



# UK children go online : listening to young people's experiences

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# UK CHILDREN GO ONLINE

Listening to young people's experiences

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# Executive Summary & Recommendations

## Project overview

**UK Children Go Online.** This new research project, part of the ESRC's E-Society Programme, focuses on the nature of children's internet use. The report presents qualitative research findings, drawing on fourteen focus groups with children. The next step will be to survey internet-related attitudes and practices among 9-19 year olds across the UK.

**Aims.** The report addresses two areas of opportunity:

**Learning** - education, informal learning and literacy,

**Communication** - social networks, participation and identity, and two areas of risk:

**Dangers** - of undesirable forms of content or contact and

**Inequalities** - exclusion and the digital divide.

### Key findings on learning

**Children as the internet experts.** Although many households contain one or more computer-literate parents, children consider themselves more expert in using the internet. Indeed, both girls and boys gain significant, perhaps even unprecedented, social status and domestic power through the value that adults place on this expertise. Although parents may be 'catching up', young people's willingness to experiment may make this a lasting reversal of the generation gap.

**The internet as a flexible medium.** Children and young people regard the internet as a flexible medium which allows them to find information for school, communicate with friends and relatives using email, instant messaging and chat rooms, play games, download music and visit fan sites.

**Learning by doing.** In addition to new technical skills, young people's expertise may also include a change in learning styles and knowledge – to 'learning by doing' rather than rule-bound learning.

**Downloading and hacking as alternative skills.** Teens especially were keen to discuss alternative forms of expertise. In addition to, or even more than, educational skills they place a high value on music file-sharing, hacking and communication skills as central to their peer culture.

**Limitations on literacy.** Despite young people's enthusiasm for the internet, 'internet literacy' is still developing. Young people admit to aspects of internet use which they find problematic, including searching and information overload. Awareness of the motives behind websites and a critical attitude towards their credibility and trustworthiness appear little developed.

**"My dad hasn't even got a clue. Can't even work the mouse ... so I have to go on the internet for him."** (Nina, 17, from Manchester)

**"It's better to do trial and error because you can learn from the mistakes, and you can find new places, for different sorts of things."** (Kim, 15, from Essex)

**"Every time I try to look for something, I can never find it. It keeps coming up with things that are completely irrelevant and a load of old rubbish really."** (Heather, 17, from Essex)

### Key findings on communication

**Constant contact with friends.** Children's motivations for going online centre on new opportunities for communication and identity play. While the conversational content is often mundane, being readily in touch with their friends is important to them.

**Online communication fosters offline links.** Online communication is rarely an escape from real life. The internet appears to foster, rather than undermine, existing social contacts, for example with friends from school, connecting children into local, rather than global, networks.

**Avoiding contact with strangers.** The internet also facilitates some broadening of everyday networks, sustaining connections with friends from abroad or distant relatives. However, most young people see little point in talking to strangers on the internet, regarding unknown online contacts as 'dodgy'.

**Shifting from chat to instant messaging.** Although some younger teens enjoy 'messaging around' in chat rooms or pretending to be someone else, many are leaving chat rooms in favour of instant messaging (and SMS) with their local circle of friends.

**A wide range of communication choices.** While adults tend to judge online communication against an ideal of face-to-face conversation, young people evaluate a wide range of options – face-to-face, email, instant message, chat rooms, phone, SMS – according to their communicative needs. Their criteria include immediacy, message complexity, mobility, cost, privacy and embarrassment.

**Little interest in political participation and online content creation.** Young people appear uninterested in the possibility of political participation via the internet, being cynical about the likelihood that politicians would listen to them. Although they relish participating in a globalised and commercialised youth culture online, they are less interested in creating their own websites.

“Even if you’ve just seen them at school like, it’ll be like you’re texting them or talking to them on the phone or on MSN.” (Kim, 15, Essex)

“If you’re talking to someone you haven’t met, how do you know if what they’re telling you is the truth? You don’t really mean some things you say, like, it is a bit fake.” (Mark, 17, from Essex)

“Chat rooms, you really don’t know who you’re talking to. Whereas instant messaging – you do.” (Cameron, 13, from Derbyshire)

“You can email your MP, but is he going to listen?” (Heather, 17, from Essex)

“I get in touch with celebrities once in a while, and they send an email back.” (Padma, 15, from London)

### Key findings on online dangers

**‘Weirdos, spam and porn’ as downsides.** Children associate the internet with paedophiles in chat rooms, spam mail and advertising, online pornography and viruses. Insofar as use of the internet poses a threat to children and young people, their relatively trusting, uncritical approach to the internet is a matter for concern.

**Varying experiences of pornography.** Many children and young people claim to have seen pornography online. For some this is definitely unwelcome, and here gender is important. Teenage boys, far more than girls, express interest in seeing online pornography, though many – especially older boys and girls – claim to be indifferent. Teens say they encounter pornography more easily and more often on the internet than via other sources. They have varying views on whether access to pornographic online content should be restricted.

**Raised awareness of chat room dangers.** Chat rooms appear to be losing popularity in favour of instant messaging, reflecting the success of media awareness campaigns warning children of the risks. Younger children have been especially impressed by media stories, though older teens may regard the risks online as less than those they encounter offline in their neighbourhood.

**Some children still taking risks.** Perhaps the ‘comparative safety’ of the internet leads some teens to take risks. Some are motivated to acquire social status through making new contacts online. Some avoid telling their parents of the risks. Some admit to forgetting safety advice when in a chat room.

**Parents are monitoring and restricting internet use.** Children report that, responding to a mix of media stories and personal experiences, parents are restricting or monitoring their internet use, employing a variety of regulatory practices. Young people are particularly frustrated by overly restrictive or inefficient filtering, both at home and school.

**Children value their privacy.** Domestic regulation of the internet can undermine trust between parents and children. Children spoke strongly of their value for privacy, objecting to being monitored or checked up on – likening this to having one’s pockets searched or one’s personal space invaded. In response, they attempt to evade or outwit their parents, and they outline a range of tactics for doing this.

“The internet is just like life as I see it, but just easier. So if these 13 or 14 year olds want to find stuff (pornography), they’re going to find it in real life or on the internet.” (Lorie, 17 from Essex)

“There’s obviously the scare of paedophiles and people like that on chat rooms... it’s on the news, and there are ad campaigns against it.” (Alan, 13, from Essex)

“Talking to your parents about the internet is bad for you. They might try and think about taking the internet off your computer.” (Amir, 15, from London)

“My mum’s always watching me when I’m in a chat room to check there’s no trouble.” (Rosie, 13, from Derbyshire)

“Because you want your independence, really, you don’t want your mum looking over your shoulder checking what you’re doing all the time.” (Steve, 17, from Manchester)

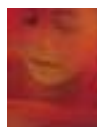
### Key findings on inequality

**If the internet disappeared tomorrow.** Enthusiasm for the internet, though considerable, remains less than for other activities – going out, meeting or phoning friends, watching television. Seen as a great convenience, young people remain confident they could do all they need or wish without the internet if necessary.

**Non-users feel excluded.** The few children who lack home access to the internet claim to miss out on communicating with friends and feel left out of conversations about popular websites. However, they try to develop strategies to compensate.

“If we didn’t have the internet, we’d get everything we have on the internet somewhere else.” (Marie, 16, from Essex)

“They’re missing out on downloading stuff and using chat rooms ... Some people can’t afford it, which is just a sad truth.” (Steve, 17, from Manchester)



# Five Recommendations

On the basis of this report we offer five key recommendations to policy makers, internet service providers, teachers, parents and children:

**Developing critical evaluation skills.** Children and young people's 'internet literacy' requires further support and development. This must look beyond technical and searching skills to encompass a critical awareness of the quality, purpose and reliability of websites. Being able to make an informed evaluation of online sites and services is crucial if children are both to benefit from online opportunities and to avoid the dangers. Hence, while parents, teachers and others should continue to value children's expertise, it should be recognised that they also need continued guidance in use of the internet.

**Parental trust in children.** Simply pressing for more parental monitoring, restriction and control could encourage children's evasion rather than their cooperation with attempts at internet regulation in the home. While often naïve about threats to their privacy from external sources, children are fiercely protective of their privacy in relation to their parents. Parents need more information, confidence and guidance so that they feel empowered to discuss the risks with their children, especially as they grow older. An explicit negotiation of the balance between children's safety and children's privacy is important to the trust relationship between parents and children.

**Improving levels of internet safety awareness.** Many children have direct experience of pornography online, and many know of stories of risky encounters in chat rooms. As in other safety campaigns or other areas of public information, it seems easier to get the message across than to ensure safe practices under all circumstances. It is encouraging to note the widespread awareness of chat room dangers, and this must be sustained through continued campaigns. However, under particular circumstances, it seems that young people continue to engage in risky behaviour, necessitating more careful, targeted strategies for safety awareness.

**Maximising opportunities for participation and creativity.** Young people's cynicism or lack of interest in political participation using online resources poses a challenge to policy makers especially. These might usefully take as their starting point the nature and channels of participation which young people enjoy – creating links with music, fashion, animals, the environment, etc. It is particularly disappointing how few young people feel encouraged or inspired to create their own internet content. There is a considerable challenge, not least to internet service providers, to provide young people with accessible and stimulating possibilities for content creation.

**Overcoming the digital divide.** It should not be assumed that all children have free access to the internet, despite the minimal conditions of access becoming more widespread. Too little is known as yet of the social, educational and other consequences of exclusion, but it is clear that internet access remains heavily stratified and that, especially for popular and social uses of the internet, some children are being left out. If internet use is restricted to educational uses in schools, libraries etc, then children lacking home access may still feel excluded from their peer culture.

# Project Overview

## The present report

UK Children Go Online is a new research project exploring the nature and meaning of children's internet use. With a timetable from April 2003 to March 2005, the research team is conducting qualitative work and a survey of internet-related attitudes and practices among 9-19 year olds across the UK, comparing girls and boys of different ages and backgrounds. The project asks how the internet may be transforming, and may itself be shaped by, family life, peer networks and informal learning processes. It develops an earlier project in which the first author conducted participant observation in thirty families (Livingstone and Bovill, 2001).<sup>1</sup> It also extends the work of the second author on young people's construction of personal homepages (Bober, 2002; 2003).

In this first report we present qualitative research findings, drawing on a series of focus groups and individual interviews with children conducted during summer 2003. The next report (due spring 2004) will present findings from a national face-to-face survey of children and parents. For full details of the research and related publications, see [www.children-go-online.net](http://www.children-go-online.net).

## Context

Many households, especially those with children, now have domestic internet access, although some do not. In the first quarter of 2003 54% of UK adults (aged 16+) had used the internet (up from 49% in 2002), and 60% had used it at any one time (up from 55%) (ONS, 2003). Overall, some 11.7 million UK households (47%) have access to the internet at home (up from 43% in 2002). The ways in which internet use is becoming embedded in everyday life, potentially transforming society for better or for worse, is attracting considerable attention. In public and private sectors, the very rapidity and scope of internet adoption across Western societies and beyond adds urgency to the many questions being asked. From a household or consumer perspective, these include:

- What skills and opportunities are people gaining by using the internet?
- Who lacks access, and in what ways are they getting 'left out'?
- Does online communication enhance or undermine face-to-face interaction?
- Does it support traditional, or new, forms of community participation?

- Are children benefiting from the educational potential of the Internet?
- What about the dangers of engaging in risky or harmful behaviour?

Given the present climate of speculation and hyperbole, sound empirical evidence and a sceptical mindset is much needed. In response, a growing body of academic research is examining the social shaping and social consequences of new information and communication technologies, particularly the internet, in relation to work, leisure, politics, culture and the family (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002). Understanding the domestic use of the internet is crucial because the regulatory, social and economic frameworks that will shape its future consequences are being developed now.

Considerable attention, and anxiety, is focused on children and young people. They are seen as 'the digital generation', being in the vanguard of new skills and opportunities, yet also vulnerable and potentially at risk. Households with children 'lead' in internet access, making young people in key respects the 'pioneers' of new media cultures (Drotner, 2000). The 2002 BECTa survey shows that 84% of 5 to 18 year olds in the UK have used the internet (up from 73% in 2001), with 71% using it at school (up from 56%) and 56% at home (up from 45%).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, 68% of 5-18 year olds have access to the internet at home (up from 64% in 2001).

Children and young people are generally enthusiastic and creative adopters of the internet – for communication, entertainment and education. Parents hope that home access will improve their children's educational prospects, although many are unsure how to guide their children towards valuable sites, and they are concerned about online dangers. In school, pupils increasingly rely on online educational resources, and the internet is becoming a key mediator of informal learning, linking home and school.

Commercial interests seeking to expand the child and youth market increasingly centre on the development of targeted online contents and services, while in the public sector there are hopes that the internet may stimulate young people's political engagement and community values. The opportunities are considerable,





though in many ways still untapped at present. But media attention – and hence public concern – mainly alerts people to the potential risks and dangers, leading to discussions of how to regulate or restrict young people’s internet access and use. In policy terms, society must strike a balance between two risks: the failure to minimise the dangers and the failure to maximise the opportunities (Livingstone, 2001).

### Theoretical framework

Most empirical research on the social uses and impacts of the internet has neglected children, presuming them to be included in research on ‘the population’ or ‘spoken for’ in surveys of parents (Livingstone, 2002a). With notable exceptions (e.g. Pew 2001a/b; BECTa, 2002), research on children tends to be small-scale, and little is known about online contents and services available to children or how they interpret, evaluate or use them.

Two broad and competing frameworks have emerged to interpret the societal significance of new forms of information and communication technology. One framework stresses historical continuities, sceptical of utopian and dystopian claims for a technology-led future, critically questioning whether everyday life is being fundamentally transformed. The opposing framework postulates radical change, seeing the internet as a facilitator of larger social, cultural, political and psychological changes – whether towards the network society, the postmodern condition or a dystopian nightmare.

UK Children Go Online steers a course between these polarised approaches, arguing that empirical findings are essential if we are successfully to chart the unfolding relation between continuity and change. It draws on three theoretical traditions.

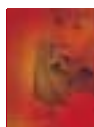
1. Drawing on the ‘continuity’ approach, the project contextualises new media in relation to older media. The historical lesson of previously-new media is one of diversification rather than displacement, with repositioning and specialisation of older media (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). Since little evidence supports claims for the child as dramatically affected by the supposed harms (or benefits) of changing

media, this approach invites us to locate the young internet user within ever-widening social circles – home, family, peers, school, community, nation – to analyse their responses to an increasingly media-rich environment. The internet, after all, represents one element among many in a more gradual and multidimensional process of social change - in the family and childhood, leisure and lifestyles, youth culture and consumer culture, work and education and in social values (Drotner, 2000; Fornäs, 1995; Kinder, 1999).

2. From the ‘change’ approach, while eschewing any simple technological determinism, the project draws on some of the questions asked about how information and communication technologies may drive forward the inevitable processes of social and cultural change. It leads us to ask, for example, how children respond to the introduction of the plural, even anarchic, hypertextual forms of knowledge representation, which may be replacing the once-linear, authoritative media texts (educational, public service, adult-approved). Or, is the once-mass audience fragmenting into multiple individualised niche markets, and does this matter? Or, what does it mean to claim that the boundaries between once-distinct domains of entertainment/ education, work/ leisure, public/ private, local/ global and producer/ consumer are becoming blurred (Snyder, 1998; Poster, 2001; Turkle, 1995)?

Yet these approaches are media-focused, asking about the internet – its forms and contents - first and then considering its consequences for users. This is usefully complemented by a user, or child-centred, focus:

3. Taking a ‘child-centred’ focus, the project regards children as active and interpretative agents who appropriate and shape the meanings and consequences of the ‘new’ through a series of well-established social and semiotic practices. For, whether information and communication technologies are incorporated into the ongoing stream of social life or whether they reorient or open up alternative trajectories, new media depend on the beliefs and actions of their users to activate particular trajectories over others and to give them meaning and value in daily life. Hence we need an account of the changing conditions of childhood, together with an analysis of how children themselves play a role – through their





imaginative responses, their creative play, their micro-practices of daily life - in establishing the emerging uses and significance of the internet (Buckingham, 2002; James, Jenks, and Prout, 1998; Seiter, 1999). Listening to what young people have to say is especially important because they keep surprising us in their pioneering of new media practices – the unexpected growth of text messaging being a good example. Particularly, this approach avoids construing children as passive or vulnerable rather than as agents in their own right, although nor should their oft-claimed sophistication in internet use be exaggerated.

### Aims

Given these contextual and theoretical considerations, the project aims to understand how children and young people are using the internet at the start of the twenty-first century. This will, it is hoped, contribute to the development of a balanced and grounded policy framework.

More concretely, the project will balance an assessment of two areas of opportunity:

- (i) education, informal learning and literacy
  - (ii) communication, participation and identity
- with two areas of risk:
- (iii) undesirable forms of content or contact
  - (iv) inequalities and the digital divide.

### Methods

In framing a project with children, we have been guided by the following principles (Greig and Taylor, 1999): empirical data should be collected from children directly, as part of working with (rather than upon) children; ethical aspects of the research require specific and careful attention; triangulation of qualitative and quantitative methods is vital particularly when researching private, domestic practices; rigorous, representative quantitative research is needed to permit generalisations to the population; and, intellectual and policy frameworks should jointly guide research design and interpretation.

The research triangulates three data sources: initial qualitative work, a national survey of children and their parents, and follow up qualitative work (see *Work in Progress: Next steps*). In the qualitative research presented here, 14 focus group interviews were conducted in schools with children between the ages of 10 and 19, and return visits to children who participated in the earlier project were begun (see *Technical Appendix*). Combining interviews in a school and a home environment enabled us to explore different aspects of children's relationship with the internet.

Interviewing children and young people individually at home provided direct access to their domestic media environment. Discussions of internet use and parental rules arose naturally and could be pursued in context, and the content and context of internet use could be observed directly. Interviewing in schools explored their internet-related interests and experiences and allowed us to observe the peer context within the group situation.



# Contextualising Children's Internet Use:

## The Case Studies

To set the scene for the discussion to follow, we present three case studies from the home-based interviews. Each draws on initial interviews with parents and the child, conducted separately, followed by two periods of observation of the child using the internet (carried out during 1999-2000), and recently extended by a three or four year return visit combining interviews and observation (in summer 2003). The combination of methods is important, because a typical picture from the interviews is one of great expectations and good intentions, while the observations - especially when followed up some time later - suggest more modest or narrow uses of the internet together with a series of practical hindrances.

### Megan<sup>3</sup>

At 8, Megan was one of the youngest children we visited in 1999. A very bright and lively girl, she lives in a small modern house on a quiet suburban estate with her hard-working and rather quiet parents – both white collar workers - and her older brother, a computer enthusiast. A rather 'stay-at-home family', her parents spend much of their leisure time watching television, and they are keen to acquire and keep up with the latest screen technologies. By contrast, Megan's interests centre on reading and writing stories, for example about her pets. She does this on the computer which had been acquired a year earlier and is squeezed into a small space next to the front door. Both children are figuring out how to get what they want from the internet – with a little help from their father. Her parents are delighted to describe Megan as 'an information junkie', having very high aspirations for her. But they are cautious in relation to the internet, encouraging a focus on visiting well-known and trusted sites rather than bold exploration, and gently restricting her to information rather than communication applications.

By observing her internet use it soon became apparent that Megan's skills were somewhat exaggerated by her parents, her internet use being narrowly concentrated on three sites – Askjeeves for searching, Nickelodeon for games (following up on her liking for the children's television series Rugrats) and a few sites relating to pets (e.g. Petstore.com). Her use of these sites often proved frustrating and inefficient. Her parents keep an eye on her internet use from the living room. They have banned email, chat, downloading and most interactive functions, resulting in little need to be concerned about the risks of internet use. Megan provided one of the funny moments in the project when we asked about content her parents would disapprove of. She told us of a site for sexing your

hamster – 'they don't like me seeing male bottoms', she said with a cheeky grin. Overall, however, we came away from this family feeling that neither her parents nor the design of the websites she visited were encouraging Megan to explore and benefit from the opportunities she is more than capable of.

Four years on, now that Megan is 12, there have been some changes. Her father has changed jobs, her mother now works full-time, her brother has taken over the father as the 'computer buff', the computer has been replaced, and Megan has begun secondary school. Yet it is the constancies that are more striking in this still close, quiet family. Lively and chatty as ever, dressed in 'grunge clothes' though not quite a teenager yet, Megan still reads and writes stories – now on the computer, sometimes using the AOL story-writing option on the kids' page. She still searches for home-work or leisure-related interests, now using Google. She has also become a fan of the computer simulation game The Sims, visiting the Sims website and sites with cheats for the game. As before, she follows her interest in animals onto the internet – for example using Neopets to name and keep a virtual pet. But as before, her skills are more limited than her confident talk leads one to expect – she has lost the password for her 'neopet', nor can she manage to get the webmaster to email it to her. Unlike before, she does now have an email and instant messenger account, but rarely uses it, and there is nothing in her inbox when she looks. She says she ignores any invitations on sites she visits to chat, vote or email. Generally, her online style is quick and competent, getting where she wants efficiently, but her range is narrow, with little exploration. Even when we ask what is listed under 'favourites', she says she does not know, having never looked, and when something goes wrong, she skims over the problem rather than stopping to figure out what happened.

Two new themes have emerged. First, Megan has become aware not only that her father is Jewish but also that her school harbours some anti-Semitic feelings. This she chooses to counter head-on by researching and presenting a paper to her tutor group on Judaism – surely a particular and valuable use of the internet. Second, in common with many girls of her age,<sup>4</sup> she has developed a taste for adventure and horror. We have a long conversation about how to murder your Sims, full of gore and tragedy. She also shows us her current story, a complex and imaginative though ghoulish and melodramatic thriller about a mysterious and beautiful foreign woman uncovering a trail of murder and destruction. The contrast between this protective, contented home with its well-behaved children and Megan's fascination for such melodrama is thought-provoking, suggesting that the internet provides what Bettelheim (1976) describes (in relation to fairy tales)

as a vital but safe opportunity for children to explore the possibility of disaster, desertion and death. Yet her explorations are highly focused, not carrying over to other online possibilities. So still there is little need to worry about online risks, for Megan appears to have internalised the caution once explicitly impressed on her by her parents.

## Anisah

Fifteen year old Anisah is from a Ghanaian family and lives on a once-very troubled housing estate. We first visited Anisah, the middle child and a lively and confident girl, when she was 12. The family lived then in a very small two-bedroom flat, the computer finding a place in the living room along with most other family activities. Her educated parents have not found work in the UK which matches their qualifications, leading them to place huge expectations on their three children. Two of the children are sent to private school, and the older boy is now studying medicine. There is ample evidence of the stress placed on education, from the several sets of encyclopaedias and educational CD-ROMs to the emphasis placed on homework and computer access. The family has had a computer for ten years already and the internet for two, and both parents help the children with these technologies. Anisah is active and outgoing, but lives far from her school friends and so spends a fair amount of time on her own. Still, she dances, plays netball, likes shopping, socialises through the church, and she also has responsibilities around the house.

She uses the internet on most days, expressing a preference for making friends in chat rooms, which she finds exciting and which perhaps compensates for feeling separated from her friends in the evenings. She also enjoys feeling ahead of her classmates in having domestic access to the internet (this was three years ago, and her peer group is not well off), often using the internet to research school projects (using Yahoo, Excite or BBC Online). The internet, she finds, is better than books (quicker and more precise) though her skills are imperfect: she tells us about a project on China (the country) for which she downloaded an illustration of china (porcelain from America). She does not use email, perhaps because only a minority of her friends have access. Anisah and her mother agree that so far, pornography or other undesirable content has not been a problem – though she now chats on the Nickelodeon website because of some dubious experiences in adult chat rooms. Her mother stresses the importance of a strong moral framework online as well as offline.

In 2003, Anisah at 15 has become a charming, strong-minded, articulate teenager, doing well at school and hoping to become a designer. Having moved to a new house, she and her sister now have a bedroom to themselves and, to her delight, this also houses the computer. The family's serious, moral attitude is still strong in Anisah. She is the first and only child we have observed to read the news on the homepage of her internet service provider, for instance. While still a very keen internet user, her usage has changed as she has grown up. Now she uses email and instant messenger, and is scathing about chat rooms. This is both because of negative publicity about paedophiles, dangerous contacts, etc, and because she sees chatting to someone she does not know as pointless.

As for many of her age, the internet now is a means of keeping in contact with pre-existing friends whom she sees every day at school, and she often chats with them until late at night, after the family has gone to bed. As she is about to enter

her GCSE year, she also spends a lot of time on the BBC's exam revision site, Bitesize, which she considers extremely helpful. We have an interesting discussion about how – unlike her peers – she refuses to download music, it being both illegal and wrong. Otherwise, she uses the internet in a purposeful manner – to research art work for a project, to follow her interest in design, to find a cheap flight, etc. Largely she uses public-service oriented sites, with little evident advertising, and she claims to have seen no pornography or otherwise problematic material.

As she remains present for the interview with her mother, following this observation session, we unwittingly occasion a lively debate between them regarding parental monitoring and intervention. For Anisah, her use of the internet is private, though she acknowledges her mother's right to check on her occasionally. For her mother, such checking must be undertaken frequently – though perhaps she claims more than she practices – precisely because 'children are children' and require guidance. She expresses this view even though she sees Anisah's generation as the 'guru generation' in relation to the internet. Hence, she is scathing of parents who express such trust in their children that, as she sees it, they neglect to monitor and regulate their children's internet use in practice.

## Ted

We first visited Ted, a middle class white boy, when he was 14. An only child, privately educated, Ted's life is far more privileged than either Megan's or, especially, Anisah's – though Ted is dyslexic. A delightful, if rather over-protected boy, Ted likes to spend his time with friends, cycling and playing rugby and cricket. He also watches a lot of television and listens to music. Education seems rather less emphasised in this household except as a means to gaining a comfortable lifestyle. The parents subscribe to the middle-class distrust of screen media, though this hardly prevents their considerable use of it. Like many children, Ted cannot remember a time before the family had a computer, though the internet is recent, but he does not know a lot about either of these technologies. 'I haven't got a clue', he says, when things go wrong. Being a computer consultant, his mother is the expert at home, guiding Ted in his use of the internet. It is she who bookmarked Bitesize for him, for example, although he does not use it. Having internet access – 'mainly for homework, sometimes for fun', and to support the father's home-based business, the family is still at the stage in which planned uses greatly exceed actual usage.

Internet use is fairly social. Often one of his parents are present in the father's study, where the computer is located, when Ted researches his homework online or plays games, or Ted's friend Mark, his internet 'guru', visits and they go online together, Ted following Mark's lead. They check on their favourite stars, television programmes, sports stuff, send a few jokey emails to their mates, and they visit Yahoo Chat – pretending to be older, to be other people, to meet girls. So for Ted, the internet is mainly 'fun and funny, it's good, frustration sometimes' – especially when it comes to the difficulties of effective searching. Worry about viruses makes his mother stop Ted downloading, and she checks the history file occasionally to see where he is going, although, as she says somewhat ruefully, 'he probably thinks he knows more than me'. This family, like several others we have visited, has its story of the dodgy encounter. In their case, Ted searched for the pop group 'The Spice Girls', and his mother saw the unexpected outcome – 'very scantily clad ladies came up on the screen', she remarks. This story is offered

by both Ted and his mother as their justification for caution online, but also as a story of trust – she has seen what can happen and understands about accidents, he will discuss with her what he's seen, and so they have an open channel of communication.

We return to visit Ted when he is 18, waiting for A-level results, about to go to university. Family life has changed, with fewer family activities and Ted spending a lot of time in his room. A number of the earlier plans have not worked out. His father's business does not have the web page they intended, though the mother does more work-based searches to support his business. Despite the passage of four years, Ted still says his mother is better at using the internet than he is, particularly for searching. Indeed, when we observe his searching, he is not especially skilled, nor has he thought about why sites exist and what they might want from him.

Like many teens, Ted now spends a lot of time downloading music via the peer-to-peer file sharing system Kazaa. As we also saw with Anisah, instant messaging with friends has replaced meeting strangers in chat rooms. He has 19 people on his 'buddy' or contact list, and he also emails them or sends text messages to their mobile phones.<sup>5</sup> Typically, he 'communicates' with his friends in such ways while downloading music, multitasking to relieve the boredom of having to wait. Internet safety issues are no longer an issue now that Ted is 18, as his parents say, and they are confident he is 'not the kind of kid' to go to inappropriate sites – fortunate, because Ted gets annoyed if he thinks they are checking up on him. However, Ted hardly searches the web at all now – only checking out university sites for possible courses when he needs to – and generally, the internet has become for him a medium of communication and music, not of information or education.

### Learning from three children?

The changes evident within this four year time frame remind us that all 'answers' to questions of internet use are inevitably provisional because both the technology and its social contexts of use are changing. Moreover, any answers are inevitably diverse, because however unified the medium may be – and of course it is not – families are far from homogenous. These case studies show how children's experience of the internet is grounded in their domestic and family circumstances, circumstances which are both structural (dependent on age, socioeconomic status, etc) and individual (dependent on particular life histories, personalities, interests, etc).

Anchoring our key themes – education, communication, protection, etc – in real life contexts also reminds us that these themes are strongly interlinked. For example, the child who loves to chat online may also be the child who does not take advantage of educational opportunities, undermining any simple continuum of use/non-use. Megan mainly uses the internet to search websites – what McMillan (2002) terms user-documents interactivity, while for Ted, user-user interactivity (chat, email) is much more important. Anisah makes perhaps the broadest use of online options, treating the internet as a more flexible and diverse tool than the other two. How should we link this to Megan's more protective parents, Anisah's more ambitious and informed domestic background, or Ted's economic privileges? Certain themes are already in evidence. Each of these children – for reasons of gender, class, ethnicity or special needs – illustrates the concerns of the digital divide. Each is treading a careful line between parentally-approved and child-favoured activities, raising issues of domestic regulation (and its dependence on national regulation) which balance freedom, safety and privacy. Each is developing valued expertise which we might term 'media literacy' (Livingstone, 2003), though these are centred on making the interface work than part of a broader critical literacy.

However, these are just three children. What do the focus group interviews tell us that adds to and develops these emerging themes?<sup>6</sup>

## Emerging Findings from the Focus Groups

### What is the internet?

Children and young people see the internet as a flexible and diverse medium, helping them to find information for school and homework, communicating with friends from school and relatives using email, instant messaging and chat rooms, as well as playing games, downloading music and visiting fan sites.

### A flexible medium

"I use it for like homework, emailing my cousin in Australia and keeping in touch with my friend in Cornwall." (Linda, 13, from Derbyshire)

"The best thing about the internet is downloading music, things like that, and MSN." (Ryan, 14, from Essex)<sup>7</sup>

"You can do anything with music – download it, watch videos, contact bands. The internet is really useful for music." (Abdul, 17, from Essex)

"Internet's quite exciting because when you open your inbox, you want to see how much you got! You go 'Yes! I've got this much today!'" (Salimah, 15, from London)<sup>8</sup>



However, the internet also has negative connotations, including the dangers of chat rooms, spam mail and advertising, online pornography and viruses. A group of 10-11 year olds from Hertfordshire drew us a 'mind map' of what the internet meant to them (see figure). This showed that the 'opportunities and dangers' framework is as salient to children as to adults:

**Mind maps**

"The internet is where you can find lots of things to do, you can find out about the news and lots of other different things, like games. Keep in contact with friends. Best: Play games. Worst: If you by accident go on a web page and then put your address in, then bad things happen. Get parent/guardian permission before you go on it because something could happen to your computer." (Brian, 10)

"The internet is a place where you can find websites, and we call that surfing the net. You can also play games or find out information. The internet can be dangerous if you enter chat rooms or email people you don't know. You can access the internet at school, the library or at home." (Ellen, 10)

There are also things the internet is not. Some questions we asked did not generally attract children's interest, particularly the idea of participating in local networks or political processes, as we shall show.

Children access the internet from various locations – public libraries, internet cafes or parents' work as well as the major access points of home and school. However, the computer remains the major route to go online - few had accessed the internet via the mobile phone, public telephone or digital television, and most were not aware of this possibility.

In what follows, we present the children's discussions in the focus groups according to the four project themes. Inevitably, certain aspects of each theme are focused on, leaving others for later research.



Children's 'mind map' of the internet

**Great expectations**

Parents commonly say that supporting their children's education is their main reason for investing in a home computer and internet access. Yet in pointing to the 'uncertain pedagogy of the home computer', Buckingham (2002) identifies some unresolved questions regarding the benefits of domestic internet use.<sup>9</sup>

What skills are children learning through computer use? Is the internet better than books and encyclopaedias? Do young people learn through 'edutainment' games? Does computer and internet use at home compensate for deficiencies in, or complement, use at school? Are young people developing new styles of learning? Are traditional skills and values being lost?

Beyond the possible educational consequences of domestic internet access, the social implications of extending education further into the home are noteworthy. The home, once supposedly a sanctuary from the demands of work and education, is increasingly transformed into an informal learning environment, extending the responsibility of parents to embrace a learning-support role and demanding that children learn constantly - through play, through media use, through well-spent leisure. We begin to address these issues here, focusing on questions of expertise and literacy.

**Expertise**

In stark contrast to other expensive domestic goods, the computer is associated with an image of the child as expert. Although many households contain a computer-literate parent, children are likely to consider their parents less knowledgeable when it comes to using the internet. By contrast with the early days of computers, where attitudes and experiences were often gendered, we found boys and girls equally confident of their expertise.

**Inexpert parents**

"Well, my mum doesn't use the computer, she doesn't even log on. But my dad – he doesn't know how to use the computer as well – but he always asks me 'how do you do -?' It doesn't take a day to learn how to use a computer, it's very difficult to use it. But when you get used to it, you're able to use it." (Amir, 15, from London)

"My dad hasn't even got a clue. Can't even work the mouse ... so I have to go on the internet for him." (Nina, 17, from Manchester)



I had to show her how to load up games and things. It was really funny. She's like going 'Right, so how do I open that?' and I was like 'Oh, nan'.

Possessing a type of expertise valued by adults has significant consequences (Facer, Sutherland, Furlong, and Furlong, 2001; Ribak, 2001). Children gain status through the public valuing of their ability to access information resources in a way which is, perhaps, unprecedented. Papert (1996) points out that for children, computers are about mastery; the internet may offer an experience of mastery not otherwise forthcoming in their lives. More concretely, they gain responsibility, and therefore some power, in the home through taking on new tasks – researching family holidays, finding information, even helping with the accounts. Thus children are reversing the hierarchical teacher-pupil relationship, teaching their parents or grandparents, as 13 year old Rosie from Derbyshire explains:

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### Teaching the grandparents

**Rosie:** My nan has got ... my step dad's old lap-top computer and - I took it over to Spain and used it 'cause I go to Spain every holiday ... I had to show her how to load up games and things. It was really funny. She's like going 'Right, so how do I open that?' and I was like 'Oh, nan'.

**Interviewer:** You taught her everything?

**Rosie:** Yeah, because I was brought up with computers. We've all been brought up with computers 'cause my step dad builds them, and like I've got my own computer.

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This may be only a temporary role-reversal, as parents are also improving their skills, as these two 17 year olds from Manchester note:

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### Parents catching up

**Nina:** My mum ... She didn't know how to switch a computer on about two years ago. Now she can do everything on it.

**Steve:** Yeah, I'm probably the expert in my house, but not that big, because my dad's got a thing about fiddling with the computer ... so he's starting to catch up with me. But my mum will only play Solitaire on it, so she doesn't like the internet or anything, she just wants to play cards on it.

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Insofar as children act as pioneers of technological developments, they may retain their advantage. On the other hand, for the 'expert' child to ask for advice or help is to relinquish some social status, possibly inhibiting such requests.

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### Literacy

Is this expertise broader than a set of specific technical skills? Is it rather, as it was for print media, a matter of literacy, a whole way of thinking and knowing? This emerged as a theme when we asked children how they had gained their internet skills and why some people lacked them. Here a group of 15 year old girls from Essex discuss the importance for them of learning by trial and error instead of reading a manual or being taught formally how to use the internet. The implication is that what may appear to the observer as just 'messaging around' may reflect a process of 'learning through play' or 'learning by doing'.

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### A different way of thinking

**Claire:** I don't think you can really teach anyone how to use it. You sort of just have to try yourself.

**Kim:** Yeah, I think it's better to do like trial and error because you can like learn from the mistakes from it, and you can find new places and stuff, for different sorts of things.

**Milly:** Like, um, I go to London, and if I'm lost, I just walk around until I find a tube station, and then I know where I am. But my mum would like have a map out, be like 'Where am I, ahhhh'. They really need something to follow, to know where they are.

While the map or rule-book analogy is a good one, for most young people the key contrast is with books – a 'boring' world of libraries and indexes, authoritative sources, endless lines of print and too few images. Using the internet as an information resource is far more fun and far more rewarding – producing images as well as text, interesting and quirky facts, as little or as much detail as needed, and all without going to the library. These views are particularly common among children and younger teens, as illustrated by this group of 14-16 year old boys from London:

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### The internet is seen as better than books by younger children

**Interviewer:** And how would you compare Encarta and the internet? If you had a project, which would you turn to first?

**Several:** Internet.

**Amir:** Internet, then Encarta, then books, then people, then...

**Prince:** Encyclopaedias are hard to use really... Because there's so many, and you don't actually know which one of them to use. And how to get what you really want, except if you have a very long time.

**Interviewer:** That's interesting, because I've heard people say that, exactly that, about the internet – that there's so much...

**Elkan:** But if you search for something –

**Faruq:** You've got to get used to the internet. It depends how long you -

**Prince:** How long you've used it for.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah.

**Faruq:** [The internet] used to be really hard. But gradually you get used to it.

**Amir:** I don't find it hard to use the computer, because I got into it quickly. You learn quick because it's a very fun thing to do, to log on to computer and do whatever you want - feel.



# I personally feel more comfortable with a good set of books.

Interestingly, some older teenagers return to books. They are 'more serious about their school work' as they get older, as one respondent from this group of 16-17 year old college students from Essex put it:

## Older teens return to the value of books

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**Marie:** I personally feel more comfortable with a good set of books.

**Abdul:** Doing research, it is easier with books than on the internet – but maybe it's quicker, because there's so much on the internet. What you want to find is really hard to find. With books it's a lot easier. I can't really use the internet for studying.

**Lorie:** I get very frustrated with the internet at times.

**Interviewer:** Ok.

**Lorie:** But it's good if you want to be doing some research at half eleven at night. That's the time that it comes into its own, because you can't get to a library.

**Mitch:** You don't always find what you're looking for. And when you get to college you're more serious about your work, so you choose the books ... Helps you out more in the long run than just going on the internet and getting the first thing you find.

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Both these discussions, however, acknowledge the difficulties of the internet as an information source, pointing up the limits of young people's expertise online.

## Critical thinking

Despite their distinctive expertise, young people admit to aspects of internet use which they find problematic. They cannot always find what they are looking for, although they know of different searching strategies. They are overwhelmed by the amount of information and find it difficult to obtain or select what they need.

## Too much information

"Well, just every time I try to look for something, I can never find it. It keeps saying – you know – well it keeps coming up with things that are completely irrelevant to the actual thing that you search for. And a load of old rubbish really." (Heather, 17, from Essex)

I'll sometimes type in something, and I'll get pages of, you know ... for that search, and it's just, I can never find what I'm looking for. Unless you are willing to spend an hour going through each page. It's ridiculous." (Hazel, 17, from Essex)

However, it was encouraging to see that the youngest group of respondents, a group of 10-11 year old primary school children, was aware of how to narrow down searches, perhaps a sign for improving searching skills. The girls explained how to find information about the British explorer Sir Francis Drake on Google.

## Searching for project information

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**Ellen:** We type in "Francis Drake", and then you make it smaller and smaller, like narrow it down until you've got what you want.

**Interviewer:** How do you do that?

**Ellen:** If you type in – if you wanted to find out Francis Drake – his life, you can put "Sir Francis Drake", and it would come up with loads of stuff, and if you wanted to know about a certain part of his life, you would type that in.

**Emma:** "Sir Francis Drake, age when he died", something like that.

**Ellen:** "Sir Francis Drake, when he went in the Armada".

**Holly:** We've been taught to narrow it down.

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Even more important than the efficiency of their searching is their evaluation of the information obtained. Myths about the internet are commonplace, especially among the younger respondents, and in general an awareness of the motives behind websites and a critical attitude towards their trustworthiness is only now developing.<sup>10</sup>

## Trust

Children and young people tend to be ignorant of the motives behind the websites they were using and many, it was clear, have not thought about this question. Few are aware of the commercial interests or persuasive strategies at work.

## Why do people develop websites?

"Because there's some people that have nothing better to do than make a website that's ... about rubbish ..." (Jim, 14, from Essex)

"Because someone's interested in what it is. Somebody's just thought this is my interest, and I'm going to share it with the world." (Steve, 17, from Manchester)

"It's usually companies advertising something." (Stuart, 17, from Manchester)



Perhaps as a consequence of this lack of critical literacy, most tend to trust the information found online – particularly if it is professionally presented and if it neatly fits their requirements. One of the 14-16 year old London schoolboys had a more critical attitude, realising that the source of information is often unknown and cannot be checked. His class mate was convinced that comparing across websites would provide a sufficiently balanced view.

### Reliability of online information

**Interviewer:** Is there something about why all that information - who's putting it all on the internet?

**Faruq:** That's why it's not reliable!

**Interviewer:** Ah, ok. Go on, Faruq.

**Faruq:** It's like you don't know who's doing what, who's website it is, who wants what, who wants you to learn what. So you don't know who's put what information there, but ...

**Elkan:** Half of the time though it is.

**Faruq:** It's reliable – but you don't know who's put it, who wants you to gain what from that information.

**Prince:** Why I think it's reliable is because, say you've got two different sites to go, you go to Yahoo, and you search for something, they've got lots of sites to go through. And say you go through all the sites, you get more or less the same information from all the sites.

The question of media – or internet – literacy, encompassing not just how to find but also how to evaluate sites, is surely crucial if children are to benefit from the educational and informational opportunities provided by the internet (Livingstone, 2003).

Before concluding this section, we note that when children are seen, or see themselves, as experts online, this may not concern information searching at all. Parents appear impressed by the speed and confidence of children's style of internet use, for they click fast and furiously, if not always to great effect. And children themselves are excited by non-educational uses – passing amongst themselves the expertise to find fan sites, download music or set up an email account. Indeed, when they claim to value the internet for its information, they are more likely to mean game cheats, football results or music releases than the educational content adults hope for.

Of the various forms of expertise associated with the internet, one of the unexpected themes young people wished to discuss was hacking – a form of expertise they valued highly.

### Alternative expertise - hacking and downloading music

In the older focus groups, although not claiming they could hack themselves, there always seemed to be someone who knew someone who could, supposedly, hack into websites or email accounts. Hacking is not seen as particularly difficult or extraordinary or, indeed, wrong – perhaps because of the ubiquity of downloading and writing DVDs of music and films.

### Hacking

**Interviewer:** Would you know how to get access to someone else's email?

**Mitch:** I wouldn't personally, but someone working for the government or someone like that would be able to get into your computer, just like that.

**Mark:** I know how to – I wouldn't do it, just because it's – cause, what's the point?

**Interviewer:** And how would you? Do you mean you know how to get someone else's password out of it?

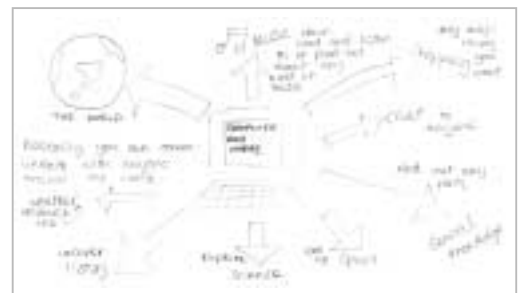
**Mark:** I don't know. I suppose, I could really try and hack into their account if I was really bothered. But I'm really not bothered, it's too much effort.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**Lorie:** I know a friend who can do it, who's our age, and he can do it. But then, what is he hacking into? If he was hacking into me, there's nothing interesting other than a couple of conversations, researching hotels, medicine sites, there isn't anything interesting. And it's when you start giving your credit card details and stuff – that's when it's – but I don't do that. So it's no real issue.

(17 year olds, from Essex)

Children's drawings describing the internet



Since downloading music with peer-to-peer file sharing software such as Kazaa has become an everyday activity, the illegality of hacking is, perhaps, blurred by the apparent acceptability of these other, also illegal, activities (Pew, 2003).

Older teenagers, at least, realise that this activity is illegal. In a manner reminiscent of the arguments of the Open Source Movement,<sup>11</sup> they find their own ethical justification for downloading, copying, distributing and buying copied CDs from friends in the huge profits of the music industry compared with their own paltry resources. Like hacking, the difficulties in tracking down the culprits also serve to make this an acceptable, indeed an admirable, part of youth culture and, hence, of young people's expertise.

### Downloading music – cheap but illegal?

**Nina:** You don't like buy CDs from HMV any more. You just get them off one of your mates who copies CDs.

**Steve:** They get paid enough anyway, them stars.

**Stuart:** A good thing about Kazaa is that it's untraceable because it's from one person's computer to another.

**Steve:** [Napster was closed down] because I think it was based in Florida, they had one computer that was doing it all. And if they took that one down like they did, then it just collapsed. But Kazaa, it's just –

**Stuart:** All different people.

**Steve:** There's no central [server], so it's untraceable.  
(17 year olds, from Manchester)

Notwithstanding their fascination with alternative forms of expertise, we conclude that although they are enthusiastically developing a range of skills for internet use, becoming increasingly sophisticated as they get older, children's so-called expertise is limited in important ways. This is partly a matter of training, partly the responsibility of teachers and parents,<sup>12</sup> but also a matter of interface design (Fasick, 1992; Machill, Neuberger, and Schindler, 2003), for the difficulties of searching should not always be laid at the door of the user. Lastly, much depends on the quality of online experiences: feeling encouraged and confident to explore the internet freely is crucial to getting the most out of it.

You don't like buy CDs from HMV any more. You just get them off one of your mates who copies CDs.

## Theme 2: Opportunities for communication, identity and participation

### Constant contact

Adults may wish children to go online for educational reasons.<sup>13</sup> Children's own motivation primarily centres on the new opportunities for communication. What changes are underway in social networks as online communication becomes commonplace? The most striking change is the way young people are embracing 'constant connection' – they are, and wish to be, 'always on', continuously in touch with their friends.<sup>14</sup>

Even if or, indeed, precisely because they have already seen them at school that day, in the evening young people want to phone their friends from home, chat via instant messaging or send text messages. Interestingly, despite the image of girls being more enthusiastic about communication than boys, we found boys as likely as girls to express this need to contact their friends.

### The 'always on' generation

"Even if you've just seen them at school like, it'll be like you're texting them or talking to them on the phone or on MSN." (Kim, 15, Essex)

"Classes get in the way – you can't talk enough in school."  
(Sean, 15, from Essex)

"I email my best friend in the evenings 'cause like, sometimes, she's just like, she's been at my house for tea or something. She goes home and goes straight on the internet, and we'll email each other again."  
(Rosie, 13, from Derbyshire)

The content of these conversations may seem mundane or trivial to adult observers, being focused on day-to-day topics, gossip and talk for the sake of talk. But the point is less the content than the contact, the keeping in touch, being in the loop, all of which takes a considerable effort to sustain. Moreover, since young people multi-task – chatting while doing homework or waiting for music to download – the communicative aspect of the internet makes the rest more pleasurable.

### Integrating on and offline communication

Online communication is rarely an escape from or an alternative to real life. The popular opposition between online and offline, or virtual and real, communication is inappropriate. Young people are not divided into sociable kids who meet face-to-face and isolated loners who chat to strangers online. Rather, young people use both on and offline communication to sustain their social networks, moving freely among different communication forms (Drotner, 2000; Pew, 2001b). The more they meet offline, the more they also meet online, or so it would seem. Hence, for all but the already-isolated – for whom the explanation lies elsewhere – the internet appears to foster, rather than undermine, existing social contacts (Slater, 2002), connecting children more fully into their local networks.

### Old and new friends

'Local' is the key term here because, as the integration of on and offline communication implies, contacts are generally local rather than distant (or 'virtual'), with friends rather than strangers. Access to new communication technologies need not result in a larger or geographically wider social circle.



Particularly, we see little evidence for the 'global village' hyped in earlier discussions of the internet.

However, the internet does permit some broadening of everyday networks, strengthening already-existing relationships which are otherwise hard to maintain – friends from abroad, distant relatives, staying in touch with people who have moved.

### Keeping in touch with old friends

"I think mobile phones and the internet are a good way of keeping in contact with friends. For example, I have friends in other countries who use MSN. I can send them an email everyday rather than phoning them up and running up a huge phone bill, or sending them a text message. And it's just a good way of keeping in contact with people." (Lorie, 17, from Essex)

"I'd probably have lost contact with a lot of my friends from my last school without MSN. Can't phone everybody ... The really close friends I still phone ... I'd much rather see someone than keep in touch via the internet." (John, 17, from Essex)

Some young people told us that they have built up large friendship networks on the internet and report large numbers of contacts on their MSN 'buddy list', mostly friends from school or 'friends of friends', as these 13 year old boys from Derbyshire note:

### Expanding networks

**Interviewer:** So who do you email?

**Toby:** Friends.

**Interviewer:** From school?

**Toby:** Not usually. Sometimes I email cousins and relatives quite far away.

**Interviewer:** And on instant messaging, who do you talk to?

**Cameron:** I mainly talk to my friends. Some of my friends' friends.

The question of making new friends online is the subject of some debate among young people themselves. Most say they were not interested in talking to people they did not know on the internet, preferring to communicate with friends as they feel they can relate better to them.

### Conversations with strangers as meaningless

"If you're talking to someone on the internet who's a friend, you actually talk to them saying stuff, but feelings and everything are real, and the stuff you're saying means stuff, but if you're talking to someone you haven't met, how do you know if what they're telling you is the truth? You don't really mean some things you say, like, it is a bit fake." (Mark, 17, from Essex)

Children who have chatted to strangers online describe it as 'weird', referring to unknown online contacts as 'dodgy'. They say they 'don't see the point in meeting up with someone they don't know', such as this group of 14-15 year old boys from Essex, who refer to the recent case of a British girl who flew off to France with a man she met online.<sup>15</sup>

### No point talking to strangers

**Ryan:** I don't see the point of going on chat rooms and starting talking to someone and then flying to France to meet them.

**Sean:** I wouldn't really be bothered –

**Ryan:** No, to meet someone you hadn't seen before.

**Jim:** There's no point going on a chat room to meet my new best friend or something!

Teens tend to prefer instant messaging to chat rooms because 'you know who you're talking to' – a phrase used over and over in the focus groups. They are clearly aware of adverts and media reports warning children of online dangers.

### You don't know who you're talking to

"I use instant messaging because if I didn't have that, I wouldn't go in chat rooms because chat rooms, sort of, you really don't know who you're talking to. Whereas instant messaging – you do know who you are talking to, and you can sort of ... you can't give out information that might be important to you." (Cameron, 13, from Derbyshire)

"Because of all these adverts about paedophiles and stuff, so it's just best to stick with people that you know." (Sean, 15, from Essex)

But some children are interested in meeting new people online, enjoying the opportunity to 'pretend to be someone else'.

## Meeting new people online

"I've got a couple of people I don't really know on instant messaging but I talk to them anyway ... But I don't really tell them the truth – there's no point, I don't even know them." (Jenna, 13, from Derbyshire)

These 14-16 year old boys from London are just at the point of moving on from this kind of chat – they recall the pleasure of 'messing around' in chat rooms, but have now become bored with it.

## Becoming bored with chat rooms

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**Faruq:** Chat rooms aren't the most reliable, and it's dangerous as well.

**Amir:** It is a bit, yeah.

**Faruq:** I know a lot of people go to chat rooms just to have a laugh ... Boys and girls go on there, flirting a lot ... I used to do that before, I used to go to these chat rooms, but then I realised ...

**Elkan:** You grow out of it some time.

**Faruq:** I don't think you could grow out of it.

**Amir:** It's just like you get bored sometimes, you might go on it today, you might go on it tomorrow, depends.

**Faruq:** If you've time, it's like most of the things, most of the time – it depends on what you have to do. If you haven't got nothing to do, you can talk to someone.

**Interviewer:** And then you meet people? Or you just kind of tell jokes, mess around, or...

**Faruq:** Mess around.

**Amir:** Mess around, yeah. Fake names ... Sometimes some people – my friend, they went – I don't know if it's them – they could say 'I'm a girl' and you can start saying 'this is how I look, this is my phone number'. And when you call them, you actually know it's your friend! It hasn't actually happened to me. But I know this happened.

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We discuss the attendant risks of chatting to strangers in the next section. One wonders, however, whether the age and gender of the young people quoted above is significant – are boys more sceptical of strangers, is it younger teens, especially girls, who are more likely to run risks? Certainly it was very noticeable that older teens are turning away from chat rooms, choosing instant messaging instead.

## From chat to instant messaging

When interviewing teens three years ago (Livingstone and Bovill, 2001), it was common practice among them to agree, before the end of the school day, to meet later in a certain chat room at a certain time. Notwithstanding the public perception of chat rooms as a place designed for meeting strangers, teens treated chat rooms as places for their personal network to meet up. This illustrates the process of social shaping (McKenzie and Wajcman, 1999), with users creatively reshaping the chat room into something more suited to their needs, for here the demand for a communicative form lead to the subsequent development of the technology - instant messaging. Today, teens meet using instant messaging, leaving chat rooms to the playful games of younger teens.

## Communication choices

This activity of adapting the communicative form to one's communicative needs and interests points up a broader theme in the focus groups, namely the complexity of the choices underlying young people's uses of media. While public discourse tends to judge online communication against an ideal of face-to-face communication, young people themselves embrace a wider range of options – face-to-face, writing, email, instant message, chat rooms, telephone, SMS. In other words, rather than accepting the supposed superiority of face-to-face communication, young people evaluate the suitability of different options for different communicative needs according to a range of criteria.

## Immediacy

Some factors influencing the choice of a communication technology are practical, as these 17 year old boys from Manchester explain.

## Convenience

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**Interviewer:** So when do you phone somebody rather than email or text them?

**Stuart:** If you want to speak to them immediately. 'Cause email, they've got to be on the internet, they've got to see it. For emergencies. And for convenience.

**Steve:** Because with an email it takes time. Because you can type it out, and then you'll always see something that's wrong with it. So you want to try and reword it so it makes more sense. But on the phone normally they can get what you mean by your tone and stuff.

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## Complexity

The length of the message matters. Text messaging is used for short messages, the telephone and email for long ones.

## Length of message

"Emailing, I just do it like if it's not a long bit to say and not a short bit to say ... But text messaging, I just ask questions – it's just short questions. And phoning, I just have a long conversation with people, about nothing really." (Beatrice, 13, from Essex)

I know a lot of people go to chat rooms just to have a laugh ... Boys and girls go on there, flirting a lot ... I used to do that before, I used to go to these chat rooms.

## Mobility

The mobile phone enables children and young people to be in contact with their friends from anywhere (Ling, 2000), by comparison with which the fixed location of the desktop computer is an important constraint.

### Texting from anywhere

"I think using mobile or text is a bit easier because you can do it while, like while you're in the middle of the supermarket, and then you can arrange to meet someone." (Joe, 13, from Derbyshire)

This mobility confers advantages for parents wishing to supervise their children's activities (Logemann and Feldhaus, 2001).

### Mobile phone and parental control

"My mum wants me to have my phone with me all the time because I come to school on the train so if the train's delayed or cancelled, I have to get in contact with my mum. Or if I'm going out shopping, if anything happens, I have to get in contact with my mum or she can get in contact with me if she's going out or something like that." (Rosie, 13, from Derbyshire)

### Connecting technologies

Young people use the mobile phone in conjunction with the internet, as this 14 year old boy from Essex explains:

### From text to instant message

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**Ryan:** So you can go on MSN, and if the person's not online, and they've done the phone link thing, you type in the conversation, press enter, and it just sends a text to their phone.

**Interviewer:** That's very good, right. And then they can go and get on MSN if they want to.

**Ryan:** Yeah, basically if they want to talk to us, yes, they can just go online.

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## Cost

Children are very conscious of the financial cost when choosing which communication technology to use. Often having to pay their mobile phone bill themselves, they prefer to use the mobile for sending text messages than for calls. And they prefer instant messaging to texting because it is 'like sending a text to someone but with no money' (Jim, 14, from Essex).

### Costs of instant messaging versus text messaging

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**Steve:** You get – what is it – thirty pound a month for broadband and you get to use it as much as you want. So if you use it a lot, the cost is like a fraction of a penny.

**Interviewer:** Yep. And you're conscious of the cost of sending a text on your phone?

**All:** Yes.

**Nina:** Because you don't really see the cost when you're in there, but you know when all your credit's run out on your phone.  
(17 year olds, from Manchester)

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## Privacy

More personal issues are also at stake when choosing how to communicate with friends. 13 year old Beatrice from Essex was not alone in describing how talking in a private online space enabled friends to be more open with each other, an important factor in girls' friendships. Face-to-face communication, in this context, is too visible and, thus, subject to peer pressure.

### Saying what you really think

"When you're like talking to them face-to-face, you're like – you've got other people around you, and they can't tell you what they really think. So like instant messaging, you can." (Beatrice, 13, from Essex)

Again, because of the risk of others overhearing a face-to-face conversation, the 10-11 year old girls from Hertfordshire liked emailing secrets to their friends.

### Telling secrets

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**Interviewer:** What do you write to them?

**Sally:** Sort of secrets and stuff.

**Interviewer:** And why do you write secrets on email and not just tell them when you see them?

**Sally:** 'Cause they can make their mind up. When they've got people there, they don't always say what – when they've got people there.

**Ellen:** And sometimes if you've got the email address of the person you fancy, write it to them.

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## Embarrassment

Some, boys particularly, prefer online communication for private conversations as a face-saving device. Here too, face-to-face conversation, far from being ideal, can be risky and difficult for teenagers, as 13 year old Cameron from Derbyshire illustrates.

### Awkward situations

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**Cameron:** I once dumped my old girlfriend by email.

**Interviewer:** Really? Why did you do that by email?

**Cameron:** Well, it was cowardly really. I couldn't say it face-to-face.

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These 15 year old girls from Essex agree, arguing that the internet creates a protective distance which enables them to think more about what they are going to say and avoid embarrassing situations that would occur on the telephone or face-to-face.

### Keeping a protective distance

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**Milly:** It's like you don't have to answer immediately, it's not like you have to keep the conversation going. You can think about what you want to say ... It's not embarrassing. Because like, on the phone, you can hear when someone's voice sounds embarrassed.

**Kim:** You can just tell.

**Milly:** It's really obvious when you're face-to-face. So on the internet you can just say anything, it doesn't really matter. And if they like take it really badly, you just say you're joking.

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### Overcoming shyness

13 year old Laura from Essex thinks it is possible to get to know someone who is shy at school better by talking to them on instant messenger.

### Getting to know someone better

Because you can get to know people really what they're like, at home, and stuff like that ... like if someone was really, really shy at school, they don't talk much, and they a bit liven up at home, they talk to you more, I think. (Laura, 13, from Essex)

### Privacy again

Older teenagers, on the other hand, prefer to hold private conversations face-to-face which they think is more secure than online communication. They are concerned about the possibility of someone 'spying' on online conversations, as these 17 year old girls from Essex suggest. The confidence with which they talk about private and personal conversations suggests these girls have moved on from the problems of embarrassment and peer pressure which preoccupy younger teens. Now they are more concerned that their privacy is secure.

### Older teens prefer talking face-to-face

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**Hazel:** If you wanted to have a private conversation, then I'm sure you'd talk to them face-to-face rather than using the internet, because if you know they can be listened to, or someone else can see what you're doing, then I wouldn't have thought that you'd want that to happen. So you'd therefore talk to them, meet up and talk to them face-to-face.

**Stephanie:** Exactly. 'Cause that friend could be with someone anyway. Or they can cut and paste your conversation into someone else's internet conversation. So that is – I don't think anyone would be that silly to discuss their private [life] on MSN.

**Hazel:** I mean, you've got all these advice things, haven't you – I mean, you can talk to Doctor What's-His-Face and psychiatrists, can't you? So I don't know if I'd ever do something like that. Again I'd probably go to talk to them, go to a clinic or whatever, or wherever they are and talk to them, rather than use the internet.

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It's really obvious when you're face-to-face. So on the internet you can just say anything, it doesn't really matter. And if they like take it really badly, you just say you're joking.

### Advice

Young people differ among themselves on whether the internet represents a useful way of getting advice on personal problems (such as family or relationship problems, health or sexual matters) via specialist websites or online communities.<sup>16</sup> As with the debate over the value of chatting to strangers, for some young people, especially for girls, seeking advice online is less embarrassing as it can be done anonymously. These two 17 year old girls from Manchester told us that they had used the internet to ask advice on personal problems.

### Seeking personal advice online

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**Nina:** If it was something you didn't want people to know about, then you'd probably say it in a chat room, because they don't know you, and you can just forget about it once it's gone.

**Shannon:** They have a website called HealthyPlace.com.

**Interviewer:** Right. Tell me about that.

**Shannon:** If you have a problem - my friend goes on it, she has loads of problems, and she goes on it, and they talk to her and give her advice.

**Nina:** I think it's good 'cause you don't have to go through the embarrassment afterwards.

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However, most prefer to speak to people they know, such as friends and family, face-to-face, and older teens are concerned whether their online conversations would stay private.

### Multiple criterion decision-making

In sum, children and young people relish this new and complex communication environment. They make subtle and deliberate choices according to multiple criteria, some of which concern the medium and some of which concern the age or personality of the child. We still know too little about the implications of online peer networks for identity.<sup>17</sup> Suffice it to say that through their enthusiastic experimentation young people are again pioneers in constructing the emerging perceptions and conventions surrounding different forms of communication.

### From communication to participation?

Does online communication transcend interpersonal matters to encourage participation in local or political communities? The internet has been hailed as the technology to bring direct democracy to the masses, enabling citizens to directly participate in politics (Bentivegna, 2002).

Some organisations are now initiating interesting opportunities for public or civic participation of one kind or another. Thus far, experience suggests that young people often value opportunities for participation when offered, although in practice these tend to be restricted in scope and tightly controlled (Coleman, 2003; Sundin, 1999).<sup>18</sup>

### Online participation

The young people we interviewed are generally disillusioned about or not interested in the possibility of political participation via the internet. Over and over again the conversation flagged when we turned to the idea of connecting to the world of politics via the internet. The same occurred when we discussed local community participation or invited children to discuss their school website. This negative view was expressed with some cynicism by 17 year old Heather from Essex.

### Not interested in politics

**Interviewer:** The other thing people say is that the internet makes things more democratic. Because now you could email your MP, or go on a political chat room...

**Heather:** Yeah, you can email him, but is he going to listen?

For this group of 17 year olds from Manchester, finding a career is more important than getting involved in political matters.

### Other things more relevant than politics

**Interviewer:** Politics is a bad word, is it?

**Steve:** Yeah.

**Stuart:** The good thing about the internet is that you can find jobs and –

**Steve:** You can find next to anything that you want.

**Shannon:** And any classes and that what you want to join in.

This suggests that young people's idea of participation in realms beyond their immediate networks is highly functional. Indeed, when we asked about emailing organisations, government bodies or anyone outside their local contacts, the only answer they could offer concerned contacting universities by email or consulting the web when researching their future studies. Nor did they express much interest in setting up their own personal homepage and creating their own online content, even though some of the older respondents had been taught the basics of web design at school.

While their lack of interest in politics is undeniable and, especially for those approaching 18, a matter of concern, young people are finding other ways to participate - through fandom, expanding friendship networks or even peer-to-peer file sharing networks for downloading music. Such participation is often highly meaningful to young people. Even if it seems to have no direct political consequences, perhaps these are the precursory activities of participants in new social movements?<sup>19</sup>

### Participating in fan communities

"I remember, once on the internet, I was in this chat room, and recently a footballer died – Mark Vivian Foe. And then this boy said – I think it was a boy – and he said – he was from Africa, 'Can we have one minute silence – no typing – for Foe'. And everyone – no-one typed for a minute. It was a blank screen for one minute." (Amir, 15, from London)

However, such participation tends to link young people not to a public or civic network but to the world of commerce. This 15 year old girl from London prefers emailing celebrities than politicians.

### Emailing celebrities

**Padma:** I get in touch with celebrities once in a while, and they send an email back ...

**Interviewer:** If you email a celebrity, who do you think replies? Do they reply, or is it their secretary?

**Padma:** Yeah, sometimes you get personal – sometimes you get a secretary – but sometimes you get personal emails back. They personally get back to you.

**Interviewer:** Right, right. Ok. And what kind of things do you say to them?

**Padma:** Just compliment them on what it is they do, or ask them for something like a fan t-shirt. But if you're like a regular person, you get the real celebrity answering back to you. But if you're just like a one off, they're like 'oh well'.

**Interviewer:** But Padma, you feel you're more likely to get a response by email than if you wrote to somebody?

**Padma:** Yeah. I get like a – sometimes, like, two weeks, every two weeks, I get personal mails from celebrities. My favourite celebrities. That's ok!

**Interviewer:** Ok, ok. But you don't get in touch with politicians, or ...

[LAUGHTER]

**Padma:** I'm not really interested in [politics] exactly. They all chat crap, so ...

As with Heather's comment earlier, it is clear that for Padma participation must be two-way: young people will not visit websites if they think no-one is attending to them or that only an official rather than a personal response will be forthcoming.



### Theme 3: Dangers of content, contact and commercialism

Use of the internet poses particular threats to children and young people. Consistent with the three categories of online threat identified by Childnet International (Williams, 2002), the research literature thus far has concentrated on exposure to sexual and pornographic content, on the incidence of exploitative and dangerous contacts, and on issues of privacy, advertising and commercialism. The focus groups did not address advertising, branding or online commercialism other than in relation to young people's readiness to trust, rather than critically evaluate, online information (see earlier).<sup>20</sup> This section will concentrate on pornographic content and unsafe contact.

#### Content

Feilitzen and Carlsson (2000) map the availability of online pornography, finding much that could upset or embarrass children. Whether pornographic websites are experienced as problematic by young people and their families is less clear (Sutter, 2000). Survey estimates of children's exposure to undesirable online sexual material and their engagement in risky behaviours vary widely.<sup>21</sup> Does internet use result in actual harm to children and young people?<sup>22</sup> Thus far it seems that not all risks taken result in worrying incidents and not all worrying incidents result in actual or lasting harm. But there are also sufficient reasons for concern.<sup>23</sup>

Young people commonly claim to have come across pornography online, usually accidentally. They see it as part of the media environment more generally, it also being available through videos, magazines and newspapers.<sup>24</sup> Here gender plays more of a role. While some respondents regard it as unwelcome, especially the younger teenage and mid teen girls, others, especially teenage boys, express curiosity about sexual matters and are not opposed to seeing it. This was freely debated at some length by a group of 14-16 year old boys from London.

#### Differing opinions

**Amir:** It's just what teenagers do, I mean, it's only hormones. Some people deal with it, some people don't. Some people I know they go on it because – some people just have fun.

**Prince:** I don't think there's anything good about watching porn movies or porn sites.

**Amir:** I don't think there's nothing wrong with it.

**Prince:** What I'm saying is, what good is it? If you – I mean – there's nothing wrong – I don't think there's any point in watching porn movies, because it's just, like, people say there's pleasure in it, but I don't think there's no pleasure. I think – I've seen some porn movies, yeah, but I've come to realise there's no point.

**Elkan:** Sometimes I find them funny.

**Amir:** I just find it's a good experience!

Consequently, they do not think online pornography should be restricted. They do, however, agree that it is more available on than offline.

### Restrict online pornography?

**Amir:** On MSN, you can get jokes sites and nasty like jokey sites – I mean there's some pictures of Somalian people that look like J-Lo<sup>25</sup>, just like comparisons like that. There was a picture of a black lady who had humungous breasts, they were down to her knees. They were so big! Just little things like that just pop up.

**Interviewer:** And do you think they should be stopped?

**Several:** No.

**Elkan:** I reckon they should carry on, because –

**Amir:** You get bored with just the same actual thing. Put different things on.

**Faruq:** Everyone's got access to it, some people like, just got different tastes – a little button saying 'if you want to see' –

**Interviewer:** Rather than just having it pop up, and there it is. Yeah. But is the internet added – I mean, is there more on the internet, or is this just what you could see if you go into the newsagent?

**Prince:** There's more, much more on the internet.

**Elkan:** There's a newspaper that has it – Page 3, on The Sun – it influences kids to –

**Prince:** I reckon there's much more on the internet.

However, their classmates, a group of 15 year old girls from the same school, are offended and embarrassed by online pornography. One of the girls explained how she accidentally came across pornographic pictures that had been downloaded onto the home computer by her older cousins who live in the same house.

#### Girls offended by online pornography

"Every time I pass, they've got a computer in the backroom, yeah, so every time I pass them, not really every, every time, but once I passed them, they're watching porn. They download it on the computer – the oldest one, he said he used to download it ... You see, they watch it in Windows Media Player, and whenever I go to play music, it will be there. But I change it. But they've got them in their documents." (Tanya, 15 years, from London)

As a group of 17 year olds from Essex argue, pornography is easier to find on the internet, compared to other media such as television or the newsagent.

### The internet is like life, only easier

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**Marie:** To be honest, a lot of those sites you wouldn't find by accident, and if you do, they normally have like a warning page before you enter it.

**Lorie:** The internet is just like life as I see it, but just easier. So if these 13 or 14 year olds want to find stuff, they're going to find it in real life or on the internet.

**John:** It's not accidental on the TV or the newsagents – it's there for a reason. On the internet, you can get it by accident.

**Scott:** I don't think there is realistically any way it can be censored completely. So I think, yeah, you just have to try and avoid it as best as possible.

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For some young people, especially girls, the greater exposure to pornography on than offline is problematic. This is particularly because it is not restricted to leisure contexts, also intruding into educational uses, as this group of 13 year old girls from Derbyshire complain when pointing out that boys go on 'porn' and 'rude' websites.

### Just for the boys

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**Interviewer:** Why do boys go on porn?

**All:** Because they just like – like fit women.

**Rosie:** Like Geography, we were doing this um, Australia project and obviously there's Kylie Minogue, Holly Valance and Delta Goodrem. All from 'Neighbours'<sup>26</sup> or whatever.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, but that's not porn, is it?

**Rosie:** No, but – we were getting images, and obviously Holly Valance is a very pretty girl and um – and, one of my friends, he decided – we were looking through the images trying to choose which one we wanted [for our Australia project], and he decided we were going to get the one where Holly Valance – there was Holly Valance and with another girl, and they had hardly any clothes on whatsoever, so they wanted that one straight away.

**Interviewer:** So was that at school?

**Rosie:** That was in school, yeah.

**Interviewer:** There are no blocks? [internet filtering software]

**Rosie:** There are blocks, there are blocks.

**Interviewer:** And what did your teacher do when he saw that?

**Rosie:** Then we didn't print it off in the end.

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The London girls spoke of a similar incident in their school, this highlighting some day to day struggles between teachers and pupils to manage internet use.

### Boys downloading pornography at school

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**Tanya:** Yeah, these boys, they just go onto the internet, they download it, they put it on as screensaver.

**Padma:** I don't know where they get it from.

**Tanya:** It's just sick.

**Nabila:** If you - if you have Hotmail, that's when you get junk mail, loads of it.

**Interviewer:** And they put it on the screensaver [or rather, desktop wallpaper] on the computer, in school?

**Several:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** And so what do the IT people do?

**Nabila:** There was an argument.

**Tanya:** Sometimes they hardly see, but -

**Salimah:** But then [they] told that person to take it off.

**Padma:** But they didn't.

**Salimah:** But they're like 'Yeah, but there's nothing bad about it', and all this stuff. In the end they had to take it off.

**Interviewer:** Ok. So you think it's something that the boys are into, but you're not?

**Tanya:** It's just disgusting. [GIGGLES]

**Interviewer:** Do you think it should be stopped then?

**Several:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Is it – if it's disgusting, does it upset you? Does it make you feel -

**Nabila:** I think it's disgusting looking at people revealing themselves.

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On the other hand, other respondents, especially older teenagers, appear more indifferent towards pornography, as this 15 year old girl from Essex explains.

### Not such a problem

**Milly:** I think there's way too much hype about it. Because I use the internet loads. And you so, so, so rarely come across something that – maybe like a pop-up for a porn site. But that's hardly-

**Interviewer:** Ok.

**Milly:** Once you're into your teenage years, you've got used to the idea that people have sex. It's not really that scary any more.

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However, although teens may consider that they can protect themselves, all agree that younger children should be protected, for example by setting up internet filtering software, as expressed by these 17 year olds from Essex:

### Younger children should be protected

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**Heather:** No, I definitely don't want to see that. No, it doesn't upset me. I know what's out there so I know it's there and ... yeah.

**John:** It doesn't really bother me. I know it's there, and you can just move on to something else you find ... It doesn't really matter when you're our age. But I mean, for little kids ... maybe the parents should set it up. But when you're like 17 or about – it doesn't really matter. Just ignore it, just move on.

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We return to the theme of parental protection below.

### Contact

Most public concern centres on the growing incidence of unwanted or inappropriate sexual contact made to teenagers by adult strangers. The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2001b) found that nearly 60% of 12-17 year olds online had received messages (of any kind) from strangers. NOP's Kids.net survey found that 29% of UK children using the internet would give out their home address and 14% their email address (Wigley and Clarke, 2000). The Chatwise, Streetwise Report (Internet-Crime-Forum, 2000) charted mounting evidence of actual crimes against children, suggesting that incidents of adult sex offenders meeting children online are increasing, the key group at risk being girls aged 13-17.

### Chat room dangers

Fortunately, many young people are now getting the message. We have seen that chat rooms are losing popularity in favour of instant messaging. In part, this reflects the success of media awareness campaigns warning children of the risks, as this 13 year old boy from Essex describes:

### Paedophiles in chat rooms

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**Alan:** There's obviously the scare of paedophiles and people like that on chat rooms –

**Interviewer:** And how do you know there are paedophiles in chat rooms?

**Alan:** Well, it's on the news, and there are ad campaigns against it. It's just a kind of thing that you realise there's probably someone on it who is a paedophile or like a child sex-abuser or someone, and you don't really want to kind of meet one of them or speak to one of them.

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These 10 year olds from Hertfordshire were impressed by Coronation Street's treatment of this issue, although the experience of one of the girls is more personal. She tells of a friend who was attacked by someone she had met in a chat room.

### Mediated and personal encounters with danger

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**Ellen:** Because adults can like turn their voices into younger children, and like they can ask for pictures and stuff and ask to meet you. If you give away your name and address, they could –

**Holly:** Get you involved in drugs and stuff and that sort of thing.

**Interviewer:** And how do you know that can happen? Because you've never been in a chat room –

**Holly:** I've seen it on a TV programme.

**Ellen:** You can get killed as well.

**Interviewer:** What was the TV programme?

**Holly:** It was Coronation Street. With – what was she called? David? Sarah? Sarah. She went onto a chat room with her friend and she was meeting this boy, and he pretended to be the boy's dad, but he was actually a boy, and he told her.

**Ellen:** And he kidnapped her.

**Holly:** And like, it just told me that, they could be lying, and they could get you into serious danger or trouble.

**Ellen:** Sometimes people get killed, I've seen it before, when people go on chat rooms. The person's told them to meet them somewhere, and they've hurt them, kidnapped them...

**Sally:** In Eastenders.

**Holly:** I know it's true because it happened to my old friend, but I don't see her now.

**Interviewer:** What happened?

**Holly:** Because she went into this chat room, and she thought she had this friend, and she thought it was one of her friends, like there was a friend on there that she had met, so she met up with him in the park, and she got beaten up.

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While increased safety awareness is a positive outcome of media publicity, this is associated with considerable parental anxiety. For some, a further outcome is a simple ban on the use of chat rooms, email or specific content.

## Internet rules

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**Holly:** You're not allowed to give your last name to any website.

**Ellen:** At home I'm not allowed to go on chat rooms.

**Holly:** At school you're not allowed to go on any websites like –

**Interviewer:** Websites like what?

**Ellen:** Like EastEnders websites or stuff like that.  
(10 year old girls, from Hertfordshire)

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For young children, restrictive responses are perhaps appropriate, although children's understanding of these responses reveals a confusing mix of reality and myth.

## Chat room dangers and myths

"My mum doesn't let me go on chat rooms ... They find out your address and come and rob you and things. That's why I don't go on it."  
(Adrian, 10, from Hertfordshire)

"I would say that chat rooms would be dangerous because, like Cameron said before, you don't know who you're talking to. And then if you give your address, then they can come and kidnap you or something. And take you away. It's just, I think it's on the news. I remember someone's got into a chat room and gone off to Paris." (Joe, 13, from Derbyshire)

## Assessing the risks

While younger children have been impressed by media stories, older teenagers seek to assess the risks by comparing them with other risks encountered in real life, as pointed out by these 15 year old girls from Manchester.

## Risks online versus offline

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**Claire:** I think there is a little bit of a risk obviously because it's going to be due to all the stuff, but I don't think it's that high at all.

**Kim:** No, not compared to like walking in country lanes at night.

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Interviews with parents confirm that fears of danger to young people on the street are more salient than online threats (Livingstone, 2002b). Given that young people are highly constrained in their freedom offline, to increase constraints online is unfortunate.

## Chat rooms safer than real life

"On the internet you feel physically safer because you know no-one can beat you up on the internet and do any physical harm. When you live round my way ... it gets a bit rough sometimes, you know, you don't want to go out on the streets that much." (Steve, 17, from Manchester)

"The internet, you can control what's going on, but when you're outside, you can't." (Prince, 16, from London)

## Taking risks

Perhaps the perception of the 'comparative safety' of the internet leads some teens to take greater risks than is advisable. In the focus group discussions, we identified several hints as to why safe practices might be ignored on occasion (see also O'Connell, 2002).

First, even among those aware of the risks, young people may gain social status by meeting people on the internet.

## It's nice to say I've met someone online

"I've got about five buddies on my thing but you can't really say, oh, this is a young girl, she's got brown hair, blue eyes, 'cause she could be an old – she could be a he and it's an old man but I suppose it's quite nice to just say, oh, I've met someone on the internet." (Rosie, 13, from Derbyshire)

Second, when young people encounter dubious aspects of the internet, they may avoid talking to their parents about it, as this in turn involves the risk of losing their internet access.

## Not telling parents

"Talking to them about internet is bad for you and stuff. They might try and think about taking the internet off your computer, which isn't good for us."  
(Amir, 15 years, from London)

Third, as this London boy also confesses, when young people get involved in an interesting conversation, they simply forget about the risks.

## Forgetting about the risks

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**Amir:** When you're actually on the chat rooms, you don't think of what's happened to this person, if someone's chatting to you, you're having an interesting conversation.

**Interviewer:** Right, right. So then you might forget about some of the risks?

**Amir:** Yeah.

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Fourth, as Amir's friend explains, young people may think they are safe in chat rooms because they see themselves as sensible.

## Common sense

"I also think that people have got common sense. If you hear on the news because someone got lost because they went to a chat room and chatting to people, I think they'll use their common sense to know they shouldn't do this ... And I also think it's the situation some people are in, to just go in chat rooms and stuff – maybe the family's not settled and things like that."  
(Prince, 16, from London)

As in other safety or public information campaigns, it seems that it is easier to get the message across than it is to ensure safe practices under all circumstances. In addition to seeking to maintain high levels of safety awareness, public campaigns could become better targeted to counter the specific conditions which lead some children to take risks online.

### Parental responses and domestic regulation

In response to the risks, parents are developing rules for managing their children's internet use. Many children report their parents monitoring or restricting them.

#### Parental worries

"Sometimes my mum might, like when I'm on MSN, she goes 'Hope you're not going to chat rooms' and stuff because she hears loads of stuff. So I just say I'm chatting to my friends and she can see that. So I think she knows I wouldn't go into chat rooms because – it's only weirdos – like in Coronation Street, that one that Sarah Lou went and met a pervert." (Kim, 15, from Essex)

"There's all these scares going about. If you go into a chat room you'll be abducted by a dirty old man. I know it's not necessarily all that but ... It's just that my parents are a bit worried about it, and it is possible."  
(Rachel, 13, from Derbyshire)

"On AOL, you can only like go into certain chat rooms. So they've always got hosts and they're watching over. And my mum's always in there watching me as well when I'm in a chat room to check there's no trouble."  
(Rosie, 13, from Derbyshire)

Regulation may be triggered by personal experiences. Hazel, 17, describes how her father restricted her and her younger sister's use of instant messaging after the sister was sent a message which contained a link to pornographic material.

#### Parental restrictions

"My dad, not being funny, but he is a bit like – he doesn't let me go on the internet very often, because we had an incident one day, where my sister – it wasn't to do with me, it was to do with my sister – she had, she was on MSN, and some one sent her something through. And it was actually like – it was like porn – so my dad saw it, and he was like very angry – so he doesn't let us use MSN now. And I think that's one of the issues where I probably don't use it as much now, because basically I'm not allowed. He has restricted what we do on it. If it's for school purposes or for college purposes, that's fine, but the social side of it and downloading the different things – he's a bit anti." (Hazel, 17, from Essex)

A variety of solutions are put into practice. Toby explains how his father has set up different accounts for him and his younger brothers with different levels of protection.

#### Internet filtering at home

"We have different names to log onto the computer, it's not just one. You can set up your own thing. So my dad's got hardly any [restrictions] on it. I've got, you know, quite a bit. But my brothers, they've blocked out most of the stuff, so they can only go on very limited sites." (Toby, 13, from Derbyshire)

The parents of these 10-11 year old primary school girls have set up parental controls which block 'nasty emails' and stop the girls from accessing chat rooms or making online purchases.

### Parental controls

**Emma:** It restricts the websites that you can go on. And – because my one at home – my uncle set it up for me. And it stops people emailing you like nasty emails, and you can't send like nasty emails back to them. And it deletes their email, so if like really bad people email you, it changes your email for you automatically for you sometimes.

**Sally:** It also stops you going on websites you're not meant to go on.

**Interviewer:** And what kinds of websites are those that are blocked?

**Ellen:** Chat rooms.

**Emma:** And if you want to go like, if you're being like really silly, and you're going on holiday, and you want to book a holiday sometimes.

Although these girls realise that the filtering system protects them from undesirable content, they have experienced some disadvantages. For example, their particular settings at home would block Google, the search engine they are encouraged to use by their school.

### Downsides of internet filtering

**Ellen:** I used to have Kids AOL, but my dad changed it. You couldn't go on Google, because it wouldn't let you go on it. So my dad changed it, because you couldn't go on anything.

**Holly:** Sometimes it's silly, because sometimes you want to find out stuff, like find out about mountains [for school projects], sometimes it won't let you. But like, the ones that you shouldn't really be going on, it – it stops you, so it's quite good.

Indeed, we heard many stories of children's frustration with overly restrictive or inefficient filtering, whether installed at home or at school.

### Filtering at school

**Sean:** The school always blocks the sites, blocks the fun sites. Anything to do with games they'll block ... That's why we're constantly on the net at home, so we can look at game sites that have been blocked at school, so we can play on them.

**Ryan:** That's the most annoying thing.

**Jim:** Filtering – yeah – sometimes, yeah – it filters out what you don't want it to filter, and then it just leaves –

**Ryan:** Filters are the worst thing ever.  
(14-15 year old boys, from Essex)

## Age differences in attitudes towards online protection

Older teenagers do not see the need for their age group to be protected, considering themselves old enough to assess the dangers. But they recommend monitoring for children younger than themselves. For example, 17 year old Nina from Manchester thinks the age limit should be 13 or 14.

## Age of responsibility?

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**Interviewer:** I'm just wondering, what age you think people should be protected up to?

**Nina:** I'd say about – just when they're young, and they don't really know what they're doing. About 14 – 13, 14, about then. Because after that they know what they're doing and all that.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah. Old enough to take responsibility.

**Nina:** Yeah, they've got more sense.

**Interviewer:** And how do you think they should be protected?

**Nina:** I think they need to know not to go around giving email addresses out and meeting people they don't know.

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Nina has taken on the responsibility of watching while the 13 year old girl she babysits visits chat rooms, especially because she says that the girl's parents are ignorant of their daughter's internet use.

## Protecting younger children

"The kid who I babysit, I have to proper watch over her shoulder because she's always like talking about the wrong stuff, like sex and that, to them. I have to watch over to stop her from doing that and giving her phone number out ... I just tell her not to do it. Because she's only 13, she shouldn't be talking about the stuff that she's saying on the internet. She gives them like a phone number, and they ring her up – you just have to warn her that she shouldn't be meeting them." (Nina, 17, from Manchester)

Other respondents, especially older teenagers, such as this group of 16-17 year olds from Essex, think that their parents are insufficiently experienced in using computers to install internet monitoring software in order to protect their children. Instead they resort to rather more direct methods.

## Parents unable to monitor their children's online use

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**Mark:** Parents wouldn't be able to do the thinking to get that software.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**Marie:** My parents wouldn't know where to start.

**Lorie:** I think parents are more inclined to shout at the children and say 'get off the internet, go to bed', rather than spending the money on filtering.

**Mark:** Or if they steal the lead for the internet.

**Interviewer:** Yes.

**Mark:** That's what my dad did.

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Indeed, as seen by both parents and children, some parents lack confidence in the use of the internet, as illustrated in the discussion of expertise. This impedes the guidance they can offer their children and the protective strategies they can implement. The limitations are not just technical: some parents find it difficult to discuss the reasons for such regulation with their children, although discussion between parents and children of the reasons for internet-related rules at home may be crucial for achieving a workable environment.

## Do your parents know?

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**Interviewer:** And is this [pornography] something your parents ever talk to you about?

**Several:** No.

**Elkan:** Too embarrassed.

(14-16 year old boys, from London)

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## Balancing safety and privacy

Anonymity and playfulness, privacy and deception, have always been vital to childhood: it is ironic that these are both central to what children value about the internet and also what gives rise to parental fears for children's safety. Children and young people do not like their parents and teachers monitoring their internet use, seeing it as an invasion of their privacy. They expect, and indeed receive, more trust and respect as they get older.

To explain why they object to having their internet use monitored, children use metaphors such as having one's pockets searched, having one's personal space invaded or being stalked – ironic given that parental monitoring is partly aimed at precluding stalking online by strangers. On the other hand, with software named Cybersnoop, for example, or Cybersitter, which 'works by secretly monitoring all computer activity', young people's strongly expressed view that they too have privacy rights should be more clearly heard.<sup>27</sup>

## Privacy metaphors

"My parents don't ask me 'ooh, what did you go on?', because I wouldn't like it if I came from school, came home, and they search my pockets. I'd say 'what are you doing – that's personal'. What if I had something I didn't want them to see? Just like I wouldn't search my mum's bedroom."

(Amir, 15, London)

"I think it is like your personal space." (Kim, 15, from Essex)

"It's like tapping your phone calls and things – it's like you're being stalked!" (Milly, 15, from Essex)



To maintain their privacy, young people have a variety of tactics for evading parental or school monitoring and controls, and some clearly enjoy the challenge of outwitting adults, capitalising on their comparatively greater internet-related expertise. They hide folders on the computer where parents cannot find them, and they minimise or switch between screens when parents are looking over their shoulder.

### Strategies to manage privacy

"I hide folders." (Milly, 15, from Essex)

"You can minimise things." (Kim, 15, from Essex)

They are aided by parents' lack of consistency in controlling internet use. Ten year old Ellen from Hertfordshire describes how, by using the adult settings, she evades the restrictions her parents have set up for her on the AOL Kids account:

### Finding ways around parental restrictions

Ellen: Because then if they don't want you to know about certain things, then it'll stop you going on. But then if you try going on your one [account] and it doesn't work, you always know that it will work on the adults' one. So if the adults have passwords that the children don't know, so then, children can't go into the adults' one and find out bits that they don't know, or that they're not allowed to know.

Interviewer: And do you know the password to go on the adults' one?

Ellen: I've got my own one, I know my own password, and I know my dad's password.

Sally: Do you use your dad's?

Ellen: He knows I went on it.

The group of 14-16 year old London school boys claim that they can always find a way around the school's filter, always find things they want, and they clearly enjoy engaging in this forbidden activity. On their home computers, these boys do not have filtering software because, they say, their parents would not know how to install it.

### Ways to get around it

Amir: The technical things there, the kids nowadays – they just know how to go onto new sites.

Prince: This goes back to what you said earlier, like we know the computer, we're the generation of computers.

Amir: We know how to go on something else if it isn't there, 'cause we always know how to search for things.

Interviewer: So it's not that you can break the filter, but you can find a way round it to get –

Amir: Yeah, to find a way around it. It's not about breaking, it's about – there's always plan B.

Prince: There are always other options.

On occasion, children's comparatively greater expertise in evading the rules is more perceived than real. For example, this group of 17 year olds from Manchester says that their mothers still check the history file, which shows a list of visited websites, but they have – or at least they think they have – found a way around it by accessing sites through a search engine which, they think, will not show up in the history file. At their age, privacy is important for them as a way of gaining independence from their parents.

### Escaping parental control

Stuart: Good thing about the internet at home is you're free to access anything you want.

Steve: My mum says, as long as she doesn't get charged on the phone bill on top of the internet, she doesn't care what I go on.

Interviewer: Does your mum sometimes check what you're doing?

Steve: She'll check what I'm doing. But most of the time I'm just in chat rooms or doing email.

Stuart: Good thing about search engines, they can't actually trace what website you've been on, if you actually learn to search for it.

Nina: That's what I do.

Stuart: 'Cause my mum used to check what websites I've been on, but she doesn't know, so like...

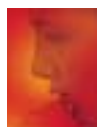
Interviewer: What do you mean? You go to a website through the search engine?

Stuart: Yeah, you like, um, bring up the Ask Jeeves, shall we say, then you type in the website you want to go on – say like Lycos – you type in Lycos in the actual bar and that brings Lycos up. Do it that way. It's untraceable.

Nina: You just like don't want your mum spying on you and knowing everything about you.

Steve: Because you want your independence, really, you don't want your mum looking over your shoulder checking what you're doing all the time.

Rather than pressing for more parental monitoring and control, advice which could encourage children's evasion more than their acquiescence, society must find ways of stimulating more discussion of risks among all parties, including children, together with a clearer negotiation of alternative strategies to minimise harm, if it is to balance children's safety and children's privacy.





## Theme 4: Dangers of inequality, exclusion and the digital divide

Access to the internet remains stratified, with significant inequalities across and within households in all nations studied (Rice, 2002). Hence a significant minority of young people lack domestic access to the internet. The 'digital divide' in access is increasingly a divide in the quality of access rather than simply a matter of access to a computer and modem. The existence of a more subtle but potentially more pernicious digital divide in extent and quality of use remains controversial. Some suggest that, given access, disadvantaged groups make equivalent use of ICT, so that equalising access is sufficient. Others suggest that providing domestic access to ICT may increase rather than decrease inequalities in class, gender or ethnicity. Research questions include: for users, which aspects of their domestic, local or school context support internet use? How can quality of use be evaluated? For low or non-users, what are the barriers - access, location, support, networking, motivation, etc - for different groups of children (Facer and Furlong, 2001)? To what extent do children manage to overcome inequalities in access? In what ways does it matter to them to lack access? Can the school redress inequalities at home?

The present report only hints at some directions here, because only 5 of the 55 children who participated in our focus group discussions lacked access to, or were not allowed to use, the internet at home. Particularly, we cannot comment here on the crucial question of socio-demographic inequalities, leaving this to be pursued in the survey.

### A new source of exclusion?

For the five children without access, we could hardly pursue their possible sense of exclusion within the focus groups. Still, they said that they missed out on being able to communicate with their friends and felt left out because they could not discuss popular websites at school. However, they reported finding ways to compensate - sending emails during the school lunch hour or in a phone booth or going online at a friend's house. For example, 10 year old Holly from Hertfordshire is the only one among her group of friends without internet access at home.

### Feeling left out?

**Holly:** We should have time like in our computer lesson if we want to, if we really want to find out something, like, the other kids have been talking about, and like I haven't been, haven't got the internet at home - so if you want to go and see what they're all talking about, and you can go on it then.

**Interviewer:** And do the others often talk about things on the internet?

**Sally:** And emails.

**Holly:** Especially these three. [pointing at the other girls in the group]

**Sally:** And emails.

**Interviewer:** And you haven't seen -

**Holly:** When I've been round their houses, sometimes I've seen it.

**Interviewer:** So you go on the internet at their house sometimes, do you?

**Sally:** Yeah. And we talk about emails and stuff.

**Holly:** They let me read their emails.

This 17 year old from Manchester, who has a broadband internet connection at home, spoke up for those without internet access. He stressed exclusion from the entertainment value of the internet more than its educational aspects, as learning-related information is available from other sources.

### Thoughts on non-users

**Steve:** Well, they're missing out on downloading stuff and using chat rooms, but if they just need to do research for something, then I don't see that they're missing out that much.

**Interviewer:** Hmm. It's not something you laugh at people for?

**Steve:** Yeah. We try and encourage them to get it, but we don't laugh at them if they don't have it. Some people can't afford it, which is just a sad truth.

### Importance of the internet

Interestingly among the majority with access, the internet is regarded with some ambivalence. We asked children how important the internet was to them and how they would feel if it ceased to exist. Despite their huge enthusiasm for the internet, its importance to them remains relative - both relative to other media and other leisure activities. Many children prefer other activities (such as playing sports, meeting friends or going outside) or other media (such as television or games consoles), seeing the internet as something for use 'on rainy days' (Livingstone, 2002b).

The importance of the internet depends on a child's age, among other factors. Whereas younger children have grown up with it, older teenagers remember the times before the internet existed and, perhaps, have a different approach to this technology.

### Older teenagers didn't grow up with the internet

"My younger cousins, they're all under the age of eleven - and they're now coming into an age where the internet is all they've ever known. Where we, really, when we were young, we were still doing all the [outdoor] activities, and the internet wasn't really around. So we've got balance. But maybe in five or ten years time that will change." (Lorie, 17, from Essex)

When asked what they would do if the internet disappeared tomorrow, some initial responses were of horror. However, after a little reflection, the major message concerned the convenience of the internet. In other words, while children and young people recognise its usefulness, especially for schoolwork, and say they would miss internet access, they are confident that eventually they would find alternative ways to do the same things, as illustrated by these 17 year olds from Manchester.

### If the internet disappeared tomorrow...

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**Interviewer:** Suppose the internet disappeared tomorrow.

**Steve:** Oh, Christ!

**Shannon:** Complain to the government.

**Steve:** Find something else to do.

**Nina:** It's good to find stuff out, like – because before I came here, when I was thinking of courses, you could just go on the website to find out about them.

**Steve:** It would be harder to find stuff and keep in touch, and the phone bill would be through the roof.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah.

**Steve:** It would make life harder because you'd have to go out and hunt for the information at different libraries and things and wait for them to get the books in, and something that would take half an hour or an hour would take two to three weeks.

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For this group of 13 year old girls from Derbyshire losing other technologies, such as satellite television or the mobile phone, would be more 'devastating'.

### As long as we still have television and the telephone ...

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**Linda:** Occasionally we get homework on the – like researching stuff on the internet and stuff and it's just – it would make it awkward.

**Rachel:** It wouldn't bother me at first, I don't think. I'd manage to – a couple of weeks, yeah, fine. But when I realised it was gone, it'd probably annoy me a bit knowing that I can't go and –

**Susie:** It's like always really horrible weather up here, and like you get bored of it eventually because you can't go out every day and stuff.

**Rosie:** I do use it a lot but it's kind of like – if you lost the internet, I wouldn't be as bothered as if we'd lost Sky digital. I would be bothered. I wouldn't be as bothered because like if we didn't have Sky, I'd be distraught. Yeah, but if we lost the internet, I'd probably be like, oh no, oh no. I'd be upset for like a couple of days.

**Susie:** You'd live on the phone.

**Rosie:** I'd just live on text messaging. Yeah. Because you can get chat rooms on your phone, so I don't see what's wrong with that.

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Some older teenagers, such as these 16-17 year old girls from Essex, are more critical towards the internet, saying that they would not miss the internet as it does not necessarily improve learning, and the information is also available from alternative sources.

### The internet is just an easy way of doing things

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**Marie:** If we didn't have the internet, we'd get everything we have on the internet somewhere else. And I don't think the internet is the solution to anything. And especially not education because there are too many distractions. Um, and I just think the internet can be an easy way of doing things, but it won't actually change anything like education.

**Lorie:** It doesn't improve, it just gives a different way, faster but maybe not that much necessarily better.

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Other teenagers, such as these 14-15 year old boys from Essex, see the internet as an entertainment medium for downloading music and playing games; yet for them it remains a mere 'trend' or 'novelty'.

### The internet is just a novelty

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**Ryan:** It's just something that everyone has, it's just like a trend. Someone's got it and then everyone's got it.

**Sean:** You get it and you're like 'Oh wow, I've got the internet!' and then after a month – it's a novelty thing, really.

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Clearly the internet is not so much taken for granted that young people cannot contemplate life without it, although this may be changing. Although the internet is highly convenient for schoolwork, it is gaining its most insistent role in everyday life through its impact on communication habits: indeed, staying in touch with their peer group becomes increasingly important as they grow older, form their identities and gain independence from their parents.

In short, the crucial issue concerns the peer group norms. If the internet disappeared tomorrow, young people are confident they would adjust. But given that the internet is widely but not universally available, for those few who lack access, the shift to an online peer culture may well exclude them socially as well as add barriers to their educational performance.

# Work in Progress: Next steps

Thus far, the research project UK Children Go Online has explored children and young people's expressed experiences of the internet, mainly at home but also in other locations, particularly at school. A child-centred perspective has proved productive in exploring some key and easily neglected issues – for example, expertise, privacy and peer norms - demonstrating that parents can be poor informants on their own children's online activities.

A child-centred approach also brings out some methodological challenges in respecting children's own voices as they make sense of their lives, including those aspects which they keep private, secret, away from the judgmental glare of adult attention. After all, it is and has always been integral to childhood to generate tactics to live within, or circumvent, the strategies by which adults attempt to guide or constrain children. The internet merely provides a new context within which such negotiations – between regulation and evasion, surveillance and secrecy, normative expectation and creative experimentation – are played out. However, the creativity of children's use of the internet should not be overstated. Youth culture is being reshaped in key respects by today's young generation – and here the pioneering theme is appropriate - but for each individual child the peer norms remain strong. Thus, the scope for creativity or innovation is limited.

On the other hand, as young people go online, integrating the on and offline, the changes have implications far beyond leisure, the traditional focus of media research. When television arrived, the home was conceived as a sanctuary, apart from the demands of work and community. Today the internet is finding its place in a very different kind of home, defined through its connections with, rather than separation from, work, school, community, even globe.<sup>28</sup> Within this, family members live increasingly individualised lifestyles and here too the internet facilitates, blurring boundaries between home and work, public and private, education and entertainment, citizen and consumer. The child sitting and staring at the computer screen is precisely not off in a world of their own, but part of the world where everyone else is too, and this brings dangers as well as opportunities.

## Designing the survey

Before the present analysis is continued, linking issues and findings across the four main themes, a national face-to-face survey of children and young people aged 9-19 will go into the field in January 2004. This will reveal the social, economic and

cultural patterning of interests, beliefs and practices identified in this report across different children and young people.<sup>29</sup> Then a second phase of qualitative work will be conducted, and all findings will be analysed and integrated.

Currently there is a lack of independent surveys of UK children's domestic use of the internet. Broad-brush findings which chart access and the basic features of internet use provide an essential starting point but offer little detail, depth or context. For example, BMRB's Youth TGI (2001) showed that the most common uses are studying/homework (73%), email (59%), playing games (38%), chat sites (32%) and hobbies and interests (31%). But which young people are emailing whom? Who makes use of which educational resources? If some lack access, what are they missing out on?

A detailed survey can go beyond the headline findings of commercial and public opinion surveys. But more importantly, the survey will combine the advantages of a large-scale sample with statistical techniques to examine interrelations among the variables, deepening the analysis:

- Frequency and variation. Discovering which aspects of internet use are more or less common is essential in developing both theory and policy. Particularly, reliably establishing the incidence of perhaps rare but risky behaviours demands a sizeable sample. Such a sample can be broken down to advantage: too often children and young people are treated as a homogenous group, masking diversity. A survey permits systematic analysis by age, gender and socio-economic status, family type, location, ethnicity, disability, media at home and history of internet access. It can reveal precisely who is gaining the advantages, running the risks or getting left out in the growing adoption of the internet at home.



- Contingency. A series of relationships among key variables may be hypothesised which only statistical analysis can examine. A simple example is to cross-tabulate types of internet use with location of use to determine which internet-related opportunities and dangers occur in which social contexts. More complexly, previous work suggests but has not established that parents with less experience of the internet are more anxious about their children's use, and that this may lead to more restrictive domestic regulation and even to more cautious – or perhaps more evasive – behaviour on the part of their children. If this is the case and, moreover, if social stratification means that less experienced parents are poorer or less educated, the analysis of this and other contingent or path-dependent relationships might reveal some significant inequalities.

In designing the survey, a number of lessons can be taken forward from the qualitative stage of the research:

- Matters of phrasing include the difficulty in measuring time spent online, given the extent of multitasking both among online applications and between online and offline activities. Other issues of phrasing become evident from the focus groups: online communication is described as 'talking to' or 'messaging' someone; communication with strangers is described as 'people you don't know' or 'when you don't really know who you are talking to'; online pornography is described as 'porn' or 'rude websites' or as showing 'people with hardly any clothes on'. Caution is required in addressing distinctions important to policy debates but less familiar to children (e.g. commercial versus publicly provided sites or even, for younger children, the distinction between using computers and using the internet/being online).

- Topics to address include issues important to children: their privacy online, their fascination with hacking, their pleasure in naughtiness, cheats or evasion, their subtle comparisons of the strengths and disadvantages of different communication channels. Also, fast-moving trends will be addressed, for example the apparent shift from chat rooms to instant messaging, the recent and apparently commonplace downloading of music from such sites as Kazaa, and the take-up of mobile access.

- Interpreting findings requires caution in celebrating internet-based opportunities. For example many children have made a website in school but they may regard this more as a chore than an empowering occasion for creativity and participation. Also one should expect a complex diversity of barriers to use and some equally complex consequences of non-use or exclusion.

- The focus groups reveal a considerable familiarity, among those 14+, with pornographic images, but a lack of a consensual vocabulary to discriminate among types of images. It is important to note the importance of distinguishing unwelcome images from those deliberately sought out. Spontaneous discussions of paedophiles and 'weirdos' online suggests their mention in a survey may be less intrusive than feared. However, there are also widespread myths regarding the technological means of monitoring, regulating or intruding upon internet uses – whether by other children, parents, public or commercial bodies – which may confuse answers to questions on domestic regulation.

Addressing these considerations will, it is hoped, result in a richer and more insightful survey than might otherwise have been produced.



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# Technical Appendix on the Qualitative Research

## The school sample

One primary, three secondary and two post-16 schools were selected to represent a range in respect of three characteristics (see Table 1):<sup>30</sup>

- geographical location (rural, town and city settings in the north and south of England)
- social grade of the catchment area (middle-class and working-class)
- achievement level of the school

Fourteen group interviews of around one hour were held with mostly same-sex groups<sup>31</sup> of approximately four children each (a total of 55 children). Each school provided two groups (usually one with boys and one with girls) of the same age from the same class, apart from school D which provided two groups of boys and two groups of girls. The five age groups interviewed were 10-11, 12-13, 14-15, 16-17 and 17-19 years. The teachers were asked to select the children at random (every fourth or fifth girl or boy from the register). The children were all asked for their written consent to participate in the group discussions. For children under the age of 16, written parental consent was sought in addition.

School A is a Church of England voluntary controlled primary school for 3-11 year olds. Serving a rural area, it is smaller than most primary schools. About one in five pupils are of non-white UK heritage, a proportion of these coming from traveller families. The number of pupils eligible for free school meals is above national average. Key stage 2 SATS results are above average: English 81%, Maths 88%, Science 100%.

School B is a small Roman Catholic voluntary-aided mixed comprehensive school for pupils aged 11-16 years. All pupils have Christian backgrounds although not all are from Roman Catholic families. Almost all pupils speak English as their first language and are of European origin. The percentage eligible for free school meals is below the national average, and ability levels are above average with 71% of the pupils gaining five or more GCSEs in 2002.

School C is an inner city Church of England secondary school for pupils between the ages of 11 and 18. Although co-educational, there are almost twice as many boys as girls. The school is situated in a mixed area of residential and commercial use. Nine in ten pupils are from ethnic minority backgrounds and the majority lives in homes where English is not the first language (the main languages spoken

Table 1: School sample<sup>32</sup>

School	Type	Size	Area	Location	Social grade	Achievement <sup>33</sup>	Age interviewed
A	Primary	97	Rural	Hertfordshire	Mixed	Above average	10-11
B	Secondary	369	Town/ rural	Derbyshire	Middle class	Above average	12-13
C	Secondary	928	City	London	Working class	Above average	14-16
D	Secondary	1148	Town	Essex	Mixed	Above average	13 14-15
E	Post-16	2010	Town	Essex	Middle class	Slightly above average	16-17
F	Post-16	2911	City	Greater Manchester	Working class	Below average	17-19





are Bengali, Somali, Turkish and Arabic). Pupil achievement has long been considerably below the national average, but the school has recently raised the level at a much faster rate than the national trend, with 71% gaining five or more GCSEs in 2002. The percentage eligible for free school meals is well above the national average.

School D is a mixed 11-16 comprehensive and has specialist status as a 'Mathematics and Computing College' with online and ICT based curriculum resources being integrated into all subjects. The student body is predominantly white and speaks English as a first language. A wide range of backgrounds are represented amongst the pupils, although the proportion of those coming from advantaged socio-economic households is high. The percentage eligible for free school meals is in line with the national average. 65% gained five or more GCSEs in 2002.

School E is a sixth form college and has been awarded Beacon status for achieving excellent inspection results (average A-level points score of 295). The number of students progressing to Higher Education is high and increasing. The school draws a significant minority of students from outside the area. The student body is predominantly white, reflecting the ethnic profile of the local area. The local economy has experienced an upturn over recent years, and unemployment is low.

School F is a large general further education college serving the city of Manchester and Greater Manchester. Manchester's population is relatively young and ethnically diverse, but it is one of the most deprived in England. Manchester is England's third most disadvantaged local authority area. The unemployment rate is around double the national average. Educational participation and performance by young people in the area are very low. The average A-level points score of the pupils at school F is lower than the national average at 123.3.<sup>34</sup>

### The family sample

Each family was visited by one of the report authors (see Table 2). Each visit consisted of an interview with the child (approx. 90 minutes) and an interview with one or both parents (approx. 30 minutes) where the child could also be present. During the child interview, the respondent was asked to go online on the home computer and show the researcher what he or she normally does on the internet. The parent interview was held either before or after the child interview, usually taking place in the living room or kitchen. The children were all

asked for their written consent to participate. Written consent was also obtained from the parents.

### Outline of the discussion guides: Schools

Detailed interview guides were prepared for both the school groups and home-based interviews. These were not followed verbatim in any interview, as the priority was for the discussion to develop naturally, following the children's lead and exploring the topics of most interest to them. Given the broad age range of the children the study focuses on, three different guides were prepared for the school group interviews, each using age-appropriate materials and introducing age-appropriate topics for discussion.

For 15-19 year olds, a series of topics were covered. Some of them were introduced using illustrative materials such as a newspaper advert or article, a print-out of a website or an email. Topics included: internet literacy/expertise; use of different types of communication technologies; participation in global and local human networks with the help of the internet; downloading of files, e.g. music or games; undesirable online content (spam, advertising, pornography); internet safety awareness and rules for using the internet; internet monitoring and filtering software; privacy online and offline; internet non-use and exclusion; and the role of the internet in education.

For 12-14-year olds, sets of coloured cards displaying different media and communication technologies were used to investigate the role of the internet in young people's lives in context with other media. The first set of cards, displaying different communication technologies (email, instant messaging, chat, SMS, mobile phone, landline telephone, fax machine, face-to-face conversation, letter writing), was used to explore which types the children would use to contact who under which circumstances. The second set of cards showed different types of media technologies (internet, computer, printer, CD-rom, video games console, gameboy, TV, digital TV, video recorder, camcorder, satellite, radio, stereo, walkman, discman, books, comics, magazines, newspapers; the mobile phone was included here as well). The cards were used to make maps of technologies which children felt 'went together' and to act as a focus for discussion (which were exciting/boring media, modern/old-fashioned, the media parents approved/disapproved of, the media they would miss most, etc).

For 9-11-year olds, the technique of mind mapping was utilised (Mavers, Somekh, and Restorick, 2002). The children were asked to explain what the

Table 2: In-home interview sample to date (Ongoing research)

Family	Age of child	Gender	Area	Location	Social grade	Family type
1 'Ted'	18	Male	Town	Surrey	Middle class	Couple
2 'Anisah'	15	Female	City	London	Working class	Couple
3 'Megan'	12	Female	Suburb	Essex	Working class	Couple



internet is to a Martian by drawing and/or writing on a large sheet of paper as a group. Next to the picture of a Martian, the sheet of paper showed speech bubbles with the following questions: "What is the internet?"; "What can you do with it?"; "Where can you use it?". Further questions were then asked, and the children's drawings and writings were used to initiate a group discussion: "What's the best thing about it?"; "What's the worst thing about it?"; "What's dangerous about it?"; "What are the rules for using it?"

Each interview was carried out by one of the report authors (apart from the groups in School F where both authors were present), audio-taped and fully transcribed.

### **Outline of the discussion guides: Home-based interviews**

The observational and interview session with the child focussed on topics which had emerged during the last visit by Livingstone and Bovill (2001) and how these had changed or developed over time. Specific topics included how the children's general interests had developed and/or changed; how the children's relationship with their parents and siblings had changed; if and how the children's internet literacy had grown; if and how their use of the internet had changed (time spent online and activities); if the surroundings and conditions for going online had changed (e.g. computer in different room of the house, broadband access).

Further, the session focussed on central themes of the research, i.e. internet safety awareness; use of different communication technologies; experiences with undesirable content (spam, advertising, sexual); parental rules for internet use, filtering and monitoring software, and privacy issues. The interview with parents addressed: ownership of media; own use of the internet in relation to other media; view of their child's internet use; attitudes towards the internet, worries and rules.

Each interview was carried out by one of the report authors, audio-taped and fully transcribed, and notes were taken during the observation of the child's online activities.

# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Families and the Internet, a BT-funded research project conducted in 1999-2001, comprised a series of visits to thirty families combining participant observation and in-depth interviewing (Livingstone and Bovill, 2001). The present project is conducting follow-up interviews with ten of these families (see Technical Appendix). Some illustrations in the report were produced as part of this project.

<sup>2</sup> The proportion of young people using the internet (anywhere) increases with age, from 42% at Key Stage 1 (5-7 years), to 84% in Key Stage 2 (7-11 years), 94% in Key Stage 3 (11-14 years), 97% at Key Stage 4 (14-16 years) and 96% among post-16s.

<sup>3</sup> The names of all children appearing in this report have been changed to preserve anonymity.

<sup>4</sup> Hudson (1984) claims that during adolescence, girls face an inner conflict of whether to behave according to cultural norms of femininity or whether to rebel against them.

<sup>5</sup> The expressions sending a text/ text message/ texting are used as synonyms for sending an SMS from a mobile phone.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this report we summarise the main themes and trends as discussed by our respondents. However, one should be cautious in generalising claims regarding the beliefs or activities of 'many' or 'most' children until these can be confirmed by the survey.

<sup>7</sup> Microsoft MSN – one of the instant message service providers

<sup>8</sup> Some of the quotes and dialogues in this report have been edited to improve readability and reduce redundancy.

<sup>9</sup> Intriguingly, little direct evidence supports the view that the internet benefits children's education (although see BECTa, 2003; Loveless and Ellen, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> As the first author has argued (Livingstone, 2003), a sophisticated analysis of internet use in relation to media literacy is required. This should include the competence to seek out, evaluate, share and produce knowledge as well as technical skills. In the UK, media literacy is the responsibility of the new communications regulator: "OfCOM will also be a 'reach out' regulator that embraces consumer protection through the promotion of effective competition and choice, whilst being informed by modern citizenship" (Stephen Carter, CEO of OfCOM; Hermes Database, 5/3/2003). OfCOM's Content Board will promote media literacy ([www.ofcom.org.uk](http://www.ofcom.org.uk), July 2003), ensuring that, as Lord Dubs, Chairman of the Broadcasting Standards Commission put it, "the user is able to comprehend the choices available and evaluate them" (Financial Times, 21/1/2003). Thus, "OfCOM must give parents the information and tools to control what their children access on the internet" (Ibid.).

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.opensource.org/>

<sup>12</sup> Devolving responsibility to parents as a solution to the challenge of internet content regulation raises several concerns: there are inequalities in parents' skills, so that relying on them risks reproducing social disadvantage. Parents may not take on this responsibility, providing little supervision of children's internet use or they may impose outdated learning styles on children (Papert, 1996). Others worry that this responsibility will overburden mothers, introducing new problems as it resolves others (Bird and Jorgenson, 2003). While undoubtedly parents have always played a key role in regulating the media environment of their children, and while none denies their moral responsibility here, many feel ill-equipped and insufficiently supported (Livingstone, 2001).



<sup>13</sup> To some extent, children do, of course. There were several references in the focus groups to educational sites such as the BBC's Bitesize revision site for SATS and GCSE ([www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize)) – certainly regarded as both highly popular and comprehensive (The Times Educational Supplement, 14/4/2000).

<sup>14</sup> Their desire to be constantly connected cannot be denied, but some are concerned that this results in a highly normative culture which constrains as much as it enables (Taylor and Harper, 2002), perhaps placing young people under surveillance at the cost of freedom and privacy (Schofield Clark, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> One high profile case at the time, spontaneously discussed by the focus groups, was that of a 12-year-old girl from Greater Manchester who went missing for four days after flying to France with a 31-year-old former US marine. The pair met in an internet chat room, he thinking that she was 19. They had emailed for up to a year, then exchanged letters and possibly phone calls before meeting. Following an international police hunt, they were found in Germany where he was arrested (BBC Online News, 14th-18th July 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Borzekowski and Rickert (2001) note the absence of figures on whether adolescents visit the health sites targeted at them although their small survey suggests such use to be fairly common.

<sup>17</sup> Inspired by Turkle's (1995) analysis of a 'culture of simulation', research is examining whether and how children use computers as a safe and private place to experiment with themes of sexuality, politics and selfhood. Some see children (and, indeed, adults) using new online communication to reproduce prior social norms and conventions (Slater, 2002). Others argue that young people's online communication uses playful language to innovate in identity and language (Danet, 2001). Perhaps the truth lies in between, with such activities being innovative at the level of the culture but normative in establishing and imposing conventions which constrain the contributions of individuals.

<sup>18</sup> The internationally endorsed Children's Television Charter asserts children's rights to self-expression, creativity and participation, in effect to cultural citizenship through television. If applied to the internet, perhaps a vision of online cultural citizenship could emerge, as suggested by the Center for Media Education (2000)?

<sup>19</sup> In reviewing explanations for young people's lack of political participation, Kimberlee (2002) suggests a generational explanation. Far from being apathetic or interested only in alternative politics, young people are following an altered trajectory in the transition from child to adult. As traditional structures of work as well as traditional values and expectations are lost, cues to participation and citizenship are no longer salient to young people. Prout (2000: 304) offers a complementary analysis, stressing that 'despite the recognition of children as persons in their own right, public policy and practice is marked by an intensification of control, regulation and surveillance around children', this impeding rather than facilitating the ability of organisations to encourage children's participation.

<sup>20</sup> See Turow (2000), Montgomery (2001), Center for Media Education (2000), Livingstone (2001).

<sup>21</sup> As Thornburgh and Lin (2002) note, the empirical research base on the impact of sexually explicit material on children is not extensive due to ethical and legal considerations, the conservatism of university review boards and a lack of research funding. A Canadian survey of parents suggests 1 in 5 children have found undesirable sexual material online (Media Awareness Network, 2000). An American survey found one in three teens have seen pornography online (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2000) while another found 25% of 10-17 year olds had unwanted exposure to sexual pictures on the internet (Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak, 2003). Kids.net found up to a quarter of UK 7-16 year olds may have been upset by online materials, rarely reporting this to an adult (Wigley and Clarke, 2000).



<sup>22</sup> In approaching this question it would be wise to learn from the lengthy but inconclusive search for television's harmful effects (Seiter, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> Evaluating availability, exposure and harm is impeded because little attention has been paid to the definition of pornography: drawing an analogy with print, it would be helpful to distinguish 'top shelf' material, material restricted to sex shops, and illegal material. In the focus groups we took our lead from the respondents in identifying pornography.

<sup>24</sup> Online pornography was investigated explicitly in the older age groups only (ages 14+).

<sup>25</sup> J-Lo – the actress and singer Jennifer Lopez.

<sup>26</sup> Neighbours – Australian television series.

<sup>27</sup> Indeed, few filtering programmes flag up the value of discussing such monitoring with children (Childsafe being one exception that displays an optimal 'Acceptable Use' policy to communicate parental rules to the child), leaving one to presume that unobtrusive monitoring, conveying little trust in the child, is generally deemed crucial ([www.cybersitter.com](http://www.cybersitter.com)).

<sup>28</sup> The sample of 1500 children and young people will be divided into approximately 1000 who use the internet fairly or very often (these will be asked a detailed series of questions) and 500 who use it infrequently or never (these will be asked a briefer series of questions). A written survey questionnaire will be left for parents to complete.

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<sup>30</sup> The report authors had been in contact with the schools during previous research projects.

<sup>31</sup> Three groups were mixed-sex, i.e. one in school F and both in school E.

<sup>32</sup> Information about schools is taken from the most recent OFSTED inspection report and the school website.

<sup>33</sup> Ability levels were determined according to how the school had performed in relation to National Average Performance levels cited in the 2002 school league tables. At that time the percentage of children in British primary schools gaining level 4 or better was as follows: English: 75%, Maths: 73%, Science: 86%. For secondary schools, 51.6% gained 5 or more GCSEs; the average points score for students taking 2 or more General (GCE) and/or Vocational (VCE) A levels was 254.5.

<sup>34</sup> Source: [www.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.dfes.gov.uk).



# UK Children Go Online: Listening to young people's experiences

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