Enhancing Online Safety for Children

Response to Discussion Paper from children and young people, as facilitated by ReachOut.com by Inspire Foundation

March, 2014
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About ReachOut.com by Inspire Foundation

ReachOut.com by Inspire Foundation is a national non-profit organisation established in 1996 in direct response to Australia's then escalating rates of youth suicide. With the mission to help young people be happy and well, our flagship program ReachOut.com engages over 600 000 young people aged 14-25 every year.

Young people are at the centre of all the organisation does — as partners in the development and delivery of all our initiatives. ReachOut.com by Inspire Foundation uses technology innovatively to reach young people and build trusted social brands that are a part of their landscape, as well as undertaking a range of research and evaluation work, conducted in partnership with academic institutions and research centres, in order to inform our service delivery and policy advocacy.

Preface: Children and Young People, the Ultimate Online Safety Experts

There is no question that technology plays a key role in children and young people's lives. A recent National Survey of young people conducted by the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre found that 99% of respondents used the internet daily, and that, compared to four years earlier, there had been significant increases in the frequency of access, the length of time spent online, and the variety of activities carried out there[1].

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many concerns have, and continue to, arise about the safety risks associated with this level of technology use, particularly in relation to the internet as a catalyst for bullying, suicide and sexual predation. Indeed, whilst parents are increasingly online, research suggests that they are less confident than young people in their understanding and use of social networking sites and thus often feel very concerned about the safety and wellbeing of their children[2]. The prominence that is often given to the risks of internet use is compounded by a lack of intergenerational understanding of young people's abilities to safely negotiate online environments. Comparatively less reported has been young people's accounts of the internet as an empowering context where they can both access feedback and discuss important and sensitive issues, such as mental health, sexuality and sexual health.

There is no question that the wellbeing and safety of children young people is paramount. The challenge therefore is to harness technology in a way that positively impacts on the wellbeing of young people while empowering them to protect themselves from any potential risks.

There is thus a need to develop a shared culture of responsible digital citizenship in which families, industry, government and young people all take part in the conversation as to what this concept may look like. Young people as the greatest users of the internet; and adopters of new technology, should be positioned as 'experts' when it comes to the development of frameworks around responsible online safety and cyber bullying prevention.

To this end, the following submission is largely formulated around the views of children and young people themselves who were consulted online (via a survey and moderated community discussion) by ReachOut.com.

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[1] Burns, JM, Davenport, TA, Christensen, H, Luscombe, GM, Mendoza, JA, Bresnan, A, Blanchard, ME & Hickie, IB, 2013, *Game On: Exploring the Impact of Technologies on Young Men's Mental Health and Wellbeing. Findings from the first Young and Well National Survey.* Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, Melbourne.

[2] Collin, P., Rahilly, K., Richardson, I. & Third, A., 2011, *The Benefits of Social Networking Services: A literature review.* Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, Melbourne.

1. Establishment of a Children's e-Safety Commissioner

The establishment of a single Government point of coordination for e-safety is broadly supported, especially if such an office also took responsibility for delivering greater public education regarding online safety and relevant laws. Further, we believe that for greatest effectiveness such an office should work closely with industry, police, relevant non-government organisations and with children and young people themselves in order to develop and promote effective initiatives and processes.

2. Dealing with harmful/offensive content on social media sites

Defining social media sites

In all responses received from young people, "connection" was listed time and time again as the key-defining characteristic of a social media site:

> *I usually see social media or a networking site as a kind of digital medium that we use to communicate with each other and gives us many options to connect.*

> *I think that it would be a site where you can connect to people through the internet.*

> *Social networking sites are a platform where people can communicate with each other*

> *An online forum with an opportunity to converse/ share content & information in real time or on a public website. Includes blogs with comment functionality, gaming chat, chat communities, websites for SM and networking (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pintrest, Linkedin etc). Excludes websites without comment/ chat functionality.*

As seen from these responses, another characteristic that repeatedly arose related to the facilitation of communication between individuals, not just in real time but also through the sharing of a variety of content and posting of messages. The definition of a social media site as being more than just a 'website' but encompassing of a "digital medium" or "platform" is also noteworthy. In this vein, young people were unanimous in their support for including games with an online chat component in their definition of a social networking site:

> *yup, online gaming, I would say counts.*

> *I have never done online gaming but if people communicate then yes I would include it.*

Complaints

Children and young people were overwhelmingly of the view that **anyone,** regardless of age, should be able to make, and receive, a complaint.

> *Anyone should be able to make a complaint or at least have the ability to "flag" content. No age limit.*

> *I think if you are old enough to make harmful content then you are old enough for someone to complain about it.*

Children and young people also had very clear ideas as to the level of evidence that should be supplied with a complaint:

> *A copy, snapshot or physical record of the harmful content. A short blurb about why this content is inappropriate/ harmful.*

> *I'd put who's been targeting you, how long it's been going for, why you want this stop as well as any screenshots of messages/comments that user has directed towards you.*

A number of respondents felt that having "some sort of evidence" was critical, in order to avoid problems related to possibly vexatious complaints. As one young person contributed:

> *I know some people who report just because they hate someone so maybe having some sort of evidence maybe as to why the report is being made*

Indeed, whilst not addressed in the original discussion paper, a number of young people raised concerns about some users who used complaint systems themselves to harass and intimidate others online.

> *It really sucks when people use the report system to troll " I suppose it depends on each site's procedures in addressing that problem. If there are regular users that are doing that, then they can be identified and have their accounts suspended or permanently deleted.*

Young people were of the view that requiring evidence to be submitted along with complaints could help to minimise this problem, and moreover that social networking sites should have in place a mechanism to identify and sanction vexatious complainants.

> *you can send out warnings to those "troll complainers" and give them a warning and if they do it again (so if they make a complaint that isn't worthwhile or a "troll") then they get either suspended or kicked off the site.*

Another consistent theme from those who engaged in the consultation was the need for prompt response to complaints, and the rapid removal of material deemed to be harmful or offensive.

> *They need to take action ASAP even if its just sending an email to the person as a first resort sort of thing so they can at least be aware that they are being watched and investigated.*

Many young people further suggested that any content or material that was the subject of a complaint should be immediately or quickly blocked/hidden pending investigation of the complaint in order to minimise harm and potential further sharing or distribution of that content:

> *I think that the content should be blocked as soon as the complaint is made and then either removed if necessary or unblocked if it's okay. When you email them they send an automated email to say that the complaint is being processed and give a time frame as to when it will be dealt with then the person who issued the complaint knows that the site is doing something about it.*

> *As soon as possible. I think that the content should be removed immediately for inspection and if it's seen to be 'appropriate', then it can be put back into its original spot. Removing as soon as a moderator is aware of its existence would prevent others from jumping onto the bandwagon and giving their nasty 2 cents. The complaint should be then processed and a decision would be made about it.*

> *Maybe within a few hours of the complaint being made, auto-block until deemed safe to go back up. Guilty until proven innocent.*

Others put a view that response times should be in proportion to the number of complaints received about a particular communication or piece of content:

> *Depending on how many complaints/ flagged items occur in a particular timeframe. If many complains come through- within 24 hours… Other content with single, few complaints- within 72 hours.*

Children and young people then had a range of suggestions for determining whether comments and content could be deemed harmful or offensive:

> *Follow a similar system to film/ TV classification. Content that would be rated X or R18+ (drugs, sex, violence) that would be distressing, inappropriate for young audiences that do not have the cognitive capacity to evaluate such content is harmful. In addition, any illegal content is unacceptable for any audience.*

> *If its hateful its definitely harmful*

> *Something that involves a lot of swear words and abusive language. I guess it really comes down to the context of the content.*

> *There's also explicit photos and videos too that could invade people's privacy or is there for defamation.*

> ***People** who **use** harmful content should also be allowed to be deemed harmful or offensive.*

Importantly, children and young people expressed a desire to be involved in an ongoing way with determinations of what was considered to be harmful or offensive, strengthening our earlier call for a Children's e-Safety Commissioner to engage in a meaningful and ongoing way with children and young people.

> *Encourage young people to have a say for themselves what is harmful, not just adults or professionals.*

Finally, children and young people talked in some detail about the importance of "fully removing" content and communications deemed to be harmful or offensive. Whilst doing so presents some considerable, and possibly impossible to overcome technical challenges, young people spoke about the fact that once online much content remains "forever" and that it needs to be harder to locate. It is clear then that this specific issue remains a challenge for the technical sector to address, and one that would benefit from concerted attention, possibly led by a new Children's e-Safety Commissioner.

3. Legislative options for dealing with cyber-bullying

The children and young people who participated in ReachOut.com's consultation largely did not demonstrate an in-depth understanding of Australia's existing legislative options for dealing with cyber-bullying and related offenses. As highlighted in the earlier section of this submission there is a pressing need to undertake widespread community education about the existing relevant laws and the rights and responsibilities of all users of social networking sites in Australia.

When asked specifically about the perceived appropriateness of the creation of an offence specific to minors, respondents were split 50/50 in their support/opposition for the idea. Amongst those who did support the introduction of a specific offence for minors, the suggested 'penalties' were heavily focussed on education, counselling and support, indicating a preference for support and rehabilitation rather than taking a punitive approach:

> *An educational course and some community service would be a good penalty.*

> *Internet ban, parental responsibility, some counselling sessions to see if that can help the problem. And maybe supportive programs can really be beneficial for all ages.*

A number of respondents advocated for a 'three-strikes' warning system before penalties were imposed, whilst a significant number also suggested that any convictions recorded under the legislation should be expunged before adulthood:

> *I think probation or something that can be wiped once they get over 18 and have showed good behaviour or a warning and as someone said, a 3 chance system would be a good way for under 18s*