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Protecting Children in the Digital Age

A report with recommendations from the Association of Sites Advocating Child Protect and the Free Speech Coalition

Introduction

Everyone can agree that adult content is created for, and intended to be viewed by, adults. The proliferation of online content is real; but is the Deputy Children's Commissioner's campaign to create a 'moral panic' the best way to approach building evidence based policy that will protect our children? No one doubts the UK government has the best of intentions, but we, as responsible adults should question whether knee-jerk reactions based on fear rather than expert opinion and fact is helpful.

We, in the adult content industry believe it is critical to partner with government officials, parents, educators and other stakeholders to provide an environment that promotes a healthy developmental environment for today's youth. To that end, we have provided recommendations based on our experience and self funded efforts to ensure children are protected from adult environments..

The internet offers incredible opportunities for our children to learn about other countries, cultures, activities. It is not unheard of for a classroom in the UK or the US to contact their counterparts halfway around the world in real time--something that, for most us, was just a dream when we were children.

The information highway provides countless possibilities for travel and exploration just as our actual highways have done for decades. How many of us have taken a small child by the hand and walked him or her across a busy street? Or sat next to a teen providing guidance as he or she learned how to drive?

Just as it is our responsibility as adults to help our children navigate our streets and highways, so it is our responsibility to help our children and our youth navigate the great information highway that is the worldwide web.

It is natural for parents to want to protect children. Yet, it is not uncommon for well-meaning adults to impair development and/or diminish our youths' present and future civil liberties in the name of child protection. Nowhere is that more obvious than the push for abstinence-only education and the defunding of comprehensive sexuality education in the United States during the Bush Administration. For those states that accepted federal funding and embraced abstinence only until marriage education, teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections rates skyrocketed. (Stanger-Hall and Hall, 3)

For these well-meaning adults, fear and ignorance drove policy as policy makers turned their backs on available research and went with what they thought was best for kids.

The Government is at a critical turning point as it considers how best to protect children on the internet. There is no "abstinence-only" easy fix for what our children may encounter on the worldwide web. Adult content is one of many issues for parents and adults to discuss with children and youth concerning safe and appropriate internet usage. As with sexuality education, a comprehensive approach to age appropriate internet usage will best serve UK's youth.

The goal of this document is to provide a reasoned and comprehensive approach to a complicated issue that combines the resources of all stakeholders for the betterment of today's youth and tomorrow's decision makers.

Assessing the Threat

Instinctively, adults want to keep adult content out of the hands of underage viewers. To this end, Ofcom commissioned Dr Guy Cumberbatch, an independent expert in the effects of media, especially on young people, to review empirical research from 2005 until present. His task was to answer the question "Does viewing adult content pose harm to minors under the age of 18?"

In his executive summary, Dr Cumberbatch concludes: (Cumberbatch, 2)

The research reviewed in this report does not provide conclusive evidence that sexually explicit material might seriously impair the development of minors.

The research does not provide clear, conclusive, evidence on whether sexually explicit material might impair their development.

Some studies report a pattern of associations between exposure to sexually explicit material and a range of sexual attitudes and behaviors which have typically been taken as problematic (for example, greater sexual permissiveness, stronger beliefs that women are sex objects, lower sexual satisfaction, earlier sexual activity, higher probability of anal intercourse). However, these associations could equally support the idea that those with particular attitudes and values are drawn to sexual media.

At best, Dr Cumberbatch concluded that, “The empirical evidence for harm is weak and the research is very limited, so it cannot be confidently concluded that sexually explicit material carries no risk to minors.” Moreover, his research could not conclude if influence on today’s youth is a result of adult content on the internet or general sexualized marketing, music and movies.

Furthermore, in a study on exposure to adult content on the internet identifies **peer-to-peer networks** as a key factor to exposure for youth on the internet. The study states that, “An important characteristic is that these networks are created by users. Therefore if a high proportion of the users are teenagers, it is also the case that **a high proportion of the distributors are teenagers.**“

It goes on to say, “This is similar to **teen chat rooms** where a high proportion of the talk is about sex and this sexualized talk is created by the chatters themselves.” (Greenfield, 6) As with many other studies about teens and youth—especially concerning sexual issues—point out, this study emphasizes the **importance of communication between parents and/or trusted adults and youth** about sex and about exposure to sexualized media. (Greenfield, 7) The study states, “In today’s media environment an open communication style within the family is critical.” (Greenfield 6)

ATVOD

ATVOD's Rules and Guidance addresses the issue of protecting under-18s from "Harmful Material". Rule 11 states, "If an on-demand programme service contains material which might seriously impair the physical, mental or moral development of persons under the age of eighteen, the material must be made available in a manner which secures that such persons will not normally see or hear it." (ATVOD, 11)

Clearly, research—even ATVOD's own research—does not support that under 18s are seriously impaired by adult content and therefore the issue does not meet the basic requirement for the imposition of regulations as stated in ATVOD's Rules and Regulations.

ADULT ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

However, as the internet and the overall media environment provides broader access to content for our children, we in the adult entertainment community believe it is **critical that we partner with government officials, parents, educators and other stakeholders to provide an environment that promotes a healthy developmental environment for today's youth.** We believe that a comprehensive, reasoned and responsible approach to content on the internet and the media environment in general will best serve our children.

As the US learned with its 'abstinence only until marriage program' addressing sexuality, a quick fix, head-in-the-sand approach to sexual issues will do more harm than good in preparing our youth for the decisions they face. It is our responsibility as adult to help our youth navigate not only the worldwide web, but also today's media environment as a whole.

Clearly the best way to support healthy development for youth is to provide parents and key adults who work with youth with the tools they need to proactively influence youth as they navigate the internet and the media environment as a whole. "The role of parents in the lives and decision-making processes of youths is often underestimated. Although the transition to greater independence is the hallmark of this developmental phase, parents clearly have a role and exert significant influence in the choices young people make about sex." (Clark, 2)

Why Filtering alone is Ineffective and Potentially Harmful

Submitted by [Association of Sites Advocating Child Protection \(ASACP\)](#)

The Association of Sites Advocating Child Protection (ASACP) is calling for more thoughtful solutions to the problem of preventing minors and adolescents from accessing legal adult entertainment websites.

Currently there is no single “silver bullet” solution to protecting children and adolescents from potentially harmful content and interactions in their digital lives. The best solution lies in a multi-layered approach in which the parent is the central and most important component.

Filtering technology has been around for a number of years. Although its effectiveness and accuracy has improved due to initiatives such as the award winning Restricted To Adults (RTA) website meta label, which the ASACP created to provide more accurate parental filtering, these technologies still fall short in fully protecting children in their digital lives for the following key reasons:

- Filtering technologies are challenged with limitations that block content that should not be blocked (over blocking) and let content through that should be blocked (under blocking); parental involvement is required to correct this erroneous filtering.
- Filtering technology does nothing to prevent access to age-inappropriate content, which resides in very large quantities on other areas of the Internet such as UseNet, chat boards, peer to peer networks, file lockers and more.
- Filtering technology can easily be defeated by motivated and tech savvy youth, even when implemented at the ISP level.
- Filtering technology does nothing to protect children and adolescents from very serious dangers that exist in their digital lives, which include cyber-bullying, child luring, cyber-stalking, and the inappropriate sharing of personal / private information.
- Filtering technology employed by ISPs will block content that should not be blocked (over blocking) and thus deprive individuals, adults and minors alike, of their ability to access that information.

It is essential to recognize that while filtering technologies are able to assist parents these tools do not provide an adequate solution to protecting children and adolescents as they live their digital lives. What is required is a holistic approach that employs technology, education and parental involvement.

When it comes to Internet safety, all reputable, unbiased, academic research proves the best outcome for at-risk children and adolescents in their digital lives comes from parental involvement and support. In fact, research into this topic firmly concludes that the attitudes some express as to parents doing enough, or that children always evade parental guidance, are ungrounded. Researchers have found that parental involvement in their children's digital lives made the most significant impacts on behaviour and safety level, by making sure their children know how to stay safe, be responsible and to respect others online.

The best steps taken by parents appear to be keeping an open line of communication with their children and teaching them about online safety, making sure they knew they could ask for help if needed. In fact, researchers have concluded that technical mediation alone, such as filtering, have no significant impact on children between nine and 14 years old and are even associated with more harm than good for 15 and 16 year olds.

The clear message here is that parental controls work in conjunction with parental engagement, not instead of it.

Another concern with any plan that includes government mandated filtering at the ISP level is the fact that there is a real danger it will create a false sense of protection for parents, children and adolescents. If parents falsely believe that the child is safe because of ISP level filtering, there is the risk parents will not be as involved as they need to be in that child's digital life in order to protect them adequately.

This is absolutely the wrong message to be sending to both parents and children.

Parents need to be made aware that filtering technology alone will not protect their children online and that filters are only a tool to assist them in this regard. It is essential that education is provided for both parents and children in order to promote parental involvement and the steps that parents, children and adolescents need to take in order to be best protected in their digital lives.

It is often said that due to the range of Internet enabled devices, there are not enough parental controls to effectively aid parents in protecting their children. This is simply untrue. There are parental controls built into and available for all devices children are currently using to access the

Internet today. There are wide ranging technologies that allow parents to filter and to also monitor exactly what their children are doing and who they interact with online.

It is the parent's decision to decide to what degree they employ these technologies, and it is essential that this control remains within their power.

It is also often said that mobile phones pose a great risk to minors, and because the age of mobile phone users continues downwards, children are at greater and greater risk. Again this is simply not true. Mobile phones have parental controls and all mobile operators in the UK provide parental controls for free to their users, with most having these controls turned on by default.

There are many excellent resources online that can help educate parents about ways to protect their children who use these Internet enabled devices. As an example, an excellent U.K. solution exists at the XXX Aware website (www.xxxaware.co.uk), which educates parents on the parental control options available on a wide range of Internet enabled devices.

In conclusion it is clear that government mandated filtering at the ISP level will have very little real-world impact on protecting children and adolescents as they live increasingly digital lives. In fact there is the potential to do much harm. We can all agree that we want to protect children online and help provide the most positive digital experiences and educational opportunities for them. We must ensure in our quest for this noble goal that we take the steps that actually have a real impact in this regard, without negatively impacting the experience of the Internet and its end users as a whole.

Today, the best option is clearly education and technology, coupled with parental involvement, which is essential. You simply cannot adequately protect children's best interests in the digital age without all three.

Recommendations:

Workable, Practical and Effective Recommendations for Protecting Children Online

As discussed throughout this paper, creating hysteria and setting up blocks at the ISP level not only will do little to protect children online, but also may pose additional threats because it will give parents a false sense of security. A comprehensive, thoughtful and research-based

approach to protecting children online is where the UK government can and should focus its attention and resources.

Therefore, we offer the following three-pronged approach to child safety online as a practical, sensible and effective alternative to the Government's ISP filtering proposal.

1. Launch a public campaign that gives factual information to UK citizens about how to protect children online. Talk about the dangers of cyber-bullying, age-appropriate and age-inappropriate content, and how predators gain access to children online. Make child online safety everyone's responsibility.
2. Partner with adult content providers and gaming sites to make sure that all sites utilize a filtering system that facilitates age-appropriate parental controls
3. Provide classes for parents and carers at their children's schools that teach:
 - How to install parental controls on all of their child's devices
 - What rules parents should impose on their children's online activity including social networking sites
 - How parents and carers can monitor what their children have accessed online and with whom they have interacted.
 - How to initiate discussion and communicate with their children about with whom they interact and what they see online

These recommendations will be easy to implement as the tools to facilitate this kind of education, and communication are readily available. Ofcom has the research that discusses safety challenges for parents and children online. Current ATVOD media campaigns that are focused on imposing ineffective regulations can be redirected to discussions that engage parents, children and trusted adults in creating an environment that makes online safety part of everyone's daily routine.

Education resources for parents are numerous and it would be easy for schools to utilize resources already available. For example, Thinkuknow (<https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents/Primary/>) offers parents a "Top Ten Tips" on child online safety. Childnet International (<http://www.childnet.com/parents-and-carers/what-do-i-need-to->

[know](#)) provides parents with a list of “Conversation Starters” to facilitate discussions with children about online activity. The Parentzone (<http://www.theparentzone.co.uk/>) provides a course for parents on how to “take their offline parenting skills online.” And Mumsnet (<http://www.mumsnet.com/internet-safety/primary-school-children>) provides a how-to on “Keeping primary school-aged children safe online.” The information is out there and it is just a matter of picking and choosing the best curriculum for the school, parents and children.

Finally, we in the adult entertainment community are parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. We care deeply about protecting our children and all children online. We already utilize online filters like RTA and more. We are very interested in working cooperatively with governments to create effective programs centred on sensible research-based approaches for the online safety, health and well-being of all of our children. We would like to work with ATVOD and Ofcom to create a truly safe online environment and look forward to the possibility of working together to that end.

About ASACP

Founded in 1996, ASACP is a non-profit organization dedicated to online child protection. ASACP is comprised of two separate corporate entities, the Association of Sites Advocating Child Protection and the ASACP Foundation. The Association of Sites Advocating Child Protection (ASACP) is a 501(c)(4) social welfare organization. ASACP manages a membership program that provides resources to companies in order to help them protect children online. The ASACP Foundation is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. The ASACP Foundation battles child pornography through its CP Reporting Hotline and helps parents prevent children from viewing age-restricted material online with its Restricted To Adults (RTA) website label (www.rtalabel.org). ASACP has invested 17 years in developing progressive programs to protect children and its relationship in assisting the adult industry’s child protection efforts is unparalleled. For more information, visit www.asacp.org.

About FSC

The Free Speech Coalition is a trade organization dedicated to educating the public about the vital role adult entertainment plays in our society and it is committed to providing a credible voice for the adult industry. When FSC started in 1991, it was focused primarily on fighting against censorship and challenging laws that negatively impact the industry at the Federal,

State and local level. FSC since has expanded its mission to fight against piracy, monitor industry trends and help develop responsible and effective business practices.

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