Online Safety and Technology Working Group:

Report of the subcommittee on Internet safety education

To understand how industry, schools, non-profits and government can best provide Internet safety education, we must first grapple with what it is we’re educating about and then tackle how to go about the business of educating. And to do that we need to understand the risks and the way youth actually use the Internet and the social media they access through computers, mobile phones, game consoles and other devices.

A lot has changed since the last major congressionally mandated look at Internet safety. When the Commission on Online Child Protection (COPA) issued its Report to Congress in 2000, there were no social networking sites, cell phones were pretty much limited to making phone calls and the primary perceived risks associated with the Internet were access to pornography and other inappropriate material and the fear of adult predators using the Net to entrap our children. In 2000, “place the computer in a central area of the house” was good advice. But that was before Netbooks, tablets, web enabled smart phones, Wi-Fi and wide-area wireless networks.

There have also been profound changes in the way young people use technology. In the ensuing decade, young people’s use of the Net has shifted away from being mostly consumers of information to becoming active participants. Social networking and video sites have empowered young people not only to shape their own lives but have a direct impact on the media landscape that affects themselves, their peers and adults as well. In February, 2010, the Pew Internet & American Life Project reported1 that “73% of wired American teens now use social networking websites,” up from 55% two years earlier.

Young people have also gravitated toward mobile devices enabling them to do far more than talk. A 2010 Nielsen study2 on teen use of text messaging found that American teens send and receive an average of 3,146 text messages a month.

Predator danger

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1 Pew Internet & American Life Project: Social Media and Young Adults (http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Social-Media-and-Young-Adults.aspx)
Knowing that young people spend a considerable amount of time “hanging out” online, many caring adults – including elected officials – naturally worry that they are at risk from predators that might in some way harm them. And, indeed, there are examples of sting operations by law enforcement (and famously even TV crews) that have been successful in exposing adult “predators” who have made online sexual advances to undercover officers and other adults posing as children and teens. To the extent that young people have received an unwanted sexual solicitations online, data from a 2000 DOJ-funded study and a 2006 follow-up from the Crimes Against Children Research Center (CACRC) at the University of New Hampshire concluded that “youth identify most sexual solicitors as being other adolescents.”

That is not to say that unwanted solicitations, whether from an adult or a minor, can’t have serious consequences, but studies – including some funded by the U.S. Department of Justice – have shown that the statistical probability of a young person being physically assaulted by an adult who they first met online is extremely low.

In a report published in the February/March 2008 issue of *American Psychologist*\(^3\), researchers from CACRC found that “adolescents’ use of popular social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook do not appear to increase their risk of being victimized by online predators. Rather, it is risky online interactions such as talking online about sex to unknown people that increases vulnerability, according to the researchers.”

After reviewing peer-reviewed studies, the Berkman Center’s Internet Safety Technical Task Force\(^4\) (the “Task Force”) last year found that “cases [of adult to child sexual encounters on social networks] typically involved post-pubescent youth who were aware that they were meeting an adult male for the purpose of engaging in sexual activity.” The Task Force also concluded that “the risk profile for the use of different genres of social media depends on the type of risk, common uses by minors, and the psychosocial makeup of minors who use them.” In its review of the youth-risk literature, the Task Force’s Research Advisory Board, made up of distinguished scholars and experts in the field of youth safety, concluded, “Youth identify most sexual solicitors as being other adolescents (48%; 43%) or young adults between the ages of 18 and 21 (20%; 30%) and that youth typically ignore or deflect solicitations without experiencing distress.”

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Cyberbullying

What the Task Force and many researchers did find was that “bullying and harassment, most often by peers, are the most frequent threats that minors face, both online and offline.”

“Cyberbullying, as it is called when youth are bullied via computers or mobile phones, is real and is affecting a statistically significant number of American youth. And it can start “as early as the 2nd grade for some children,” according to a study conducted by Rochester Institute of Technology.\(^5\)

The actual percentage is difficult to pin down, but a 2008 Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Electronic Media and Youth Violence issue brief\(^6\) reported that “9% to 35% of young people say they have been the victim of electronic aggression.”

Among certain populations the problem is even worse. A study conducted at Iowa State University by Warren Blumenfeld and Robyn Cooper\(^7\) found that 54% of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth had been victims of cyberbullying within the past 30 days. Forty-five percent of the respondents “reported feeling depressed as a result of being cyberbullied,” according to the study’s authors. Thirty-eight percent felt embarrassed, and 28% felt anxious about attending school. The authors reported that “more than a quarter (26%) had suicidal thoughts.”

Not all aggressive behavior rises to the level of bullying

The Centers for Disease Control defined electronic aggression as “any type of harassment or bullying (teasing, telling lies, making fun of someone, making rude or mean comments, spreading rumors,

or making threatening or aggressive comments) that occurs through email, a chat room, instant messaging, a website (including blogs), or text messaging.” This is a broader spectrum of behavior than researchers’ definition of cyberbullying, which generally refers to unwanted aggression that is repeated over time with an imbalance of power between the perpetrator(s) and the victim (see also the Journal of Adolescent Health, August 2007.

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\(^7\) Iowa State researchers publish national study on cyberbullying of LGBT and allied youths (http://www.news.iastate.edu/news/2010/mar/cyberbullying)
Others define it as repeated unwanted harassment, or a one-time serious threat of bodily harm such as “I will kill you!”, which mirrors many state harassment law approaches.

Cyberbullying is basically the same as real-world bullying, though it has elements that don’t exist in the physical world such as anonymity, the ability to impersonate the victim, follow the victim home, embarrass the victim in front of an unseen (and potentially vast) online audience and persist online over a long period of time. Also, cyberbullying is typically psychological rather than physical and it’s possible for the bully to remain anonymous. But there is often a link between cyberbullying and real-world bullying. In a 2008 cyberbullying study of middle school students conducted by Sameer Hinduja and Justin Patchin, 82% said that the person who bullied them via technology was either from their school (26.5%), a friend (21.1%), an ex-friend (20%) or an ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend (14.1%).

A 2009 study carried out by Harris Interactive on behalf of Cox Communications in partnership with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and John Walsh found that approximately 19% of teens say they’ve been cyberbullied online or via text message and that 10% say they’ve cyberbullied someone else. The Cox study defined cyberbullying as “harassment, embarrassment, or threats online or by text message,” which is actually more consistent with the CDC’s definition of “electronic aggression” than with the classical definition of bullying.

While the study didn’t address the issue of cyberbullying, there is evidence that overall physical bullying is on the decline. Writing in the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, David Finkelhor, Heather Turner, Richard Ormrod, and Sherry Hamby found that 15% of youth (ages 2-17) reported that they were physically bullied in 2008. The good news is that that percentage went down from 22% in 2003. The study also found that the percentage reporting a sexual assault decreased from 3.3% to 2%. Lead author Finkelhor noted that declines in bullying and sexual assault and that these problems have been aggressively targeted by school programs and other prevention efforts in recent years. “This suggests that some of the decline may be the fruits of those programs,” he said.

“Sexting”

There is a lot of concern about young people using cell phones and computers to distribute naked or sexually suggestive pictures of themselves, a practice that recently came to be

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8 Does Online Harassment Constitute Bullying? An Exploration Of Online Harassment by Known Peers and Online-Only Contacts (http://unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV172.pdf)
9 Cyber Bullying Research Center (http://www.cyberbullying.us/research.php)
known as “sexting.” Estimates of the extent of the problem have varied widely, but a recent study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project\textsuperscript{12} “found that 4\% of cell-owning teens ages 12-17 say they have sent sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images or videos of themselves to someone else via text messaging.” Fifteen percent of young respondents “say they have received such images of someone they know via text message.”

While 4\% who admit having sent a “sext” is still a large number, it’s far from the 20\% figure reported in a less rigorous 2009 study that prompted a major news website to write in a headline, “Sexting Shockingly Common Among Teens.\textsuperscript{13}”

As we look at the sexting data, it’s important to try to view the issue from the perspective of teens. There are certainly teens who have been strongly affected by sexting. \textit{Sexting in America}, a documentary\textsuperscript{14} created for MTV’s A Thin Line Campaign in February, 2010 depicted sexting’s impact on two teens. One teen named Ally was extremely distraught after a picture she sent to an ex-boyfriend was distributed all over school. Another teen, Philip Albert, is suffering the legal consequences of having sent out naked pictures of his 16-year-old girlfriend in a fit of anger in the middle of the night. She took and sent him the photos when he was 17, but he distributed them a month after his 18th birthday, which resulted in criminal charges. He’s now on probation and, unless his lawyer is successful in getting the court to take him off the list, he could remain on the registered sex offender list until age 43. He told MTV that he was kicked out of college, can’t find work, and he can’t live with his father because his dad lives near a school.

\textbf{Consequences of sexting}

One interesting set of findings from that 2008 Cox study is that 90\% of youth who admitted that they “sent a sext” reported that nothing bad happened as a result. Two percent said that they got in trouble after the photo was forwarded to an “authority figure”; only 1\% said the photo was posted online; 2\% said the person they sent the photo to made fun of them; 2\% said the photo was forwarded to someone they didn’t want to see it; and 4\% said the person they sent the photo to threatened to send it to someone else. The study found that 14\% of “sexters” said they were caught by parents (9\%), a teacher (1\%), another authority figure (3\%) or someone else (3\%)

Though most incidents of sexting never make it to legal authorities and, even when they do, most police and prosecutors are using their discretion to deal with the cases without resorting to criminal prosecution, there have been some cases where minors have been

\textsuperscript{13} “Sexting Shockingly Common Among Teens” at CBSNews.com (http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/01/15/national/main4723161.shtml)
\textsuperscript{14} MTV Documentary: A Thin Line (http://www.athinline.org/)
arrested, tried and convicted of manufacturing, possessing and/or distributing illegal child pornography. Some States are addressing the issue by decriminalizing the voluntary taking, possession and consensual sharing of sexual or nude images between minors. Recently, some courts have addressed the use of child pornography and sex offender laws in sexting cases, chastising over-zealous prosecutorial actions.

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children’s Policy Statement on Sexting provides advice to law enforcement on what is and is not sexting and how to approach individual cases. “NCMEC,” according to the policy, “does not believe that a blanket policy of charging all youth with juvenile or criminal violations will remedy the problem of sexting.”

The Youth Online Safety Working Group (YOSWG) which consists of several law enforcement, child protection and education organizations and agencies, has developed an “Interdisciplinary Response to Youth Sexting” for educational professionals and law enforcement. The document recommends, among other things, that authorities “recognize possible causes of sexting within schools by examining school climate and any underlying behavioral issues” and that they “use discretion when determining legal actions.” YOSWG is also recommending prevention education programs for educators and law enforcement and is encouraging a “team approach” to “combat the problem of sexting.”

Inappropriate content

The report of our Sub-Committee on Parental Controls Technologies deals extensively with the issue of inappropriate content, but there is also an educational component to this issue. In addition to all of the child-friendly material online, there are some websites that contain material that most would agree can be harmful or at least disturbing to children.

These include sites that depict sexual content as well as those that encourage hate speech, violence or unsafe activities such as drinking, drug use or eating disorders. With some exceptions (such as child pornography, obscenity and sites that advocate violence against individuals), this material is constitutionally protected and any efforts to keep children from seeing it must be balanced with the rights of adults to produce and consume such material.

At its September meeting, the Working Group heard from Jessica Gonzales of the National Hispanic Media Coalition and Steve Sheinberg from the Anti-Defamation League about the impact of hate content on youth. Ms. Gonzales warned of the harmful impact of online

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16 “Interdisciplinary Response to Youths Sexting” (http://www.oakland.k12.mi.us/LinkClick.aspx?link=SafeSchools%2FInterdisciplinary+Response+to+Youths+Sexting.pdf&tabid=656&mid=3640)
“speech that induces encourages or otherwise legitimizes violence against particular groups of people, that ... truly crosses the line or dances very close to the line of unprotected speech.” Mr. Sheinberg agreed but observed (speaking for the ADL) that “We believe that the best antidote to hate, to hate speech is more speech – is good speech.”

While, in most cases, there is nothing government can do to take down such material, there are ways that government can help parents in their own efforts to both shield their children from such material and help their children more effectively deal with it when they do encounter it. This includes education on the availability and use of parental control tools and encouraging instruction in critical thinking and media literacy – helping children understand how to make good decisions when selecting material for consumption and processing material that they see. It also includes helping parents better understand the actual impact of inappropriate material, which varies greatly based on the material itself, the maturity of the child and the extent of exposure, for example occasional exposure versus obsessive interest in certain types of sexual content.

**Other risks**

There are other risks children face online. In his introduction to “A Broadband Plan for Children and Families”\(^\text{17}\) this March, Federal Communications Commission Chairman Julius Genachowski talked about “Harmful Websites,” pointing out that “35% of eating disorder patients visit pro-anorexia websites.” He also discussed distracted driving, citing data that “a quarter of U.S. teens with cell phones say they have texted while driving,” an activity that can clearly lead to death or serious injury. He also discussed “Inappropriate Advertising” that exposes young people to potentially unhealthy or inappropriate messages such as ads for male enhancement drugs or sugary foods. These, along with access to online pornography, hate sites, and many other problem areas related to the Information Age are a constant challenge for young people.

**Security risks and identity theft**

Young people, along with the rest of us, are also exposed to spam, malicious software, phishing attacks and other modern-day scourges that can invade their privacy, jeopardize the security of their computer and other devices and, in some cases, lead to financial loss, identity theft and damaged reputations. Contrary to what some people might think, children and teens are vulnerable to identity theft\(^\text{18}\) because their typically squeaky clean credit histories make them valuable targets. Young people need to understand how to protect themselves from online criminals and hackers not only by knowing how to use


protective tools like security software but by understanding “social engineering” – how bad actors can manipulate even savvy Net users into disclosing confidential information. Helping young people learn to protect themselves and their devices from criminals and deceptive social engineering practices can itself be a lesson in media literacy and online safety.

There is also the risk that a young person might do something that gets him or her in trouble with school authorities or the law. Regardless of other consequences, there can be legal or academic sanctions for a wide range of activities, including being depicted online drinking alcohol or illegally using drugs, being involved in gang activity, sexting, cyberbullying, using cell phones to cheat on exams and illegally downloading music and other media.

Further, there is the risk of over-use or obsessive use of technology that interferes with a young person’s other activities, including exercise, schoolwork, family time and in-person interaction with peers. Young people need to learn that everything has its time and place and that the inappropriate use of technology (such as texting at the dinner table, or updating their social-networking profile when they should be doing homework, sleeping, or playing outside) needs to be avoided. And adults need to think of how they are modeling this behavior in front of their own children and other youth.

There is the risk of loss of reputation. What we post online can live online forever and what may seem funny or appropriate at the time could turn out to be embarrassing later on. Youth need to understand how to set the privacy features of the services they use and understand that even with these tools in place, it’s possible for anything that’s posted online (even if they think it’s only for their friends) to be copied, stored or forwarded.

Finally, there is the risk of young people being denied access to technology and social media for a host of reasons ranging from financial obstacles, geographic isolation and attitudes and fears that cause adults to deny them access either at home or at school. For some youth, this could be the greatest risk of all because lack of access to technology correlates with lack of access to educational and job opportunities, health care information and participation in modern society.

**What we know about risk prevention**

It’s beyond the scope of this report to go into great detail about all youth risk prevention but there are some things we do know from researchers and risk-prevention practitioners. The first is that a “fear-based approach” is not an effective strategy. Referring to “scare
tactics” used in alcohol education projects, sociologist H. Wesley Perkins told the Yale Alumni Magazine that “traditional strategies have not changed behavior one percent.”\(^{19}\)

In 1986, Perkins and Alan Berkowitz published a paper which concluded that providing students with evidence that excessive drinking is not a “norm” among their peers had a better outcome than trying to scare them. The norms approach is also a more effective way to curtail bullying. In a paper presented at the 2008 National Conference on the Social Norms Approach, Perkins and David Craig found that “while bullying is substantial, it is not the norm. The most common (and erroneous) perception, however, is that the majority engage in and support such behavior.” The researchers found that the “perceptions of bullying behaviors are highly predictive of personal bullying behavior,” but that the “norm is not to bully, but only a minority know it.”\(^{20}\)

Based on this research, the commonly repeated mantra that cyberbullying is reaching “epidemic proportions” is counterproductive. Perhaps a better message is to remind youth that most kids don’t bully other kids (cyber or otherwise) and that those who do are exhibiting abnormal behavior. Craig and Perkins presented a series of posters used at middle schools with messages like “80% of Crystal Lake 6-8th grade students say students should not treat each other in a mean way, call others hurtful names or spread unkind stories about other students.”

The research also shows that most youth are remarkably capable of dealing with Internet problems. A 2008 study on the impact of parenting style and adolescent use of MySpace found that “For all Internet problems, the vast majority of MySpace teens either had appropriate reactions (telling the person to stop, blocking the person from the MySpace page, removing themselves from the situation by logging off, reporting the incident to an adult or to MySpace authorities) or ignored the behavior.”\(^{21}\)

The study also found that “parenting styles were strongly related to adolescent MySpace experiences, behaviors and attitudes.” Parents who engage with their children’s use of media in an “authoritative” manner (exerting authority while remaining responsive to their children) were more effective than those who were “authoritarian” or “neglectful.”

Further, there is some evidence that social networks can be protective in helping to shape and reinforce positive norms. In an online video\(^{22}\) describing the book *Connected: The Surprising Power of Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*, co-author James Fowler observes how social networks (real world or online) can influence behavior. “If your friend’s

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friend’s friend becomes obese it increases the likelihood of your becoming obese.” But it can also have a positive effect. “If your friend’s friend’s friend quits smoking then it will also have an impact on whether you’re going to quit smoking.”

Based on data from the Framingham Heart Study, the two authors found “an individual’s chance of becoming obese increased 57% if someone named as a friend became obese in the same time interval,” according to an article in the January 23, 2009 edition of Science.23

The same principle can apply to young people online. When he addressed the September, 2009 OSTWG meeting, USC media Professor Henry Jenkins pointed out how young people in online communities tend to have a positive impact on each others’ behavior through social norming. “Some of the fan cultures that I’ve studied,” he told the OSTWG meeting, “have incredibly ingrained ethics, ways of teaching, mutual support systems.”

Jenkins also talked about work he has done with the MacArthur Foundation that found that “kids who engage in participatory practices online also increase opportunities for civic engagement at about the same rate as being on the school newspaper, being on the debate team – the same sort of activities that have traditionally been enshrined as the birthplace of civic skills.”

In a 2009 video24 for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, USC visiting scholar and former Xerox PARC director John Seely Brown said it this way: “We have to get kids to play with knowledge.” Kids have to be able to “create, reflect and share,” and “in that sharing you start to build a whole new kind of culture because you begin to get a kind of peer-based learning ... where the kids can learn from each other as much as from the mentor or the authority figure.”

So, based on the research and the opinions of several experts, one of the biggest risks to children may be adults who try to shut down the informal learning involved in their use of Internet technologies at home or school.

**Prevention needs to be tailored to risks**

Different kids are susceptible to different risks and need different approaches to prevention and intervention. In 2009, the Internet Safety Technical Task Force concluded that not all youth are equally at risk. Youth with offline high risk profiles tend to be similarly at risk online.

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23 “Friendship as a Health Factor” in *Science* (http://jhfowler.ucsd.edu/science_friendship_as_a_health_factor.pdf)

This point was made very clearly at the September 2009 OSTWG meeting by Dr. Patricia Agatston, a counselor and prevention specialist with the Cobb County (GA) School District’s Prevention Intervention Center. She is also a trainer, technical assistant consultant for the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, and co-author of Cyber Bullying: Bullying in the Digital Age and cyberbullying curricula for grades 3-5 and 6-12.

At the OSTWG meeting, Dr. Agatston talked about how the Primary, Secondary and Tertiary models that are used in health-related prevention work need to be applied to youth online risk.

- **primary** prevention includes the basic skills, knowledge and behavioral information that all online kids need. Because most kids don’t take extraordinary risks, primary prevention is what should be used for the vast majority of youth.

- **Secondary** prevention applies to kids who are at somewhat higher risk such as kids who live in gang-infested neighborhoods or who have exhibited some early behaviors that are likely to correlate to risk.

- **tertiary** prevention and intervention is used with what are commonly called “high risk youth” who not only need special messaging but, likely, professional intervention with a psychologist or, in extreme cases, in a hospital setting.

Although this framework has been fully accepted by the Centers for Disease Control and other health agencies for prevention of physical diseases and other risks, such as drug and alcohol abuse, it’s rarely applied to Internet safety messages or bullying. But Dr. Agatston assured the Working Group that it can apply to online behaviors. “Some of the things that we look at with primary prevention are: What is it that’s going to help kids be in a safe environment and grow up safe and have the skills and education they need to make healthy choices?” While a lot of primary prevention does occur at school, it also takes place in the community, she told the group. “There are certainly things that are already going on right now where it fits, where we could infuse media literacy, digital citizenship, and online safety in all the appropriate areas in the school and in the classroom because that’s where kids spend most of their time, obviously, but primary prevention also takes place in the community.”

Also, as we have shown above, it is effective to involve peers, not just adults, in risk prevention and education. Social-norm education and peer-mentoring programs have had proven effectiveness in reducing youth risk. For example, Finland has a 38-year-old “peer-support” program that operates in 90% of its schools. Now including Net-safety lessons,

the program involves more than 10,000 middleschool-level “peer students” or mentors working with primary school students. The program – which was featured at the European Commission’s 2009 Safer Internet Forum – is designed to “increase social responsibility and secure a safe, enjoyable and supportive school year for all,” according to the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare in Finland and speaks to the view of U.S. psychologists and risk prevention specialists that, where schools are concerned, the most likely solution to cyberbullying is a “whole school” approach.26

**Online risk correlates to offline risk**

Dr. Agatston reinforced an important finding by the Berkman Online Safety Technical Task Force, which observed, “Minors who are most at risk in the offline world continue to be most at risk online.” The Berkman report cited research that found, “Female adolescents ages 14–17 receive the vast majority of solicitations (Wolak et al. 2006). Gender and age are not the only salient factor. Those experiencing difficulties offline, such as physical and sexual abuse, and those with other psychosocial problems are most at risk online (Mitchell, et al. 2007).”

Many of today’s Internet safety messages fail to take into consideration the fact that not all youth are equally at risk. The problem with this one-size approach is that the messages are not getting through to the very youth most in need of intervention. It is analogous to inoculating the entire population for a rare disease that most people are very unlikely to get while at the same time failing to inoculate the population that’s most at risk.

**How youth are using social media**

In addition to understanding the risks, it’s important to understand how young people use social media and technology. In *Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project*, researchers summarized the findings of the MacArthur Foundation’s five-year, $50 million digital media and learning initiative to “help determine how digital media are changing the way young people learn, play, socialize, and participate in civic life.” 27

The researchers found that, “Most youth use online networks to extend the friendships that they navigate in the familiar contexts of school, religious organizations, sports, and other local activities” and that “a smaller number of youth also use the online world to explore interests and find information that goes beyond what they have access to at school or in

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26 “Bullies: They can be stopped, but it takes a village,” by Yale University Prof. Alan Yazdin and Boston College Prof. Carlo Rotella [http://www.slate.com/id/2223976](http://www.slate.com/id/2223976)

27 “Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project” [http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/report](http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/report)
their local community.” Both these “friendship-driven” and “interest-driven” networks amount to informal learning environments where “youth are picking up basic social and technological skills they need to fully participate in contemporary society.” The researchers argue that “erecting barriers to participation deprives teens of access to these forms of learning” and that “youth could benefit from educators being more open to forms of experimentation and social exploration that are generally not characteristic of educational institutions.”

The implications of the MacArthur research are profound in that they demonstrate how young people have taken it upon themselves to create their own learning environments that, for the most part, are not supported, endorsed or even acknowledged by the formal learning environment called school.

“Unfortunately, many children are not learning effective digital or media literacy skills at home or at school,” FCC Chairman said in his presentation of the “Digital Opportunity: A Broadband Plan for Children and Families.” In fact, many parents and teachers tell us that they don’t sufficiently understand digital technology, much less know how to teach kids about how use it effectively.”

Tech educator and author Will Richardson calls it “the decoupling of education and school.” And the MacArthur researchers ask, “What would it mean to really exploit the potential of the learning opportunities available through online resources and networks?”

The question is not rhetorical nor is it unrelated to our topic of youth online safety. Now that so much media has a social or behavioral component, learning constructive behavior is part of learning the effective, enriching use of media. But schools’ liability fears and extensive filtering, in some cases, causes educators to abdicate their long-held responsibility of guiding and enriching young people’s experience with current media.

New-media literacy and citizenship are not just academically enriching, they are also protective in a social-media environment. A 2007 study in Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine found that “youth who engage in online aggressive behavior ... are more than twice as likely to report online interpersonal victimization” (Ybarra, et al). Unless new media are used in schools and within families, youth are on their own in figuring out the ethics, social norms, and civil behaviors that enable good citizenship in the online part of their media use and lives. We are not suggesting that schools allow kids to update social network profiles in class but rather that schools find ways to incorporate educational social-technology tools in the classroom to enhance learning and provide pre-K-12 educators with an opportunity to, in the process of teaching regular subjects, teach the

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29 “Online Behavior of youth who engage in self-harm provides clues for preventive intervention” (http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV160.pdf)
constructive, mindful use of social media enabled by digital citizenship and new-media-literacy training – using the media and technologies familiar and compelling to students.

By way of an analogy, imagine if there were no organized sports programs in schools or communities. Kids would still play “ball” in the streets, their backyards and in parks but they would have no formal training in rules, the ethics of fair play or appropriate ways to interact with teammates and opponents. Kids would make up the rules as they go along and would be deprived of all they learn now from coaches, PE teachers and other adults who mentor young athletes. In many ways, that’s exactly what is happening with teens’ use of social media. They’re playing, but there are very few coaches to help them avoid unsportsmanlike conduct and learn to slide home without skinning their knees.

The state of net safety education in the United States

Industry efforts in net safety education

In his testimony at our September meeting, Family Online Safety Institute CEO Stephen Balkam referred to industry’s role as “a multi-million dollar effort” for which “virtually all of the major players have set aside not just funds and resources but personnel and time and energy to try and get this issue right.” (FOSI is a Washington-based international Internet safety organization whose members include Internet, social networking and telecommunications companies.)

In addition to efforts in developing tools and education programs, Balkam reminded the Working Group about “the rules that companies develop, their terms of service, which are a critically important part of safety.” Balkam pointed out how some sites put messaging exactly where it needs to be. “One of the things I found fascinating in the discussion we just had was the remark that I got a safety message as I was leaving MySpace, or when I was using Hotmail, I was told that I was going to go to an insecure site.”

He also pointed out that “there has been a significant move away from a rather fear-based approach and [toward] using more ... research of actual harm.”

Balkam said there are still some challenges. “Some companies are rather disconnected from each other, sometimes acting both in isolation but also acting in a vacuum. We [companies] don’t have a coherent set of meta-messages from government, a ‘Smokey the Bear’ type of message or the seat belt campaigns upon which to anchor their own messages and tools.” And, in response to a question, he noted that there is sometimes a disconnect between a company’s messaging and the people who should be delivering those messages. He gave an example: “We live in Rockville [Md.], and in the town square, there are about four or five different cell phone shops. I just did a very random survey. I walked into each one and
virtually all of [the people working in the stores] weren’t aware that they had safety controls on their phones.”

All major social network sites offer some type of user education, and many provide financial support for non-profit organizations to extend that message beyond users to the general public. Some have brought cybersafety experts together to advise them or provide content for their sites and networks. This group does not have the resources to chronicle what every company is doing, but here are some examples from major social-network and Internet companies.

See Addendum B for details on how several companies are dealing with Internet safety education.