

December 2016
III ISCEST Conference
Nigeria

PAPER 2

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CHILD PROTECTION: A LOOK AT SOME INTERNET REGULATIONS

Abstract

As a result of the rapid increase in technological development and the widespread use of computer-based communication and information sharing via the internet, regulation relating to child protection has become a serious issue of concern. This concern is shared across many countries around the world, including those in Africa. But the issue of child protection seems to have gained more attention in the Western countries than in other parts of the world. Despite its many benefits, however, evidence from research suggests that the internet has become the 'new medium' through which some commonly recognised forms of child abuse such as maltreatment, sexual and emotional abuse occur. This has impacted negatively on children's education. This paper examines the internet regulation for child protection. It discusses the role of educational institutions, regulatory measures and legislation relating to child protection with particular reference to internet-mediated communication. The paper draws on the perceptions of teachers and parents and legislative measures introduced by the European Commission in preventing children from the internet abuse. The paper employs a small-scale research to explore parents' and teachers' views about children's use of the Internet in classrooms and at home. The paper concludes with a set of recommendations and measures aimed at tackling the incidence of internet abuse and leaves us with a question to address' To what extent are Nigerian education institutions protecting children from the internet abuse?

Key words: Internet, globalisation, technology, child protection, legislation and Human Rights

Introduction

This paper examines internet regulation for child protection in relation to use, misuse and abuse. As a result of the rapid increase in technological development and the widespread use of computer-based communication and information sharing via internet, regulation with regard to child protection has become an issue of serious concern. This issue affects many countries around the world, including African nations, but it seems that it is in the Western World that the issue of child protection is given more attention. In spite of the many benefits that are derived from the use of internet, the evidence from research findings suggests that the internet has become the 'new medium' through which some commonly recognised forms of child abuse such as maltreatment, sexual and emotional abuse occur. Such abuse has impacted negatively on children's education.

Regulatory measures and legislation relating to child protection, with special reference to communicating via the Internet together with the role educational institutions play in this regard are the main areas that this paper will discuss. Attention will be given to the school as well as the home environment. It will draw on legislative measures introduced by the United Nations (UN), the European Commission and national policies and legislations that address child protection from internet abuse. The paper employs a small-scale research to explore parents and teachers' views on children use of Internet in classrooms and at home. The sample (teachers, parents and students) used in the study are from two inner London city schools. The perceptions of teachers and parents form part of the discussion. The paper concludes by making some recommendations that may be useful in tacking internet child abuse.

Context

The global advancement of technology and the widespread use of the Internet have meant well for youths as well as adults. The Internet has provided access to a large volume of information that is useful for educational and research activities. From a survey conducted by Internet Society, with reference to attitudes towards the Internet, it was found that 98% of users agreed or strongly agreed that the Internet is essential for their access to knowledge and education; 80% agreed or agreed strongly that the Internet plays a positive role for their individual lives as well as society at large; and approximately 75% of users strongly agreed that access to the

Internet allows them to seek any information that interests them (Internet Society, 2013). Interestingly, when the same survey asked about Human Rights in relation to the Internet, 83% of respondents agreed or agreed strongly that access to the Internet should be considered a basic human right; and 89% agreed or agreed strongly that Internet access allows freedom of expression on all subjects, and 86% agreed or agreed strongly that freedom of expression should be guaranteed. Such strong views and widespread use has no doubt put the Internet in very high flying position as far as mass media is concerned.

The popularity that the Internet has gained seemed to have led many parents and adults to believe that it is safe but the evidence shows otherwise. Many children are exploited via the Internet and cyber-bullying is also very prevalent. The issue of online predators has become a very serious concern. Davis (2014) reports on a study by Cox Communications and the Center for Missing and Exploited Children: 51% of parents do not have safety software on their computers, 57% did not know common instant messaging abbreviations, but 61% allow their children to participate in online chats within chat rooms and Internet messaging. The children are just as exposed for Davis (2014) notes from a study carried out by George Washington University found that 54% of the children ages 9 to 12 either thought it was safe to meet someone online, or were unsure about it; 25% revealed their real names online, and 25 per cent thought it was safe to post their address. The Office of Communication (Ofcom) is responsible for regulating communication affairs in the United Kingdom (UK). Ofcom's 2008 survey reveals: "99% of children across the UK have access to the internet, while 86% have access at home. Concerns associated with children using the internet can be summarised as: accessing inappropriate content, forming online relationships which may be exploitative, identity theft and cyberbullying" (Ofcom, 2009).

The high level of exposure noted from the evidence above has led to much abuse and governments around the world were forced to turn their attention to Internet Regulation – the using laws, rules, policies or procedures to protect the general public from being exploited.

Policies and Regulations

The public and private sectors make much use of the Internet so there is need for governments to make clear distinctions when formulating policies and laws. This paper is concerned with child protection so any policy makers must have the rights of children as the foundation principle in all the activities that they undertake to regulate the Internet. The Convention on the Rights of the Child in *Article 1*, defines a 'child' as a person below the age of 18 (The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2013). *Article 17* of the same Convention states that children have the right to get information from the mass media, including the Internet. As noted earlier, the Internet has been used by predators to exploit vulnerable children, but the issue of exploitation is also addressed by the Convention. *Article 36* (Other forms of exploitation) notes: children should be protected from any activity that takes advantage of them or could harm their welfare and development. In terms of protection of children's rights, *Article 4* of the Convention states: Governments have a responsibility to take all available measures to make sure children's rights are respected, protected and fulfilled (UNICEF, 2013). All the countries that ratify the Convention, in principle, agreed to review their laws that relate to children. This means that these countries are under obligation to protect children from the harm that is done to them via the Internet.

Acts and Legislation

One of the Acts that is in place to deal with grooming is Section 15 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003. It clearly explains the issue of communication with children (under age 16, England but under 17 Northern Ireland) with a view to meeting them to engage in a sexual act. (Northern Island Assembly Research (NIAR), 2010). Internet protection in the UK, as noted in the Byron Review, needs more than legislation to deal with all the harm that children are exposed to while using the Internet. The following is what was proposed:

...a shared culture of responsibility with families, industry, government and others in the public and third sectors all playing their part to reduce the availability of potentially harmful material, restrict access to it by children and to increase children's resilience (in NIAR, 2010).

The above proposal was accepted and as a result; The UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) was set up (Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI), 2013). It comprises over 200 organisations from different sectors and government institutions in the UK.

Challenges and Problems

Parents and teachers face many challenges in dealing with child protection and Internet safety. This is a serious problem for the entire society and should be addressed in the best way possible. A recent Sky News item reported this from a member of the National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), said: "Young

people tell us they are experiencing all sorts of new forms of abuse on a scale never before seen. It's now clear that we are facing an e-safety timebomb, with this being one of the biggest child protection issues of our time" (SKY News, 2014). The same report also noted that over 41% of the 11 to 19 age group, and 27% of the 7 to 11 age group "have seen something online in the past 12 months that they found hurtful or unpleasant".

We live in an age where some children know much more about the surfing the Internet than their parents do. Sometimes, those parents who are very familiar with the Internet believe that because they know how to block certain websites, their children are safe. Also, generally, schools are going to great lengths to make sure that children are safe when they are online. In spite of this, schools and homes are not able to monitor what children get up to when they are on their own. This demonstrates that child protection issues still exist because Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, although useful, can be easily abused.

The Role of Schools/Colleges in Tackling Child Protection

Schools and colleges have a massive role to play in trying to deal with child protection issues. Online sexual abuse is becoming more prevalent. NSPCC (2013) contend that teachers are often in the best position to notice concerns about children who are at risk of abuse. NSPCC also note that the Education Act 2002 gives teachers a statutory responsibility for looking after the welfare of the children. This means that child protection should be on the agenda of schools' training programmes. Where schools are unable to deal with certain sensitive issues, they should get assistance from government departments that deal specifically with such issues. Schools/colleges can go a long way in tackling children protection issues if they work in close partnership with government bodies that deal with vulnerable children.

Methodology

A small-scale research that used a qualitative design was conducted to get participants' views on child protection. The main aim of the research was to hear what students has to say about Internet use and to hear teachers and parents' views about child protection issues. A semi-structured interview and a focus group discussion were used to collect the data. The sample comprised of 30 students aged 17 to 18, 10 parents and 10 teachers from two inner cities London universities – Business and Management departments. Permission was sought from the participants before the research was conducted.

Findings

The findings produced much data and a number of issues were revealed. However, because of space, this paper reports on a small section of the findings. Below are some participants' comments:

Students

There is nothing wrong in using computer to communicate and socialise with friends and families because we hardly see face to face, but limit what you do with the people you know. It becomes a problem when you start chatting to strangers on the internet, skip or Facebook. (Student 7)

Everybody should take the responsibility of protecting children and every one using computer as there is a lot happening to people on the internet. Watching dangerous films and acts can influence a child to start practicing what they have watched. Government should impose strict laws both at schools, universities and at home usage in particular to help vulnerable children from internet abuse. (Student 19)

Parents

Internet access for a child is very worrying particularly when one is at work and child is at home alone browsing. When at home one can monitor, but it becomes difficult when Mum or Dad is away or sleeping. What is more important is educating them constantly on what they should watch and retrieve and whom to talk to on the web skip. (Parent 1)

I worry much about how my daughter can concentrate completing her assignments as she is always on the skip especially when I am not there to supervise her work. However, we have a block on her to prevent her access from watching rubbish. That is working for us but she is still hooked on the screen. Shame you cannot block them entirely as computer is needed for her work especially when they are asked by the teacher to use it for information seeking or complete set home work. (Parent 8)

Teachers

I should say that embracing new technological development is good for young people, unlike our days. My worries are that kids of these days get addicted to computer, sometimes doing nothing with than chart, skip and doing irrelevant things with it than their school work. The good thing is that the university has a strict policy of

blocking under age sites, but adult can also be abused if not well educated on what is good and bad on the net. It is bad for everybody not just the kids if addicted and hence can affect their academic studies. (Teacher 2)

Admittedly, internet can have both negative and positive impact on a child education. It all depends on how the community and individual perception about it. For me, there is great need for children to access information for academic purposes; however, where it poses a threat on a child is when they digress from the main usage to something that is not acceptable and relevant to their work. Luckily, our institution has a strict policy to block access to certain sites while using the university computers meant to support their studies. However, teachers and institutions can only prevent access to pornographic on-site, but could not extent this power while at home. (Teacher 4)

Discussion

Generally, the findings revealed a number of concerns that children, teachers and parents have as a result of widespread use of the Internet and the number of social networking sites that are available for children to access. All the participants saw the good in the Internet. They spoke much about how the Internet is able to help child to find information that can help them to do their research assignments. They were all anxious to point out that it is not the Internet that is bad, but it is those who use it for wrong purposes. One student saw the danger in 'chatting to strangers'. Another saw the downside of the Internet as 'watching dangerous films and acts'. The fear was that this practice can greatly influence a young person's way of thinking; and this can be dangerous since it can lead to acting out what was seen. This is perhaps what the teacher meant when she expressed her fears about 'addiction to the Internet'.

All the participants agreed that the responsibility of dealing with child protection rests with everyone, children as well as adults. The consensus was that the development of successful preventive measures requires the cooperation and involvement of all – government institutions, schools and colleges, community organisations and youth groups that children are members of. These thoughts are in line with the proposal made NIAR (2010) and the principles held by UKCCIS.

The respondents also expressed appreciation for the policies and legislations that the UK government has in place to deal with Internet child protection. A similar thought was expressed for the efforts that the educational institutions are making to formulate policies relating to blocking all harmful Internet sites. NSPCC expresses thoughts in their paper 'Safeguarding in Education Service'. Generally, the results of the research show that internet regulation is necessary for child protection.

Conclusion and Implications

The main theme of this paper is child protection, in relation to internet regulation. This is necessary because of the rapid increase in technology that has made a number of social networking sites available over the years. It shows that although the Internet is beneficial in many ways, there are some serious problems that arise from its abuse; therefore child protection has become a major issue for countries around the world.

From a small-scale research, the findings from a semi-structured interview and a focus group discussion show that participants have similar concerns to those identified by organisations such as NSPCC and UKCCIS. The common themes are benefits of the Internet, the misuse of social networking and the need for policies and regulation to protect children from harm. Schools and colleges are recognised as having an important role to play in child protection. This has implications for education officials, teachers, parents and children. Education officials should play their part in making policies for regulation for schools and colleges. Teachers should be willing to work alongside government organisations who deal specifically with vulnerable children. They should be alert to any sign of abuse among the children in their care and be willing to act on any problems that they identify. Parents need to monitor children's activities as closely as possible and be willing to cooperate with the schools in any action that they take to protect children. These measures will only have success if the children themselves are prepared to obey and follow the directions that they are given by parents and teachers. Child protection is a very big issue and should get the full attention of all concerned.

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