The need for parity of protection

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Julia Fossi *explores the diverse interests of children and the rich lives they lead online. She argues that to reflect the modern experiences of children, steps must now be taken to equally protect them online and offline. Julia is Acting Head of Child Safety Online at the NSPCC, where she is responsible for all policy and the charity's related programme of work in relation to child safety online. This includes issues such as online child sexual abuse, online harassment, hatred and bullying, and children's access to adult content online. [Header image credit: Sarah R., CC BY-NC-ND 2.0]*

Children and young people make up one-third of internet users, and see little distinction between offline and online. They test relationships, explore their sexuality, experiment and push boundaries, constantly asking themselves questions about the person they want to be, and the internet is vital for satisfying this curiosity. They should be encouraged to learn, explore and interact with one another online, but the content they can access, and the online space that they are navigating, must be age-appropriate and safe.

The need for mandatory safeguarding

Child safeguarding policies and training are rightly seen as mandatory in numerous offline spaces that children routinely access. Parks are regulated spaces, with 'safety by design' considerations at their heart. Youth clubs and youth groups must have child protection policies and procedures. Films and video games are regulated by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), to protect children from potentially harmful or otherwise unsuitable media content. But what of the online world?

The internet acts as a young person's online playground, their communication channels, their creative space and where they go to view, stream or download content, but the design, content and functionality of online services do not consistently place child protection at the centre. Pornographic content can appear on children's newsfeeds, adults can sexually expose themselves

to children on video chat sites, while new technology such as virtual reality opens up the potential for new risks that are not yet fully understood.

Some of the facts

- In an NSPCC and Children's Commissioner study with over 1,000 young people aged 11–16, over half of the sample had been exposed to online pornography, with 94% having seen it by age 14, and many exposed to it inadvertently i.e. through pop-ups.

- In 2015/16 Childline saw a 60% increase year-on-year in counselling sessions with children across the UK left worried about seeing adult content online.

- In an unpublished survey for Net Aware conducted by the NSPCC in 2016 with over 1,700 11- to 16-year-olds, 65% felt that social media sites needed to do more to protect them from adult content, 67% from self-harm content and 60% from violent content.

Making it law

The UK government, through the Digital Economy Bill, are making great steps to protect children and young people from online pornography. When the bill becomes law, the UK will have an age-verification regulator to ensure that all commercial pornographic content must be behind an age-verification wall. If a recent amendment to the Bill is actualised, pornographic websites that continually do not comply with this will be blocked. Making it the responsibility of providers of pornography to ensure that their users are adults better ensures that children are kept safe online. This is the same approach for offline pornographic content, with, for example, laws in place to ensure that R-rated films are only available to purchase from licensed retailers.

A statutory code of practice

Online pornography is one risk for young people online; cyberbullying, violent content and disturbing pro-anorexia sites are also high among children's concerns on the internet. The content children can access online and the spaces they interact in and navigate across must be age-appropriate. Online platforms, like the teacher, Girlguiding leader and playground manufacturer, have a duty to ensure children reach their potential in a safe and responsible way. This is about representing the interests of children and the rich lives they lead online, which we already do offline. To reflect the modern experiences of children, steps must now be taken to do the same for the online world.

The NSPCC believes that child protection should be built in to online services, and a statutory code of practice, establishing a set of minimum standards that would apply to social networks, ISPs, mobile telecommunication companies and other communication providers, is the best means of achieving this. It would, for example, lay out how content should be managed; ensure that clear and transparent processes were in place to make it easy for both children and parents to report problematic content; oblige online service providers to engage with and use all the tools and mechanisms available to tackle child sexual abuse material; and set out what providers should do to develop effective safeguarding policies and procedures. These could be based on, but not limited to, the BBFC classification system, the ICT Coalition Principles, the IWF reporting, take-down and blocking/filtering services and UKCCIS guidance, to ensure that children's safety is incorporated into the design, content and functionality of online services, and that the safety and wellbeing of children are held as a fundamental element of good design.

A clear, transparent and accountable process, whereby children, parents and those tasked with safeguarding children are able to assess the safety of the services children use and interact with, would make a huge difference to child safety online. To be effective, the development of a code of practice must involve industry, academics, child protection organisations and, crucially, the children and families who use online services. The UK could lead the way in developing such a code that could be global in application. It is imperative however, that we do not lose sight of what the internet represents for children.

Recognising strengths and risks

The NSPCC's priority is protecting children and preventing abuse, which applies both to the online and the offline world. As in any assessment of safety, it is important to focus on strengths as well as risks, and to recognise the potential of the internet to support the learning and development of children. It is a place children go to have fun, so we must recognise the richness of children's lives and how they deploy, use and interact with technology as a means of learning, empowerment, self-expression and connecting with others. For all children to receive this rich and positive experience online, we must protect them online as well as we do in the rest of their day-to-day lives. There must be a parity of protection between the online and offline worlds, with consistent child protection and safeguarding practices across all areas of a child's life.

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