

Generation Web

Part 4: The Dangers of the Internet

Nick Sharp

The internet is everywhere for young people, and now I want to talk about its dark side. Here are four dangers that it poses.

Privacy

We need to protect our personal information. Why? Witness this comment to a BBC discussion forum:

James Rigby: *"If you get hold of someone's email address, ...[and]... enter it into the search feature of Facebook, ... more than half the time you'll be able to find the email address owner's full name. If they've not locked down their Facebook account, you can see their status updates, friends, and information such as their date of birth. Perhaps one of their status updates mentions a problem they've had with their bank and when they're going on holiday. Perhaps one of their friends is their mother, who mentions her maiden name. So you now have their full name, date of birth, mother's maiden name, when they're away from home and perhaps other information such as their pet's name. All useful information for those with devious intentions."*

And as technology progresses and we have more and more devices and places we store information, it will get worse and worse. I work in computer security and am aware of the risks and what to do about them. Among my friends, I know of no one else who has anything close to an understanding of the issues."

We'd never go out leaving our house unlocked and our valuables on show, but somehow our danger sensors don't kick in where the internet is concerned. Young people are usually less likely to take precautions and need to learn about the risks they run.

Pornography

I'll start this section with a provocative statement. As a society we have delegated sex education to the porn

industry. I wonder if you think they're doing a good job?

The internet has done the pornography industry a huge service by removing barriers. A generation ago, pornography could best be found on the top shelf at the newsagent. Now, you can shut the door of your room, switch on the computer and be three clicks away from anything you care to find.

Porn is an addictive drug, and as with all drugs, tolerance develops, meaning that a higher dose is necessary as time passes. Increasingly hard-core images are necessary to stimulate, and one's normal sexual response becomes increasingly dysfunctional. Some people seek out more and more bizarre sexual images, others become fixated on images of children, and can be sucked into the criminal world of paedophilia.

Statistics suggest that approximately 12% of all websites offer some sort of pornography and that 70% of men under 24 browse these sites. The rise of porn is reflected in our society which increasingly allows sexual imagery, images of perfect bodies, frank discussions about sex to be accessible to all ages.

Now, imagine you are a pubescent teenage boy, full of questions about sex. Who are you going to ask? Your parents? Not likely! Your friends - maybe, but it's hard to admit you don't know it all already. I know! What about the internet?

More worryingly, it starts younger than that. According to Symantec (producers of internet filtering software), the top 5 search terms for children seven years of age and under are:

1. YouTube
2. Google
3. Facebook
4. Porn
5. Club Penguin (a Disney site for children)

All Saints Alive

Cyberbullying

A group of friends discover the Facebook login details of a schoolmate. One of them has snapped a picture of him coming out of the school showers. For a laugh one night, they log in to his Facebook page, rewrite his profile and post the naked picture of him. Next day at school they tell the whole form to take a look.

Far-fetched? A recent survey suggested that 1 in 4 under 19's attempt to hack in to their friends' Facebook pages – mainly by attempting to guess their password.

A recent online habit is sexting – sending indecent images by text message or bluetooth. It starts as fun, but can swiftly be exploited and turned against you. What do you do if you're in a culture where you're pressured to join in?

With what I might call "normal" bullying, at least you could get away from the bullies at home. But if the medium is your mobile, then the bullying follows you everywhere you take your phone.

Grooming

Last year there were on average 60 sex offences reported to the police every day. Like the porn industry, people who want to abuse children are finding the internet to be a gift.

By chatting online, inventing fake IDs and researching the interests of their targets, paedophiles can make themselves sound believable and attractive. They will go to almost infinite lengths to build up a relationship with someone, before instigating a meeting in person. At each stage, they build in safeguards to make it hard for the young person to tell others, to make them place their trust in a person they have never met in the flesh, and to create a relationship that feels more strong and authentic than real life friendships.

Online relationships feel more intimate and authentic than real life ones. I don't know why, but this is what many young people say. Many would rather trust online friends than real ones. Again, our danger instincts are silent.

Conclusion

We must never think that the internet is an innocent play garden. It's no different from the real world. It has all sorts of people on it, with good and bad intentions. Parents dare not use it as an electronic babysitter. We know how to take care when crossing the road, and we need to teach ourselves to take care when cross the information superhighway too.

Harvest Moon

The harvest moon gives out a special glow
 At this time farmers wish this light to grow
 Into a magnificent beaming light
 This helps get our crops in, it is a sheer delight
 When the harvest is gathered in
 Then a wondrous party will begin.
 It goes on for hours galore
 Merriment continues, it is never a bore
 Bur rather romance is on young people's minds
 The music and the moonlight makes couple bind
 Before they realise it they make a troth
 Let us hope it develops into a wonderful growth
 Of a timeless love affair with life
 They remain wed with little strife.
 One cannot explain the beauty of harvest light
 You can be entranced, it shines so bright
 It is the height of the summer season
 We are especially joyful then, this may be the reason
 Of a wonderful enchantment, our spirits raised high
 We want these feelings to go on
 And never bid them goodbye

Mollie Day

