

(Notes for the FOSI Roundtable at the Googleplex, 9/17/08)

## Online safety as we know it is obsolete

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### I. Why obsolete?

**a.** Rooted in the ancient past - Web 1.0 - the Web of hyperlinked, static, one-to-many "content" and clunky discussion boards and chatrooms, with users as consumers/downloaders, and young users seen and referred to pervasively as potential victims. (Obviously we've moved on to a multiplatform, fixed and mobile highly user-produced environment, with users as full *participants*.)

**b.** Online safety 1.0 is dominated by lawyers and law enforcement people - well-meaning, of course - but experts in *crime* (many online-safety meetings for parents and students in schools are still given by police, ICAC members, FBI agents, etc.)

**c.** When crime is where expertise lies, criminals - predators - become the focus of all discussion, and fear underlies it. Yet we know now that probably less than one-tenth of 1% of teens are at risk of sexual exploitation as a result of any Internet activity (and even fewer children under 13), according to UNH's Crimes Against Children Research Center, and meanwhile the most common risk online kids face is peer harassment - *non-criminal* adolescent behavior.

**d.** The predator panic we've been experiencing in this country is not only unproductive but destructive to online kids' well-being because...

1. It causes parents to overreact, which breaks down parent-child communication and sends kids underground - minus the input of informed, caring adults.
2. It distracts parents from the real *opportunities*: to teach critical thinking, respect for privacy, ethics, and citizenship, what mitigates aggressive behavior online. [We need to present online activity as a fresh opp to teach kids useful lessons parents *have always taught* - the msg to parents being this is not rocket science, this is parenting.]

### II. What do we know about the current very portable, 24/7 social Web?

We know that:

a. ...young people make little distinction between online and offline and move constantly and fluidly between the two, with the focus more on the *activity* than on the device or location where it's occurring.

E.g., a London School of Economics study shows they're frustrated by having to fit the nuances and layers of privacy in their everyday social lives into the currently very limited settings of social-network sites. [As Jonathan Zittrain points out in *The Future of the Internet and How to Stop It*, we think too much in binaries - online/offline, public/private, bully/victim, always either one or the other and nothing in between in a reality with multiple shades of grey and perpetual motion between.]

b. ...the Internet has increasingly become a mirror of "real life" - what kids do online is not about technology, it's about life, child and adolescent development, functioning in community, learning social norms, doing the primary task of adolescence: risk assessment. And their online experiences are as individual as the way they conduct their social lives *offline*.

c. ...it's the young people at risk offline who are most at risk online, consequently expertise in at-risk prevention is essential to any discussion about online safety.

#### **We know that the 4 sources of risk are:**

a. Predators and bullies, yes (though care is needed in ref to "cyberbullying" now - see NFN, 9/19 <<http://www.netfamilynews.org/2008/09/cyberbullying-better-defined.html>>), but also...

b. ...*normal adolescent brain development* (the development of the pre-frontal cortex that isn't complete till everybody's early 20s - the impulse-control, "executive" part of the brain that understands cause and effect).

[It's helpful to keep in mind that part of what we're seeing online - all that risk assessment and identity exploration - is what has always been occurring with teens - we're just seeing more of it because the behavior is now so very public.]

c. ...*a volatile mix of normal adolescent brain development + self-destructive behavior* (e.g., cutting, substance abuse, eating disorders). We need to learn more about how the Internet reinforces self-destructive behavior and bring related expertise into the national discussion.

### **III. Where does that leave us?**

**First**, we can't simply lop off the "online" part, call it safety, and be done with it, because there *are* some unique factors the Internet brings to the party - as anonymizer, amplifier, perpetuator, and distribution channel of whatever's posted. [see interview with Danah Boyd, 1/07 <<http://www.alternet.org/story/46766/>>.]

**Second**, since we're probably stuck with the term "online safety," we'll have to work extra hard to educate the public that "online" has become a very broad, multi-device, anywhere & everywhere experience of life, and that "safety" is much broader than we've all been led to think so far (includes emotional well-being, reputation "safety," privacy, computer and phone security, etc.).

#### **IV. What should the "online safety" field look like?**

What I'm seeing is that the keys to online safety going forward look very much like the keys to well-being in general: critical thinking (about what's being uploaded as well as downloaded), personal ethics, media literacy, and digital citizenship. Young people's online environment is a participatory culture made up of countless interest communities. Their "online" experiences cross any previously imposed or imagined lines between devices, technologies, ethnic identities, or locations (household, school property, national borders).

We need to...

- Educate the public about what the risks really are and provide a balanced perspective.
- Communicate that youth are *participants* of the social Web and therefore key stakeholders in their own well-being and that of their friends and the community as a whole. (This will help mitigate fears fueled by the portraying of all online kids as potential victims and get thinking moving in a substantive, positive direction.)
- Promote *mindful* Internet use - critical thinking in terms of behavior toward others, and safety and privacy for self.
- Not verify ages but work together to teach children about disinhibition - helping them see that *human beings with feelings* are behind those avatars, text and IM messages, profile comments, and blog posts.
- Get experts in at-risk prevention, child development, psychology, pediatrics, social services, etc. into the online-safety discussion.
- Keep abreast of social-media research and disseminate its findings to the public.
- Acknowledge *youth* expertise and stay informed about how teens use technology and what technologies they use.
- Stay close to and learn about *educators' and parents'* needs and concerns and bring them and their interests to the discussion, as we try to do at [ConnectSafely.org](http://ConnectSafely.org).

- Seek support to establish a speakers' bureau - a list of experts who can speak to the main, adolescent development, part of youth online safety.
- Help establish an *international* code of best practices.

## Notes

- After 10.5 years of observation, the No. 1 question in my mind for "online safety" going forward is: **What messaging, tools, features, and modeling will best promote self-respectful, socially responsible behavior among youth online as well as offline?**
- A few passages noted in Zittrain's *The Future of the Internet*, toward promoting a culture of responsibility, users as stakeholders...

p. 152 We need "to create and demonstrate the tools and practices by which relevant people and institutions can help secure the Net themselves instead of waiting for someone else to do it."

p. 161 "Powerful norms that focus collaborators toward rather than against a commitment to the community are necessary. This is an emerging form of netizenship.... It is easy for Internet users to see themselves only as consumers.... With the right tools, users can also see themselves as participants...."

p. 127 A news story about conditions that foster safe, responsible behavior....

A **traffic mgt. experiment** in Drachten, Netherlands (pop. 45,000): The city removed all traffic signs, parking meters, and parking spaces. The only rules: 1) right of way in intersections and 2) parked cars blocking others will be towed.

**Result:** dramatic improvement in road safety. "Without signs to obey mechanically, people are forced to drive more mindfully, operating their cars with more care and attention to the surrounding circumstances. They communicate more with pedestrians, cyclists, and other drivers using hand signals and eye contact. They see other *drivers* rather than other *cars*." [Emphasis mine - seeing other *cars* is an example of disinhibition, what in essence dehumanizes the experience.]

Speaking about the experiment, a **traffic expert** was quoted in Germany's *Der Spiegel* newspaper as saying: "Having many rules strips us of the most important thing: the ability to be considerate. We're losing our capacity for socially responsible behavior. The

greater the number of prescriptions, the more people's sense of personal responsibility dwindles."

- *Basic difference between Webs 1.0 and 2.0: On Web 1.0 nobody knew if you were a dog. On today's Web, "everybody knows you're a dog!"* -- from one of Clive Thompson's sources in "Brave New World of Digital Intimacy," NYT Magazine, 9/5/08  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/07/magazine/07awareness-t.html>>