Evidence to The House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee: Freedom of Expression

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Question Addressed: How should good digital citizenship be promoted? How can education help?

0.0 Executive Summary

0.1 Digital literacy skills need to be embedded in the national curriculum, obtaining status *on par* with English, Writing and Mathematics.

0.2 Free and easy access to digital literacy training for parents.

0.3 Lessons should include, though not limited to, irresponsible social media usage, privacy, resilience, reporting harmful content and teaching individuals about the effects of online abuse.

0.4 Educational initiatives, like those in Australia, should be mirrored in the United Kingdom.

1.0 Education and the younger generation

1.1 Education is an important tool in creating a safe online environment for all internet users. We are now living within a society where some generations do not know a world without the internet, or indeed social media. In the UK alone 99% of 12 to 15 year olds use the internet regularly.[1] ***It is therefore important that good digital citizenship is promoted throughout the educational system, particularly educating users on the legal effects of irresponsible social media usage***. For instance, research undertaken by Powell-Jones uncovered a lack of understanding of the legal repercussions associated with irresponsible social media usage, throughout her study into young people's perceptions of social media.[2]

1.2 During her verbatim quotes study of 184 participants,[3] across two schools aged 11 to 18, responses to case examples of abusive conduct online, resulted in comments such as 'just saying', 'just joking' or 'just an opinion'. In fact, '[i]n some cases, children's views mimicked alt-right arguments in favour of liberty, free speech

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[1] HM Government, *Online Harms White Paper* (CP 57, 2019) 1

[2] Holly Powell-Jones, 'How do young people interpret and construct risk in an online context?' (PhD Thesis, City London University 2018)

[3] Verbatim quotes are essentially handwritten notes taken in the field which cover quotes given by participants, '… plus any salient comments, observations or initial analysis …' *Ibid.,* 80

and the right to offend'.[4] Indeed, there was a clear lack of understanding as to the legal limits of free speech amongst many participants. ***Digital literacy skills need to be embedded within the national curriculum and be on par with the emphasis placed on Reading, Writing and Mathematics.***

1.3 Good digital literacy will cover;

> '… social and emotional literacy and digital competency to positively respond to and deal with any risks they might be exposed to when they [online users] are using social media or going online.'[5]

We therefore need to go further than teaching young people computer skills such as word processing, spreadsheets and how to use search engines. ***Instead, digital literacy skills need to focus on educating the younger generation about the dangers of the online world, including how to spot online dangers, encourage students to think critically about the content they are exposed to, understand that actions conducted online have real-life consequences, and help to build online resilience.*** Put simply, digital literacy should encompass educating all students on all aspects of the digital world, from how to use technology to behaviours which are unacceptable online such as cyberbullying.[6]

1.4 By educating the younger generation the foundations for a safer online world are created, where individuals can understand the ethical, social and criminal implications of their conduct online.

2.0 Adult Education

2.1 Digital literacy skills should also be promoted to parents and guardians of young people. Parental guardians are now more concerned about the safety of their children online than smoking or drinking.[7] ***The dominance of the internet, in particular social media, means that parents need to fully understand not only how the internet works, but the safety mechanisms that can be employed to***

> ***At its very basic, digital literacy lessons should cover irresponsible social media usage, privacy, resilience, reporting harmful content and teaching individuals about the effects of online abuse.***

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[4] See, https://theconversation.com/online-abuse-teenagers-might-not-report-it-because-they-often-dont-see-it-as-a-problem-116479 [accessed 22 July 2020]
[5] See, https://youngminds.org.uk/assets/0002/6859/Resilience_for_the_Digital_World_YM_Positioning.pdf> [accessed 21 March 2019]
[6] See, https://theconversation.com/online-abuse-on-facebook-and-twitter-cant-be-solved-by-regulation-alone-89270 [accessed 14 December 2020]
[7] See, https://www.pshe-association.org.uk/news/parents-call-education-address-sexting-children [accessed 25 March 2020]

better protect their children online. As outlined by the Communications Committee, parents need clear guidance on social media usage.[8]

2.2 In early 2019 stories started to emerge online concerning a puppet who supposedly appeared during videos uploaded onto the social media site YouTube.[9] Allegedly, the puppet Momo would encourage users to partake in dangerous activities such as self-harm and asphyxiation, known as the Momo challenge. Following increasing reports online concerning Momo, which quickly caught the media's attention, parents across the country panicked with many choosing to limit their child's technology intake, and schools issuing warnings to parents.[10] **Though the Momo challenge was later proven to be a hoax, it illustrates the need to educate the wider public on online safety**.[11] **This can be done by creating free digital literacy workshops.**

2.3 Education is an important aspect in tackling online abuse. By educating online users, issues such as online safety and how to conduct oneself online can be strengthened. In turn, by educating all online users it will allow for a better understanding of the real-life implications online abuse can have on another person, such as the detrimental psychological effects that can occur.

3.0 Lessons from Australia

3.1 In Australia educational initiatives to tackle inappropriate conduct online are regarded as '… one of the most important elements of crime prevention'.[12] Education is seen as the foundation for ensuring adequate safeguards are in place to protect online users; and is given more weight than criminal law intervention. Programmes have been created throughout Australia by the Federal Government targeting both school-aged children and the wider public on online safety, including the 'Thinkuknow' initiative.

3.2 The 'Thinkuknow' initiative was created in Australia in 2010, where in its first 9 months 118 presentations were given to 4,450 individuals.[13] Specific programmes have been created, based on up-to-date evidence, to provide users with the tools to navigate the online world safely. These presentations are delivered by numerous stakeholders throughout Australia, including the police, school liaison officers and crime prevention officers.[14] The programme has since expanded and in 2017-18 17,144 presentations were given to parents, carers and teachers, with a further

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[8] Communications Committee, *Regulating in a digital world* (HL 2017-19, 299) 62
[9] See, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/02/27/parents-warned-online-suicide-game-appearing-peppa-pig-videos/ [accessed 25 March 2019]
[10] *Ibid.,*
[11] See, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/feb/28/parents-momo-scare-youtube-kids [accessed 25 March 2019]
[12] Parliament of Australia, *Cyber Safety - Joint Select Committee High-wire act: Cyber-safety and the young Interim report* (June 2011) [11.18]
[13] *Ibid.,*
[14] See, https://www.thinkuknow.org.au/index.php/our-program [accessed 14 December 2020]

2,711 presentations given to 196,881 students across Australia.[15] The scheme has been considered highly successful and includes lessons on, though not limited to:[16]

- Online grooming;
- Sexting;
- Inappropriate conduct online;
- How to report online abuse;
- Respectful behaviour online; and
- Privacy.

3.3 In addition, specific State programmes have also been created to tackle online abuse. For example, in the State of Victoria, the Victorian Government has funded the first project aimed at addressing sexual abuse and violence against women online.[17] The purpose of the project, which is being led by Gender Equity Victoria, is to train users of the internet to call out sexism, essentially creating a form of self-regulation online. Gender Equity Victoria aims to educate moderators based in media organisations to '… understand the gendered nature of violence', whilst also 'empowering' online users to tackle sexism.[18]

4.0 Policy Recommendations

- Digital literacy skills need to be embedded in the national curriculum.
- At a minimum, digital literacy lessons should cover irresponsible social media usage, privacy, resilience, reporting harmful content and teaching individuals about the effects of online abuse.
- Nationwide educational initiatives, similar to Australia, should be created to ensure that good digital citizenship is promoted throughout the United Kingdom. These workshops should be free and should cover, as a minimum, the topics listed in the bullet point above.

> *By creating a nationwide educational initiative, like Australia, we can ensure that good digital citizenship is promoted throughout the United Kingdom. These workshops should cover, at a very minimum, irresponsible social media usage, privacy, resilience, reporting harmful content and teaching individuals about the effects of online abuse.*

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[15] See, https://www.afp.gov.au/news-media/media-releases/annual-awards-recognise-thinkuknow-volunteers-0 [accessed 14 December 2020]

[16] n.14

[17] See, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/01/online-sexism-targeted-in-world-first-bystander-project [accessed 27 July 2018]

[18] *Ibid.,*

5.0 About the Author

Dr Laura Higson-Bliss is a Teaching Fellow at the University of Birmingham. She has recently completed a PhD examining the current criminal law framework and its application to conduct carried out *via* social media. Laura has experience in teaching workshops looking at the repercussions of irresponsible social media use to young people.

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6.0 Further Resources

Bliss, L. (2020) *Legality, Social Media and the Criminal Law* (PhD Thesis: Edge Hill University). Available at: https://research.edgehill.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/legality-social-media-and-the-criminal-law

Bliss, L. (2019) 'Little Mix member Jesy Nelson confronts the harsh realities of online abuse- and she's not alone' *The Conversation* 18 September 2019 https://theconversation.com/little-mix-member-jesy-nelson-confronts-the-harsh-realities-of-online-abuse-and-shes-not-alone-123555

Bliss, L. (2017) 'Online abuse on Facebook and Twitter can't be solved by regulation alone' *The Conversation* 18 December 2017 https://theconversation.com/online-abuse-on-facebook-and-twitter-cant-be-solved-by-regulation-alone-89270