NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING BACKGROUND PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE INTERNET
A CASE STUDY IN A PRIMARY SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

The Internet plays an important role in the K-7 curriculum. As the use of the Internet increases, there is a need to educate children and parents about protecting themselves from dangers in cyberspace. The Internet should be a safe and worthwhile medium for children. There is a strong feeling that censorship should be implemented with regard to what is available on the Internet. This paper discusses the use of Internet by primary school children from Non English Speaking Background in a Sydney suburb and the lack of knowledge and skills in protecting them from harmful information available on the Net. Findings are recorded and suggestions made.

KEYWORDS

Censorship, Child protection, NESB, Ill-effects, Awareness

1. INTRODUCTION

Censorship and control of information to masses, in particular, children, has for years influenced what people have seen, heard and read. Support to censorship has extended from various groups in the community, for protection from obscene materials, violence, child abuse and other materials that will not be accepted by communities. There is a strong feeling, that censorship should be implemented for children with regard to what is available on the Internet. While there is censorship in films, books, T.V. shows etc, there is a necessity to censor certain information on the Internet that could harm children in the society. The Study aims to find the awareness among parents of upper primary school children from Non English Speaking backgrounds about the Internet and how they could be helped and shown an appropriate pathway to access information on the Internet.

2. CENSORSHIP AND THE INTERNET

In Australia, concerns with obscene, blasphemous and seditious materials have been raised by government agencies, religious and moral groups, each objecting to improper material found in books, plays, news, military intelligence, theatre and films. Despite the dangers, hazards, potential risk and controversy, the Internet has become an invaluable resource and has become and integral part of today's society. We have moved into a new paradigm across all facets of life. The technological changes have also given rise to numerous challenges. While there are benefits, there are also many issues that confront this new medium. The wide variety of information available through the Internet leads us to the question whether everything available could be made accessible to children. This includes harmful information such as hate groups, pornography, cults, language, violence, etc. Should there be a censorship or protection for children from such perilous materials?

2.1 Internet awareness in children

Children are able to quickly surf through endless knowledge about countless topics on the Internet. They could click their way to exciting new worlds. With such numerous topics, the Internet plays an important role in K-7 curriculum. With a vast amount of information, which makes it extremely volatile and had to manage, many goals and benefits can be attained through careful and proper planning. However a great deal of information on the Internet is not acceptable for children. If the child has full-unrestricted access to the Internet, can access pornographic material or a violent scene, either by accidentally accessing such sites or by deliberately searching them out. Children have informed their parents and teachers that words searched innocently have led them to pornographic sites. Even popular children's characters, have thousands of links to porn sites. The other issue is that there are people who have a sexual appetite for children and search for victims through conversations with unsuspecting kids on the Internet (6). Can we ignore such information on the Internet? Isn't it important to protect children from such materials? Are the NESB parents aware of all this? What needs to be done in a NESB environment?

2.2 Statistics

The Internet is increasingly replacing the library as a primary research tool for doing school projects. According to Kaiser Family Foundation, 77 percent of tweens (aged between10-13) go online to do school work. Reports indicate more than 90 percent of teens and 64 percent of tweens use e-mail and approximately 74 percent of online teens use instant messaging (5). Further it is estimated that more than 100,000 Web sites offers child pornography and an increase of 345% in child pornography sites between 2/2001-7/2001. The Report further indicates, one in five children who use computer chat rooms have been approached over the Internet by paedophiles, 1 in 4 kids participate in Real Time Chat and 89% of sexual solicitations were made in either chat rooms or Instant Messages.

3. AUSTRALIAN SCENARIO

The need to educate children and parents about protecting themselves from dangers in cyberspace has to be addressed as the use of the Internet increases. The challenge is to work at the grass roots to seek solutions that will ensure a safe and secure Internet that will truly reach its wonderful potentials. Protecting our children on the Internet is a shared responsibility. The Australian Broadcasting Authority reports that a large number of Australian children have accidentally viewed offensive Internet materials. The report, *The Internet at Home*, surveyed 310 Internet-using households with children under 18, and found that 47 per cent of the children had seen something on the Internet they thought was offensive or disgusting. The main culprits were pornography, tasteless jokes and violent imagery (2).

3.1 Internet access in NSW schools

The Department of Education, NSW facilitates greater access to online learning materials and opportunities to foster collaborative groups for learning, professional support and administration. The Internet Services and Products (ISP) project provides students and staff at schools with a personalised portal, which acts as a gateway to a variety of services including, email, chat, web browsing and web publishing (8). The Government's *Computers in Schools Policy* "aims to improve learning outcomes for all students in all key learning areas from K-12 and recognises that computer-based technologies provide a significant educational resource for achieving this aim" (8). This includes connection of all schools to the Internet to assist students to develop their skills in information and communication. The Department allows each school to develop in association with its community, a policy on student access to the Internet for safe management and effective use of school's Internet connection. Under the Computers in School Policy, Cyber Patrol is installed on each Internet computer for school-level filtering. (3,8).

4. SAMPLE STUDY

For the purpose of this study, a primary school that has a culturally diverse community and receives *Priority Schools Funding Program* support was selected. The School has approximately 96% of students from Non English Speaking Backgrounds. They come from different cultural background such as Arabic, Assyrian, Vietnamese, Yugoslavian, Thai, Chinese, South American and Tongan. Most of the parents have difficulties to communicate in English. There is also a high percentage of unemployment in this area among the NESB due to lack of language proficiency and skills. Some of the parents arrived in Australia either on refugee status or as war victims.

A systematic sampling method was used to select a sample of 39 Non-English Speaking parents originating from different countries with different cultural and social background. They speak different languages such as Vietnamese, Spanish, Arabic and Turkish. These parents were interviewed, and their views and knowledge about the Internet were recorded. Some parents are literate in their own language but their English knowledge is not adequate to communicate. Some participants are attending English language courses in TAFE, AMES and other Institutions. 90 percent of the parents are in the age group of 25 and 45. Most of them arrived in Australia between 1996 and 2002. The purpose of this study was explained to the parents. The sample allows the analysis to focus on the target group, namely NESB parents.

4.1 School's computer policy

The School in which the children are attending has installed 20 computers in the library and 2 computers in each classroom with Internet facilities. The Teacher-Librarian was interviewed for specific information. The School's Internet policy has been examined. Students are expected to have read the *Internet Policy and Agreement* (rules of Internet etiquette) with the teacher. A signed parental agreement slip is returned to the teacher before a student is given access to the Internet. Adherence to the *Policy and Agreement* is a condition for a student's privilege of Internet access and copies of these rules are displayed near the computers as a reminder to all users. Inappropriate use involving any violation of this *Policy and Agreement* results in cancellation of the privilege, which is determined by the School's Computer Committee.

The School has developed three types of strategies for dealing with the transmission and receipt of inappropriate Internet material. They are *Filters – Smart Filter*, an Internet Network filtering device to block undesirable material; *Supervisory –* Staff supervise all student use of the Internet and if necessary, proof read and edit students' outgoing and incoming emails; and *Responsibility of Students* rests in individuals the use of the Internet as stipulated in the *Use Policy*.

5. FINDINGS

5.1 PC ownership and Internet accessibility at home

96 per cent of homes had personal computers, but only one-third had access to the Internet. 50 percent of the parents could not afford to get connected to the Internet due to their financial situation. But they are happy that these facilities are available at the School. 28 percent of the non-owners of PC said that they take their children to Public Library and use the facilities to access the Internet.

5.2 Internet is fine but what does "ill-effects" mean for them?

Perception about the Internet is identified as a source of learning, communication and information. 30 percent of PC owners and non-owners are aware of the dangers of the Internet. Others have very little knowledge about the 'ill effects" of the Internet. They are not aware of the fact that their children could access information not acceptable to them. They are of impression that the Internet provides educational materials and helpful to send e-mails to contact their relatives and friends in their countries. Since most of the parents' cannot communicate in English, they make use of their children to send messages.

Majority of kids' online use occur at home right after the school. Since the parents' reading and writing skills are not adequate to comprehend, they are not able to follow what the children do in front of the computers. Literacy issues drive the parents away from not supervising their children when they are using the Internet at home.

Children coming from Middle Eastern origin look upon their father as head of the family. In some cases, the father has to work or attend evening classes when the children are at home and the mother has no say. In most cases, mothers are not aware of the IT developments and lose track of what the children do in front of the computers.

5.3 E-mail and ill effects

Earlier studies report that 64 percent of tweens use e-mail. Adult sex sites appear as spam in e-mails. From around 8 years, children seem to be interested in chatting and corresponding online. One tenth of the parents are aware of the spam in e-mails but do not know the ways to avoid the spam and protect their children.

5.4 Supervision by parents?

2 out of 39 parents supervise their children while they are connected to the Internet. Due to their lack of English language skills the parents are not able to spend time when the children are online. They are not able to suggest good sites or help them with some tips for good searching.

5.5 Awareness of child protection technology

Most of the parents are not aware that Internet Safety is an important issue to deal with. However, many don't know how to keep their children safe online. 85 percent of homes that have access to the Internet do not have any filtering or blocking software. They are not sure of the options that are available to protect them from harmful materials. 10 percent of the parents seem to know about softwares available to protect their Children. But they are not sure which technology is appropriate for their home and how to implement each tool is more difficult for them to understand. 15 percents of those who have installed filters are sure that it is a foolproof tool and the children can access only good and safe sites! They are not aware of the fact that none of these tools is foolproof and the best tool of all is parental supervision and guidance.

5.6 General consensus

90% of the parents who were interviewed felt that their children should not have access to materials that could have ill effects on them. Parents expect the school to teach online etiquette and guard their children from such harmful materials. 22 percent felt the filters should be based on the age level of the students. But all are of the view that the Internet use in the school should be carefully monitored.

6. SUGGESTIONS

6.1 Internet literacy

In order to make the Non English Speaking parents to function efficiently, safely and socially in their new environment, specific information and necessary skills have to be imparted. Parents' knowledge about the ill effects, filtering and monitoring softwares can provide a life-changing experience for children. Most of the parents are not sure what the online behaviour meant to them. They sign the School forms as they consider the Internet use as a great privilege, as such facilities were not available in their countries. Only a few knew about inappropriate materials available on the net. There is a need to educate parents who are not 'Internet Literate'. The challenge is to make sure the Internet is a safe and useful medium for children and protect them from dangers. What can today's parents do? They can become more "Internet literate", be vigilant and

aware of online dangers, inform children not to reveal personal information, such as their name, address, telephone number, credit card number, pictures etc and not to open e-mails from people the children don't know. Parents can place the computer in a public area where they can monitor child's Internet activity, monitor the time the child spends on the Internet, make the children feel comfortable to discuss what they have seen on the net and communicate regularly about what they do online and who they talk to online. It is advisable to choose child's screen name, email address or instant message name and talk to kids about their Internet experiences. It would be good idea to learn and install protective soft wares.

7. CONCLUSION

Parents' biggest concern about the Internet used to be pornography, but there is definitely a greater fear today. An aware and informed parent can help keep children safe. Access to the Internet has to be restricted, until a child is old enough to make appropriate decisions of what is acceptable. Till that time, parents and teachers should make that decision as what is acceptable content and educate children how to utilise the Internet to their advantage and not allow it to become a disadvantage. Children need to be made aware of the Internet's dangers so that they can learn to avoid them. They should know how to handle them when they come across such sites. Children need to be educated to protect themselves from dangers in cyberspace. Tools such as filters, labels and safe zones that can help parents guide their children's Internet experience. Each family needs to make its own decisions about tools that are most appropriate depending on children's age, level of guidance they require and family values. A few suggestions include, Cyber Sentinel, which helps to customise, Net Nanny for parents with children of different ages and Cyber Petrol, which allows various categories of contents to be blocked or unblocked. But there is no substitute for parental supervision and guidance when children use the Internet. The Australian Broadcasting Authority Website could be a good starting point for parents and children to know more about the surfing on the Internet (1).

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