An Experts' Dialogue: Child Safety for the Online World

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The Executive Board of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) is meeting today, 17 June, in London. The Council, which now consists of over 200 member organisations, was set up in 2008 and our Sonia Livingstone has been involved in it since the beginning. To give you some insight into the considerations and dilemmas the Council will be dealing with, LSE's **Svenja Ottovordemgentschenfelde** *has reconstructed a discussion Sonia had with two other members of the UKCCIS Board, John Carr and Vicki Shotbolt about whether age specific rules should apply to online 'places'.*

How can and should we protect children on the Internet? This question has become a primary concern for parents, teachers, children's organizations, researchers and also increasingly for policy makers. John Carr, member of the Executive Board of the UK Council on Child Internet Safety, is one of the promoters of age-related rules on the internet. In a March 2014 blog post, he addressed the need to enforce online age-verification, based on the argument that "in the real world societies across the globe have constructed well defined lines of demarcation between adults' and children's places". He elaborated that "children tend to mix with other children of roughly the same age and, while there is more scope for mixing, adults do the same in their worlds. When children and adults don't stay in their peer zones, it is generally seen as a marker for risk". As a result, Carr concludes in his blog, society should now replicate similar structures of age segregation online.

Carr's blog post sparked a lively personal email exchange with Sonia Livingstone, Professor in LSE's Media and Communications Department, and Vicki Shotbolt, founder and CEO of The Parent Zone. The following is a summarized reconstruction exchange. What's at stake is the design and use of online 'places' – are they like offline places, or should they have special rules? Should children be locked into walled gardens online or are there circumstances under which they can safely mix with adults – on message boards, social networking spaces or fan discussions?

Sonia: John, I think there's a problematic reversal in your argument. To be sure, especially in recent Western history, we have tried to keep 'adult' spheres of activity away from children. But we have not ever, until the internet, tried to keep children away from adults in general. On the contrary, we have always had children's play and learning spaces in our societies where adults were around. As a society, we know that most adults are benign. Also, insofar as some are not, it's important that the decent adults are on hand to provide the necessary and legitimate oversight to protect children from risk and predators. My suggestion for the internet would be the same. We should keep 'adult' content inappropriate for children away from children. But we shouldn't create segregated worlds for children where all adults are assumed to be untrustworthy.

Vicki: I agree with Sonia insofar as that in real life, the ideal environment is one that allows for adults to keep an eye out for children without blighting their play. That is what happens online in spaces like Moshi and Club Penguin. In the online world, creating "young people only spaces" where adults are kept out feels itself like a high risk strategy. Inappropriate adults are likely to be attracted to these spaces while the good ones are likely to stay away. We want spaces that make it possible for adults to look out for young people and intervene – "family friendly spaces" if you will.

John: Sonia, I agree that the "segregation by age" we are observing is a modern development, but I doubt that it is a particularly Western one. There are real world spaces outside of the Western context where "unaccompanied adults" are not allowed, such as swimming pools, sports

facilities or "teen mornings" at the cinema. The real world places where adults and children generally mix occur in carefully structured environments (e.g. school, organised sports). Why would any child want to "hang out" with an adult they are not related to? And how would adults be on hand to help, guide or socialise on online spaces like Facebook, Twitter or Tumblr?

Sonia: When I said children have always mixed with adults, I didn't so much mean in institutional settings but routinely on the streets, in malls, at cinemas and in parks, around and about. I'm worried that there is no "around and about" online where children can learn to engage normally with adults, and adults can support, smile or be themselves around children without immediately being suspected of being a pervert. I agree, of course, about strangers friending children on social networking sites, but wonder if we've been imaginative enough in designing online spaces that allow for the casual benefits (and safety) as well as variety and interest of offline sites?

John: I don't think the offline-online analogy holds. On the one hand, on the internet there are no equivalents of shopping malls. On the other hand, there is a lack of context online, as any either risky or inappropriate situation offline is pretty much wholly revealed in an instant through the medium of your own eyes and ears. That cannot happen online, or will happen only rarely.

Vicki: I find myself agreeing and disagreeing. Opportunities for parents to supervise their children online as they would in the park do not exist, yet there are other opportunities for adults to get involved. The obvious examples are flagging inappropriate content on YouTubethrough the "digital neighbourhood watch program" or social reporting on Facebook – the interesting fact is that lots of parents don't get involved in this. Perhaps they don't understand that type of online good citizenship or aren't encouraged enough? This is complex, but I will go back to a family-friendly internet. After all, in the real world, children are surrounded by people who keep an eye out for them – teachers, parents, police officers. It's that network that is disempowered online.

This discussion among experts raises crucial questions and concerns about the actual and imagined structural and social aspects of children's online and offline life worlds that should be taken into consideration, including by UKCCIS as it now debates its future strategic direction to create "a world where all children and young people can safely enjoy the benefits of the digital world".

The minutes of the UKCCIS board meetings are made available after the meetings and can be found on the Council's .gov.uk page. This article presents the views of its author and those of the individuals featured within and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.