The paradoxical Internet – achieving positive empowerment and a safe environment

Speech by Nigel Williams, Chief Executive, Childnet International[1]

They say that a picture is worth a thousand words, so I would like to start with an image. For some of you this image will be familiar, as it is one that Childnet has used to try and sum up the potential of the Internet, and it appears on the home page of our web site. This picture is of Tommi, holding the world in his hands. Tommi was one of our junior judges in the Cable and Wireless Childnet Awards last year. He loves using the Internet for fun, for connecting with friends and for some homework too. Indeed, I think all of us would agree that this is what the Internet should be about – children, holding the world in their hands – a powerhouse for learning, creativity and fun.

But Tommi's picture also illustrates another point – Tommi is deaf and for him the Internet allows him to be in touch with other children on a level playing field. Indeed Tommi says himself "No one knows you are deaf online".

So what sort of web sites does Tommi like? He helped with the shortlisting of three sites for the individual category of the Childnet Awards earlier this year, and I think it is worth taking a brief look at them[2].

This is Matmice.com – a wonderful site put together by the three teenage Boyd sisters from Newcastle, New South Wales. They wanted to make it simple for kids to have their own web pages online, without any advertising, so they developed some simple tools to make that happen. When we first looked at their site 40,000 children had created their own pages. A year later there are over 200,000 individual users. Now that is what I call the positive empowerment of children using the Internet.

This site is called Froguts.com and it was put together by a teacher in Florida, Richard Hill to provide a free online step by step guide to frog dissection. You make the cuts and you peel back the skin. It's a lot less gruesome than it sounds, and children love it.

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[1] See www.childnet-int.org for further details
[2] See www.childnetawards.org for details of the awards program and links to all the winning sites over the last five years.

Tommi's particular favourite site was this one – Oriland.com which was put together by two Russian psychologists, to help children learn about origami. It has lots of easy to follow animated instructions.

These three sites illustrate all that is best about the web. All encourage participation by children, rather than simply staring at a screen. All are educational in a very unobtrusive way.

And yet sadly, that is not what the Internet is always like for children. I think we all know that there are negative sides to the Internet, that can get in the way of children's enjoyment, or at worst take it away all together.

In Childnet, we have summarised these dangers with three C's,

Content – everyone is familiar with pornography on the net, and often this gets quoted as parents' major concern. But there are also issues with inaccurate content – that may only mean that a school assignment gets a lower mark, but if it were inaccurate information about health issues like abortion or anorexia it could be life threatening.

Contact – the Internet potentially puts you in touch with millions of people worldwide. Most of these people are great to have contact with, especially if they share the same interests as you. But there are a few people who abuse the privilege of contact – a new form of bullying has emerged where children can send harassing e-mails or instant messages to their peers. Worst still, predatory adults with a sexual interest in children, see the Internet as a wonderful way of getting in touch with children. There have been cases in many countries of children being abused offline by adults they first met on the Internet. While these cases are very rare – they are devastating for the families involved.

Commerce – the Internet is hugely popular as a means of marketing to children in the 9 – 16 bracket. They are the online generation, and companies have the advantage of being able to get to them with messages, and collect information from them without having to go through their parents. In the USA the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act prevents companies from collecting information from children under 13 without parental permission. For most of the rest of the world there are few restrictions.

And all of this is about to get even more complicated – the Internet is fast moving to cell phones and mobile devices. In Japan it is already happening. Photographs can be sent from handset to handset. Instant messages can be received on the phone. Links to web sites can be sent. For many young people the mobile phone is more important to them than their computer. It is their personal communication device. These three C's of content, contact and commerce will be even more potent on the mobile phone.

So that then is the central paradox about which I want to speak. The Internet is such a powerful communication tool, and yet the very features that are so attractive for positive uses, are equally attractive for negative uses. Let me just highlight a few examples

Speed of communication and overcoming distance – I had a pen pal in Australia when I was a boy. It was such a frustrating experience. I posted a letter off and then each day waited for a reply, rushing to look at the post each morning. Of course it took months to get a reply. Today's pen pals can get a reply within hours – sometimes within seconds if their friend is online. But those same features mean that the people developing nasty Internet content can base themselves anywhere. They just need a server and Internet connection to do so.

Graphic richness of content – The froguts.com site I showed earlier was incredible in its graphic imagery, and dynamic use of video and multi-media tools. You can imagine how the same tools are used for less desirable ends.

Multiple communication methods – E-mail, messenger, chat, bulletin board messages, personal web sites, web cams, SMS text messages – there are so many ways we can be in touch with another. Teenagers love these multiple channels – and often use more than one at the same time. But these very same methods in the wrong hands allow a child to be "groomed" by an adult, or provide a tool for a war of bullying and harrassment.

How then do we respond to this double-edged sword? How do we ensure that children really are empowered to get the fantastic benefits of the Internet without being sidetracked or hurt by the dangers? These are the questions that led me to establish Childnet in the first place. I think we have found some approaches to answering the questions that are helpful, but we are still learning, still adapting our responses. Indeed, the deeper you go the more challenges you find. It is as if that central paradox is like a Russian doll, you think you have cracked it, and open the doll, and there is another one inside!

The first thing I think we need is *a sense of proportion*. Most children, most of the time, will have a great time online with few problems. But the paradox is that when things do go wrong, they can cause spectacular damage.

If we are alarmist or sensational, we will simply put parents in a panic and potentially prevent children from getting the benefit of the net. But equally, if we underplay or minimise the dangers, there may be an ineffective response, and children may be hurt. So we must have a **REALISTIC** response, that neither ignores nor overstates the dangers.

Research shows us that parents really are concerned about internet dangers, and much more so than they are about television. For example the ABA

commissioned study on Internet Use at Home in Australia[3] showed that 84%of parents thought using the Internet involved some risk – and this figure had actually risen since a similar survey in1999.The fears do exist and we have to respond to those fears.

We also need to recognize that developing children's Internet proficiency and providing them with enjoyable and interesting places to go online is, in and of itself, a safety strategy. That is why Childnet is so keen to promote the positive. We need kids with good skills doing great things online. If safety is reduced to a set of negative rules we have missed the point. In the UK the official education technology agency[4] is currently working on an internet proficiency certificate for 9-11 year olds, in which safety is woven into the syllabus.

When we try and develop realistic positive responses like this we will still face challenges. I would like to point to three paradoxes in particular that we will need to navigate:

- Parents' and children's view of the Internet and safety issues differs
- Children use technology in different ways in different environments
- How can we get attention for our safety messages without sensationalism

Let me deal with each of these in turn:

The Parent's v the Child's view

Most parents purchase a computer at home and get an internet connection out of a desire to help their children's education. This is a huge motivator for many parents – its about "keeping up with the Joneses". But for children and teenagers while they welcome using the computer for study, the thing they really like is the fun communication tools, the interactive games, the downloadable ring tones for their phone, the music…

Similarly, most parents buy mobile phones for their children so that they can use them like a very long dog leash, and give it a yank when they want to know where their children are, or so they can phone if they are stuck somewhere and need help. Children on the other hand see the phone as their personal communicator – to talk to who they like, when they like about what they like.

The implication of this paradox, is that we have to recognise that parents and children are different audiences and need different kinds of communication. Childnet recently prepared two leaflets which are being distributed in schools in the UK – the one for children is called *Helping your Parents be cool about the Internet*, and the other for parents is called *Keeping up with your Child On the.*

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[3] The Internet at Home ABA 2001 see http://www.aba.gov.au/internet/research/home/index.htm

[4] The British Educational Technology and Communications Agency www.becta.org.uk and specifically http://www.becta.org.uk/schools/smanagers/jul1101internet.html

Internet[5]. I think the very titles indicate that the approach is somewhat different in each leaflet, and yet the core message is similar.

We have already heard from Liz about the excellent work of the New Zealand Net Safe[6] organization. I would also like to highlight the work of the Parents' Advisory Group on the Internet in Singapore[7], who have been very successful in identifying the different needs of parents and children and responding to them – we will be hearing from Carmee and Bernard after lunch. But here in Australia there is also very good work going on, not only through our hosts NetAlert[8], but also with the ABA's dedicated online safety site – cybersmartkids.[9]

Most parents believe they are supervising their children effectively online. A survey[10] in the USA showed that 67% of parents say that someone else is in the room when their child is using the Internet. However, when you asked the **same children**, 78% said they used the Internet alone. This dichotomy in view is an important one. Parents don't like to admit that they are not involved with their children's technology use. Kids can be very concerned to try and keep their parents out of what they are doing. They simply want to avoid questions and hassle.

These differences between parents' and children's views and behaviour have been highlighted by recent research in the UK by a number of broadcasting bodies[11]. For example, the study found that there was a big difference between parents knowing about possible safety strategies like filtering products and actually using them. The study also found evidence for children finding ways of getting around or avoiding general parental instructions about Internet use.

The implication of this paradox is that we have to help build bridges between children and parents and especially help parents learn how they can talk to their children about the Internet.

One incredible story that came out of the National Academies' study of Children and pornography in the USA[12], was of a girl who was so worried that if her Mum

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[5] See www.kidsmart.org.uk for the text of these leaflets.

[6] See www.netsafe.org.nz

[7] See www.pagi.org.sg

[8] See www.netalert.net.au

[9] See www.cybersmartkids.com.au

[10] Penn, Schoen, and Berland Associates, 2000 *Web Savvy and Safety: How Kids and Parents Differ in What They Know, Whom They Trust.*
http://www.microsoft.com/presspass/press/2000/nov00/safetywebsitespr.asp see also Table 7.1 of the National Research Council Report , 2002, on *Youth, Pornography and the Internet*.
http://books.nap.edu/books/0309082749/html/index.html

[11] *Striking a Balance – the control of children's media consumption* a report undertaken for the British Broadcasting Corporation, Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Independent Television Commission see http://www.bsc.org.uk/publications.htm

[12] This story was anonymously given in evidence by the girl to the National Research Council study (ibid) page 7-2

knew what the Internet was really like, she would be stopped from using it. So the daughter set her technically illiterate mother up with an AOL account with the maximum safety settings and she (the daughter) held the master password. Thus the mother was happy, and the daughter was happy. But for how long… arrangements based on deceit tend to unravel. How much better if they could have had a good conversation about the net, and learnt together about safety strategies.

But this girl was not alone. The Girl Scout Research Institute undertook a study which found that amongst respondents "30% of girls had been sexually harassed in a chat room, but only 7% told their mothers or fathers about the harassment, most fearing their parents would over react and ban computer usage altogether"[13]

Another simple issue is that parent's like talk of safety and keeping kids safe. Children, especially as they move into adolescence hate it, They think safety means boredom, taking the edge off their fun, avoiding risks. Some years ago we did some research for the European Union on running internet safety awareness campaigns[14]. Our focus group research showed parents wanted any campaign to be headlined "SAFETY".

We have faced this problem each time we start a new safety initiative. Two years ago when we were launching our site about safety in Internet chat rooms, we had to register a domain address. We could have had chatsafe.com but we new teenagers would find that offputting. So we chose chatdanger.com[15] which we got criticised for by some in the industry as they said it was too negative. Our response, was that kids would look at it, and we have been proved right.

Children using Technology in different environments

A lot of internet safety effort is rightly put into the school environment. Schools need internet safety policies, they need to ensure adequate supervision of pupils, they need to think about filtering policies and so on. But the fact is that most kids are very well supervised in school and face little risk when using the net at school. Many schools either ban or simply don't use the really interactive products that bring the greatest risk of inappropriate contact. So you will find that many children are not using chat or messenger products at school.

Therein lies a dilemma. If schools are important and reliable places to promote internet safety, and yet the most risky internet products are not used in schools, how can you teach children safe use. This is further complicated by the fact that

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[13] Whitney Roban, 2002, *The Net Effect: Girls and New Media*, Girl Scout Research Institute, New York
http://www.girlscouts.org/about/PDFs/NetEffects.pdf
[14] See www.netaware.org for details of this research.
[15] See www.chatdanger.com

most adults, including parents and teachers, are not familiar with tools like chat and messenger. As a result they don't understand the benefits and the risks. Childnet's answer to this paradox, is not to avoid using schools for internet safety messages, but rather to find ways of communicating about these very issues in a school context[16]. We run seminars for teachers and parents. We take drama into schools to communicate to students and teachers about issues like stranger danger in chat. We have just started a new schools programme called net-detectives[17] which uses a bulletin board type environment that kids love, and help them work on online role plays including one about Internet safety. Thus we can use interactive technologies in a fun, secure and educational way.

We need to find imaginative ways of bridging this home - school gap.

My final challenge is about **the way we deliver our message**.

We need to reach a mass audience, but we have quite a challenging and subtle message to deliver. We are trying to balance a set of positives and negatives. We are trying to inform and educate rather than shock. These goals do not sit easily with the most pervasive media of our day – the television, radio and the popular press.

We have had to work through this in Childnet, and engage with these media outlets in a way that we believe is positive.

I suppose the best example is the story of the launch of chatdanger.com. This arose out of an incident where a young girl was contacted online, thought she had met the love of her life, he was a man of 32, she was 13. He persuaded her not to tell her parents, to meet secretly, and they had sex on three occasions before she told them. The parents contacted Childnet and asked us to get a message out to warn other parents and young people.

We chose to do this through the chatdanger web site, and decided to launch it to coincide with the sentencing of the adult predator. This ensured massive media attention. But it also gave us some control of our message. I could intone the mantra in front of the TV cameras to look at the web site. We wanted to turn a negative into a positive. We included on chatdanger examples of good uses of chat. We had links to Childnet award winning projects.

I would argue that we have to harness the media. I do not underestimate the challenge, but we need them to get real reach. Of course we should develop leaflets, web sites, and other resources. But they are only as good as the distribution strategy. It is not the quality of the resource that counts, but ensuring that a quality resource is in the right hands and used in the right way.

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[16] See www.kidsmart.org.uk for some details of these approaches.
[17] See www.net-detectives.org

In closing, I hope that I have begun to answer the central paradox posed in the title of this talk: "How we empower children for positive use of the net but keep them safe". I am passionate about the need for fun, creative and entertaining Internet use by and for kids, and I am confident that this can be achieved in a safe way.

The way I would focus the challenge we face is in relation to building trust. We need to build trust between the Internet industry and consumers; between the regulators and the regulated; and most especially between parents and children in homes where the Internet is being used.

Trust is not automatic. But it comes from both parents and children being well informed, about both the opportunities and dangers online, in a way appropriate to their different needs. Trust comes from parents being confident in talking with their children about the Internet. It comes from children knowing that their parents are being realistic, not sensational. Trust comes from giving practical steps that work, rather than a wish list.

All of us in this hall need to play our part in building trust. In that way we will navigate a path through the myriad of paradoxes that the Internet will continue to generate.

Thank you.