

Can we trust industry to put children's interests first? New Network Level Porn Filters Fail to Protect Children

In 2013 the Prime Minister announced that an agreement had been reached with the UK's 'Big Four' Internet Service Providers (BT, Sky, TalkTalk and Virgin) to offer all broadband customers the option of a network level family-friendly filter. This was to be rolled out to all new customers by the end of 2013 and all existing broadband customers by the end of 2014.

- BT introduced its network level filter, BT Parental Controls, on 13th December 2013.
- Sky introduced its network level Sky Broadband Shield on 14th November 2013
- TalkTalk, has been offering network-level content filtering to subscribers since May 2011 through its HomeSafe system.
- Virgin has yet to provide a network level filter but it has announced network level filtering will be available in early 2014.

In February 2014 Mediawatch-UK tested the network level filters for efficacy. Using search engines Google, Bing and Yahoo, researchers tried to access pornography using the search term 'porn' on networks filtered by BT Parental Controls, Sky Broadband Shield and TalkTalk's HomeSafe.



In each case a web search for the word 'porn' produced a list of search results including the most popular pornographic sites. However, it was not possible to click through to these sites as, in every case, the network filter produced a flash page to say that network settings prevented access to the sites.

However, an image search for the word 'porn' produced a gallery of hardcore pornographic images. A curious child searching for 'porn' would be able to find more than enough material using a basic image search without having to visit the blocked sites themselves.

Continued on page 2, column 2

The Legacy continues...



2014 is a landmark year for Mediawatch-UK. It is 50 years since Mary Whitehouse issued her call to arms at Birmingham Town hall in 1964 and we will be marking the occasion with a series of initiatives. As you can see we have adopted a new logo for our anniversary year which we hope will remind people of our longevity and the continued support for our campaign.

Every other day this year we are tweeting a quote from Mary Whitehouse's writing. It is ironic that much of what we know about her views has come to us filtered by the media itself. This is an opportunity to hear Mary Whitehouse in her own words taken from the books she wrote during her lifetime. I think many people will find it quite surprising.



You can follow the initiative on Twitter @MrsMWhitehouse



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Our dedicated website marywhitehouse.com

Letter from the Director



Much has been written about the merits or otherwise of playing video games – particularly those of a violent nature. Critics claim that games are addictive and can foster an obsession with killing and death whilst supporters argue that they improve visual, coordination and reasoning skills and can provide a safe outlet for aggression.

Some new research from Canada has recently been published which considers the link between the types of video games teens play, how long they play them, and their levels of moral reasoning; also their ability to take the perspective of others into account.

Researchers surveyed 13 and 14 year olds of both genders; they were questioned about their gaming habits and patterns and were assessed to gauge their stage of moral development using an established scale.

Previous studies have suggested that a person's moral judgement goes through four phases as they grow from childhood and enter adulthood. By the age of 13 or 14 young people should be entering the third stage, and be able to empathise with others and take their perspective into account.

However this latest study found that this stage appeared to be delayed in teenagers who regularly played violent video games. Hours spent playing violent video games was effectively stunting teenagers' emotional growth. Interestingly, there was no correlation between the amount of time adolescents reported playing non-violent video games and their moral reasoning levels.

Researcher Mirjana Bajovic said: 'Exposure to violence in video games may influence the development of moral reasoning because violence is not only presented as acceptable but is also justified and rewarded. Spending too much time within the virtual world of violence may prevent (gamers) from getting involved in different positive social experiences in real life, and in developing a positive sense of what is right and wrong.'

Debates on violent video games often get stuck at 'do they cause violent crime?' but as this study shows that, there are other more subtle outcomes which are also of concern. ■

Vivienne Pattison, Director

Continued from page 1

These new network level filters, which have been welcomed by parents, are clearly failing at the first hurdle. Whilst filtering is by no means the whole solution to online child protection it is an important tool, and parents who are using filters trust that they are fit for purpose and provide an effective level of protection for their children. Sadly this is not the case.

Last year Mediawatch-UK research found that Tesco Mobile, a leading mobile phone operator, is not automatically filtering adult content for new mobile phone purchases despite the Prime Minister's assurances earlier this year. Blackberry was similarly exposed as ignoring self-regulatory codes in 2011.

Can the industry be trusted to put the interests of children first? Companies would take things rather more seriously if they were constrained by statute.

We welcome the efforts of the industry to help parents to protect their children but more needs to be done to provide parents with adequate tools to enable them to parent effectively. Clearly the main ISPs network level filters

are failing to provide adequate protection for children. We cannot rely on a voluntary code but need the law to change to ensure that children are protected online to the same extent that they are offline.

Baroness Howe's Online Safety Bill, currently before the House of Lords, would leave the Prime Minister's voluntary approach of self-regulation behind and enforce compliance with regard to child internet safety measures, including age-verified filtering, from all ISPs. ■



Self Regulation: a weak fix

The Government recently announced that it had worked with Internet Service Providers to come up with a voluntary industry agreement to protect children online and this represented a great step forward. However it can only be really effective if accompanied by robust age-verification for users which is sadly lacking from the industry's own proposals.

If we rely solely on self-regulation we will have no long-term security. It may be that under intense political and media pressure today the industry will get its house in order, but where will we be in 5, 10 or 20 years' time? If it is true, as the Prime Minister has said, that 'few things are more important than this,' why is it that we have laws on myriad eventualities but nothing in relation to one of the most important areas currently affecting us and our children?

We believe that self-regulation is not a long term solution and that statutory backing is needed. We have been supporting Baroness Howe's Online Safety Bill, which had its second reading in the House of Lords at the end of last year. The Bill, should it become law, would provide the statutory underpinning presently lacking.

However, Baroness Howe's Bill is a private member's bill and,



although it received the overwhelming support of all the peers that attended its second reading, the passage of such bills is notoriously precarious unless they are allocated government time. So, whilst the Bill goes through due process Baroness Howe put forward an amendment to the government's Children and Families Bill with very similar clauses to her original Bill.

The New Amendment was debated in the House of Lords on Tuesday 28th January. Sadly the amendment was not carried with 118 peers voting for it with 153 voting against.

An early vote was crucial to the success of the amendment and unfortunately this was scuppered by two last minute developments.

Firstly, the Commons decided to send the Lobbying Bill back to the Lords and secondly there was much debate on an extremely controversial sex education amendment which took a long time to debate.

Had the vote been earlier, the amendment would have been carried comfortably. It is deeply frustrating that at the end of the day this should come down to something as capricious as timing rather than the quality of arguments.

Although disappointing we should also take encouragement from the result. In her summing up Lady Howe said:

"We have debated these issues on many occasions and need to come to some resolution. On that basis, I wish to test the opinion of the House."

The closeness of the vote indeed shows the opinion of the House. The peers who voted for the amendment included Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrats and cross-benchers. Clearly this is an issue which transcends party boundaries and shows the strength of feeling on this issue. The government will have noted this and are likely to be watching very closely. In the words of one expert, speaking at a conference on child protection the day after the vote, 'it would only take another Tesco (see front page story) and they would have to legislate'. ■



Double standards at the BBC

if they work for the BBC why should they be? After all, every swearword and obscenity was used, some several times over, in this "afternoon" play, so I guess the BBC regards them as perfectly acceptable, including, I'm sure, in letters of complaint.'

However the BBC refused to accept his complaint because it considered the language of his letter 'unacceptably abusive or offensive'.

'When handling your complaint, we will treat you courteously and with respect' came the response. 'We expect you to show equal courtesy and respect towards our staff and reserve the right to discontinue correspondence if you do not.' The reply did say that, if Mr Harrow resubmitted his complaint 'using more acceptable language' it could be considered.

How ironic! The BBC are ready to transmit

words into our homes which their staff are not prepared to read.

When this case was taken up by a journalist from a national newspaper (without the offending words) he was told that listeners are 'accustomed to the use of realistic, at times challenging, language in the context of contemporary dramas'. Completely missing the thoughtful satire of the original complaint the Corporation said it understood that 'listeners make their complaints in colourful ways when they are angry. We think most people would appreciate there is a difference in how language is used in a fictional drama and how it is used in correspondence between real people.'

Perhaps the BBC does not consider that its listeners are real people? ■

Radio 4 listener Colin Harrow was not happy about the offensive language which littered the Radio 4 afternoon play on 21st January at 2.15pm. He considered it inappropriate for the early afternoon and so wrote a letter of complaint to the BBC. Mr Harrow decided to treat the Corporation as it had treated him and he opened his letter with the same words and similar tone to the broadcast to which he had listened.

He wrote: 'I hope whoever reads this is not offended by the language used so far, but then

Legacies

In recent years Mediawatch-UK has been indebted to members and supporters who have kindly arranged to leave us legacies. This income has enabled us to continue confidently with our most important work. Perhaps you would like to consider remembering us in this way when you write or amend your will.

Inappropriate in any circumstance

At the end of 2013 it came to light that Facebook had dropped its ban on clips showing extreme violence and was hosting a video depicting the decapitation of a Mexican woman.

This prompted a host of objections, including one from the Prime Minister who tweeted: "It's irresponsible of Facebook to post beheading videos, especially without a warning. They must explain their actions to worried parents."

The Australian Police Force complained and even members of Facebook's Safety Advisory Board expressed their dismay at this decision.

Responding to this reaction Facebook initially added a warning banner to the offending content but it eventually caved into the pressure and admitting it had been wrong to refuse to take down the beheading video and removed it altogether

However, rather than set a black and white policy on violent images, Facebook said it would make a determination about each post individually, allowing such videos to stay up as long as posters "condemn" the violence and warn viewers of the graphic nature of the content. But the content will be

removed if it is deemed to be shared for 'sadistic pleasure or to celebrate violence.'

The absurdity of allowing videos of beheadings while banning pictures of

'citizen journalism', enabling people drawing attention to horrible things to speak out about them, and yet the site is open to 13 year olds and we know that many, even younger, children are regular users.

Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and other social media sites are reluctant to be seen as news organisations or publishers. They want to be seen as nothing more than arenas for others and, indeed, social media is different.

Publishers are responsible for the content they publish and Facebook and the others don't want



Pan Xunbin / Shutterstock.com

nursing mothers is bad enough but the distinction between condemnation and glorification is not always so obvious.

As the Guardian pointed out: "a bit of lip-service condemnation would not be hard to construct for someone whose motive was altogether less benign." Besides, isn't it possible to condemn a decapitation without actually showing it? When the Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl was brutally murdered that way in 2002, news media around the world managed to denounce it without airing the video.

Facebook is proud of its contribution to

that level of responsibility: for one thing, maintaining standards costs money. But it's getting harder and harder to maintain the pretence that Facebook doesn't make editorial judgments, including ones that have serious consequences. It does – and it has made a very bad one. ■

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