



Internet Safety & Responsible Use - Emerging Threats in Education

ABSTRACT

The media is often full of examples of how children and young people are at risk and under constant threat from some of the dangers posed by the Internet. The truth is that just like any environment, online or offline, virtual world or real world, there will always be dangers.

In the real world we manage the perceived risk of these dangers by understanding the environment and doing our best to help educate the most vulnerable, often the very young and very old. The same holds true for the online world. One of the biggest issues that educational professionals face regarding Internet safety and responsible use is that many do not fully understand the online environment and emerging technology or the huge impact this has had on the behaviour and expectations of young people. This in turn makes it very difficult to educate and protect students while at the same time providing the environment that allows them to take full advantage of the learning opportunities of the Internet.

This paper outlines some of the emerging issues that education professionals need to be aware of if they wish to be ambassadors for the Internet Safety and Responsible Use Agenda.

INTRODUCTION

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1. UNDERSTANDING YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

Whether you agree with the term 'digital natives' or not we must accept that many of our young people have grown up in a world immersed in technology.

Recently, Channel 4 commissioned research from OTX into the relationships that young people (aged 12-24) have with technology. Some of the statistics included:

- They frequently conduct over five activities whilst watching TV
- 25% of them agree that "I'd rather stay at home than go on a holiday with no Internet or phone access"
- A quarter of young people interviewed text or IM (instant message) friends they are physically with at the time
- They have on average 123 friends on their social network spaces

Whether you think these statistics are significant or not they are interesting for a number of reasons. The statistic about mobile phones and holidays is one of the most important because it demonstrates how technology has had an impact on youth culture. Imagine asking the same question ten years ago before mobile phones were ubiquitous – the result would be completely different. Similarly, if you show the latest 'digital camera' to a ten year old child and ask them what it is, they will simply call it a 'camera'.

According to the data the average number of friends for young people on a social networking space is 123. The reality of the situation is that it is the 24 year olds who have closer to 123 friends and the 12 years olds often have many, sometimes hundreds, more. One of the reasons for this is that our definition of what a 'friend' is has changed. To an adult a friend is probably someone that you trust and who you would share your deepest secrets with. To a young person a 'friend' is an associate, including someone they have never met on a social networking space. For practitioners wishing to keep young people safe online they must understand the modern day definition of what a friend is. We need to speak a common language with young people – even if we don't agree with it.

In short, technology is changing young culture but it is also changing language.

2. EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Another way that technology is having an impact on young people is through access to digital content. We all know that there is some very inappropriate content on the Internet. Some of this content should be considered 'universally inappropriate' such as child abuse images, extreme pornography and racist material. Other content is inappropriate for certain age groups or levels of maturity.

¹ <http://blogs.channel4.com/platform4/technology-kids-and-telly/93>

It is the latter that is likely to be having the greatest impact on young people as they come in contact with online material that they are not emotionally ready for.

Television shows that are streamed and then available to watch online are a good example of this. In the past young people coming into contact with television material, which may be age sensitive, were protected by two things. The first was that households may have only had one television and this was often in the family room. The second was that the watershed, where television that was more aimed at an adult audience was broadcast after 9.30 pm, protected young people.

The ubiquitous nature of computers, laptops, games consoles and mobile devices has changed this. Many young people now have access to their own device where they can watch television that would have traditionally been broadcast after the watershed whenever they want to. Often this is achieved just by ticking the box to say they are over sixteen.

As a result of this and other ways that young people access digital content. Many children are likely to be coming into contact with material that they are not emotionally ready for. Children often need to and want to talk about what they have seen online and it is important that as education professionals we facilitate this. This is vital if we want to help young people understand the difference between fantasy and reality.

3. DOES PRIVACY REALLY EXIST?

Another concept that should be considered vital when trying to educate children and young people about Internet safety and responsible use is our understanding of privacy.

There are a number of UK and European laws that protect our privacy but the reality is these laws don't always take account of emerging technology. CCTV is a good example of this. CCTV laws are designed to protect us, but have you got any idea how many live streaming Web cameras there are constantly broadcasting and up-dating to the Internet? The Web camera layer of Google earth or Google Maps is a good illustration of this.

The other problem with privacy is that quite often we choose to give our information away. This normally happens with our consent, but often without us knowing about it because we haven't read the 'small print' before we tick the 'terms and conditions' box at the bottom of a web page.

The end result is that a lot of information about us appears online. For example, if your not ex-directory your name, address and telephone number will be in the BT online phone book. Websites like 192.com allow you to search the electoral roll. Pipl.com is a people search that searches the deep Web aggregating data sets from across a variety of Web sites linked by name, email or location.

This brings us to social networking sites. Lots of people have social networking sites for example nearly 46% of the UK population have a Facebook profile (that's nearly 55% of all UK Internet users). When we sign up to Facebook we actually agree to give them our data, even if we then go on to delete our account .

People who don't have a Facebook account are equally at risk because many of their online 'friends' have already given Facebook lots of data about them. This includes tagging them in photographs and handing over their email address lists .

Facebook's privacy controls are actually not that bad - the problem is understanding how to set your privacy settings. This is particularly the case when we consider that the language Facebook uses is aimed at people over the age of 13 years old. You have to be 13 to have a Facebook account. Of course many young people under the age of 13 have their own profile – but this isn't actually Facebook's fault.

It does however introduce a really interesting question and dilemma for educators. As professionals we constantly tell young people to watch out for others online because they might not be who they say they are. Yet we have thousands of young people in the UK who are not who they say they are online because they have already been dishonest about their digital identity to sign up for some of the most popular social networking sites, such as Facebook.

² <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/united-kingdom>

³ <http://mashable.com/2009/02/16/facebook-tos-privacy/>

⁴ http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/rorycellanjones/2010/10/not_on_facebook_facebook_still.html?page=78

4. DIGITAL FOOTPRINTS

One of the most difficult concepts to try and get across to young people is that of the 'digital footprint'. A digital footprint is basically the trail of online information that you leave behind you as you up-load information to the Internet, social network or comment on Websites. It also includes information that people write about you; might be on their own social networking space, a tag or your name inside a digitised newspaper article.

Research from AVG suggests that the average age at which a child acquires an online presence courtesy of their parents is at six months, and by the time they are two 81% of children have some kind of 'digital footprint'.

Digital footprints present a number of problems for educators. The first is that practically everybody has a digital footprint and the second is that in order to get a job in future it is very likely that employers will 'Google' you to find out more about you. The key safety message here is to make sure that you have good and responsible digital footprint that reflects who you are and your personal values.

It is also important to remember that it is almost impossible to delete anything from the Internet. Anything that you up-load to a Website or social networking space is likely to be there forever. As search engines become more advanced over time it will be possible for powerful people searches to aggregate all the online information that has ever been written by you and about you. The Wayback Machine at archive.org is a good example of how un-published Websites can still be viewed online.

Try 'Googling' yourself to get an idea of your own digital footprint.

5. INCREASED USE OF SMARTPHONES

2010 was the year that the mobile Internet really took off. Google announced its 'mobile first' policy, Facebook announced its mobile strategy and Microsoft launched its Windows 7 phone.

2011 is likely to be the year that a significant amount of children ages 11+ will have an Internet enabled phone with access to all of the associated benefits and dangers of such wonderful technology. Mobile technology also presents some other interesting issues for educators.

Most Internet enabled phones are now also GPS enabled. Technology such as Google Latitude, Facebook Places and Foursquare allows users to 'check in' and see the location of online friends. Although these features are useful and fun they also present obvious dangers.

In addition, augmented reality is also now becoming very common. This is where digital data can be superimposed over what you see through your mobile phone camera and is linked to location data. Again although this is useful to help explore a real place that you have not visited before it also has emerging user risks. For example, as facial recognition software becomes more advanced how long will it be before our phones can recognise the faces of those nearby and link to their online digital footprint. TAT has already built a demo of how this technology might work.

Mobile phone credit is also becoming the new currency with young people. Through Websites like onebip.com it is now possible to use your mobile phone as a credit card without a bank account and normally at an inflated price. Owning a mobile phone with enough credit will basically allow you to buy almost anything online.

6. LANGUAGE AND GEOGRAPHY

In the same way that technology has already broken down barriers of geography it is now also starting to reliably break down the barriers of language. Google translate; for example, can automatically translate Web pages with a good degree of accuracy between 57 different languages.

It is technologies such as this that means we must constantly remind young people that when they communicate with others online they could be anyone from anywhere.

⁵ <http://jrsmith.blog.avg.com/2010/10/would-you-want-a-digital-footprint-from-birth.html#ixzz11bDDtqNh>

⁶ <http://www.microsoft.com/privacy/dpd/research.aspx>

⁷ http://www.mobileworldcongress.com/conference/event_highlights.htm

⁸ <http://www.technologyreview.com/computing/24639/>

7. INCREASED USE OF VIRTUAL WORLDS

The final technology and trend that is useful for educators to be aware of is the rise of virtual worlds. This is particularly important when considering the safety of children and young people. The reason for this is that most social network sites aimed at younger children exist within 3D environments. Data from KZero Worldwide clearly shows that the greatest number of newly registered accounts in virtual worlds is in the 5 – 15 year old category. At the end of 2010 there were nearly 800 million registered users of virtual worlds in this age category. Virtual worlds are big business and it is important to understand that our current five year olds will never grow into a 'text based' interface like many of our modern social network sites. Instead, it is likely that they will continue to socialise increasing sophisticated virtual environments. Teaching young people how to keep safe in these virtual environments needs to be a fundamental message of any Internet safety and responsible use message for young people.

8. FILTERING AND ITS ROLE IN DELIVERING E-SAFETY

The Internet has been one of the biggest disruptive technologies and has had a dramatic impact in education. However, the Internet is a lawless and dangerous place and alongside the challenge of educating students about these dangers is how best to deploy effective filtering that opens up the learning potential of the Internet while minimizing the risk.

Any filtering that is deployed to block inappropriate content must be used in conjunction with ongoing user education and a robust policy to aid responsible use of the Internet in the classroom. More advanced Web filters that use dynamic real-time filtering allow students and staff to safely access much more of the great educational content that's available online. Ofsted recently stated that where schools had deployed these types of dynamic filtering systems rather than locking down access to a limited number of sites on the Internet, students had a better knowledge and understanding on how to stay safe online.

ABOUT BLOXX

Bloxx is a privately held company with offices in the U.S., U.K., The Netherlands, and Australia and offers web filtering appliance-based solutions for medium and large organizations in both the business and public sectors. In 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010 it was recognized by Deloitte as one of the U.K.'s Top 50 Fastest Growing Technology Companies in its prestigious "Fast 50." For more information please visit: www.bloxx.com.

To learn more about Bloxx Filtering, book in for an online demonstration at bloxx.com/demo, call +44 (0)1506 426 976 or email info@bloxx.com.

