

Freedom and protection. The ultimate online dilemma

How do countries tackle online child sexual abuse while still giving young people access to the Internet? It's a thorny problem that has yet to be answered satisfactorily, but some structured thought is starting to sort fact from the emotions – and at times the hysteria - that have accompanied this debate.

And yet the hysteria does have a home. There are millions of such images online, showing tens of thousands of children. The age of child subjects is also getting lower, with three in four victims appearing to be under 10 years old. And images are becoming more graphic and violent too.

The development of the online environment has not created crimes involving sexual abuse and exploitation of children, but it has increased the scale and reach for potentially causing harm, explains a new research paper released today, *Child Safety online: Global challenges and strategies*.

The new report, from UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre, examines the extent of risks, how children are using the Internet, and how they can be protected. With the dangers – child abuse images, online grooming and cyberbullying – also come historic, unparalleled benefits for children in education, socialisation and entertainment.

To children the online world is a magical place of communication, friends and exploration that enables them to push boundaries and take control of their lives. For many parents, the internet is a murky, misunderstood world of unintelligible language, over-familiarity with strangers and unhealthy pre-occupations with sex.

Generation gaps are nothing new, but what makes the Internet different is the spectacular pace at which it changes and evolves. Already personal computers are beginning to look obsolete, as children switch to smart phones as their preferred gateway, giving them more freedom, and their parents even less control.

Offenders are also taking advantage of rapidly enlarging web access that is supported by increasing broadband and mobile phone penetration. The emergence of broadband is a decisive factor in facilitating online child abuse because it allows the exchange of larger files, particularly files containing pictures and videos. And it has opened a new gateway for offenders in developing countries, where the Internet is still a novelty and growing at such breakneck speed that it is hard to keep pace with how young people are using it, let alone fathom the real underlying dangers. As senior adviser to the United Nations, John Carr, says, "as night follows day, as internet penetration increases within a country ...it's been followed by an increase in criminal behaviour. So those countries that at the moment are not registering high levels of child abuse images, as the Internet grows, unless they take active steps to combat it, it will follow."

From Angola to the USA, what then are some solutions?

The new report focuses on four: A primary goal is the empowerment of children and youth. Recognizing that most children are more *au fait* with technology than their parents, this generation is intrinsic to building a safer Internet. Developing their agency to access the creative benefits of the Internet, to understand certain forms of risk, and to manage that risk is key to constructing an effective response.

The second element – removing impunity for abusers – requires a level of international co-ordination in legislation and enforcement that has yet to materialise in most countries. Of 196 countries reviewed, only 45 have legislation sufficient to combat child abuse image offences. Children in the emerging Internet markets – and their countries

that are relative latecomers – can enjoy a protective environment that is put in place *ahead* of time, though harmonized legislation and child empowerment are fundamental.

The third strand noted in the report is to remove the availability of and access to child sexual abuse images, something that requires the cooperation of Internet service providers, along with child-friendly filtering and blocking mechanisms. Industry has the power to develop and introduce new tools to make the Internet safer for children.

Whether it will or not may require incentives - a market advantage for one organisation to provide a better and safer offer to consumers.

The report's fourth element is to support the recovery of child victims of online abuse; no easy task when most abuse goes unreported, and is often not even perceived as abuse by the child involved.

It may never be possible to remove all risks that exist in the online environment. It is a space too huge, evolving, growing and creative to ever be subject to the type of controls that would be necessary to fully protect children. Nor is it desirable that such control is sought, because total control would destroy the essence of the Internet and its many benefits. But more should – and could – be done.

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