-down rules and regulations.

A key need that emerges from this chapter is that of determining a new role for the corporate sector – including the internet industry, but also other companies that seek to engage with young people in online environments – to determine where the limits of their responsibility lie. The extent of socialisation that takes place in online environments would suggest that corporate entities now take on a significant role in raising youth. As such, it is important to strike an accord that determines how far these parties should go in attempting to provide greater limits and, importantly, stronger guidance and more positive norms for young people interacting in commercial domains that are otherwise largely free from adult mediation.

3. The limits of rules and regulations

The previous chapter showed that there are continuing areas of concern when it comes to young people's interaction with digital media. Using the internet does increase the possibility of being exposed to harmful content or at the receiving end of harmful behaviour. Especially when more extreme cases are highlighted by the media, it is understandable that the first place we look to solve such problems is formal regulation.

The internet poses a special challenge in this context, and there are great difficulties in imposing a formal regulatory environment online in a way that mirrors the regulation that we have long imposed on our broadcast industries. As a consequence, workable solutions are not likely to be solely regulatory. However, it is useful to understand the current regulatory position and begin to consider when and where it could be changed to reflect our rapidly changing media environment.

This chapter outlines the current regulatory framework, identifying what it covers and what it does not. It outlines some of the difficulties in regulating internet content, and considers solutions offered by self-regulation and co-regulation, and by technological systems such as filtering mechanisms. In doing so, it also highlights the role that may be played by parties other than government.

The current regulatory environment

This next section details the current regulatory environment as it applies to the internet and internet content. It outlines the most relevant laws and then reviews how government has specifically approached the regulation of communications – including television and the internet – in the UK and Europe.

Basic legal standards

During its early days, the internet was regularly characterised as a 'new frontier', or 'Wild West' – a lawless environment. However, online content has largely been subject to the same legal acts as other publications, and what is illegal offline is also illegal online. So, in addition to laws relating to child abuse images (for example), online postings are subject to defamation, libel and intellectual property law.

The following Acts of law are among those relevant to online content:

- **The Public Order Act 1986** makes it an offence for a person to use threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour, or to display any written material which is threatening, abusive or insulting which is likely to stir up racial hatred.
- **The Sexual Offences Act 2003** relates to the creation, possession and distribution of indecent images of children under 18 years of age. Where the internet is concerned, making an image includes downloading – as doing so means a copy of the image is created. This Act also created a new offence of 'grooming', which makes it a crime to befriend a child on the internet or by other means and to meet or intend to meet the child with the intention of abusing them.
- **The Defamation Act 1996** applies to the internet just as it applies to offline material: the definition of 'publication' under the Act includes websites where they are available for the public to access. Typically, the originator of defamatory remarks (in other words, the person who has written the comment or statement) is held responsible, and a website owner who allows other users to post comments is provided a defence under 'innocent dissemination' so long as the person or firm hosting the content 'took reasonable care in relation to its publication, and did not know, and had no reason to believe, that what he did caused or contributed to the publication of a defamatory statement.'
- **The Obscene Publications Acts 1956 and 1964** make it an offence to publish any content that may 'deprave and corrupt' those likely to read, see or hear it. This could include images of extreme sexual activity, such as bestiality, necrophilia, rape or torture. Importantly, the test for obscenity is the tendency to corrupt or deprave an adult, rather than a child or young person. As

a result, law enforcers recognise that this legislation is likely only to relate to the most extreme images rather than preventing the majority of online pornography.

However, while these laws are applicable online they are nonetheless difficult to enforce. This is for a number of reasons, which we shall explore in the section ‘Why is internet content excluded?’

We now go on to look at regulation relating specifically to the content of communications.

Regulation of communications content

Here we look at the Communications Act 2003, the European Audio Visual Media Directive (2006), self-regulation and co-regulation, and technological solutions.

The Communications Act 2003

Where broadcast content is concerned, we do not simply expect programmes to meet a basic standard of being legal. Film, radio and television content has long been subject to standards that extend beyond basic laws and relate to more subjective areas, such as taste and decency, and curtailing the provision of content that is likely to cause harm or offence. The most important piece of legislation in this respect is the Communications Act 2003. This Act established Ofcom, and defined the limits of content regulation as we formally know it.

Box 3.1: Ofcom’s Standards Code

Ofcom’s Standard Code sets out obligations for television and radio programmes to ensure that:

- People under the age of 18 are protected
- Material likely to encourage or incite the commission of crime or to lead to disorder is not included
- News is presented with due impartiality and accuracy
- Adequate protection is provided from offensive and harmful material
- Advertising is not misleading, harmful or offensive nor contravenes the prohibition on political advertising.

Because of the looming prospect of convergence, the Act sought to take a platform-neutral approach to content regulation. So, rather than saying ‘all content on television is regulated’, Ofcom’s Standards Code applies to all ‘television licensable content services’. Thus content delivered via mobile phones, the internet or other distribution means could be included, as long as it is made available for reception by the general public (in other words, is not a ‘private’ service) and is made up of television programmes.

So for example, one element of the code translated practically is the implementation of the watershed, which runs from 9pm to 5am. This provides a guiding device to parents and young people that any content broadcast after 9pm will be aimed at adult audiences.

What is not covered by the Act? The definition excludes services provided by electronic communications networks as long as their main purpose is not to make television or radio programmes available for a viewing public. They are also excluded if they offer a ‘two-way service’ (in other words, one that relies on users ‘pulling’ content via the internet, rather than having content ‘pushed’ to them).

Thus the Communications Act explicitly excludes internet content from Ofcom’s regulatory remit. But as the internet becomes a major source of entertainment, news and information, this stance has raised some difficult political questions.

The European Audio Visual Media Directive (2006)

In Europe, there has recently been strong debate over the proposed amendments to the Television Without Frontiers Directive (TWFD). The TWFD was introduced in 1989 to set standards across Europe for the regulation of television services, both in economic terms, and in terms of content.

Over the past few years, the European Commission has investigated updating the Directive in order to reflect the changing nature of audio-visual services. The debate has raged over the extent to which

regulation should be extended to internet content, and the revised Directive has been through numerous drafts in order to ensure that while on-demand or Internet Protocol Television (IPTV) - delivered broadcast content is captured, internet content is not.

The UK, led by Ofcom and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), has held fast to its position that this is the right direction to take, and that more substantial legislation would dramatically harm a burgeoning new media industry, stall innovation, and adversely impact the development of Europe's 2010 agenda (Jowell 2006).

The final text of the Directive has now been agreed, and member states have until the end of 2009 to implement it. The most significant change is the requirement that member states have to introduce 'co-regulation' of video on-demand services. Other than this, it is likely that only a few regulatory changes will be necessary. However, the path of the Directive has offered the most high-profile opportunity to discuss regulatory issues in relation to the internet for some time.

Why is internet content excluded? There are a number of reasons why the internet has been treated differently from other broadcast content. We discuss three of these here.

First, internet users are seen as being much less passive than viewers of broadcast content. This is partly because internet users select the content they want to view and 'pull' this content by typing in a website address (URL) or clicking on a link. This is fundamentally different to the way in which linear broadcast content is effectively 'pushed' to the viewer. However, it is not clear for how much longer this distinction between passive and active will remain salient, given moves to deliver broadcast content via an on-demand model that provides consumers with more choice and control over their own media experience.

Furthermore, content consumers also often contribute to the regulation of content and information online. Wikipedia is perhaps the most prominent example, where users actively contribute to drafting entries for the online encyclopaedia. But users also assist in establishing the reputation and veracity of other information on the internet. Reputation systems enable the online marketplace eBay to work effectively, as buyers and sellers rate the quality of each others' transactions.

Alongside this, there are also a range of filtering and blocking tools that enable users to manage their own experiences: filtering out unwanted content (for instance, spam email messages) or blocking pop-up advertisements.

The second key factor is that editorial control on the internet is widely distributed. Much of the transformative nature of the internet is afforded by the fact that anyone can post content – for instance, by writing a blog, setting up a website, posting videos to YouTube, uploading photos to Flickr, or simply creating a MySpace profile or commenting on a news story. This means the internet is a rich and diverse source of opinion and information unlike any other.

The third, perhaps most important, factor in understanding why the internet is treated differently is in recognising the different technical characteristics that distinguish the internet from a broadcast media model. In legislative terms, the internet is seen as a distribution tool – a 'carrier' analogous to the post office. Under the e-Commerce Directive of 2001, Internet Service Providers (ISPs) are afforded 'mere conduit' status. They have no responsibility to monitor content that passes over their servers. This is because it is extremely difficult to control content standards in an environment in which anyone can be a publisher of content, and where a range of providers are responsible for meeting user demands.

While users will typically access services via an ISP such as AOL, BT, Bulldog or Eclipse, the content they choose to access will not necessarily be provided by these companies. It may not originate from the same country as the point of access, and may in fact cross jurisdictions depending on the different suppliers involved in finally delivering data to the individual.

This poses many problems. There is a difficulty in deciding which point in the supply chain is the correct place to assign responsibility. Moreover, particularly where media content is concerned, regulation tends to be based on national boundaries to which the internet does not confine itself: content originates from, and can be received by, people all over the world.

International standards are difficult to secure – particularly where issues of taste and decency are concerned. As Baroness Scotland put it, ‘there is no international consensus on what constitutes obscenity, or when the freedom of an adult to have access to obscene or pornographic material should be constrained’ (Hansard 2004).

Where content originates from overseas but falls foul of UK law, there are various obstacles in having such content removed – particularly if it does not qualify as illegal in its country of origin. Even where content is illegal, countries may not have the same appetite or resources to tackle the problem. This fact is illustrated when we consider online images of child abuse: of those reported in the UK, the vast majority originates from overseas – most commonly the US and Russia (IWF 2006).

Self- and co-regulation

The fact that the internet presents such a qualitatively different environment for regulators – and one in which laws are difficult to enforce, compared to traditional broadcast media – means that simply extending a legal solution to cover concerns that are currently arising around children and young people’s use of the internet is not always the most effective course of action.

In response, industry and government have sought alternative ways to make the internet a safer place, focusing on the use of self and co-regulatory mechanisms of which, under the Communications Act 2003, Ofcom has a duty to promote the development and use.

Self-regulation is typically regulation undertaken by the industry partners concerned. It is seen as much more flexible than formal legislation. In an environment where innovation has occurred at a rapid rate and the limits of technological possibility change regularly, this is seen as a key advantage as it is able to respond more quickly to the changing demands of the market, and it can involve industry actively in setting standards that will not limit the potential of innovation. It is also seen to have certain benefits in terms of cost, typically being much cheaper than formal regulatory mechanisms.

In contrast, **co-regulation** involves a state actor, and may require legal provisions in order to ensure that industry commits to the scheme across the board. Schemes are still often designed by industry, so they retain some of the benefits of self-regulation in understanding what works and what does not, but a co-regulatory scheme is likely to give the relevant parties greater incentives to participate. This is normally because the regulatory body responsible for co-sponsoring the scheme holds ‘reserve’ or ‘backstop’ powers to enforce formal regulation where necessary.

Deciding when and where self- or co-regulation is the most appropriate regulatory mechanism often depends on a range of circumstances. In a paper to the European Policy Forum, Foster (2007) identifies these as:

- The degree of alignment between the incentives of industry and the aims of policymakers and the public
- The extent to which the general public is sufficiently informed to make good decisions
- Whether there is a credible threat to ensure compliance – for instance, is the business risk of breaching a self-regulatory code sufficient or are significant financial penalties necessary?
- Whether the model used would be enough to generate public and political trust in its efficacy and avoid future moral panics.

To take an example, we now consider how three organisations – the Internet Watch Foundation, the Advertising Standards Association and eBay – fit these characteristics.

The Internet Watch Foundation

The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) was set up in 1997. Often cited as one of the UK’s most successful co-regulatory models, it was initially intended to simply provide a hotline for reporting child-abuse images. However, in 2001 its remit was widened at the request of the Home Office to include criminally racist content, and it now deals with this and potentially illegal adult pornography. Reports can be made to the IWF via a hotline.

Once a report is received, the organisation will investigate whether the image is illegal, trace the host of the content and, if the host is in the UK, give them notice that the image should be removed. It will also notify law enforcement. If the image is found to be hosted outside the UK, the organisation will contact the relevant international body. To facilitate regulation of such a boundary-less medium, the IWF was instrumental in setting up INHOPE (an international body of internet hotline providers). INHOPE's members include groups from the US, Austria, Spain, Belgium, Australia, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Greece, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Holland, South Korea and Sweden.

While the incentives of industry, government and the public are broadly aligned – for example, all parties would prefer to rid the internet of child-abuse images – the issue is serious enough to require substantial penalties for disregarding the advice of a code. Even though ISPs are not the creators of such images, they are nonetheless liable for their publication if and when they have knowledge of their existence. The penalty is severe. Although the IWF is often referred to as a 'self-regulatory body', this label is inaccurate since it largely performs functions otherwise undertaken by law enforcement. ISPs and other industry players cannot choose not to abide by the IWF's notices: to do so is to act illegally and risk prosecution.

The IWF's success means that it does command the trust of politicians and public and the prospect of replicating the IWF model and extending it to include other forms of content – for instance, that which is considered harmful or offensive has often been raised. Most recently, the suggestion of a 'clearing house' for internet content has been mooted (Hansard 2008). However, it is worth remembering that the success of the IWF is largely due to the content it deals with and the fact that it has such a specific remit.

The IWF model for removal of content follows the so-called 'notice and takedown procedure'. Put broadly, this procedure effectively follows the following pattern:

1. A user identifies a piece of content that he or she believes infringes UK law – for instance, is libellous, contains illegal images (such as those of children being abused) or infringes copyright.
2. He or she notifies the relevant ISP, which is then put on notice.
3. The ISP will investigate the claim of illegality and remove the content accordingly. Where content contravenes UK law, it may notify police or, if the offence breaches the ISP's own content guidelines, suspend the content poster's account.

This procedure may seem simple enough, but it is subject to many complexities, which are often overlooked by policymakers and campaigners alike.

In 2000, a pan-European project called RightsWatch explored the use of notice and takedown in order to develop a tool to achieve prompt removal of copyright-infringing material from the internet. The project was fraught with difficulties, and ended in 2002 without consensus being reached. A major problem it faced was finding an easy way to identify whether content reported did contravene UK law.

While this is not a problem in some contexts, in others it is very problematic. Considering the case of child-abuse images online, the law is very clear that such images are always illegal. When ISPs are given notice of the presence of such content on their servers, they are quick to remove it, as it is easy to judge its illegality. In these circumstances, it is also rare that the individual or organisation posting the content argues their case and attempts to defend their actions, meaning that the intermediary (typically the ISP) is not placed in the position of judging who is right and who is wrong.

But for other content, judgments can be less clear-cut. In the case of copyright, copyright exceptions (in the UK, fair-dealing provisions) that enable limited use of copyrighted works, as well as the fact that copyright is not a registered right, provide difficulties in assessing whether claims of infringement are justified. An anxiety to act quickly and avoid potential legal action can lead to hasty, under-investigated removal of content (Ahlert *et al* 2004). This could have severe impacts on free speech, research and reporting.

There are similar issues with assessing taste and decency and the often-complicated assessment of what constitutes a libellous statement. ISPs have expressed frustrations that a lack of guidance in the

notice and takedown procedure – for instance, signifying exactly what constitutes a ‘notice’, how quickly an ISP should act to remove, and an indemnity from making ‘incorrect’ judgments – has left them in position of acting both as judge and jury, and of dealing with complaints that would otherwise be settled in a court of law.

Any clearing house dealing with internet content would have to keep these factors in mind and set up procedures to be able to deal with the complexities of complaints that are likely to come in. It cannot merely offer a hotline that passes complaints on to a third party intermediary: clear standards and guidelines for complaints must first be established.

The Advertising Standards Association

An example of a self-regulatory system is the Advertising Standards Agency, which enforces self-regulatory codes for broadcast and non-broadcast advertising. The Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) Code applies to non-broadcast advertising and includes provisions such as:

- Marketing communications should contain nothing that is likely to cause serious or widespread offence. Particular care should be taken to avoid causing offence on the grounds of race, religion, sex, sexual orientation or disability. Compliance with the Code will be judged on the context, medium, audience, product and prevailing standards of decency.
- Marketers, publishers and owners of other media should ensure that marketing communications are designed and presented in such a way that it is clear that they are marketing communications.
- Marketers and publishers should make clear that advertisement features are advertisements – for example, by heading them ‘advertisement feature’.
- Marketing communications addressed to, targeted at or featuring children (in other words, under 16) should contain nothing that is likely to result in their physical, mental or moral harm.
- Advertisements must not take advantage of the immaturity or natural credulity of children.
- Advertisements must not lead children to believe that unless they have or use the product advertised they will be inferior in some way to other children or liable to be held in contempt or ridicule.

As far as internet advertising is concerned, the CAP Code covers:

- Advertisements in paid-for space such as banner advertisements and pop-ups
- Advertising content in commercial emails
- Sales promotions wherever these appear online
- Commercial text messages
- Viral marketing emails
- Paid-for entries in search-engine results
- Advertisements on electronic kiosks and billboards
- Advertisements in electronic games
- Use of email addresses for marketing purposes (for example, spam).

It does not cover most editorial content on websites (other than paid-for ads and sales promotions) or items posted on bulletin boards and newsgroups, unless these are placed by a commercial company.

Anyone can complain about an advertisement. After receiving a complaint, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) will investigate to assess whether the advertisement has breached the terms of the CAP Code. Marketers are informed of the ASA’s decision, and may be asked to withdraw or amend their marketing communications accordingly. If they do not comply, sanctions may be applied. These can include the adverse publicity received from a negative ASA ruling, advertisement alerts that prevent non-compliant advertisers from being able to access advertising space of the Committee of

Advertising Practice's members. The ASA and CAP may require persistent offenders to have some or all of their marketing communications vetted by the CAP Copy Advice team, until the ASA and CAP are satisfied that future communications will comply with the Code.

The Code works insofar as the interests of industry and government policy are aligned: the advertising industry would prefer to escape formal regulation, as the work of the ASA is much swifter and more flexible. Likewise, the sanctions that the ASA can hand out – including exclusion from advertising space – have financial ramifications that are sufficiently severe to prevent continual offending.

Finally, there is a further consideration that applies to some internet services: the extent to which users themselves are willing to comply with rules and regulations online. Commitments to good behaviour are hard to come by, as we explored in the previous chapter. There have been some attempts to develop codes of ethics (BBC 2007b) but these have often been ridiculed or ignored. Simply imposing a code is not enough if there do not exist incentives to stick to it or norms to encourage compliance.

eBay

Perhaps the most successful example of self-regulation in this context is eBay. eBay is an online marketplace that uses a reputation system to establish trust between users, and to provide incentives for good behaviour within the marketplace.

For example, buyers and sellers are rated on their performance in acting swiftly and the quality of the goods sold. Buyers leave comments and a positive, negative or neutral rating for the seller, and the seller does the same for the buyer. The number of positive transactions over the lifetime of the users eBay membership is calculated to give the buyer or seller a star rating, indicating how reliable they are.

eBay encourages users to leave honest and fair feedback because of the reciprocal nature of the system. Whereas many internet sites seem to encourage negative behaviour and responses from those involved, an eBay user is unlikely to leave negative feedback where it is unwarranted as this is likely to result in they themselves receiving negative feedback in return. A negative or low approval rating has an effect on users experience of the site. For example, people with low approval ratings are often excluded from transactions, with sellers refusing to do business with buyers whose rating is low. Likewise, buyers are unlikely to interact with sellers whose selling history shows examples of low-quality goods or bad customer service.

Because buyers and sellers build up reputation over time, they are also discouraged from discarding their eBay persona and starting again: to do so would be to begin without a good reputation and therefore be little trusted in the online marketplace.

While eBay has long been seen as a workable solution for enabling trust online, the growth of the site, and in particular its use by established business, has recently led it to change its system and to deny sellers the chance to leave negative feedback for buyers in order that the balance of power may not be unfairly distributed in the sellers' favour (Schofield 2008).

Technological solutions

There have been a number of attempts to provide technical solutions to the problems posed by the internet, and to provide greater control to parents in limiting the content that their children are able to see. Filtering systems are typically set by the parent or guardian, and enable self-regulation of their child's experience. Alternatively, there have recently been movements in network-level blocking – for example BT's CleanFeed – which block certain sites for a whole range of users, or even entire countries.

Filtering

Filtering can range from being very restrictive – for example by limiting use to 'walled gardens', which allow access only to a number of pre-screened sites, to being less so – for example, by using 'key word' filters that search for keywords considered unacceptable and blocking sites accordingly.

Keyword filters may seem a useful solution, but they are also subject to the problem of ‘false-positives’ – in other words, they block ‘innocent’ sites containing offending words in a legitimate context. Ironically, this was experienced by members of the House of Commons, when Parliament’s own filtering system blocked content referring to the Sexual Offences Bill.

Filtering systems are available fairly cheaply, but parents’ knowledge of them is sparse. This has led to calls from child safety campaigners that filtering systems should be installed into each new computer as standard, and set at the highest level (CHIS 2004). Critics argue that this is not necessary, and say that limiting functionality and useability to such a degree risks returning the internet to the ‘dark ages’ (Sweney 2008). Filtering systems can also vary in quality. The Home Office has been working with the British Standards Association (BSA) to develop a ‘kitemark’ for filtering systems so that parents know they live up to certain standards.

Labelling

A further enhancement to filtering systems is combining them with labelling systems that indicate the ‘type’ of content that users are attempting to access. Perhaps the best-known labelling system is that provided by the US Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI), which continues to develop label systems offered by the Internet Content Ration Association (ICRA). This initiative was first launched in 1999, and is a free-of-charge labelling system that seeks to be internationally applicable by using ‘cross-cultural language’.

It works by inviting website owners to visit the ICRA website and complete a questionnaire about the content on their site. All the questions are of the ‘yes/no’ variety and cover the presence of nudity, sexual content, inappropriate language and so on. Once the questionnaire has been completed, the ICRA system generates a label that can be added to the meta-tag of the website. This essentially acts as a computer-readable description of the content contained by the site.

Parents are able to set access restrictions in accordance with the ICRA labelling questionnaire and filter content on this basis. For instance, they can specify that all content containing nudity or inappropriate language should be blocked. The filter will only block access to content that has actually been labelled, so the system relies on website publishers volunteering their site for rating and undertaking this task. Parents are also given the option of filtering all non-labelled content, though this is likely to vastly restrict the amount of content to which a young person can gain access.

Network-level blocking

Several countries have engaged in blocking at a network level. For instance, Pakistan recently banned YouTube due to the presence of content deemed offensive. China blocks a number of sites on a country-wide basis.

The UK internet industry does engage in network-level blocking primarily to stop access to sites known to regularly contain child-abuse images. The CleanFeed system, developed by BT, was introduced in 2004 and works against a list of repeat offender websites drawn up by the IWF. When a user attempts to access a site on this list, an error message is returned saying that the page cannot be found. While the system records how many times access is attempted, no further legal or investigatory action is taken.

Three weeks after launching Cleanfeed, BT reported 250,000 access attempts had been blocked. The system has nonetheless been the subject of some criticism. On its introduction, there were concerns that content would just move elsewhere and that ultimately the IWF would be forever involved in a game of ‘cat and mouse’ in trying to ensure that access to illegal content of this kind is cut off. There were also concerns that content would instead be shared increasingly over peer-to-peer networks, making it ultimately more difficult to discover and trace.

The most recent suggestion to improve the safety of the internet while engaging in network-level blocking or filtering was raised in a parliamentary debate. Conservative MP Hugo Swire suggested the creation of an ‘internet clearing house’, which itself would ‘build a dynamic filter and create a blacklist database which would be updated hourly’ (Hansard 2008). This blacklist would work along the same

lines as BT's CleanFeed but would have an expanded remit to include sites that glorified violence and terrorism, pornography, cyberbullying, suicide, internet gambling and anorexia websites.

The filter could then be used to offer two choices of content: one for adults and one for children, with the default setting being the child offering.

This is not the first time such a solution has been offered, and it is not likely to be the last. But as our exploration of the effectiveness of law enforcement online shows, solutions that may seem simple in offline contexts are not easily or effectively transferred online, for a number reasons.

In the first place, the internet clearing house would likely have to be an organisation of mammoth proportions in order that the blacklist could be kept anyway near up to date. It would also have to take a fairly blanket approach, banning whole sites rather than individual pieces of content within sites. If its remit did include sites that glorified violence or cyberbullying, YouTube would certainly have to be blacklisted, due to the fact that some videos posted online breach community guidelines in this manner.

Moreover, this option would seem to offer a very blunt distinction between content suitable for 'children' – in other words, those below 16 or 18 – and that suitable for adults. Our research highlights the difficulties in judging what content is suitable or not for different age groups up to 18. Such an approach risks making the internet essentially unappealing to young people and minimising risks to the extent that opportunities are also heavily quashed.

Finally, such an approach again focuses on the regulation of content as the most pressing issue in seeking to protect young people online. Again, it is imperative that we move beyond this limited thinking, towards a better understanding of how we may influence more positive experiences of engagement. This is the more challenging, but arguably more important, area that public policy must consider how to tackle.

Summary

There are clear difficulties in simply attempting to transfer to digital technologies a form of regulation designed for an offline or analogue context – particularly in the case of the internet. This is especially true when we remember that broadcast regulation has long been set along national boundaries, whereas the internet is a global phenomenon, with content and opportunities emerging from around the world. While the law can provide a framework, the job of 'regulating' the internet – that is, minimising the presence of illegal, harmful or offensive content and the levels of illegal, harmful or offensive activity online – cannot be left solely to government and law enforcement. For one thing, the cost would be prohibitive. For another, such an approach would rarely be successful.

Self- and co-regulation can be effective in some contexts, as can filtering systems adopted by parents, and the responsibility must be shared between industry, government, parents and users themselves. We must also ask ourselves whether this balance is currently fairly distributed, and whether each party has taken on their fair share. In some areas where young people are concerned, the right balance is currently missing.

One of the largest gaps in provision is the fact that there is currently no government body that has clear responsibility for this agenda. Instead, several government departments have an interest in different areas, and work continues along these departmental lines. This has an impact on monitoring standards, on suggesting action from industry, and on building capacity of users and parents. There is also some confusion regarding the number of bodies that cover internet content in some form or other – for example, the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) for news content online, the ASA for advertising online, the BBC Trust for BBC content – and some sense that the piecemeal system we are busy building up is becoming far too complex and lacks a single body to oversee all this activity.

The realities of the internet's technological structure mean that the responsibility to provide a safe environment must be extended beyond law enforcement and formal regulatory bodies. Industry has a significant role to play in promoting good practice and helping design and enforce workable guidelines. On the other hand, industry cannot do it all. The fact is that the internet is a technology

affording the user a great deal of choice and freedom. Users, or the guardians of users, must take some responsibility for the choices they make and the actions they take.

Overall, where the internet is concerned, it is important to maintain realistic expectations of what we can and cannot do. The internet is never going to be an entirely risk-free environment. Just as some prey on vulnerable people in real life, so are there some people who will seek to do so online. No young person can be entirely protected from content or people who may do them harm, but the risks can be minimised.

The success of self- and co-regulation relies on users themselves being able to make informed decisions: being 'media literate' in the way they access and use content and information. In the following chapter, we look at how media-literacy education and training is progressing in the UK, and outline areas in which it may be further developed still.

4. Learning by doing: empowering young people through media practice

Regulation cannot solve all of the challenges we currently face. The media landscape in a digital era is so radically different to that of analogue times that the levels of control and supervision we have come to expect may not survive much longer. As discussed in previous chapters, the levels of editorial control that could once serve to prevent young people from accessing content deemed unsuitable or age-inappropriate can no longer be effectively applied. The technological restrictions that are sometimes put in place can often present little more than ‘speedbumps’ which can be overcome if someone seeking material is determined enough.

The changes in autonomy and supervision of access mean that the levels and responsibility of regulation are shifting. The lack of a central point of control shifts responsibility to industry players, but the nature of the internet – and the autonomy that users exercise over their own experience – means that this responsibility is shared further down the supply chain, with users themselves. This means that parents and educators alike have an extended duty to enable young people to build their skill set so that they can manage their own experience effectively. This set of skills is often grouped under the heading of ‘media literacy’.

Meanwhile, while young people are able to manage their experiences online to a certain extent, there are some areas in which their experience is not enough. Our research shows there are clearly gaps that could be filled by media education of one form or another.

In this chapter we consider how the media-literacy agenda has been progressing in the UK, looking at the current approach employed by Ofcom. We then move on to look at where media literacy still needs to be improved, considering what kinds of skills need to be learned and the best place for teaching them.

The current approach to media literacy

Under the Communications Act 2003, Ofcom is given a duty to promote media literacy. There is no single agreed definition of what media literacy actually is, but Ofcom defines it as ‘the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts’ (Ofcom 2004: 2).

We will look at the current approach to media literacy in terms of access, understanding and creating media.

Access

As discussed in Chapter 1, almost two thirds of 8- to 15-year-olds now have access to the internet at home. Outside of the home, 99 per cent of schools have internet connections. Access is also available at libraries, community centres and internet cafés.

The UK has long been heading in the right direction as far as universal access to the internet is concerned. But this does not mean that the digital divide is a thing of the past.

Recent research shows that around one third of the population are digitally excluded (Dutton and Helsper 2007). It is often assumed that this figure largely relates to older population groups. However, 11 per cent of 16- to 24-year-olds do not use the internet (UK Online 2007). Clearly, digital exclusion is not just about access, instead ‘it encompasses a wider set of issues surrounding content, skills, and the wider social consequences of the increasing use of ICT in all aspects of life’ (Social Exclusion Unit 2005: 11).

Digital exclusion follows distributional patterns of wider aspects of social exclusion. For instance, over half of unemployed people are digitally excluded, as are 44 per cent of single parents (OXIS 2007). Research shows that middle-class children are far more likely to have home access (Livingstone *et al* 2005).

To overcome this, some schools have experimented with laptop-leasing schemes, enabling access to technology at lower cost. These schemes have been largely successful (Cabinet Office 2005) and, in

response, the Government has announced a two-year, £60 million ‘computer for pupils’ programme to enable the most disadvantaged pupils to have a computer at home.

The other side of the ‘access’ equation is access to information itself, rather than simply the technology. Just over one fifth of 9- to 19-year-olds who go online at least weekly say they always find what they are looking for. The majority (68 per cent) say they can usually find the information they need, 9 per cent say they cannot always find it, and 1 per cent say they often cannot find information relevant to their needs (Livingstone and Bober 2005).

Older children, those from middle-class backgrounds and those who say they have higher skill levels are more likely to report being able to find the information they are looking for online (ibid).

Understanding

As we have previously noted, young people’s critical interpretations of internet content are limited. Research shows that they tend to accept information on face value, with two in three 12- to 15-year-olds who have the internet at home trusting most of what they find online (Ofcom 2006a). Less than one third (31 per cent) of 12-15s who use the internet at home say they make any checks on new websites (from a prompted list of checks, including how up to date the information is, cross-referencing across other websites to check if the information is correct, and looking into who has created the website and for what purpose) (ibid).

At a deeper level, our research shows clear gaps in young people’s understanding of the consequences of their online activities. This generation is in danger of becoming the most transparent and open in history: youthful indiscretions can be recorded easily, and may be stored and made available for several years to come. There is very little understanding of who could use information in the future, and for what purpose.

Where bullying online is concerned, a lack of awareness of the compounding impact of online distribution on the extent of an individual’s humiliation is something that should be addressed. Some young people seem to overlook the additional harm caused to a person by having their humiliation played out repeatedly on sites such as YouTube, to hundreds if not thousands of spectators.

There is an urgent need to encourage within young people a greater understanding of how and when information is interpreted by audiences – a notion of an ‘imagined audience’ – in order to enable young people to take wider responsibility for their personal privacy online.

Creating media

Perhaps the largest gap in young people’s media literacy as defined by Ofcom is the extent to which they are involved in creating media themselves.

The opportunities for creating media are now readily available. Tools are cheap and easily accessible and, indeed, where video-recording equipment or internet access and software is concerned, currently in the hands of many young people (Ofcom 2006a). Yet, at present, levels of creativity are low. While young people will regularly engage in developing their MySpace page – making it attractive, adding content and so on – very few young people go beyond this. Only one third of young people report having tried to set up a webpage (Livingstone and Bober 2005).

Our research showed that across all age groups, participants did not create content on the internet apart from when creating and maintaining social networking site (SNS) profiles. Creating and maintaining websites was considered to be too complicated and involving too much effort. Participants also reported that friends who had set up websites had received negative, abusive feedback, and said that this put them off:

[On creating websites] ‘It takes too much time.’ (Boy, 14, C2DE)

‘My friend... has one [a website] and she leaves pictures of her friends and people post comments like “This one’s ugly”, and it’s just like – why would you want to do that?’ (Girl, 15, C2DE)

‘If people don’t like it... they’ll start mugging it and they won’t leave it alone.’ (Boy, 15, ABC1)

While digital evangelists have often heralded the digital age in which anyone can capture a video on their mobile phone and quickly post it to video-sharing websites such as YouTube, we found that it was still far more common for participants to view videos than to create content. While 17–18 year olds were most likely to have created their own videos, these were often for social purposes, such as sharing jokes within friendship groups:

‘I think you can do it [put a video on YouTube] yourself, but I don’t know how.’ (Boy, 14, ABC1)

‘If you were going to do it everyday [putting your own videos online] you wouldn’t really have much of a life.’ (Girl, 14, ABC1)

It is clear, then, that young people are not likely to take up the opportunities afforded by digital media to be creative without some degree of guidance and encouragement. Much of young people’s lack of enthusiasm for undertaking such work is due to the fact that they simply consider it far too difficult. Facer *et al* describe setting up web pages as an ‘exotic activity’, with only 9 per cent of young people having engaged in web-design activities (Facer *et al* 2003). In comparison, modifying pages on SNSs is much easier, and it is to this task that young people devote a large proportion of their online time.

Improving media literacy

Having examined the current situation, it is clear that there is still scope to improve young people’s media literacy. Part of this includes ensuring universal access to technology and government initiatives should be promoted as widely as possible to make sure that the opportunities are taken up.

But if we are going to promote universal access, it must be accompanied by thorough media-literacy education. Attempts to teach media literacy can vary greatly in practice. At its least ambitious, education can revolve around simple ICT skills. At the more ambitious and innovative range of the scale, it is recognised that the three components of Ofcom’s media-literacy definition are closely linked and that ‘in principle, creative activity necessarily involves the kind of skills and understandings [featured in the media-literacy definition]; and it might also be expected to assist in their further development’ (Buckingham 2005b).

We look at what can be done first at considering the importance of learning through doing. We then examine a number of factors that have an impact on young people and consider the roles that they could play to strengthen young people’s media literacy: schools, the voluntary and community sector, government activities, and informal routes such as via parents and peers.

Learning through doing

Research shows that creating media is effective in enabling young people to develop media-literacy skills, and can be more successful than attempting to simply teach concepts that are important to full understanding. As deBlock *et al* (2004: 4) explain:

‘Through making media themselves children also develop a greater understanding of media generally. Their perceptions of the media in their everyday lives takes a different light. What they watch, play or read is no longer distant and elevated but they develop a strong sense of audience and of critique.’

A sense of the ‘imagined audience’ is important particularly when we consider young people’s lack of reflexivity in their online behaviours – particularly where issues such as bullying and protecting one’s privacy are concerned. This sense provides an opportunity for young people to ‘work through’ certain issues that are important for moral development and understanding. Making media can also help young people understand how media is created, and how messages are developed and tailored to the audience in question. In doing so, the practice can help to develop critical skills. These become more important when young people are faced with an abundance of information and with the challenge of knowing what to trust, what to take as fact and what to take as expressed opinion.

This approach of learning by doing has other significant benefits – for example, the promotion of self-esteem and an opportunity for increasing the voice of young people (Goodman 2003). This can be particularly important where disadvantaged young people are concerned – for example, opportunities for creating media have been shown to help improve motivation for disaffected young boys (Kirwin *et al* 2003).

This approach can also help young people strengthen their voice with regard to things that matter to them. There is currently a great deal of concern at the apparent apathetic nature of young people. Young people are now less likely to vote than ever before (Keaney and Rogers 2006), and deep cynicism is now the prevailing attitude among many young people in the UK (Lewis and Greenberg 2007). There is also firm evidence of many young people's disengagement from mainstream news. The number of young people who say they only follow the news when something important is happening has leapt from 33 to 50 per cent in the past five years (Ofcom 2007a). Two thirds of young people also agree with the view that 'much of the news on TV is not relevant to me' (*ibid*), and actively distance themselves from it.

Engagement with news media is a crucial part of active citizenship: evidence shows that voting is positively correlated with news viewing (Norris 1996), while the mass media remains the key channel through which people can access the public realm and political debate (see Dahlgren 1996 for a full discussion).

It is imperative that we seek new ways to engage young people in debate and discussion in order to halt declines in political participation and civic engagement. Increasing their voice has been a policy concern for several years and new initiatives are seeking to ensure that children can influence the decisions that affect them, for example through distributing youth budgets devolved from local authorities.

Now, we are not attempting to claim that involvement in creating media can resolve the entrenched problem of young people's disaffection with politics, nor be the sole way in which young people should make their voice heard. But there are clear opportunities to help young people create content which is relevant to their lives and communities and to engage young people in the world around them and capture their views and ideas.

In short, media-literacy training of this kind can empower children as citizens, not simply as more informed consumers. But while this kind of creative activity happens in some areas, it is far from a universal opportunity extended to all young people. Since the concept of media literacy was introduced into law through the Communications Act (2003), there have been repeated discussions as to where media literacy 'fits'. There are a number of providers that could potentially deliver a media-literacy agenda of this kind, but there has been little direction of where would be most suitable.

The role of schools

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) develops the national curriculum, which 'defines the knowledge, understanding and skills to which children and young people are entitled' (from www.qca.org.uk). Media literacy has no formal place in the curriculum, but there are opportunities across subject areas to include aspects of media literacy. In the first place, use of ICT is a requirement in the secondary curriculum and remains a required subject through Key Stage 4.

ICT, Citizenship and English provide the most obvious opportunities for media-literacy education. For example:

- **The ICT syllabus** expects pupils to be charged with 'exploring the ways that ICT can be used to communicate, collaborate and share ideas on a global scale' as well as, 'recognising issues of risk, safety and responsibility surrounding the use of ICT and 'recognising that information must not be taken at face value, but must be analysed and evaluated to take account of its purpose, author, currency and context'.
- **The citizenship syllabus** states that study should include 'the role of the media in informing and influencing public opinion and holding those in power to account' (Key Stage 3). In this area,

the curriculum should also provide opportunities for pupils to work with a range of community partners and to 'use and interpret different media and ICT both as sources of information and as a means of communicating ideas'.

- **English teaching** has a long history of drawing on a variety of media texts, and this approach continues to form part of the curriculum.

Alongside this, media education can take place explicitly within media studies courses taken at GCSE or A Level.

Nevertheless, the scope for increasing the levels of media-literacy teaching within schools is limited. The curriculum is already noted as being fairly crowded, and despite the possibility for including these skills in citizenship education, there are also a great many other aspects of citizenship to cover. Across the range of agencies that may have a role in promoting media literacy in the formal education arena – the QCA, local education authorities (LEAs), the British Education Communications Technology Agency (Becta) and the Teacher Development Agency – none have media literacy as their primary focus. Each of these bodies clearly has higher priorities.

While there are recognised areas of good practice, teaching is nowhere near universal. It can often depend on the skills and capabilities of teacher expertise, as well as the level of access to suitable resources (Kirwan *et al* 2003). And, while 8- to 11-year-olds are happy to learn media skills from teachers or parents, nearly half of 12- to 15-year-olds prefer to learn about the media from their peers (Ofcom 2006a).

The capacity for young people to build their media literacy at school is also impacted by the level of restrictions that schools place on technology use. Several schools ban access to social networking sites, or place significant restrictions on use of equipment outside of a formal education programme. Such practices arguably hamper the extent to which schools themselves can assist in bridging the digital divide, by providing access for those who do not have it at home, and allowing these young people to explore the social aspects of this technology (Holloway and Valentine 2003).

The role of the voluntary and community sector

A number of organisations have a role in promoting media literacy across the informal sector. Many of these are included as signatories to the Media Literacy Charter (at www.medialiteracy.org.uk/taskforce/) developed by the Media Literacy Task Force – an organisation that brings together the BBC, the British Board of Film Classification, the British Film Institute, Channel 4, ITV, the Media Education Association, The UK Film Council and Skillsset.

The Media Literacy Charter is a relatively short document outlining a number of principles to which signatories commit themselves. These include 'supporting the principle that every UK citizen of any age should have opportunities, in both formal and informal education, to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to increase their enjoyment, understanding and exploration of the media' and 'encouraging, enabling or offering opportunities for people' to develop their skills set where media is concerned, including being able to 'identify, and avoid or challenge, media content and services that may be unsolicited, offensive or harmful'.

Signatories to the charter include specialist media organisations, media colleges and youth organisations, all of which have a role in delivering media literacy in the informal sector.

Across the piece, the informal sector has a hand in delivering out-of-school media-related activities. The majority have a commitment to encouraging the development of young people's skills, primarily through learning by doing. In addition, there is a large community media sector in the UK encompassing organisations that produce radio and television programming and internet content. Still, provision is far from universal.

Community media and youth media projects often share many features in common, but perhaps the most prominent is an insecure, and often haphazard, funding base. In interviews with a range of media practitioners from Southwest England, many expressed frustrations that a great deal of their time was spent seeking funding, and that the short-term nature of funding received often meant they

were unable to provide a continual or developmental programme for the young people involved. Instead, projects were episodic and discrete. Other research reports concur that across the sector there is a lack of strategic, long-term funding. There are also few forums for sharing expertise and experience and establishing best practice (Kirwin *et al* 2003).

There is a range of bodies that fund activities in the UK. These include the Arts Council, Creative Partnerships, the UK Film Council (through its Regional Screen Agencies) and grant-making bodies, such as First Light. In 2006, the Government launched MediaBox – a £6 million fund aimed at funding media activities among young people. But the majority of this money is hotly contested, or can often be focused towards outcomes or projects that do not specifically involve teaching media literacy.

For example, MediaBox explicitly stipulates that grant money cannot be directed towards funding adult supervision or youth workers' involvement in media projects: the projects must be led, managed and delivered by young people themselves. While this can offer many benefits, it misses out on the opportunities that can be gained from adult supervision – particularly from media practitioners, who may have significant expertise to share. Our evidence suggests that most young people require some degree of encouragement and guidance in order to successfully deliver media projects and to become active 'creators', rather than just consumers of media.

The role of government

If a new media-literacy agenda is to have impact, it will need greater coordination and direction, with a degree of assurance that media-literacy teaching will be a priority at some level. Currently, Ofcom is responsible for 'promoting' the media-literacy agenda. This may have made sense when the Communications Act first materialised as, since internet content was excluded from the Act, some system was needed to ensure that the needs of citizens in a new media environment were at the very least being considered. But Ofcom has little power to be bold, or to make substantial commitments to delivering on this agenda.

Media literacy should not solely be concerned with young people, but it is young people who are thought to be most vulnerable where risks posed by the internet are concerned. If we are going to provide young people with the skills to ensure their online experiences are positive, media literacy must have a place in young people's formative years – particularly during periods of adolescence, when they are most likely to pursue risks for social gain, and where the media is increasingly becoming the tool of choice. Media literacy should be given higher priority within government and placed directly within the department with the wherewithal to ensure relevant parties are delivering on the agenda – the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).

The role of parents

Of course, it is not only external organisations that have a role in developing children's capabilities in this area. Parents continue to have a role in maintaining the safety of their children where media is concerned, just as in other aspects of their child's life.

Three quarters of parents with children aged between 8 and 11 report feeling worried about their child seeing inappropriate things on the internet. For parents of 12- to 15-year-olds, this figure falls just slightly to 72 per cent (Ofcom 2006a). However, parents are likely to understate internet risks for their child, with only 16 per cent believing that their child has come into contact with online pornography, compared to 57 per cent of young people who say that they have (Livingstone and Bober 2005). Meanwhile, two thirds of parents of children within this age group say that their child knows more about using the internet than they do.

The ability of parents to deal with young people's experiences and provide instruction and guidance is fairly limited. While more than half have some form of filtering system installed, few parents have specific rules as to how their children should use the internet (*ibid*). This reflects the results of our research, in which young people reported very few parental restrictions and very little parental awareness of their online activities.

Table 4.1: Parental rules and practices to restrict young people's internet use

Type of rule	Activity	Percentage of parents who undertake activity
Privacy restrictions	Tell child not to:	
	• give out personal information online	86%
	• buy anything online	77%
	• use chatrooms	62%
	• fill out online forms or quizzes	57%
	• download things	24%
Peer-to-peer restrictions	Tell child not to:	
	• use instant messaging	24%
	• play games online	10%
	• use email	11%
Supportive practices (overt monitoring or co-using)	• Ask child what he/she did or is doing on the internet	81%
	• Keep an eye on the screen when the child is on the internet	63%
	• Help child when he/she is on the internet	57%
	• Stay in the same room as child using the internet	50%
	• Sit with child and go online together	32%
Checking up (covert monitoring)	• Check the computer later to see what the child visited	41%
	• Check the messages in the child's email account	25%

Source: Adapted from Livingstone and Bober 2005

Table 4.1 illustrates the types and frequency of parental rules and practices, showing that parents are more likely to engage in privacy restrictions although some supportive practices, such as using the internet along with their child, are also common.

The practices shown in Table 4.1 are more likely to be put in place for 9- to 11-year-olds than for older age groups. There was no difference in regulation applied to girls and boys, nor any differences on the basis of socio-economic status (*ibid*).

While there appears to be no direct relationship between implementing more or less regulation and the opportunities and risks that children encounter online, an indirect relationship is apparent. Parental regulation is shown to be positively related to children's internet skills: children whose parents have more rules in place tend to use the internet more and gain more skills (Livingstone *et al* 2005).

In terms of the types of regulation in place, supportive practices are shown to increase the online opportunities of children, while limits in peer-to-peer activity minimise both opportunities and risks (*ibid*). Supportive practices may be dependent on parents' own internet skills, and here a 'digital divide' stemming from parents' work and educational experiences can have an effect (Facer *et al* 2003).

There are significant discrepancies between what regulations parents say they have in place regarding media use in the home, and what children actually report (Buckingham 2005b). As our evidence shows, young people are proficient in side-stepping technical regulations, and are unaware of any specific regulatory practices in place. What is more, parental regulations are shown to become less effective with age, with intervention in 9-11-year-olds having the most significant impact (Livingstone *et al* 2005).

Clearly, parents can have a role in heightening their child's media literacy – particularly at younger ages – but this is related to the parents' own skill level: where this is lacking, more restrictive practices may be put in place that can limit the benefits that young people can reap from internet access. Evidence shows that in some key areas of concern, such as bullying, parents have little idea of how to deal with problems when reported (Livingstone *et al* 2004), and a tendency to overact (for instance, by removing internet access altogether) may decrease the likelihood of the child reporting issues when and where they do arise.

It is important, then, that we do not neglect parents when devising information campaigns to increase media literacy and minimise risks. This does not mean heightening awareness of the range of filtering mechanisms available, but rather concentrating on building parents' capacity to deliver a supportive online experience – particularly for younger children. This is in part predicated by parents' own level of ICT skill, so support in this area should also focus on helping parents develop useful skills in dealing with innovations in new media so they can understand and react to their children's experiences and behaviours online.

The role of peers

Evidence shows that young people are most likely to go to a friend if they have a problem they need to discuss (DCSF 2007). We have seen also that where digital media is concerned, young people are most likely to want to learn from their peers.

The potential role of young people in building each other's media literacy, and in supporting each other when problems arise, tends to be neglected in favour of an emphasis on cyberbullying, happy slapping and user-generated content. But peers form an important part of young people's socialisation, and become more so during the transition to adulthood.

The Government has recently announced further funding for pilots exploring the role of peer mentoring for young people experiencing bullying. Such pilots could be extended to an online context, with training provided for older pupils and older website users to provide advice. Youth services also have a role in helping peers to support each other. Youth services can provide an important framework through which supportive practices may be delivered, provided that the youth workers themselves have adequate understanding of the technologies and the experiences of young people.

Peers are extremely important given that the very essence of many 'Web 2.0' innovations (that is, services that facilitate creativity and information-sharing among users) is the collaboration that takes place between users themselves. Bebo, MySpace, YouTube, Facebook and other popular sites should agree to provide material related to peer support, and offer opportunities for qualified advice for young people experiencing problems online. Of course, getting this right will not be easy, and our research found that young people were very aware of when advice or information websites were 'talking down' to them or were aimed at people younger than them. Nonetheless, some sites do get it right: our workshop participants highly rated both the Youth Information website (www.youthinformation.com) and Frank (www.talktofrank.com). These sites should be used as models for extending advice provision for problems experienced by young people in the online world.

Summary

Because formal regulation alone is not fully effective, the internet requires a different approach: one that involves parents, guardians, educators and users just as it involves industry and government. Media literacy is a crucial part of this collaborative solution.

There is a common view that young people's understanding far exceeds that of adults. Often, where technical proficiency is concerned, this may well be true. However, there are clear examples where the opportunities offered by digital technologies, when coupled with young people's technical expertise, far exceed young people's conceptual understanding.

Increasing young people's awareness to enable them to be more reflective about their online behaviour, and its impact, should be a priority of media literacy. Encouraging young people to create media themselves will enable them to develop the necessary skills, as well as delivering other benefits such as increased self-esteem and motivation.

Our current media-literacy framework is not ambitious enough. There is currently no guarantee that media-literacy teaching in schools is reaching young people, and the school curriculum is already so crowded any expectation of formal education of this kind is unrealistic. However, our attempt at 'promoting' media literacy does not make best use of the expertise that is already available – particularly among the voluntary and community sector. A range of organisations exist that would be

able to deliver a dynamic media-literacy programme that would be both attractive and useful to young people. It is important that we take steps to exploit the potential of those bodies most ready to provide this facility.

Finally, the role of parents and peers should not be overlooked. These individuals are most likely to be useful at different developmental stages of young people's media use (parents for younger children and peers for older teenagers), and safety and empowerment campaigns should make sure they are factored in to any successful delivery programme.

In the final chapter, we outline where a more ambitious media-literacy programme would fit into a new strategy, alongside broader recommendations for government and industry.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The Government has long been concerned about the place of media in everyday life, and its impact. These concerns have tended to be focused on its effect of young people, who are seen as the most impressionable and vulnerable people in society. To some extent, the internet presents merely the next stage in an ongoing cycle of panic about the influence of the media, which has encompassed comic books, films, television programmes, and computer games, each of which has at some stage been accused of having the potential to harm or morally corrupt children and young people.

There has never been any firm evidence that the media can have the level of power that we attribute to it. But despite this, regulatory methods have tended to err on the side of caution and restrict access to some content on the basis of protection. This approach is so firmly ingrained in our society that protectionist interventions such as the watershed continue to gain widespread support – not least from parents but also from young people themselves.

While we should not treat the internet as so dramatically different a technology that we throw out all experience and research that has gone before, it does, arguably, require a different approach. The greatest challenge is to move from the previous model, which chiefly considered the impact of content to a new one that considers the impact of engagement through media, and to seek to influence this in a way that leads to positive experiences for young people.

A shift of this nature demands that regulation cannot be devised and directed in as central a way as it has been before: there is no one, clear body to which we can attribute responsibility and that we can simply leave to get on with it. Instead, we need a partnership approach that encompasses all relevant parties: including users themselves, parents, the commercial sector, the voluntary and community sector and national governments and beyond, to international standards and cooperation.

The process is certainly more complicated than the existing system, but a responsibility shared in this manner should not solely be seen as an extra and undesired burden. It is also symbolic of one of the greatest features of the internet: the fact that it is a democratic tool, enabling users to gain such control over their media experience that they can not only choose what to consume, and when and where to consume it, but can also add their voice and opinion to the mass of information and entertainment that is out there.

The approach advocated in this report is to respect this great, liberating feature of the internet and not to curtail opportunities in the pursuit of removing risks entirely. Using the internet will always provide a certain level of risk, just as does crossing the street or any number of other daily activities. It is important that government is realistic in its expectations, and in the expectations that it transfers to parents concerned for their children.

It is also important that these benefits continue to be highlighted. This is where media literacy should take an empowering approach, encouraging young people to truly engage with the wealth of opportunities digital technologies present, but with adult guidance and expert advice to ensure that their understanding can catch up with expertise.

Our recommendations are broken down into those that apply to government, industry, educators, parents and users respectively. Taken across the piece, they will enhance young people's online experiences while enabling risks to be minimised. However, these responses should also be seen as a work in progress: the demands, experiences and behaviours of audiences will change in time. In the first place, it is important that we take the necessary steps, outlined above, to establish a framework that can react in a sensible, appropriate and timely fashion to these changes. Without this framework, we will continually be in reactive mode, swayed by media-driven moral panics, and neglecting to protect and prepare young people sufficiently for the digital world they are left to navigate.

Recommendations for government

1. Ofcom should be charged with producing an annual report detailing the effectiveness of existing self- and co-regulatory regimes.

Ofcom currently has a duty to promote self- and co-regulatory schemes. In order to make sure action where internet content and use is concerned is coordinated and comprehensive, Ofcom should produce a dedicated annual report detailing the effectiveness of schemes and identifying where there are gaps in provision. Government can then take a view of where industry should take further action. If this is not forthcoming, government should consider alternative regulatory approaches.

2. Responsibility for media literacy should be given to the Department for Schools, Children and Families.

Responsibility for the media-literacy agenda – and for identifying the ways in which young people engage through media – should be moved to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). Media literacy has so far suffered from a lack of engagement in this quarter, but it is this department that has to deal with the effects of a lack of media literacy – including bullying online, child safety and so on. Providing the DCSF with this new responsibility will enable it to engage schools, as well as teacher training colleges, youth services and families, in building the capacity of young people to get the best out of their online experience.

The DCSF should also set up an advisory group, consisting of young people and the Children's Commissioner, to provide advice and guidance in this area. This would emphasise the importance of young people's participation as active citizens in the media space, and would provide a useful opportunity for young people themselves providing input and advice to the policy process.

3. Consultation should be driven forward on the extent of corporate social responsibility to youth in online environments.

The DCSF needs to lead the agenda in terms of understanding the role of corporate social responsibility where raising youth is concerned. This means considering the roles not only of ISPs, mobile operators and others to whom we regularly attach the term 'industry', but also of a wider range of commercial interests that seek to engage with young people in social spaces largely unmediated by adults. The DCSF should seek to drive forward policy in this area, in consultation with the corporate sector, consumer organisations and representatives, alongside parents and, most importantly, young people themselves, and task the corporate sector with drawing up a definition of corporate social responsibility that can then be applied to engagement with young people in the digital media space.

Recommendations for industry

We believe there are grounds to ask industry to do more to protect young people and enhance their experience online. Industry has already recognised its role in setting standards for user behaviour in the form of acceptable use policies or community guidelines. However, these are not largely recognised by many users.

1. Providers of internet services popular with young people should develop a pan-industry code of rights and responsibilities. This should be reviewed by Ofcom.

There is a range of short and long-term actions that industry should take, and that government should encourage. In the short term, we recommend that providers of services regularly used by young people (for instance social networking sites) be brought together under the auspices of Ofcom, the Department for Culture, Media AN and Sport (DCMS) and DCSF, to develop a pan-industry code for social networking sites and user-generated content websites, outlining the rights and responsibilities of users and industry. They should take advice from consumer bodies, academics and other relevant organisations. Once the principles have been drawn up and agreed, they should be reviewed by Ofcom to ensure proper scrutiny.

2. Industry should co-sponsor a body responsible for monitoring code compliance and commissioning further research.

Industry should co-sponsor a body responsible for monitoring code compliance. This body should collate data on the rate and nature of content complaints and the extent to which these were satisfactorily dealt with by the organisation concerned. While this body should not encourage unrealistic expectations – for instance, we would not expect it to be a ‘clearing house’ for all complaints, nor to ensure that code breaches were stopped pre-emptively – it could nonetheless conduct useful research, particularly in understanding where, when and why continual breaches of the code took place and ensuring that necessary action was taken.

3. Age-restriction mechanisms should be more robust and used more widely.

Industry and government need to work together to consider when and where more effective age-restriction mechanisms should be introduced to online content. So long as we accept that access to some content should be restricted to young people, on the basis of the potential harm or distress it may cause, mechanisms to enforce this should be more widely deployed, or the content removed. This is particularly applicable for websites such as YouTube, which often restricts access on the basis of age but verifies this on the basis of a self-reported birth date.

Online age-verification schemes are growing in number. It is not the remit of this report to recommend one above another, or to recommend that the Government be involved in providing a standard where there is an evolving market. Nonetheless, there is a strong argument that age verification has not been taken as seriously for adult content that sits within popular sites as it has for gambling sites, for instance. Such content, where marked, should either be removed or a relevant verification procedure should be introduced.

Beyond this, social networking sites should take greater care to build an understanding of the practices of their users, and the disincentives to complying with age verification procedures.

4. Advertising should be restricted on the basis of the proportion of young users of a site.

Where there is evidence to suggest that a sizeable portion of a sites’ users are under 16, advertising should be restricted across the site. Thus on social network sites such as Bebo, junk food advertising should be curtailed, just as it is in a broadcast environment.

5. Industry members should work together to develop a code of practice for social networking sites in relation to advertising and young people.

Providers of social networking sites aimed at young people, and other environments that are popular among under-16s should work with the Advertising Standards Agency to devise an extension to the current Code of Practice in order to protect young people in these spaces. In particular, it should seek to provide strict guidelines on distinguishing between advertising and editorial content and on engaging young people to further circulate promotional material and content. The demarcation between advertising material and editorial is extremely weak, and a new balance must be struck between the needs of sites to generate income through advertising and the protection of young people from excessive consumerism.

The range of new ways in which advertisers can engage with young people using social networking sites raises the importance of understanding the corporate sector’s role in providing a responsible and positive experience of consumerism for young people. In the long term, providers of social networking sites and brands who seek to advertise online should engage with government discussions regarding the role of the corporate sector in relation to the extent of its influence on young people – again, with the aim of developing a new doctrine of corporate social responsibility that applies to this area.

6. New social networking services join the Internet Watch Foundation.

All providers of services that are regularly used by young people should become members of the Internet Watch Foundation and contribute financially to its work. Currently, some social networking sites are not members and thus contribute nothing to the work of the organisation, although they continue to benefit immensely from the important role it plays.

Recommendations for education

1. The Department for Schools, Children and Families should seek to revitalise the media literacy programme and deliver education through the Extended Schools programme and the ten-year Youth Strategy.

The current media-literacy agenda lacks a sense of purpose and ambition. It needs both greater funding and a greater sense of direction to push it through and build within parents and users the skills they need in order to be able to take full advantage of the opportunities offered in a digital age.

There is currently little scope or appetite for introducing formal media-literacy teaching into the school curriculum. Neither is it clear that this would be a success: so far, teaching in this area has very much depended on the skills of the teachers themselves – which can be variable. The Extended School programme, which aims to enable every school to offer after-school activities to children and young people by 2010, offers an opportunity to bridge some of these gaps by providing after-school activities that enable young people to create media.

In addition, the ten-year Youth Strategy provides opportunities for similar activities to be delivered through youth clubs, with the support of youth workers with experience in this field. When combined, these two initiatives will provide ample opportunity for young people to be supported in developing media-literacy skills in ways that are attractive and interesting to them.

2. Government should coordinate the expertise of existing community media and informal media with schools to provide media-literacy teaching.

The existing community media and informal sectors already provide the potential expertise needed, but coordination with schools has, up to now, been lacking, despite the fact that some community media is just as important to young people as it is to adult counterparts. Resources should be directed towards coordinating the sometimes disparate activities of the informal media, community media and after-school initiatives.

There is evidence to suggest that this approach will be both popular and attractive to young people as well as enabling them to build skills in some of the areas in which they are currently lacking – in particular, encouraging young people to become more reflective of the actions they undertake online.

3. Projects should be carefully evaluated and best practice widely shared.

A national body (reporting to the DCSF) should be put in place to build the evidence base for best practice, assess projects on a range of criteria (not simply head counts) and reward success. There is currently no evaluative criterion for successful media-literacy initiatives, nor any system for rewarding excellence among schools and school pupils. The Government's creative learning programme Creative Partnerships should be invested with the resources it needs to establish a framework of this nature on a national basis.

4. Government should not overlook the needs of parents.

Particularly where younger children are concerned, parents play an important role in supporting young people's early experiences online. It is important that they feel confident in their skill set in order to provide the support and advice that their children may need. Parental information campaigns should not focus solely on the negatives that internet access can occasionally bring, but should also provide examples of positive exercises that young people can undertake with their parents in order to explore notions of risk, privacy and personal safety in a balanced and practical way.

5. Information and learning opportunities for parents should be available through existing initiatives such as Sure Start and the Extended Schools Programme.

Reaching parents remains a difficult challenge. However, the Government's agenda for supporting parents, outlined in The Children's Plan (DCSF 2007), provides an opportunity to ensure that information is available for parents when and where they want it. Media literacy initiatives aimed at encouraging parents to engage in supportive online activities alongside young people should be delivered through existing initiatives, such as Sure Start and the Extended Schools programme.

6. Traditional broadcasters should take a role in delivering positive media-literacy information.

The role of those traditional broadcasters that are increasingly prominent in online environments should not be overlooked. The BBC and Channel 4 are still highly trusted brands, and certainly have a role to play in delivering educational content to enable parents and young people to better cope with navigating a digital environment. Rather than focusing on the negatives of internet use – in particular, concerns around child safety – they should become fully involved in delivering media-literacy initiatives and information to parents, to help them better support young people online.

7. Peers should be encouraged and supported in providing advice and information online.

We support the Government's piloting of schemes involving peers in supporting young people who are being bullied, and recommend that industry, educators and government seek to explore where the advice and support-giving role of peers can be further explored in an online context and the role of youth services in enabling this.

The role of online advice centres has not been fully explored in this report. However, we have seen evidence that, particularly where health and sexual health is concerned, the internet can be a useful tool for young people. Given the range of information out there, and the fact that not all of it may be reliable, we recommend that the Government considers expanding the remit of Frank, the drugs advice helpline (a brand that is popular and trusted by young people) in other areas – most urgently, in sexual health.

Summary

These recommendations, if implemented, would go some way in responding not only to substantive concerns about youth engagement with the internet, but also to wider public concerns about the role of this entity in society.

As suggested in the opening lines of this chapter, it is something of a tradition in our society to bemoan the harmful effects on media consumption on the young. This concern is not difficult to understand. Media in all forms – but perhaps especially the internet – is in one sense nothing more than a twisted mirror, which reflects back at us, in concentrated form, the aspects of our society that we most detest and reject: an obsession with pornography, voyeurism, bitchiness and gossip, violence and cruelty – and, worse, the passive acceptance of all these things.

The reality is that we will never succeed in removing all these distasteful elements from media, because they originate in society itself. But we can ensure that children and young people are protected from them, until they are ready to navigate the most distasteful aspects of the online world for themselves, and make their own informed decisions about what they find useful and enjoyable or damaging and unpleasant.

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Appendix 1: Research methodology – deliberative workshops

We conducted three deliberative workshops with young people in three areas of London: Southwark and Camden in inner London and Twickenham in outer London. Each workshop was held with a different age group: years 8-9 (aged 13-14), years 10-11 (aged 15-16) and years 12-13 (aged 17-18). Twelve young people participated in each group. The workshops were each three hours long, and were held in July 2007. Each participant was paid as an incentive to attend.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited using a reputable market research recruitment agency. Participants were recruited in friendship pairs, to increase their confidence within the groups and to increase the likelihood that they would attend.

All the participants had broadband access and mobile phones. This was partly to ensure that no participant felt excluded, but also because the focus of the research was on use of the internet rather than access to it.

Deliberative techniques bring together a broadly demographically representative sample of the population. The three workshops were recruited to include the full range of socio-economic groups. Socio-economic groups were determined by the occupation of the chief income earner in the participants' household. We recognise that this method for determining socio-economic group is simplistic. However, because this research involved a relatively small number of deliberative groups we were clear from the outset that there would be limited scope for drawing comparative conclusions between socio-economic groups. We therefore made a pragmatic decision that this method was sufficient for this project.

The workshops were also recruited to be broadly representative of the ethnic make-up of each borough, and to have a 50/50 split of boys and girls.

Deliberative workshops

Deliberative workshops are held over a longer period of time than focus groups. This has a number of advantages. The longer length of time provides greater opportunity for different participants to express their views fully, with confidence, and it provides a greater opportunity for discussion and debate with peers.

Each workshop included large group discussions, small break-out group discussions, a session in which group members were asked their opinion of particular websites, and a session in which the break-out groups were presented with various fictional scenarios and asked to compare and comment on them.

This methodology enabled us to understand how participants articulate their attitudes and use of the internet within their peer group, and how their views change when presented with information and challenged by peers.

By using fictional scenarios, we were able to introduce a range of sensitive issues around risk, privacy and safety in a way that did not feel too personal. We found that once these issues had been introduced in this way, many participants did share sensitive personal experiences.

The use of deliberative workshops with young people does raise specific methodological issues. In analysing these findings, it is important to acknowledge that peer-group dynamics influenced the way that participants presented their views and attitudes within the workshops. However, while the way that participants discussed issues might differ from the kind of data generated in a one-to-one setting, such as an interview, deliberative workshops specifically enabled us to analyse the shared norms that govern young people's use of the internet – including the processes by which these norms are negotiated and interpreted.

As mentioned above, this research aimed to understand internet use from the perspective of young people themselves and, as such, it was important to avoid introducing distinctly adult terminology and frameworks into the group discussions. When developing and using the discussion guides for the

groups, we were particularly careful to avoid introducing any terms carrying particular moral or political connotations for adults, unless the participants themselves had used this language. For example, we specifically avoided using the language of 'risk' or 'cyberbullying' unless participants introduced the terms themselves. Where they did, we were careful to explore and draw out what they meant by these terms.

We do, however, recognise that there is an inherent and inevitable contradiction in our attempt not to impose particular frameworks on the discussions, given that many of our initial research questions (such as those relating to attitudes to risk) were determined by 'adult'-driven policy concerns.

Appendix 2: Group profiles

This appendix sets out the profiles of the various groups of participants, listed by location.

London Borough of Southwark (years 8-9/ages 12-14)

There were six males and six females in this group. All socio-economic groups were represented, split between 50 per cent ABC1 and 50 per cent C2DE. (For a breakdown of these groupings, see Appendix 3.) The group was also recruited to be roughly representative of the ethnic make-up of the borough, so 50 per cent of participants in this group were from minority ethnic backgrounds.

London Borough of Camden (years 10-11/ages 14-16)

There were six males and six females in this group, and all socio-economic groups were represented apart from SEG A. We had anticipated that it might be problematic to recruit participants from SEG A in this borough, so we ensured that the group was balanced between 50 per cent of participants from ABC1 and 50 per cent of participants C2DE in the group. The ethnic make-up of the group was roughly representative of the borough, so 50 per cent of participants were from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Participants in this session appeared to have been recruited in friendship groups rather than in friendship pairs. The fact that a number of participants seemed to know each other may well have influenced the nature and content of the large group discussions, although it is difficult to judge the extent of the effect.

Twickenham, Greater London (years 12-13/ages 16-18)

There were six males and six females in this group. All socio-economic groups were represented, split between 50 per cent ABC1 and 50 per cent C2DE. The group was also recruited to be roughly representative of the ethnic make-up of the town, so 25 per cent of participants in this group were from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Appendix 3: Social classes

Social grade	Social status	Occupation
A	Upper middle class	Higher managerial, administrative or professional
B	Middle class	Intermediate managerial, administrative or professional
C1	Lower middle class	Supervisory or clerical, junior managerial, administrative or professional
C2	Skilled working class	Skilled manual workers
D	Working class	Semi and unskilled manual workers
E	Those at lowest level of subsistence	State pensioners or widows (no other earner), casual or lowest-grade workers