

Lecture by Nigel Williams, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, on his receipt of the Namur Award recognizing “outstanding contribution with international impact to the awareness of social implications of information technology”, at the Institut d’Informatique, Namur, Belgium on Friday 13th January 2006

“A Parallel Universe – Children and Young People’s Love Affair with the Internet.”

I am very honoured to receive this award, and it marks something of a break with the tradition of the previous seven winners. Unlike my illustrious predecessors I am not an academic. I like best the description given to me by a 14 year old boy at one of the Childnet International Award¹ ceremonies. He was a very innovative young man, and five years ago was using the Internet in exciting and different ways. He said “Nigel, you are a social entrepreneur!”

My social entrepreneurship has taken a long and winding road through working as a government bureaucrat, starting and running a small computer training and graphics business in the time just after the introduction of the IBM PC, working as a lobbyist at the Westminster Parliament for a christian social concern charity, and then founding and running the charity Childnet International from 1995 to 2003. During that period I spent all my time thinking about how children are impacted by the Internet and new technology, and working with others in government, industry and civic society to ensure that the benefits outweighed the significant concerns.

In 2003 I moved to my current job as the Commissioner for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland. This is a government funded appointment, established by legislation, but the purpose is to be an independent watchdog for children and young people, working with them to safeguard and promote their rights as laid out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Given that varied background, I hope you will forgive me if my lecture is a little less formal than those of previous award winners. I am delighted to have this opportunity to reflect on the impact that information technology, and especially the Internet has had on children and young people. My role as Commissioner in the

¹ See www.childnetacademy.org for details of the winners of this competition which ran in various forms from 1997-2005



last two years has perhaps helped me to better see this impact in the context of children's lives as a whole. I want to draw on a number of significant recent studies and sources in my comments, and the full references to these will be available in the published version of the lecture. This will be found not only on the IFIP web site ²but also my own site as Commissioner, www.niccy.org.

There are three main sets of questions that I want to address that come out of the title of this talk.

- First, why is it that children and young people are having what I call a "love affair" with the Internet and increasingly mobile Internet applications? What are the characteristics of this affection – what do young people particularly like about the online world?
- Second, as implied by my phrase "a parallel universe", how does young people's use of the Internet differ from that of adults? Moreover, how do parents' perceptions of how their children use the net differ from the actual use?
- Finally, I want to examine what the implications of these differences are. Will things change as today's inquiring young people become tomorrow's anxious parents? Are there public policy implications which we need to consider?

I need to get a couple of definitions out of the way first so that the boundaries of what I am talking about are clear. I am defining children and young people as all those under the age of 18, which is the definition used by the UNCRC. This also largely coincides with the main research that has been undertaken on media use. Many children are online at home or at school by the age of 7 or 8, and indeed some much younger. I like the description of toddlers sitting on their parent's knee as the adult goes online – "lap surfers".

By cutting off at 18, it does mean I am omitting a very important period in many young people's lives in most countries i.e. when they move away-from home for full time education at university or college. I believe the 18-22 age group would be a very interesting one to study further as in my view the Internet has transformed the process of higher education (and how students live and interact), perhaps more than any other area of society. Most student accommodation provided by

² www.info.fundp.ac.be/~jbl/IFIP/award.html



universities offers a broadband Internet connection as standard, and the Internet is the preferred means for communication in higher education. But that age group is for another day.

I also need to point out that I am focusing my remarks on the use of the Internet rather than media more generally. However, the edges are becoming increasingly blurred. Ten years ago young people's consumption of music was an entirely separate experience to their use of computers. Today the two are inextricably intertwined through the downloading of MP3 files. The same is true, to a slightly lesser extent, in relation to video and film. Computer games used to be bought or rented on disc or cartridge – now many can be downloaded, and indeed played online with players from other parts of the world.

Mobile phones³ are the “must have” communication tool of the teenager – but these too are linked to the Internet both in terms of texting and messaging from one to the other, the downloading of ring tones or games, and the latest trend of moblogging and vlogging (posting to an online blog via mobile and posting video diaries). Indeed with increasing 3G penetration the mobile phone itself is becoming an IP device, bringing all the above media – music, TV and sophisticated games to phones as well.

Taking into account these various linkages between different media types, I want to focus on the internet platform as the focus for my remarks. Thus I will not be following the media academic's traditional approach of separating out different kinds of media – TV, video, DVD, cd, computer games etc – defined by different types of device or function. Rather I will be looking at how the internet has brought these different devices and functions together in one platform.

I want to start with a screen capture of a typical desktop of a teenager. As you can see it is crowded with different communication tools and media sources all open at the same time. There is e-mail, music, digital pictures, instant messaging all on the go. This is a real live example which I have borrowed from my youngest daughter, Elizabeth, who left her teenage years behind just a month ago. It illustrates an important point about multi tasking which I will come back to, and indeed later I will peel away each of the layers of this desktop to give you a chance to see what is going on. But most of all the message I think this slide gives is one of fun and engagement.

³ Cell phones in the USA, hand phones in much of Asia



Children and young people use the Internet because they enjoy doing so. Of course, they also see it as a main source of information for their studies, but first and foremost it is a fun medium.

In trying to analyse what lies behind young people's love of the net, I am very grateful to my former colleagues from Childnet⁴ who have come up with what they call the "8 A's of the Internet's Appeal". I have expanded on their terms and must be held responsible for the detail, but I credit them for the original idea. I am not listing these features in any particular order of priority.

ANONYMITY – young people love the feeling of being anonymous online, or anonymous to all but their closest friends. Many of the communication tools and portal sites like Yahoo and MSN allow you to create a persona for yourself. You can even choose an avatar – a small personalized graphic – that will appear on screen to represent you. And of course you do not have to be one person – you can have many different personas. Imagine being logged on to a chat room and playing two different roles – you could chat to yourself, and then totally confuse a third person who joins the room.

And being anonymous can be a real bonus in looking for advice and help in relation to sensitive issues like sexual health. But like many aspects of the Internet, anonymity is a double edged sword. How do you know who everyone else is that you are in touch with online? People may not be who they appear to be, and may not be trustworthy.

ALWAYS ON This reflects the instant nature of our culture, and is especially true with broadband. I know from my own children that they leave their computers permanently online. They are keen to pick up that e-mail or instant message whenever it arrives. Moreover, it has created an expectation of instant communication – knowing the news immediately, being in touch straight away. I suspect that the art of putting pen to paper and sending a letter is a dying one as far as today's teenagers is concerned.

AWAY FROM SUPERVISION – young people view both the Internet and their mobile phones as the ultimate private communication medium. The major UK

⁴ I am especially grateful to Stephen Carrick-Davies and Will Gardner for this and other ideas in this lecture.



report, Children Go Online⁵, reported that 79% of young people used the Internet without a parent's supervision, and some 63% of young home Internet users had taken some action to hide their online activities from their parents.

Young people have very strong views about their right to privacy in communication – they don't want parents looking at their e-mail or text messages, and don't understand why they should. This is not an easy area to navigate – I well recall meeting the father of the first victim (she was 12 at the time) in the UK of sexual assault following online grooming. He had not read the e-mails setting up the initial meeting, because he felt it would invade his daughter's privacy.

ACCEPTANCE – and identity and status. Use of the net and communication tools has become part of who young people are, and being proficient in their use is very important for many young people. One young person taking part in a focus group with Childnet⁶ said "If you took away my mobile phone, you would take away a part of me", and I am sure that is a view very widely held. The Children Go Online⁷ report talks of a particular category of young people who are middle class, with parents who are heavy Internet users that are trendsetters in the online world. This acceptance factor is very important for this group.

ACTIVE NOT PASSIVE – the major difference that the Internet holds over more traditional media like television and radio is the opportunity to take part yourself – to communicate with friends and those you don't know, to play games with people on the other side of the world, and even to become a publisher. This latter task has become even easier – you don't need to create your own website or know html, you can simply use the pro forma provided by many portals, or just go blogging with your own online diary.

It was because young people find blogging so attractive that I decided a few months ago to set up my own blog on the NICCY web site⁸, describing my actions as Commissioner. Every evening I write about who I have met that day and the issues I am dealing with.

⁵ UK Children Go Online, Sonia Livingstone and Magdalena Bober, London School of Economics April 2005 This is the final report of a research project with much rich and detailed information about children and parent's use of the Internet. See www.children-go-online.net

⁶ This was in the context of research on updating the Childnet website on the challenges of online communication tools www.chatdanger.com

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Linked from www.niccy.org or go direct to www.niccyblog.blogspot.com



Another aspect of this active participation is young people trying to sell news images and videos taken on their mobiles to broadcasters, even though most sites that act as brokers for this activity have a lower age limit of 18.

I think it was Elizabeth Murdoch of the international media dynasty who first coined the phrase at the Edinburgh Television Festival a few years ago that the Internet was a "lean forward" technology whereas television was a "lean back" technology. She was attempting to portray the internet as an active medium and tv as more passive.

But even this distinction is now breaking down with digital television. A colleague described to me how his daughter and her friends watch a rock video on a digital music channel, check out the band's website, download a podcast from the band and the unedited video to her IPod video player, and then use the pass codes to hit the red button on the digital remote for a competition. The other issue with Elizabeth Murdoch's portrayal is that young people just love lounging on the couch and sending IM messages at the same time!

AMPLIFIER – In one of his plays Shakespeare wrote that "All the world is a stage and all the men and woman merely players"⁹. The Internet has given children and young people the opportunity to become players on the world stage, and bring change for both good and sometimes ill. On the positive side I would commend to you the web site for the Childnet Academy programme www.childnetacademy.org with its archive of amazing projects undertaken by young people using the Internet. Whether it be young people with disability reaching out to others with similar concerns, or providing information on bullying or creating online cartoons. It is a very rich tapestry of inspiration.

Sadly, sometimes young people like adults can also have an impact that is negative rather than positive. Some computer viruses result from teenage hackers trying to demonstrate their prowess to online acquaintances and we all know how destructive viruses and worms can be.

More disturbing still was a long story in the New York Times in December 2005 about a boy called Justin Berry who had made thousands of dollars through selling webcam pornographic images of himself online¹⁰.

⁹ William Shakespeare "As You Like It" Act 2 Scene 7

¹⁰ New York Times article *Through his Webcam a boy Joins a Sordid Online World* by Kurt Eichenwald 19 December 2005



Young people love the fact that the Internet is like a pond. Your actions can create ripples, and you don't know where those ripples will end up. And as I have shown this can be for both good and bad consequences.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION – The Children Go Online¹¹ research showed that some 90% of 9-19 year olds who use the Internet do so for the purposes of school homework or projects. So although the major attraction of the net may be the opportunities it offers for fun and communication, it also provides a vital role in education. This multi purpose benefit is unusual for any media that young people use – you could claim the same for television, but the Internet has overtaken it as an educational tool, simply because the search capabilities are so great.

Just before Christmas in the UK the main morning radio news programme on the BBC, *Today* – well known as an agenda setting current affairs programme – had a vote on who rules Britain.¹² A list of ten different people or institutions was drawn up ranging from parliament, a media baron to our Prime Minister. The most unusual entrant was the “Google algorithm”. It was included because www.google.com has become the leading search engine, and the way it presents its results will often determine the primary sources of information that Internet users, young and old, will access.

(Since I am speaking in Belgium I should perhaps add in parentheses that the winner of that particular competition, perhaps surprisingly, was Jose Manuel Barroso, the President of the European Commission, though it transpired a few days later that a certain Eurosceptic party had admitted rigging the BBC poll by sending out e-mails to supporters encouraging them to vote for Mr Barroso – another illustration of the positive and negative sides of the internet)

ADDICTIVE – given all these different features of the net, it is perhaps not surprising that the final characteristic I would identify as part of the love affair is the addictive nature of being online. I was recently told about a father who tells his daughter she needs to turn off her drug when she is instant messaging.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/>



Kim, a 15 year old member of the UK Children go Online¹³ focus group put it this way *“Even if you have just seen them at school like, it’ll be like you’re texting them or talking to them on the phone or on MSN”*

US Researchers have had a tradition of actually counting how long children engage in certain types of media activity. The most recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation¹⁴ found that the average 8-18 year old spent over an hour each day on their computer outside of school, the majority of which was online. This study published in 2005 not surprisingly found that the Internet was much more prominent in media usage than it had been in 1999 when a similar study¹⁵ had been undertaken. The proportion of young people going online for an hour or more each day has increased from 15% in 1999 to 27% in 2005.

Intriguingly, though this increased Internet use has not added overall to the number of hours young people spend consuming media in general. In 1999 young people used 6hrs 21 minutes per day on average of all media. This figure had dropped marginally by two minutes in 2005. What the researchers identified was happening was that young people were consuming more than one media form at once. My own observations would support this – UK young people too often surf while watching tv or listening to the radio.

So these are the 8 A’s of the appeal of the net –

- Anonymity
- Always on
- Away from supervision
- Acceptance, identity and status
- Active not passive
- Amplifier
- Access to information; and
- Addictive

¹³ Ibid Some 27 focus groups formed part of the research, based in ten different schools and involving .

¹⁴ -*Generation M – Media in the Live of 8-18 year olds*, Victoria Rideout, Donald Roberts and Ulla Foehr for the Kaiser Family Foundation, March 2005 Available online at www.kff.org

¹⁵ *Kids and Media @ the New Millennium* Kaiser Family Foundation 1999



I would not claim the list is exhaustive, but it does give a fair explanation of young people's love affair with the Internet. But like other kinds of love affair, different characteristics will play stronger with different users. It is because the Internet is such a many faceted object of desire, that its market reach with young people is so extensive. Gaming boys are using the same medium as messaging girls.

Now for my second set of questions, about why young people's use of the net is a parallel universe to that of adults.

I would identify three main trends:

- **Multi-tasking** – the extent to which young people are engaged in a number of different tasks at the same time when online compared with the adult focus of one or at most two tasks at once;
- **The model of communication** – young people experiment; adults compare online communication with the standard of an offline conversation
- **Choice of applications** – young people love interaction, imagination and risk taking; adults are more concerned about function

Multi-tasking- let's return to my daughter Elizabeth's desktop, and peel away the layers. First you will notice that she has two different conversations going in messenger. It would not be unusual for this to be three or four conversations with different sets of friends. I imagine it is like having a few friends in the room that you are chatting to at the same time as doing other things. The advantage though is that you can leave a gap before responding and nobody minds.

But while messenger is open and active, the e-mail window is also open, so that if a message comes in it can be responded to.

More in the background is the music. For older teenagers MP3 players are the way that music is going. They are still quite expensive, especially if you want to have the market leader iPod, but cheaper models are beginning to become available. Of course, MP3 players are only useable if you have transferred downloaded songs to them. The computer becomes the equivalent of the old record or CD cabinet, but young people today have many thousands more tracks available to them than their predecessors even 5 years ago.

My daughter also has her "My pictures" file opened. She likes taking photos with her digital camera and then sending them via her laptop to her friends. She can



upload them to websites that enable easy sharing, or just attach them to an e-mail or IM.

And of course you will notice that Google is open as well. But that is perhaps the one similarity with adults using the net for pleasure. They will either have the Google home page open or have the Google taskbar downloaded on to their PC.

Other teenagers might have a number of other applications open instead of or in addition to these. For example, an online game or a chat room, or their blog.

In my experience while adults at work may have a number of applications open that they hop through from time to time, they do not tend in their leisure use of the Internet to be multi tasking in the same ways as young people. Adults, in the main, do not respond to instant messages while listening to music or chatting online at the same time as playing a game or allegedly researching a homework project.

The Kaiser Foundation study ¹⁶found that young people are often not only using the computer for a number of different applications at once but also engaging in other media at the same time. Some 26% of the time young people are using one medium they are doing something else media related at the same time. In support of my point about multi tasking while doing homework, some 30% of young people say they either talk on the phone, instant message, watch TV, listen to music or surf the web for fun "most of the time" while they are doing homework. Another 31% say they do so "some of the time".

The model of communication –This is very well summarized in the UK Children Go Online first project report¹⁷, in the following quote "While adults tend to judge communication against an ideal of face to face conversation, young people evaluate a wide range of options – face to face, e-mail, instant message, chatrooms, phone, SMS according to their communicative needs. Their criteria are immediacy, message complexity, mobility, cost, privacy and embarrassment"

Perhaps the most important differences with adults are that young people have a wider range of communication options that they consider, and that they are more willing to choose digital means for conveying messages that adults would use a personal conversation for.

¹⁶ Ibid see especially Key Finding 8 on multitasking.

¹⁷ *Listening to Young People's Experiences the First Project Report of the UK Children Go Online project.*



Young people can be quite self aware about what they are doing here. For example, Cameron a 13 year old, said in a UK Children Go Online focus group *"I once dumped my old girlfriend by e-mail... well it was cowardly really, I couldn't say it face to face"*¹⁸

I think it is also interesting to reflect on how online communication behaviour now mimics offline behaviour. So for example, teenage girls are well known as enjoying conversation and gossip – they can't seem to get enough of it. The Internet is a gift to help them with this habit. It is cheap and allows them to hold multiple conversations – some relatively private or one to one and some more public – all at the same time.

Meanwhile teenage boys, used to boasting about their sporting abilities in the school playground can now compete online and boast in the online chat rooms associated with games about their performance. But we do need to be careful about being absolutist in relation to gender stereotypes in internet use. A colleague described to me how a friend's son regularly visits a game chatroom frequented by girls; and his own daughter is often found in an American football online forum, usually seen as a male preserve.

Choice of Applications – young Internet users are risk takers and adventurous in their media use. They are less worried than adults about the implications of downloading files, about whether something new is safe, about whether the person they are in touch with is someone they can trust.

New websites that offer rude jokes or horrific pictures are exchanged freely among young people in the way that adults used to exchange postage stamps or cigarette cards. And young people are increasingly uploading music, photos and videos from phones and PCs to web sites that host them free of charge.

IM and chat are very popular amongst teenagers – but are rarely used among adults unless there is some very specific interest group that they are part of.

Young people like blogging and portal environments like MySpace, Yahoo and MSN where they can have their own persona and move effortlessly between a range of applications. Again, adults tend to use such sites less and do so when they have a specific purpose in mind.

¹⁸ Ibid



Young people frequent peer to peer and file sharing sites for music and video – adults do so much less, and usually prompted by a specific purpose.

In summary I would suggest that the online world is the natural habitat of the young person – whereas it is a world that adults visit for specific purposes. While adults travel to the Internet to get information or share it, many young people actually live there!

That brings us to the final part of my comments, and addressing the question of whether all of this makes any difference in public policy terms. What implications do young people's love affair with the net, and the different ways that they use it, have for government.

In my role as Commissioner I actually have a statutory duty to advise ministers on issues affecting children and young people¹⁹, so I am frequently having to assess what implications are for public policy of different trends in young people's behaviour. Some of the general points I frequently make to Ministers are equally relevant in this area.

First and foremost, we must ***listen to children and young people*** and adjust policy to addressing where they are coming from, rather than setting out to change young people's habits first to meet our policy objectives. In this area of Internet use therefore, I would be arguing that we must start from understanding young people's online behaviour, as I have attempted to analyse in this lecture, and then apply the lessons we learn to the particular area of policy. Let me give two examples:

INTERNET SAFETY – this is perhaps the most obvious area about which we should be concerned. In my days at Childnet we talked of the three C's of online dangers: content, contact and commercialism. What we know of young people's online habits would lead us to some general points of the approach we should take:

- *Make messages relevant to the audience* – we cannot speak to young people and to parents in the same way. Their experience is different and their understanding of risks is different. Safety resources need to address

¹⁹ Section 7 of the Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order 2003



each audience in the most appropriate manner. We also need to recognize that young people's online habits vary with age and gender.²⁰

- *Use young people to reach young people:* if adults online habits differ, then it is going to be more effective to use young people themselves to get across awareness messages. Over the years this has been a key strategy for Childnet – from the original Chatdanger²¹ web site based on the story of an individual teenager who had been groomed online; through to the recent and very impactful DVD *Jenny's Story*²² telling a story of another girl's experience of an online/offline encounter. The UK Home Office Task Force on Online Protection has recognized the importance of such approaches and produced guidelines on how personal stories can be used in a responsible way.²³
- *Ensure parental awareness campaigns are realistic* – we have seen that adults use the Internet differently, but they also have different perceptions of the risks that their children face. For example the UK Children Go Online project²⁴ showed that while 31% of young people had received unwanted sexual comments, only 7% of parents were aware that this had happened. Recent Australian research²⁵ supports this view with over 65% of parents saying their child had not had a negative online experience compared with 40% of children saying they had not had a negative experience. Given these facts we must ensure that parental awareness campaigns give parents a true insight into how their children use the Internet, and prick their bubble of complacency without being alarmist.

GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT WITH YOUNG PEOPLE- I am especially keen that we go further than just applying these lessons about young people's Internet use to Internet safety to considering how we communicate with young people as a whole. Any government agency which wants to communicate with young people needs to take account of the realities of how young people

²⁰ See the UK Children Go Online final report section on demographic influences on Internet use

²¹ www.chatdanger.com

²² <http://www.childnet-int.org/jenny/> a pack is available for use in schools

²³ <http://police.homeoffice.gov.uk/news-and-publications/publication/operational-policing/ReallifeExamples.pdf>

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ *kidsonline @ home – Internet use in Australian Homes* prepared by NetRatings Australia Pty Ltd for the Australian Broadcasting Authority (now the Australian Communications and Media Authority www.acma.gov.au) and NetAlert Limited (www.netalert.net.au)



themselves now use the Internet. I have attempted to apply some of these lessons to my work as Commissioner for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland in the following ways:

- The NICCY website is a very significant part of our communication strategy. I am a great believer in meeting young people and listening to them face to face, but the web site is a great way of keeping in touch with a very wide range of young people.
- The design of the site has been heavily influenced by the views of young people and especially the NICCY youth panel. We have incorporated simple features like the ability to personalize the colours of the site.
- The site allows a number of opportunities for interaction – we are using polls, and a bones game for younger users.
- We have prominent means of getting in touch with us using online forms or e-mail. Apart from face to face, most of my direct contact with individual young people is by e-mail
- I have a blog to keep people up to date with my activities as Commissioner and provide the kind of personal “colour” that young people in particular enjoy.
- The NICCY youth panel have their own separate password protected micro site with online forums where they can interact directly.

I believe we have only made a start on this, and indeed preparing this lecture has made me think about how we can go even further to engage with children and young people. I do not believe gimmicks or short term fixes are the answer – we have to find ways of fitting into young people’s existing online habits.

Finally, I would pose the question as to whether all of this is likely to change as today’s young people become the parents of tomorrow. I believe that is a very hard question to answer. My hunch is that quite a lot of the way young people use the net comes from the exuberance and adventure of youth. Some of the habits that are picked up will continue into adulthood, although I can’t envisage a harassed parent trying to settle a baby, while instant messaging and surfing iTunes.

Tomorrow’s parents will certainly be better informed about the net but they will have to be very careful that they don’t base their assumptions about their children’s



online behaviour on their own experience. The Internet in 15-20 years time is likely to have a number of significant differences from the Internet in 2006.

In summary, I would argue that young people's love affair with the Internet is strong, that it readily adapts as new online applications become available, and that it does inhabit a universe that is parallel to the online experience of adults. We need to celebrate these differences and ensure that children and young people across the world have continuing and better access to the online environment and that they can do so safely. We need to listen more to young people and allow them to have the major stake in setting the terms for how we communicate with them.

This new world is not one like George Orwell's novel 1984 that we should fear and seek to hold back. Rather let us, the adults, change our role and for once learn from the young pioneers. We can certainly offer them advice about coping with social interaction and how to stay safe, but we first need to understand their world and appreciate their ingenuous use of internet technology.

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