

The Byron Review of children and new technologies

Response of the Open Rights Group

Detail of Respondents

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Part I: Introduction

1. About the respondents

The Open Rights Group is a grassroots digital rights advocacy group based in the UK. We aim to increase awareness of digital rights issues, help foster grassroots activity and preserve civil liberties in the digital age. We are funded by individual donations and small grants. Further information on our staff, corporate structure and community is online.¹

2. Our response

Our correspondents are generally experienced technology users or developers (including many prominent names, in their own fields). We solicited their responses to the Review's call for evidence via three online mechanisms:

- an email discussion list²
- a wiki³
- a blog⁴.

This document sums up the reactions of our community to the call for evidence and suggests directions for the review to take in subsequent months. The Open Rights Group would welcome the opportunity to contribute further to the Byron Review.

¹ <http://www.openrightsgroup.org/>

² <http://lists.openrightsgroup.org/mailman/listinfo/org-discuss>

³ http://www.openrightsgroup.org/orgwiki/index.php/The_Byron_Review

⁴ <http://www.openrightsgroup.org/consult>

Part II: Responses to the Questions

1. The Review is likely to generate an over reporting of risk without the balance of due concern for associated benefits.

The questions in the consultation document concerning the benefits of video games and the internet were highly generalised, whereas the questions relating to risk were far more numerous and detailed. This imbalance will generate responses that focus on risk and may not fully consider the benefits associated with these technologies, predetermining the results of any subsequent analysis.

2. The Review should focus on actual rather than potential and perceived risks.

The Executive, the Legislature, and parents ought to exercise rational decision making: managing actual risks demonstrated by clear evidence. Potential or perceived risks require analyses to determine their veracity. Over-management of potential and perceived risks, our correspondents note, is associated with reactionary social groups who have regularly (and misguidedly) sought to censor the internet both for adults and children.

3. Video games benefit both society and the individual.

Educationalists and games-developers argue that video games promote hand-eye coordination skills and reasoning ability. Video games also promote familiarity with software operation in particular and computer technology more generally. This is a social benefit and provides enjoyable, informal training to the first generation native to the information society.

4. Keeping children away from video games may disadvantage life options.

Video games increase rather than diminish life options. The games industry is a significant, growing employer and many universities now offer gaming-relating degrees. Also, video games offer opportunities for creativity (such as machinima⁵), which is meaningful to young people in a digital culture.

5. Video games improve visuospatial capabilities and should not be associated with violent behaviour.

The relationship between violence and video games requires further study. A recently published review of the academic literature⁶ on violent video games indicates a field with strong publication biases, in that results tend to correlate with the nature and direction of a particular research project. Once this tendency is controlled for the only remaining effect

⁵ Machinima is a collection of production techniques whereby computer-generated imagery (CGI) is rendered using real-time, interactive 3D engines, such as those of games, instead of professional 3D animation software. See, for example, <http://www.bloodspell.com>

⁶ Ferguson, C. J. 2007. "The Good, The Bad and the Ugly: A Meta-analytic Review of Positive and Negative Effects of Violent Video Games", Springer Netherlands, vol. 78, no. 4, pp 309 - 316

on subjects is positive: a slight improvement in visual perception of spatial relationships among objects.

6. The benefits of the internet are manifold.

The internet enables children to become active participants in the information society by searching out, discovering and debating information. It also facilitates anonymous reporting of abuse, violence and bullying. The wider benefits of the internet are manifold and are particularly valuable to Disabled and other housebound children:

- It enables access to culture and knowledge;
- It enables groups with shared interests to connect and communicate regardless of geographical location, which promotes pluralism and diversity;
- It promotes creativity, through access to creative tools such as software, as well as as a means to showcase creative work;
- Through pseudonymity, it enables people in socially sensitive situations to seek information and advice from peers without revealing identity;
- It facilitates individual, own-pace learning, in a comfortable environment, and can broaden our horizons;
- It familiarizes our youth with key 'real-world' technologies;
- As a mainly textual medium, it develops written communication skills;

7. The risks of the internet are not the same as physical dangers.

The analogy given by the Review of the internet as a portal to the outside world, much like the front door of a child's home, blurs the distinction between physical harm and harm from exploring the internet. Certainly parents should closely manage children's exposure to inappropriate materials (see below), but these risks are categorically different from a risk of, for example, road-traffic collisions.

8. Centralised content moderation is unreliable.

Central measures for filtering, flagging and sectioning-off content are unreliable. Regardless of these failings, centralised measures cannot protect the wide range of cultures and views within the UK.

Filtering at the network level is associated with various failings. First, it tends to be both too broad and too narrow, in that it cannot prevent access to all inappropriate content. Secondly, via false positives, it will prevent access to appropriate, even beneficial, content. In addition, users cannot filter according to their specific preferences. Finally, secure content cannot be filtered without compromising the security of that data.

Requiring individual content producers and publishers to flag content as inappropriate for young children places too much of a burden on the producers and publishers, given the range of people (i.e. amateurs / hobbyists) who produce content on the Web.

Consigning children to surf an internet that only contained content designed specially for them risks excluding children from the wealth of information on the Web and fails to

recognize some of our children will find such content insulting and patronizing to their intelligence levels.

9. Parents are well placed to gradually introduce their children to the internet.

Given the failings of centralised moderation, managing risks to young children online is best done at the edges of the network by making it easier for individual parents to manage access to computers and other devices connected to the internet.

Parents should closely manage the online environment which their children have access by operating a 'whitelist' of sites. The list will be tightly drawn at first then expand gradually as the child matures⁷. For example, between the ages of 2 - 6, your child could become familiar with interfacing by using cbeebies or nickelodeon, then at 6 - 8 they would be introduced to wider information sources like wikipedia or the entire BBC website. By the time they are exposed to primary school playgrounds, they should be encouraged to begin managing their own access to content, although strong oversight is of course recommended. Then, by their mid-teens, free reign is most suitable.

This progression must also go hand in hand with educating your child about the risks they will discover on the internet, just as in the physical world. This is as much about keeping them safe from predators as educating them to verify the information resources they encounter. It also allows parents freedom to raise their children differently, whilst society remains protected by social workers who can monitor for dangerous exposure. Parents should be supported in their efforts by publication of technical guidance for negotiating this new terrain.

10. Issues around inappropriate content will diminish as parents become more familiar with the internet.

Concerns associated with inappropriate content are, to an extent, transitory. Today's young parents have experienced the internet for a large part of their life, providing a far better understanding of the rewards (and risks) of the internet than the previous generation. Parents in future will be far more familiar with the kinds of content available online and so be in a far better position to manage their children's Web habits.

Part III: Relevant research material

During the course of our consultation, we collected references to relevant research material on our wiki. Links to these resources are reproduced below.

Bauman, K. E. & Ennett, S. T. 1996, "On the importance of peer influence for adolescent drug use: commonly neglected considerations", *Addiction*, vol. 91, no. 2, pp. 185-198⁸.

⁷ Whitelists can either be maintained by commercial or community groups.

⁸ http://www.prevention.psu.edu/events/documents/BaumanandEnnett_Ontheimportanceofpeerinfluenceforadoldruguse.pdf

Best, S. J. & Kruger, B. S. 2006, "Online interactions and social capital: distinguishing between new and existing ties", *Social Science Computer Review*, vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 395-410⁹.

Wellman, B. 2001, "Computers networks as Social Networks", *Science*, vol. 293, pp. 2031-2034. (not available online)

Wellman, B., Boase, J., & Chen, W. 2002, "The networked nature of community: online and offline", *IT&Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 151-165¹⁰.

Wellman, B. & Gulia, M. 1999, "Virtual communities as communities: Net surfers don't ride alone," in *Communities in Cyberspace*, P. Kollock & M. Smith, eds., Routledge, New York, pp. 167-194¹¹.

Williams, D. 2006, "On and off the 'net: Scales for social capital in an online era", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 11, no. 2¹².

Stephanie Booth "Parents, Teenagers, Internet, Predators, Fear..."¹³.

9 <http://ssc.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/24/4/395.pdf>

10 <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~wellman/publications/networkednature/vol01-1-A10-Wellman-Boase-Chen.PDF>

11 <http://www2.sims.berkeley.edu/courses/is290-1/s01/SocialNetworks/wellman-zeh.html> (Summary)

12 <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol11/issue2/williams.html>

13 <http://climbtothestars.org/archives/2007/07/25/parents-teenagers-internet-predators-fear/>