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Young People and the Internet – What is the solution?

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Abstract

New Technology is an important aspect of society, but the impact of new technology has changed the way in which society can view and deal with many traditional issues. Young people have access to the internet and in many cases are left to their own devices and free to explore a variety of sites via the internet, even if the content is unsuitable.

The paper will explore the issue of how to control the internet and how young people deal with the Internet. The paper will explore the issues of government and also school in helping young people with these new challenges.

Keywords

Australia, Internet, content and control.

Introduction

The Internet was initially designed for military purposes and academic institutions, that was until the creation of the World Wide Web in 1990 and the release of Mosaic in 1993, the first piece of software to allow “point and click” internet perusal (Hird, 2000), the rest is history.

With the growth of the Internet, controlling the Internet has become an increasing problem due to a number of factors including its continued popularity (especially with children), lack of global boundaries, policing and censorship. The lack of control of over the Internet, has been one of the reasons why the growth. This paper will look primarily at the issues surrounding young people and their use of the Internet, how it is changing their day to day lives and the possible solutions to an ever increasing problem.

Young Peoples use the Internet for a variety of purposes, both educational and for entertainment. There has been recent data collected on this usage issue by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006a). This information is summarised in Figure 1.
The statistics shown in Figure 1 clearly show that children are using the Internet for educational purposes, most likely, research for assignments, however 50% are also playing online based games, and perhaps the most worrying nearly 50% are using e-mail and instant messaging, which is often reported as a method predators use to gain access to children online.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006b) shows that almost 76% of children aged between 9 and 11 years old have accessed and used the Internet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Have accessed the Internet (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5-8</td>
<td>37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-11</td>
<td>75.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-14</td>
<td>88.7</td>
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Table 1: Percentage of children accessing Internet content (ABS, 2006b)
We also know that at least 25% of children are accessing the Internet daily (see Figure 2) with 75% "going online" at least twice a week (ABS, 2006b), which could increase the potential risks that young people face on-line.

The Australian Federal Government's NetAlert agency has identified a number of key issues related to children and the Internet and have identified the following as items that are "potentially addictive for children" (NetAlert, 2007).

- Instant Messaging and Chat;
- Online Gaming (e.g. WoW, Runescape, NeoPets etc.);
- Social Networking (e.g. My Space, Bebo etc.);
- Viewing risky content (such as pornography);
- Downloading files (especially in Peer-2-Peer networks).

**Australian Government Policy**

Within Australia both the Liberal party and the Labour party do not fully understand the Internet. The recent discussion about censoring the Internet reflects that lack of understanding. The Internet cannot be controlled from Canberra. The biggest problem that Australia (as all countries) faces is the fact that the Internet is global and there are no global agreements about its content or control. The Internet contains much positive information but unfortunately it contains so much negative information. This information is distributed freely around the world and this is why all governments need to be involved in its control. Governments will need to create the equivalent to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights for instance the "Universal Declaration of Internet Content". The Internet's global nature is reflected by the scourge of child pornography and the deaths caused by
Internet suicide chat rooms especially in Japan and South Korea. None of these major issues can be solved by Australia alone taking a stance, it will require global co-operation and global enforcement.

As mentioned previously Australia cannot control the Internet or its content, the government cannot expect Australian Internet Service Providers to track every transaction that they process and can we expect NetAlert to solve the problems of the Internet with increased funding or new software filters. The filter was offered free to families earlier this year by the government so they could block blacklisted material and protect their children. But recent reports that the Federal government’s anti pornography filter for the Internet had been hacked by a Melbourne teenager. The problem is that technological solutions cannot solve all problems of Internet protection and this case shows how technology can be bypassed and how filters cannot offer 100% protection. There has to be alternatives to technical solutions.

The political parties should look at new methods to protect the Internet, measures that could be adopted, could include:

- global co-operation to remove pornography;
- teaching computer ethics in school – to establish standards for young people about acceptable behaviour on the Internet;
- increased funding for bodies such as NetAlert to give up to date advice about the risks of Internet content;
- ongoing funding for non-technical protection initiatives including awareness campaigns;
- parents educating themselves about the problems associated with the Internet.

Since the general election and the change of government took place within Australia, one of the new key government policies is to try and censor the Internet within Australia via the use of Internet Service Providers controlling the content of the Internet (Heywood, 2007, Syvret, 2008), only time will tell if this strategy proves to be successful.

Schools and Internet

Schools have a major role in protecting young people against the dangers of the Internet by teaching computer ethics. Computer ethics is a set of moral principles that govern the behaviour of a group or individuals in relation to technology and in this instance in relation to the Internet. A major problem is the way that computer ethics should be taught, a computer ethics unit by itself would be very dull to young people and they could view computer ethics in a negative manner. A more effective way to teach computer ethics is to embed aspects in other subjects. In the UK several schools teach citizenship studies, teaching about appropriate behaviour as an adult, computer ethics could be linked to subjects or discussions relating to this appropriate behaviour. Young people could also keep reflective diaries about their experiences on the Internet and these could be used a tool as part of classroom discussions.

It is important that computer ethics should be taught at all levels of education, young people could be taught about the issues of chatting online, information they should not share online, the problems of cyber bullying and how deal with this issue and the ethical problems of piracy and hacking.

One of the problems society faces, is that young people are now brought up with easy access to the Internet, they chat socially, they have personal blogs, they download music and movies from the internet, they exist in virtual worlds such as second life, etc. The problem is that young people may have greater knowledge of technology than their parents or teachers, this poses unique issues.

By teaching computer ethics at all schools it will help to establish standards for young people about acceptable behaviour on the Internet. These personal standards will help them in all aspects of their adult life.
Within Australia, parents should be very concerned about young people using the Internet, the type of information that they can view, as well as the type of people who may contact them via this medium. But parents have the ability to do something about it, raising awareness with their children about appropriate Internet behaviour or buying technology to block unsafe sites.

The government would be better placed ensuring that computer ethics is taught to young people, this could be a low cost solution to a massive problem. A technology solution to controlling the Internet simply cannot succeed. As a society we have to accept that the Internet will be with us forever and it is going to pose many social problems for Australian society as a whole in particular the young people of Australia.

Conclusion

The solution to controlling the Internet in relation to children's access, usage and reliance on it lies in more than just a technical solution. It is necessary for all people involved to assert control. Parents in taking a proactive solution to being aware of what their children are using the Internet for and becoming more Internet and technologically savvy. Schools need to teach children computer ethics and promote a healthy understanding of the Internet, the positive and the negative aspects. And finally governments need to use appropriate policies to regulate and oversee, but at what cost to the individual.

References


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