

DOPA, social networks and keeping young people safe AoC NILTA July 2006

e-Safety education, not [filtering and blocking](#), will keep young people safe online.

Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA)

On July 27th The US House of Representatives voted on the "[Deleting Online Predators Act of 2006](#)", an amendment to the Communications Act of 1934 proposed by Congressperson Fitzpatrick. The Bill is designed to protect minors from child sexual abuse by blocking online community sites and requires "recipients of universal service support for schools and libraries to protect minors from commercial social networking websites and chat rooms," - effectively withdrawing funding from institutions which fail to censor designated sites. DOPA was passed by a majority of 410 to 19 and now goes forward to the Senate.

In addition to commercial ownership, the bill defines social network sites as those which elicit personal information, include a personal profile, support blogging or journals, and enable communication amongst users. This includes many sites which are effective in supporting learning and teaching, and are currently being used across all education sectors to support engaging, creative and effective learning- including Blogger, Flickr, and Yahoo! Groups.

AoC NILTA is alarmed at the extent to which DOPA fails to recognise the value of online interaction and the current state and benefits of e-learning. The legislation also fails to recognise the reality of current and future social and economic activity. The enactment of DOPA will disadvantage learners, educational professionals and the communities supported by educational and library connectivity.

AoC NILTA recognises that this legislation will particularly impact on those in the population who are in most need of access – learners and connectivity users who do not have private internet access. We do not believe that this legislation will effectively protect young people. On the contrary, we are troubled at the disadvantage this legislation presents to all learners and at the step backwards in social and educational terms this approach to the internet represents.

AoC NILTA is committed to highlighting and promoting the role of e-safety within the 16+ sector, as an important component of both learner support and staff development. Blocking and filtering sites does not encourage a culture where young people are supported to take responsibility for their own actions and to equip themselves for dealing with unwanted encounters with materials or people. We see the role of this sector as clear in this regard – open discussion, education, and clear, accessible routes for reporting will always be the most effective way to combat child sexual abuse.

Social network sites

Within DOPA social networking sites are broadly defined as websites which enable users to interact with one another and share information about themselves. This is a broad definition which could include sites such as [eBay](#) which require registration, encourage users to comment on their experience of transactions, and provide user forums. Other examples of social networking sites that fall under DOPA's broad definition include [Friends Reunited](#), where communities are structured around schools, colleges, universities and workplaces; [Flickr](#), a photo storing and sharing site; and [LastFM](#), where the community is organised around

shared taste in music. They also include the tween, teen and young adult dominated sites such as [MySpace](#), [BeBo](#) and [LunarStorm](#).

There is no doubting the ever growing popularity of social networking sites: MySpace has over 78 million registered accounts and attracted over 50 million visits during May 2006 ([comScore Media Metrix Releases May Top 50 Web Rankings and Analysis](#)). What is doubtful is that young people will be prevented or discouraged from accessing social networking sites by blocking and filtering procedures. Many young people are adept at getting around blocking and filtering, and new sites appear every day.

AoC NILTA recognises and supports the formal and informal educational value of social networking sites. There are many effective examples of social networking sites being used to support creative, effective and engaging learning and teaching. [The Edublog Awards](#) is an annual web based event that recognises and showcases the many diverse and imaginative ways in which weblogs are being used within education, and promotes the positive and creative uses of new web technologies in the classroom. In addition to weblogs, tagging and podcasting, educators in all disciplines are increasingly using applications such as Flickr (most obviously for art and photography courses) and MySpace (again, most obviously but not restricted to music and music technology courses). In recognition of the excellent work currently being demonstrated in the 16+ sector in this area, AoC NILTA are introducing a new award to their long standing award programme, *Innovation in the use of emerging technologies to enhance and improve the student experience*.

What's changed?

The internet provides opportunities and spaces for socialising which are accessible, practical and enjoyable alternatives to offline spaces and both offline and other electronic activities. The proliferation of social networking sites enable users of all abilities to easily personalise web pages, interact with friends and strangers, and to try out identities. For many people, spending time online, whether working, researching, socialising, and shopping, alone or with others via social networking, instant messaging, online conferencing or with voice over internet protocols such as [Skype](#), is now a common feature of their everyday life. The internet is no longer a place to just go and look at things – it's now essentially a place to create, to interact and collaborate, and the proliferation of social network applications are just one more way of facilitating this.

While the internet can appear to be a neutral, private, and safe imaginary space, especially to a young person accessing sites from the security of their own bedroom, the distinction between online and offline space is a blurred one, and there are plenty of examples, both positive and negative, of the overlapping consequences of actions in one space on the other. Like every other space in the world, the internet is neither neutral nor free of risk.

Teachers and parents are often far behind young people when it comes to navigating and interacting with the online world. Not understanding what they are doing online makes it difficult understand and share online experiences. Conversely, young people often lack the critical skills and resources which would give them greater control over their own online dealings and the confidence to effectively disclose when things go wrong. AoC NILTA are clear that using the internet also entails responsibility – online bullying and the malicious appropriation of identity are areas that cannot be addressed if you don't know what young people are doing online and you not familiar with what is possible.

The Internet increases the access predatory child sexual abusers have to children. Social Networking sites are designed to make contact between users simple. Young people using these sites often feel very secure in their online interactions – conversations taking place online promote a sense of control, particularly if these take place in the security of a young person's own home or space. While the benefits of the relative anonymity of online and electronic environments are well understood within education – these environments can support and facilitate students who may be less confident in off line situations – they can be used by people who are trying to establish relationships in order to sexually abuse young people.

There are also documented cases where abusers have persuaded young people to expose themselves, or to pose inappropriately, via webcam.

Images of sexual abuse are also widely circulated and reproduced electronically, instances of which may remain online for an undetermined length of time. Knowledge of the continued existence of images is an additional and weighty burden for people who have been sexually abused.

What hasn't changed?

Child sexual abuse is a wide-spread, entrenched social problem which predates and supersedes abuse occurring on or facilitated through the internet. Research shows that the majority of child sexual abuse is not disclosed or acknowledged until the victim reaches adulthood, and never gets reported to the authorities. Statistically, far more sexual abuse is perpetrated by family members or by trusted others than by predatory strangers. Children who are currently or have previously been abused are also going to be amongst the most vulnerable populations when it comes to interactions with online abusers. It is important therefore to contextualise child sexual abuse which is facilitated online within the wider context of child sexual abuse – educating and equipping young people about all forms of sexual abuse and providing them with safe, effective reporting procedures.

Alternative approaches

The UK's [Child Exploitation and Online Protection](#) (CEOP) Centre is affiliated to the [Serious Organised Crime Agency](#) (SOCA), and recently ran a series of workshops which examined the hugely popular and ever increasing presence of social networking sites. In particular, the event included a tour of a range of sites and input from legal professionals and the police force on the ways in which child sexual abusers are using online community sites to make contact with children.

The organisers took a praiseworthy approach – focusing on a balanced definition of and introduction to the appeal, benefits and pervasiveness of social networking, alongside an outline of the ways in which sexual abusers are making use of new community networks. The emphasis was on current and future ways in which CEOP can support adults and young people in working together to promote the safe enjoyment of the internet – including knowing what to do to keep yourself and others safe online.

How can educational institutions and professionals make the internet a safer place for young people?

CEOP provides advice and reporting procedures for young people concerning child sexual abuse. AoC NILTA also facilitates the 16+ Working Group on e-Safety, and is committed to supporting member organisations in their discussion and implementation of e-safety strategy. [AoC NILTA firmly agree with this statement](#)

[made by Henry Jenkins, co-director of the Comparative Media Studies Program at MIT, in a recent interview:](#)

“As a society, we are at a moment of transition when the most important social relationships may no longer be restricted to those we conduct face to face with people in our own immediate surroundings but may also include a large number of relationships which are conducted over vast geographic distances. Over the past decade or so, we have been learning how to live in communities which are grassroots but not necessarily geographically local. We are learning how to interact across multiple communities and negotiate with diverse norms. These networking skills are increasingly important to all aspects of our lives. Social networking services are more and more being deployed as professional tools, extending the sets of contacts that people can tap in their work lives. It is thus not surprising that such tools are also part of the social lives of our teens. Just as youth in a hunting society play with bows and arrows, youth in an information society play with information and social networks. Our schools so far do a rather poor job of helping teens acquire the skills they need in order to participate within that information society. For starters, most adult jobs today involve a high degree of collaboration, yet we still focus our schools on training autonomous learners. Rather than shutting kids off from social network tools, we should be teaching them how to exploit their potentials and mitigate their risks”

[The UK Government’s recent FE White Paper](#) refers to the need for learners to become expert learners and for staff to be able to encourage and develop this as a core part of the learning process. It does not however make reference to the fact that digital literacy for our learners and staff is a key element of this. Many young learners are already at an advanced stage of digital skills and will come into Further Education with a mindset / skill set that will naturally assume the use of e-skills as part of their learning process.

We are concerned that this is not recognised as part of the learner need and therefore as integral to any strategy for meeting learner needs. Teachers need to recognise that digital skills may not equate to digital literacy; learners may be confident but lack the critical skills to support their own learning and future careers.

AoC NILTA sees discussions about definitions of privacy, responsibility and consequence as critical to digital literacy. What is and isn’t OK to put on the web? What are the possible consequences of disclosing information? These are discussions that need to be taking place. Preventing young people from visiting sites is no substitute for, and is detrimental to, developing a whole-institution culture of education for e-safety and an environment where concerns can be raised.

AoC NILTA recognises the educational value of social network programmes. Social network tools can be cost effective, engaging and pedagogically powerful tools for educators.

The internet offers unrivalled and sometimes otherwise unavailable opportunities for collaboration and participation at local, national and global levels. Increasingly learners are part of global communities sharing culture and language. The internet can expand the boundaries of the classroom into a truly global context. AoC NILTA sees the place of debates around the use of new social technologies as a key strand within effective Citizenship skills and education.

Further reading:

Text of the "Deleting Online Predators Act of 2006" (PDF)

<http://www.politechbot.com/docs/fitzpatrick.social.networking.051006.pdf>

Henry Jenkins and danah boyd in discussion: MySpace and Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA)

<http://www.danah.org/papers/MySpaceDOPA.html>

Testimony before the subcommittee on telecommunications and the internet of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, Beth Yoke Executive Director, Young Adult Library Services Association.

http://www.ala.org/ala/washoff/WOissues/techinttele/DOPA_testimony.pdf

Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre

<http://www.ceop.gov.uk/>

The 16+ e-Safety working group is facilitated for and on behalf of AoC NILTA members and partners by Josie Fraser, ICT and e-Learning Development Officer.