Choosing to Avoid the Not-so-good Cyberstreets

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"When we fall into the trap of believing or, more accurately, hoping that technology will solve all of our problems, we are actually abdicating the high touch of personal responsibility. *** In our minds at least, technology is always on the verge of liberating us from personal discipline and responsibility. Only it never does and never will. The more technology around us, the more the need for human touch.[1] "

Regardless of issues related to the use, effectiveness, and appropriateness of technology tools, laws, and labeling systems, the simple and plain truth is that virtually every young person in this country will at one time or another have unsupervised access to the Internet through an unfiltered and unmonitored system. Any young person who desires to access the darkside of the Internet will be able to find a way to do so. Technology tools, laws, and labeling systems are insufficient means to prevent such access.

The more important question, therefore, is how can we help young people gain the knowledge, decision-making skills, and motivation to make safe and responsible choices when they are using the Internet.

The focus of my work at the Center for Advanced Technology in Education at the University of Oregon College of Education is on gaining the research insight about the behavior of young people when they are using the Internet and the development of recommended policies, practices, and educational strategies to assist schools in helping young people become safe and responsible surfers.

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[1] **Naisbitt, J.,** *Megatrends : ten new directions transforming our lives* **New York, N.Y.Warner Books,1 984.**

What is the end goal?

Young people who have:

- Knowledge of potential Internet dangers and the legal and ethical standards for behavior when using the Internet.
- Decision-making skills to determine what action is appropriate in a given situation.
- Motivation and self control to behave responsibly, especially when in situations where irresponsible behavior may not be detected.

Every parent knows how to teach a child to cross a busy street. When children are too young to recognize the danger and do not have the skills to safely negotiate crossing a street, we keep them in safe places and only allow them to approach a busy street when there is an adult present holding their hand. We talk to them about the dangers and teach them the skills necessary to avoid danger. We emphasize the value of making safe choices. Gradually, we allow them more freedom, but are on the watch for any unsafe behavior. If unsafe behavior occurs we use this as a teachable moment to reiterate the dangers and the skills necessary to avoid the dangers. When children are old enough, they are allowed to cross the streets by themselves. The exact same strategy can be used to help our young people gain the knowledge, skills, and motivation to use the Internet in a safe and responsible manner.

What is the appropriate role of schools in teaching young people to make safe and responsible choices in the use of the Internet?

Schools must play a leading role in the effort to ensure that our young people learn to use the Internet in a safe and responsible manner. Schools are the most universal location where students in the U.S. are learning how to use the Internet. Not all parents know how to guide their children's use of the Internet, not all young people use the public library, not all young people have access through community technology centers. But schools have the ability to partner with parents, libraries, community technology centers, and other organizations within a community to create a community-wide effort to promote safe and responsible use of the Internet. Schools are a well-placed, efficient vehicle to provide education to parents on these issues.

Schools must establish guidelines for student use of the Internet that are in accord with educational standards. Schools cannot enforce a wide range of different family values. However, schools can and should encourage parents to engage in dialogue with their children about their personal and family values as they relate to their children's use of the Internet at school.

What are the safety and responsible use issues that schools must address?

The key safety issues are sexual predation, protection of personal privacy, inadvertently accessing inappropriate material, Internet addiction, and handling incidents of harassment, stalking, and other harmful speech. The key responsible use issues are copyright infringement, plagiarism, computer security violations, intentionally accessing inappro-

priate material, and the production of harmful speech, including harmful material, defamation, harassment, spamming, and violation of another person's privacy.

How should schools address these issues?

The important foundation for addressing safety and responsibility issues on the Internet is teachers who are fully prepared to lead students in exciting, challenging, high-quality learning activities using the Internet and a school environment that fosters responsible behavior and personal integrity throughout all aspects of school life. It is also important to establish the clear understanding that the use of the Internet is school is limited to educational purposes -- class assignments, career development, and high quality personal research, and not entertainment or shopping.

The vast majority of school districts have adopted Internet Use Policies, also called Acceptable Use Policies, to guide student and staff use of the Internet[2]. Internet Use Policies address a wide range of safety and responsibility issues, including personal safety, illegal activities, system security, inappropriate language, privacy, resource limits, plagiarism, copyright infringement, as well as access to inappropriate material. The Internet use policy essentially establishes the "rules" for use of the Internet. If a student violates the provisions of an Internet use policy, he or she can be subjected to a range of disciplinary actions in accord with the district's disciplinary guidelines. A frequently used disciplinary action is denial of access to the Internet for a period of time. Internet Use Policies also address issues of students' rights in the context of their use of the Internet at school. These rights include the right of free speech, access to information, and due process.

A representative sample of a district Internet Use Policy is attached. A detailed legal analysis of Internet use policy issues that was recently published in the Brigham Young University Journal of Law and Education has been provided to the COPA Commission.

The Internet Use Policy should only be considered the first component of a comprehensive strategy to assist young people in gaining the knowledge, skills, and motivation to use the Internet in a safe and responsible manner. A comprehensive strategy will address environmental and technical factors, instructional objectives and strategies, and intervention strategies. It is my recommendation to educators that they develop a plan to address these issues. The overall plan initially should be developed at the district level in partnership with the representatives from the local public library, local community technology centers and parent leaders. This overall plan must be refined at each school level to reflect the different facilities and needs of students at those schools. The plan must include provisions for ongoing assessment and evaluation.

What are the best strategies for schools to address concerns of students accessing the darkside of the Internet?

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[2] A recent survey conducted by Quality Education Data revealed that in 1 999 over 90% of school districts had adopted Acceptable Use Policies.

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Schools that have good policies and planning, provide education to students about the importance of engaging in safe and responsible behavior, engage students in high-quality educational uses of the Internet, and have effective supervision and monitoring do not generally have problems with students accessing inappropriate material.

To successfully address concerns about access the darkside, it is necessary to distinguish between inadvertent access and intentional access. The former is a safety issue; the latter is a responsibility issue.

Inadvertent access can occur in several ways: a) conducting a search on an innocuous term that results in the presentation of sites with inappropriate material and accessing a site without a careful consideration of the description provided by the search engine; b) mistyping a URL; and c) selecting a link on a page that has no description or without reading the description. A school-based strategy to prevent the inadvertent access must begin when children begin to use the Internet. The foundation of an approach to avoid inadvertent access is to encourage students to "Read, Think, then Click." Unfortunately, many edutainment software programs for young children reinforce "mindless clicking," a bad habit that must be undone. Children must be warned of the presence of material on the Internet that is unacceptable for them to access. They must be provided with instruction in effective search strategies and learn how to quickly exit inappropriate sites, especially sites that have set "traps."

Children must be kept in child safe places until they have successfully demonstrated that they understand how to avoid the inadvertent access of inappropriate material and how to quickly exit an inappropriate site. Child safe spaces can be established through the use of child-friendly, non-commercial, educationally oriented portals, proxy servers, and school or classroom web site.

Addressing issues of intentional access is more complicated. If the school has established clear standards, effective supervision and monitoring, and meaningful disciplinary responses, most students are not going to take the risk of accessing such material in school. But schools must also assume the responsibility of preparing young people to engage in safe and responsible behavior regardless of where the student is accessing the Internet.

To address issues of intentional access it is important to understand the range of motivations that may underlie intentional access. Many teens will access the darkside of the Internet because of curiosity. No creature is more curious than a teenager is, especially if adults are making a fuss about something. Most teenagers will explore the darkside of the Internet just to see for themselves what is there. Teens who find the material is not consistent with their values, reinforced by family and peers, will self-censor. Some of this exploration is simply a natural component of a teenager's emerging sexuality. This kind of exploration has been present long before the Internet and cannot be expected to diminish. The most important strategy to address concerns about curious teens is a focus on personal values, including healthy sexual values.

Some teens are part of peer group, a "tribe," that reinforces ongoing involvement with darkside sites and activities during the period of teen age and young adult years -- the period of raging hormones. Given the strength of peer influences in the life of teens,

early intervention in fostering positive teen tribes and assisting young people in resisting peer pressure to engage in activities that are contrary to their values are important strategies.

The teens that present the greatest concern are those who engage in continued, excessive participation in darkside sites and activities. The teens who are most at risk are likely outcasts in the school environment and have come from dysfunctional families where they have been the victims of sexual and/or physical abuse. These teens may become involved in the establishment of darkside sites and may engage in online predation, harassment, and stalking. Their online involvement may also translate into "real world" activities of rape, sexual predation, stalking, domestic violence, and other illegal activities. Clearly, there is a need for greater research insight to address the concerns presented by these young people.

The greatest concern about young people accessing darkside material on the Internet is access of materials that demonstrate violence and abuse -- sexual, racial, animal, or other abuse. As was recently reported, "After reviewing 30 years of research, top members of the public health community have concluded that viewing violent entertainment can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values and behavior, particularly in children.[3]" Clearly, young people's interaction with violent and abusive materials found on the Internet can be predicted to have a damaging effect on values and behavior, which may result in "real world" violence and abuse.

"You are not old enough to look at this material," is an extremely weak argument against the darkside. Such an argument will likely be dismissed by most teens, who consider themselves to be every bit as competent and capable as adults are. A much more powerful argument is: "This material reflects extreme disrespect for others. It encourages and even glorifies violence and abuse of others. This is not the kind of person you are. This is not the kind of person you want to become. What you pay attention to becomes a part of who you are as a person. If you see yourself as a loving, caring, respectful person, this is not the kind of material that you will interact with."

To lay the groundwork for success for this argument, it is necessary that schools have well-developed programs addressing character education, racial discrimination, and, especially, sexual harassment. In 1993, the American Association of University Women published a peer sexual harassment study. The study showed that 81 % of students had experienced some form of sexual harassment. Eighty-five percent of girls and 76 percent of boys reported experiencing 'unwanted and unwelcome sexual behavior that interferes with their lives.[4]" The values and attitudes of students that underlie involvement in peer sexual harassment are likely to be the same values and attitudes that support intentional involvement with the sexual darkside of the Internet. Aggressive school-based programs to address sexual harassment are likely to provide an effective foundation for addressing involvement with sexual darkside materials on the Internet.

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[3] Oldenburg, A., "TV, Films blamed for child violence" *USA Today* July 26, p. 9D.

[4] American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, *"Hostile Hallways: The AAUW Survey on Sexual Harassment in American Schools"* June 1993.

When working with young people using the Internet it is important to keep in mind how features of the technology can impact ethical decision-making. As young people grow, their ethical decision-making is largely influenced by external factors. The two most significant external forces are perception of the harm they have caused by their actions, which leads to feelings of guilt and remorse, and fear of detection, which could lead to punishment or loss of reputation. Technology interferes with both of these external forces. When we use technology, we are distanced from recognizing any harm that we may cause. We also feel invisible. As young people are growing up using the Internet, we must enhance their recognition of potential harm caused by their actions and diminish their perceptions that they are invisible.

From a developmental perspective, technical monitoring systems are a far more powerful tool than are blocking systems or because they provide the opportunity for detection followed by a disciplinary consequence. Monitoring systems can help to create "teachable moments." Used effectively, "teachable moments" can be very helpful in helping young people learn to make decisions based on internalized control -- a personal identity that will effectively guide making "right choices." Another strategy which schools have used successfully is the use of students as computer lab monitors. This strategy helps to reinforce peer disapproval of irresponsible behavior.

What issue are pertinent to the use of filtering in schools?

The biggest problem with the use of filtering in schools is the false security and complacency that most often results from a decision to install filtering. Schools that rely on filtering generally do not adequately address the search skills that young people can use to avoid inadvertently accessing this kind of material, nor do they discuss issues around the darkside of the Internet and the need to make responsible choices. Schools that rely on filtering often become complacent about supervision and monitoring, thus leading to other problems related to the use of the Internet. Often the choice to install filtering reflects inadequate dedication to professional development and Internet curriculum development[5].

The use of filtering in schools also raises first amendment concerns. These concerns are addressed in-depth in an accompanying document that outlines legal issues related to filtering in schools. In brief, school officials have the right and responsibility to determine the appropriateness of materials for their students, but may not restrict students' access to material based on a desire to suppress unpopular ideas. When school officials install filtering, they are delegating the responsibility for the determination of the appropriateness of materials to private companies that make blocking decisions based on vague criteria and do not disclose their list of blocked sites to the schools. These companies are often found to have blocked sites presenting unpopular ideas in the same category as sites clearly are inappropriate for children, such as blocking access to information on safe sex or for gay and lesbian teens in the same category as pornography. Some companies have undisclosed agendas to use their filtering software to engage in viewpoint discrimination and suppress access to unpopular ideas.

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[5] One administrator said to me, "We installed filtering because our teachers are not prepared to handle student's use of the Internet."

Legislation currently pending in Congress that would require all schools receiving E-rate funds to install filtering will be held unconstitutional because Congress may not require that school officials entrust their important decision-making responsibility for the selection of school materials to private companies.

Why would a school choose not to install filtering?

The choice not to install filtering software in schools reflects the recognition of the important responsibility placed on schools to prepare young people to make the right choices and a determination that the use of filtering does not assist in achieving that objective. Here is how the principal of a Catholic school described the rationale for his school's decision not to use filtering[6]:

> "I feel that an assertive approach, works very well in every aspect of life, not just with a single medium. Therefore, an "Acceptable Use Agreement" for students, and staff, with clear, concise expectations outlined, will place the responsibility of each person's actions squarely on that person for his/her use the internet. Does that mean all have free reign? Absolutely not. The younger the child the more supervision and guidance is necessary.
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> The point is to not offer the easy way out by providing the excuse of "It's THEIR responsibility for what I do" but to instill the understanding that "I am responsible for the choices I make and I am accountable for what I choose to do". This is not only emphasized for a child's use of the net, but all forms of media during and outside of school.
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> Education and community interaction not only occurs in school. It is important for youngsters to develop the need to make the right choices when they are NOT being "watched". Education is a life long process and our kids need to be able to function properly after 3:00 PM and after graduation. A youngster encouraged to develop a strong, value based character who can function independently and properly now will have the greater, more positive affect of influencing peers and raising the next generation than any outside control. ...
>
> Educating our children is the best method of protecting them.
>
> Tom Ward, Principal, St. Michael School, Olympia, WA

As noted above, schools that have good policies and planning, provide education to students about the importance of engaging in safe and responsible behavior, engage students in high-quality educational uses of the Internet, and have effective supervision and monitoring do not generally have problems with students accessing inappropriate material.

What should be done?

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[6] Permission to reproduce and distribute this message was granted by the writer.

- Schools should be encouraged or required to develop comprehensive plans to address how they will assist students to engage in the safe and responsible use of the Internet. Schools should work with parents, public libraries, and community technology centers to develop a comprehensive, community-wide approach. We need to move beyond the simple adoption of an Internet Use Policy.

- Professional development is needed for teachers and administrators regarding safety and responsible use issues.

- Research is needed to gain a better understanding of how use of the Internet is affecting the social and moral development of young people and to understand how to assist young people in engaging in the safe and responsible use of the technology[7].

- A taxonomy of educational objectives related to the safe and responsible use of the Internet should be developed, providing guidelines for learning objectives that are appropriate for different grade levels. This taxonomy should provide the basis for the development of curriculum materials and approaches.

- Character education, anti-racial discrimination, and sexual harassment curriculum programs should be revised to incorporate concepts of making safe and responsible choices using the Internet.

Conclusion

Dr. Suess provided excellent guidance on this issue. In his book *Oh the Places You'll Go*, he wrote:

"You'll look up and down streets. Look 'em over with care.
About some you will say, 'I don't choose to go there.'
With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet,
you're too smart to go down any not-so-good streets.[8]"

The answer to our concerns about the darkside of the Internet is to focus on strategies that can help our young people gain those "heads full of brains and shoes full of feet" so that they choose not to go down those not-so-good cyberstreets.

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[7] I received a NSF grant to host a workshop of researchers and practitioners to develop a recommended research agenda around issues of the social dimensions of the use of interactive technologies by young people. The report from this workshop is available at: http://netizen.uoregon.edu/socialdimensions.html.

[8] Suess, Dr. *Oh, the places you'll go*. New York: Random House. 1990.