STRATEGY AND PRIORITIES FOR THE PROMOTION OF MEDIA LITERACY

RESPONSE TO OFCOM

FROM

CHILDNET INTERNATIONAL

Contents:

Section 1 – Childnet's Experience

Section 2 – Overarching Issues

Section 3 - Response to 10 Consultation Questions

Section 4 - Further Opportunities for Partnership

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SECTION 1 – INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Childnet International welcomes the opportunity to make a contribution to Ofcom's consultation process about its strategy and priorities for the promotion of media literacy. In this short document we seek to contribute to the debate by:

1) Outlining some of the experiences and insights Childnet has gained from working directly with children and young people in using new information communications technology .

2) Outlining four overarching issues in the strategy which we feel need strengthening and require further attention by Ofcom.

3) Making specific comments on the 10 consultation questions and seeking to give specific examples on the level of media skills needed amongst different groups.

Childnet welcomes the opportunity to work in partnership with Ofcom and hope that these points are useful as it seeks to provide leadership in the area of media literacy.

SECTION 2 - CHILDNET'S EXPERIENCE

I.   Childnet International is a registered charity established in the UK in 1995 with the mission to work with others "*to help make the Internet a great and safe place for children*. " During the last 9 years the organisation has made a significant impact both in the UK and internationally in promoting the interests of children using new information and communications technology. [1]

II. The organisation works with a range of partners including Government, industry, education sectors and parents' groups. It maintains a strong child-focus in its work by engaging directly with children and young people in its training and education programmes. Childnet also seeks to consult continually with young people and has set up processes by which it can have an ongoing dialogue with young people, for example its advisory panel which meets to help inform Childnet's work and programmes.[2]

III. As a small independent organisation, Childnet has been able to respond quickly to emerging issues relating to children and technology and over the last few years has created quality, award-winning and dynamic educational net-literacy programmes, that showcase and support young people who are using the Internet for good. We have also supported strategic policy and protection initiatives. For example Childnet;

⇨ Undertook the preparatory research for the EU Safer Internet Action Plan in 1999 on the best way to communicate Internet safety messages[3].

⇨ Developed an internationally renowned academy programme for young people who are using the Internet to benefit other children.[4]

⇨ Was the first organisation to produce a specific education and awareness resource about the dangers of Chatrooms with the launch of www.chatdanger.com in 2000.

⇨ Piloted innovative communication strategies for getting Internet safety messages out to young people by using drama, online role play, mouse mats, posters, interactive quizzes and online resources [5]

⇨ Produced simple advice leaflets for both parents and young people and todate has distributed over 1 million of these to schools in the UK.

⇨ Translated Internet education and awareness resources for speakers of Urdu, Punjabi and Hindi

⇨ Supported the UK Home Office Task Force on Child Protection on the Internet and contributed to a number of the Sub-Groups.

⇨ Worked with leading companies in the IT industry to produce high-quality education and awareness resources for their young customers[6]

⇨ Worked with Parents' Online DFES programme in the UK to write and produce the world's first interactive parents education and awareness resource on Internet safety issues.[7]

⇨ Anticipated the opportunities and dangers for children using new mobile technology with the world's first expert's conference in Japan in March 2003 and the publication of Children and Mobile Phones: an Agenda for Children" in 2004[8]

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[1] See www.childnet-int.org for full details of Childnet's work, history and links to its various programmes
[2] See http://www.childnet-int.org/about/networkers.aspx for details of Childnet's YP panel
[3] See Childnet's "netaware" report at http://www.childnet-int.org/publications/policy.aspx
[4] See Childnet's Academy programme which it runs in partnership with Cable & Wireless – see www.childnetacademy.org
[5] See www.net-detectives.org and www.kidsmart.org.uk both of which have won a total of 4 independent awards from industry and the media.
[6] For example Childnet worked with Microsoft on producing www.websafecrackerz.com a leading education and awareness resource for teenagers.
[7] See www.childnet-int.org/parents
[8] See www.childnet-int.org/publications/policy.aspx for a pdf copy of Childnet's Agenda document.

IV Childnet's approach of working in partnership to develop effective projects and policy responses has inspired others to respond in many parts of the world and the organisation is widely respected because it has sought at all times to take a balanced approach to the issues of children and technology. It does this by::

⇨ **PROMOTING THE POSITIVE** - Showcasing the inspirational ways in which children can use the Internet for good and developing both online and offline net-literacy education and awareness programmes for young people and parents.

As well as

⇨ **RESPONDING TO THE NEGATIVE** Contributing to strategic initiatives which help protect children online, working constructively with industry and initiating important policy responses and international co-operation.

Childnet is convinced that this balanced approach is crucial when looking at present and future media literacy needs. Indeed Childnet believes that one of the key strategies for ensuring that children and young people know how to use the new technologies safely is by actively promoting and inspiring them to create and produce their own media for their peers.

Childnet's Internet safety programme Kidsmart which is aimed at parents, teachers and children, has enabled us to create a bridge between safety education and Internet literacy. Kidsmart's outreach team go into schools on a weekly basis to teach children how to be SMART online and how to use the Internet in a positive and safe way. One of the key principles behind the SMART concept is that SMART use of the Internet can both help children keep safe (i.e not giving out personal information to strangers) as well as helping them to get the most out of the Internet (being able to recognise SPAM ,protect against viruses and know what is good about the Internet) In this sense safety and literacy are intimately linked.

SECTION 2 - OVERARCHING ISSUES

I.   The work which Childnet has undertaken with young people and parents, both in the UK and elsewhere (outlined in Section 1), has given Childnet a unique perspective. Before making comments directly on the 10 specific consultation questions, Childnet has identified 4 overarching points which we believe need strengthening in the Ofcom document and require further attention by Ofcom as it seeks to provide leadership and leverage to promote media literacy.

	1)CONSULTATION WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE Ofcom is right to focus on present and future media. Increasingly users of new interactive media will be today's children. However, the current Ofcom strategy says very little about the direct consultation and research among young people themselves. It is crucial that the research work that Ofcom undertakes as part of its strategy includes directly involving young people themselves who are using media and media applications which are very different from that of their parents and teachers. Today's children are using the new interactive media environments to create high quality content (as opposed to today's adults who largely consumed mass media as children, and had limited opportunities to produce and create for their peers). It is vital that emphasis is given to the way in which children and young people are increasingly the shapers for new media applications (for example SMS and instant messenger applications) and are a growing market segment for companies wanting to market new services. Future media literacy programmes will need to have a greater emphasis on supporting children and young people who are keen to produce their own entertainment and learning resources which are accessed and used by their peers globally.
	2) STRONGER EMPHASIS TO SAFETY IN USING MEDIA Childnet believe that user safety is integral to media literacy. The definition of media literacy is right to cover a range of skills including how to 'access, analyse, evaluate and produce communications'. Childnet would add that in order to do all those things it is imperative that the user knows how to do so safely, and this needs to be explicitly stated in the definition of media literacy. The issue of safety becomes more prominent for children and young people in interactive media, especially when accessing outside of the home or school where they are away from parental or teacher supervision.
	3) APPRECIATION OF THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS Whilst the consultation document does highlight the vital role that formal education plays in laying the foundations of media literacy, Childnet believes that not enough support is currently given to young people in schools about using the latest interactive media such as Internet or mobile internet. Although these are generally not used **in** schools, the proper use of them is very much becoming a life skill. This issue is increasingly being seen as vital, not least because schools have been one of the main drivers for children accessing the Internet at home (to do their homework etc) where they may doing so in a unprotected or unsupervised way. Schools are beginning to address safe and responsible use through the curriculum, but this continuity of learning between the learner's home and their educational institution is vital. Parents need greater help in understanding the issues and need support from schools whom they trust and have a relationship with, so they can play a greater role in supporting their children's safe use of ICT out of school.

4) **STRONGER EMPHASIS ON GLOBAL DIMENSION OF MEDIA USE, ACCESS AND INFLUENCE**

Childnet has always sought to work internationally because of the global nature of the Internet. Any strategy for the promotion of media literacy has to encompass an international dimension in terms of regulation, identifying good practice and delivering media literacy programmes. It is important that we are able to learn from initiatives taken and research under taken in other countries, as well as sharing UK initiatives and research with others working in this area around the world. By way of example, Childnet's own Net Detectives programme (www.net-detectives.org) has shown that a tried and tested and highly successful awareness raising program can be replicated in other countries. Media Awareness Network in Canada, have developed a successful campaign about new technologies see: http://www.bewebaware.org

SECTION 3 – RESPONSE TO SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

Question 1: What is your view of Ofcom's proposed definition of media literacy?

Childnet broadly agrees with the proposed holistic approach Ofcom is taking, in its emphasis on the need for critical thinking skills and the appreciation of future trends and the fast moving media landscape. However, Childnet believe that user safety is integral to media literacy. The definition of media literacy is right to cover a range of skills 'including how to access, analyse, evaluate and produce communications'. Childnet would add that in order to do all those things it is imperative that the user knows how to do so safely, and this needs to be explicitly stated in the definition of media literacy here.

The issue of safety and computer security does become more prominent in interactive media. The authenticating of online information implied by the words 'analyse' and 'evaluate' is one element of media literacy, but we also need to consider the personal safety issues which might arise through online contact with others. Examples of the ways in which understanding the safety issues impact on users ability to get the most out of interactive media are as follows:

Content: users to learn how to protect their families from harmful or illegal content.

Commercialism: users learn how to recognise and limit the damage of issues such as Spam and viruses.

Contact: users learn how to deal with manipulative /abusive individuals that they or their families may encounter online.

Since some of these experiences are common everyday experiences for citizens online, we suggest that adding safety to the definition will make it clearer to the public that media literacy is going to help address these issues.

> **Question 2: What do you consider to be the key role/s of media literacy in the UK?**

Education and awareness is a key role of media literacy in the UK. Whist there are considerable efforts being made by government, industry and relevant organizations to respond to Internet safety and security issues, the onus still remains with the user to keep themselves and their families safe and to know how to get the most out of interactive media. The role of education is particularly more important as access to the Internet diversifies (e.g mobile technologies), and the regulatory and technological responses to safety and security issues become more complex as a result. Media literacy should equip citizens with information, which will empower them to make safe choices on whichever device or technology they are using.

> **Question 3: Do you agree that each of the 3 proposed strands of work (Research, Connecting, Partnering & Signposting and Labelling) address an important element of the media literacy landscape?**

Childnet broadly agree that these three strands of work are key focus areas for Ofcom and would make the following observations:

Research – it is vital that this research includes young people and that specific research programmes are initiated amongst those who currently face greater barriers to accessing and understanding IT and new interactive services. It is also important that Ofcom ensure that existing relevant research, both nationally and internationally, be reviewed, evaluated and if appropriate built upon.

Connecting, partnering and signposting – it is vital that an international dimension is included here with appropriate signposting to international resources which can be adapted or replicated locally.

Signposting can offer a valuable resource to users looking for information, informing them where they can go to get what they want. This can be as simple as a calendar of events where citizens can find out about media literacy events in their area (a resource that currently does not exist), but it can also serve as a place where users can get guidance or be pointed to guidance on a range of media literacy issues, whether they be skills related, or regulatory. Parents in particular have a need for a central source of support, advice and help and Ofcom could add value by coordinating this via their website and providing a central place for signposting to all sources of help and guidance for citizens.

Labelling. There is no mention of self-labelling in the consultation paper and Childnet would encourage Ofcom to recognise the potential of a self-labelling approach in empowering users and helping to protect children. A self-labelling approach (and ICRA provide a model of this[7]) - whereby content providers self rate their content against an objective, monitored framework – could potentially offer the user another tool in the effort to control content accessible online.

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[7] The Internet Content Rating Association, www.icra.org..

> **Question 4: Are there any specific areas which you consider to be a priority that we have not considered here as part of our early media literacy work?**

As stated earlier, we would encourage Ofcom to consult with children as part of any research or implementation strategies, since they are invariably the experts in the areas of electronic media. Innovative media awareness campaigns are beginning to be introduced whereby children teach parents/adults and their peers. Further research and piloting of this approach should be encouraged.

The Internet is a global medium, therefore an awareness of global issues should be incorporated into the both the definition of media literacy, as well as Ofcom's response in terms of looking for best practice and also partners to deliver the new strategy.

> **Question 5: What do you think are the types and levels of media literacy skills necessary to enable citizen-consumers to effectively manage and enjoy the opportunities offered by new communication technologies? How do these differ for particular sectors of society?**

The types of skills necessary to understand and navigate Interactive media range from 'hands on' practical skills, to an awareness of ethical, legal and cultural issues.

1.Software skills

Parents: In the consultation paper, OFCOM outlines that it will "help producers of both hardware and software to focus clearly on the needs of the users and help them to produce tools which are effective and easy to use". Whilst basic software skills are essential for users, Childnet believe that of crucial importance here is information to the user. For example there are many different products available to users at present for filtering Internet content, users need information to help frame their expectations of any such software, they need to know that such software is a useful tool in helping to protect children from inappropriate content, but they are not 100% effective. Leaving a child on a computer unsupervised where there is filtering software installed will not ensure the child's safety, even against inappropriate content. They are useful tools but not solutions in themselves.

Users also need help in ascertaining which product to buy. Many parents find the choice of products confusing, and are unsure of which product to buy in order to protect their children. OFCOM would be helping enormously by supporting the development of a kitemark initiative for such products, and could go further by hosting and encouraging a consumer review of such products – see www.filterreview.com for a US example of this.

The ability use web development software so that users can publish on the Internet, to express ideas and opinions. Often the best way to learn about a medium is to engage in creating content for it.

2.Understanding Content

- The importance of understanding the value of your personal information, (email address, home address, telephone) to commercial companies and individuals, and know how to protect your privacy
- The ability to differentiate between genuine and 'scam' communications
- An appreciation of how technologies such as the Internet are both similar and different from other media, i.e. to appreciate the interactive anonymous nature of the Internet.
- The awareness of a broad range of uses of communications technologies, (e.g from research to voting online.)
- An understanding of the culture of the Internet, for example that it is global, and that it crosses regulatory and language boundaries.
- Understanding the workings and protocol of the Internet,e.g web addresses, links and search engines, which once understood will makes the medium much safer.

3. Ethical behaviour

- The ability to know how to behave appropriately online- What constitutes misuse and what the potential consequences of misuse can be.

4.Legal Issues – and how to get help:

- The ability to know what their rights are in protecting their families from inappropriate content and contact and commercialism, and who to go to report misuse, or if they want to get certain content removed.
- The appreciation that the responsibility for safety and security belongs primarily to the user, and not to rely on one solution.

Question 6: What do you see as being the key barriers to achieving appropriate levels of media literacy in the UK?

- The key barriers for adults are fear and lack of confidence based on lack of exposure and hands on experience using certain media (i.e. Internet)
- The speed at which new technologies are emerging and children adopt them is breath taking. How can adults keep up with that? Do they need to?
- Children's lack of literacy or understanding of the grammar of the Internet means that they can underestimate the risks or are not critical enough in what they consume and are unable to decode content. Often users learn skills related to software rather than understanding the content. This is an essential skill for children as they enter an increasingly networked and global world of work.

Question 7: Should any of the following groups with potentially particular needs in relation to media literacy feature as a priority for Ofcom's work in media literacy and why?

- Vulnerable children
- Vulnerable adults
- Disabled people

- Elderly people
- People on low income
- People in different parts of UK
- People from different ethnic communities
- People living in Rural areas
- People living in Urban areas

In relation to the groups outlined in the question, Childnet would seek to have a clearer understanding of the Ofcom definition of the term 'vulnerable'. Offline and online vulnerabilities can be different.

Media literacy in the UK should empower users, both adults and children, to exploit the technology to its positive potential and to their own advantage and to do so safely. The promise to explore barriers to greater media literacy in terms of access is an important aim of Ofcom. However, whilst it is important to find out who is excluded due to socio economic factors, it remains of utmost importance to get media literacy education to those who already have access and as recent research has illustrated, especially to include parents of children online. We would encourage Ofcom to be steered by the results of the 'UK Children Go Online' research[8], which clearly demonstrates that parents are a target group to be prioritized in terms of gaining confidence in their use of new ICT as well as their supervision of children.

> **Question 8:** Are there any other areas in which you feel that Ofcom should be conducting research in order to inform its media literacy work?

Childnet believes that it is important to address the needs of different language groups who may face more barriers to access or information for a variety of reasons. Following a pilot initiative to spread Internet safety awareness materials in three languages in addition to English (Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi), it is Childnet's belief that different language groups in the UK face different barriers both culturally and in terms of language to becoming media literate. Some research has already been conducted into this area by the e-learning foundation[9] and various parts of the Department for Education, which could be harnessed and built upon.

It is crucial that Ofcom look ahead at emerging media literacy and protection issues with the continuous development of technology and the arrival of new services, such as mobile services. Again it is important here that experience from other countries contributes here, but also that the potential for positive use is promoted as well as the development of safety provisions and information.

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[8] http://www.children-go-online.net
[9] http://www.e-learningfoundation.com

> **Question 9: What are the key initiatives, projects or resources that Ofcom should have regard to in promoting media literacy?**

1) Providing a central and comprehensive source of information and guidance to citizens about media literacy issues.
2) Ongoing work in schools – vital to ensure that Ofcom's work compliments and supports that being done in schools with all ages of children.
3) Work by industry education initiatives (such as www.Websafecrackers.com by MSN)
4) Work being undertaken by children's charities and others such as e-learning foundation.
5) Relevant work by retailers and mass marketing initiatives

> **Question 10: Do you support the need for a common labelling system for audiovisual content?**

Childnet does support the move to cross media consistency as outlined in the consultation paper. The example of the Netherlands was given, and there are other examples of cross-media labelling, see www.commonsensemedia.org for an interesting US model of this.

However Childnet would also encourage Ofcom to consider other schemes such as the ICRA model of self-labelling. We believe that self-labelling offers great potential for users in terms of empowering them to make their own decisions with regard to Internet content.

SECTION 4

Childnet is committed to helping children and adults get the most out of communications technology. We are committed to monitoring trends in the way in which children and young people use communications technology and have conducted research into this area. Through our Academy programme we promote media literacy to young people across the world. We work with parents giving them practical advice about how to get the most out of the Internet and how to keep their families safe online.

Childnet believes that the Ofcom strategy for media literacy will be successful, if partners who would be able to implement the strategy are identified at an early stage. Childnet would is interested in being an implementation partner, in the areas of research, and the development of critical thinking training resources for parents and children.