

Global Information Networks - The Agenda for Children

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The world of international communications and information networks is changing rapidly. New technologies - like the Internet, growth of broadband networks and the convergence of the PC and TV - offer great opportunities for commerce and economic development.

Children too, are impacted by these changes. Their educational and social development can be greatly enhanced, if we all - parents, educators, the information industry, governments and international agencies - choose to respond.

However, existing communications systems have been designed with little thought for children. While seeming like an electronic playground, they are adult creations with traps for the unwary - notably pornography, exploitative advertising, and invasion of privacy. Children have already been hurt.

The challenge is to ensure that the benefits for children far outweigh the real and serious threats. This challenge is central to the mission of Childnet International, a non-profit organisation based in London, UK and working around the world. Childnet researches and promotes safety initiatives to protect children in using networks and undertakes positive initiatives - for example a new international Awards Scheme sponsored by Cable & Wireless plc for innovations in communications which benefit children - see www.childnet-int.org/awards.

This document sets out the issues which need to be addressed by us all to ensure global information networks genuinely benefit children, and protect them from harm.



Principles for action

Realism - Commercial companies involved in the information industry tend to overstate the benefits and safety of their systems, and play down the dangers for children. Some journalists and voluntary groups have tended to exaggerate the risks and highlight these with little reference to the benefits. Helping children requires us to make an honest assessment of the very real dangers and the equally real advantages of information networks. Continuing research on current and future threats to children is essential.

Shared responsibility - Where opportunities and problems exist it is easy for one group (children, parents, educators, the industry, governments or international agencies) to be seen as solely responsible for acting. Arguments as to who is responsible tend to lead to inaction or insufficient action. Children have an enormous capacity for innovation, but they are vulnerable to exploitation. While parents have a primary responsibility for their children, protective and enabling actions by all parts of society will ensure the maximum benefit from global information networks for children. The industry has a special responsibility to protect and help children, as it stands to gain financially from their use of networks.

International action - information networks are now truly global. But of all those with a stake in the information society only individual commercial companies have effective global decision making structures. Governments and law enforcement agencies seek to cooperate with mixed effectiveness. Children, parents and educators have few international opportunities to influence the decisions of governments and commerce. The voice of children needs to be heard. Protection and opportunities need to be just as global as the market is. It is little comfort to a child that the person or company exploiting them is based in another country.

Equal access - children around the world are unequally positioned to take advantage of global information networks. But the extent to which such networks could benefit previously disadvantaged children is enormous. In principle, remote geographical locations need no longer be a barrier to accessing information and allowing interaction. Commerce and governments should strive to enable the maximum safe access for all children to networks that will benefit them.



Specific issues

Illegal and harmful content

The worst form of content is that which directly exploits children through portraying abuse, especially child sexual abuse. While child pornography may only be a minute proportion of the material available on the Internet, that does not lessen the grave nature of the abuse and the need to respond. Child pornography is illegal in most countries of the world, but paedophiles have recognised the potential of new networks to publish and exchange material, sometimes with relative privacy (e-mailing attached files or in "closed" bulletin boards) and sometimes more publicly (on the web or in news groups).

Apart from child pornography there is much content that has the potential to exploit children. So called "adult material" does exist in abundance on information networks. Some argue it is difficult or impossible to find by chance, but experience shows that children do come across adult material unintentionally through following chains of hyperlinks or using search engines (eg searching on "James Bond" often produces bondage material). Moreover, it is undeniable that vulnerable children who do ill advisedly look for such material will find it with ease. Some children with e-mail addresses have received unsolicited direct mail inviting them to access pornographic sites.

But the concern for children's safety extends beyond pornography to other material where children may not understand the context or realise the danger. Information on cults, how to make bombs, drugs and do-it-yourself abortions are a few examples of content available with a simple search on the web, which may lead to children being hurt.

Children are already targets of advertising in conventional media like television. The difference with advertising in new networks is the opportunity for an immediate response to the advertiser both to purchase the product and/or to provide personal information that helps commercial marketing analysis. This provides scope for companies to bypass parents and exploit children.

Illegal and harmful contact

Chat and e-mail are exciting communication methods for children. Pen pals can now become instantaneous - painting, poems and hobbies can be exchanged on-line. Childnet International's web site - www.launchsite.org - provides information on a number of projects in which children can get involved.

But contact can also be made by exploiters. In a recent case an employee of a major online company lured a child to a location on their own. Web sites advertise under age girls for sex tourism. Adults can pose as kids in children's chat rooms, which moderators sometimes struggle to detect.

Action required

Parents and carers

consider carefully the location of online access within the home - a family room is best especially for young children

learn with children how information networks work and participate with them, building trust and confidence. Try Childnet's web site which suggests lots of projects to get involved in - www.launchsite.org.

agree "house rules" about online usage (eg see safety sites like www.safekids.com and www.nchafc.org.uk)

press your Internet Service Provider (ISP) to provide protection (filtering and rating) software but maintain responsibility for your child's online use - information available through the EU site: www.echo.lu/best_use/best_use.html

change your ISP to a more child-friendly company if you are unhappy with the service provided

monitor use by children outside the home e.g. at friend's houses, in schools and public facilities like libraries and insist on appropriate safety measures

Educators and schools

try and broaden access for all children to technology across the curriculum

use the potential of technology for joint projects nationally and internationally (eg see www.gsn.org and www.web66.coled.umn.edu/schools.html)

agree school policies for online use with appropriate sanctions for misuse

use an ISP who provides a filtered feed or buy blocking software for your network server

monitor use carefully - servers can provide detailed reports, and quick checks of bookmarked sites can be revealing.

keep in touch with parents and their concerns

Youth organisations

consider investing in an online facility to broaden access (especially for disadvantaged groups)

Monitor closely as for parents and educators above.

Internet Service and Online Providers

agree a code of practice for your business including how you will serve children as direct and indirect customers and how you will deal with complaints about content

ISP's in individual countries should form a national trade association which has an agreed code of practice and can liaise with government and law enforcement agencies about content issues

provide filtering and blocking software free to your customers

ensure any chat room aimed at children is moderated rigorously

require any content held on your server to comply with the law

require content providers using your service as a host to rate their content with a recognised labelling bureau

cooperate fully with law enforcement agencies when they believe a crime against children has been committed using your services

ensure confidentiality of your customer mailing lists, especially where you know children may be included

include safety information prominently displayed on your web site, and in the software provided to all new customers, along with clear instructions

cooperate with governments and law enforcement agencies to establish hotlines to enable online users to report child pornography and other harmful content

Browser producers

ensure your software is compatible with the Platform for Internet Content Selection (PICS)

include security features prominently on your main menus (not hidden in an obscure part of your set-up procedures)

support current rating systems (eg RSACi) that seek to identify content potentially harmful to children and any new international rating system(s)

sell your browser software pre-set with maximum security features which users can then relax if appropriate

Content publishers and producers

rate your content with PICS compatible systems, especially those which are generic in seeking to identify potentially harmful content (eg RSACi)

ensure content for children maintains high ethical standards especially where responses are requested

do not try to bypass parents or teachers and seek detailed personal or financial information from children on-line

refuse commercial sponsorship proposals which may require hard sell advertising to children

Computer retailers

provide easy to understand safety information (at the time of purchase) to customers buying multi-media computers or modems

Local and national governments & law enforcement agencies

provide funding for wide, safe (filtered) access for children to new information networks - through libraries, schools and other public institutions - especially in more disadvantaged communities

ensure a clear legislative and regulatory framework for new networks that does not put commercial advantage above child safety

ensure child pornography online (in whatever format) is illegal

encourage industry to adopt high standards in protecting children from illegal and harmful content and contact

don't hesitate to legislate if industry drags its feet in providing genuine widely available child safety measures

initiate the provision of child pornography hotlines jointly with ISP's working to agreed codes of practice

resource law enforcement agencies so they are adequately trained and staffed to pursue all incidents of reported computer crime especially child pornography or exploitation

cooperate with governments internationally to promote effective law enforcement and international measures for rating content

promote awareness about safe use of the internet

International action

- by **Governments acting together and through international agencies**

promote the use of information networks to facilitate the social and educational development of children, especially in improving access by disadvantaged groups

review regularly developments in international networks as they affect children especially the effectiveness of safety measures

set minimum advisory standards for national ISP's codes of practice and create simple structures for monitoring these internationally

fund research and implementation of an internationally accepted rating system for content compatible with PICS which can reflect cultural diversity

ensure international law enforcement agencies (eg Europol and Interpol) are resourced to give a very high priority to detecting computer crime, especially child pornography and exploitation of children

introduce extra territorial legislation for prosecuting those who exploit children in other countries using technology

cooperate with other international agencies so that 'who oversees the Internet' does not become a battle between agencies but a cooperative effort to benefit us all, especially children

The views in this document are solely those of Childnet International (a non-profit charity registered in the UK - No 1053193) and not any individual, organisation or company with whom Childnet works in partnership or from whom it receives funding.

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