

SELECT COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS**CALL FOR EVIDENCE****Children and the Internet**

The House of Lords Select Committee on Communications, under the chairmanship of Lord Best, is to conduct an inquiry into *Children and the Internet*. The Committee thus invites any interested organisation or individual to submit written evidence to the inquiry. Written evidence must be submitted by **Friday 26 August 2016**.

The Committee expects to hear oral evidence from invited witnesses from July to November 2016 and intends to report in the New Year. The Government has undertaken to respond in writing to reports from select committees.

Background

In the last few years, technology has rapidly increased the number of ways in which children access the internet and has enabled them to do so outside of the view of parents and teachers. At the same time, the variety of roles that media services have in a child's life has also rapidly expanded. The internet enables access to the World Wide Web, social media, games and many other online applications.

Ofcom's 2015 report *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes* showed that:

- Over half of those aged 3-4 use a tablet and 1 in 7 have their own tablet,
- The amount of time 8-11s and 12-15s spend online has more than doubled,
- 12-15s now spend nearly three and a half hours a week more online than they do watching television.¹

This has raised a number of concerns. Children are now more likely to turn to social media and the internet for information than other more 'traditional' sources. Qualitative research commissioned by Ofcom showed "children and young people visited sites and accessed content online without actively thinking whether or not they could trust what they saw and read."²

It is well-documented that greater access to the internet has increased the risk that children may view pornography or be the victim of 'cyberbullying'. One in four children have experienced something upsetting on a social networking site.³ Social and technological 'blocking' strategies, such as parental controls, school-wide blocking of sites or parental supervision, have been employed in an attempt to restrict access to such harmful content.

Concerns have also been raised that new technology might encourage addictive behaviour and could alter cognitive, social and neurological development patterns in young children. In particular, it

¹ http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/children-parents-nov-15/childrens_parents_nov2015.pdf

² <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/research-publications/childrens/report.pdf>

³ <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/online-abuse/facts-statistics/>

appears that some elements in the design of internet and digital services, present problems for young people. Among them, the presence of ‘reward loops’ as the building block of design to extend or prolong use.

Data protection poses another problem for children.⁴ There is a risk that their personal data may be collected or transferred without them being aware. There is also concern that the online activity of children may remain visible to future employers or academic institutions.

Rationale for the inquiry

The aim of this inquiry is to examine the concerns, as well as the possible benefits, presented by the changing relationship between children and the internet; and to investigate how policies and practices might increase the value of the internet for children. We define ‘children’ to mean any person under the age of 18, but we would be interested to hear how policy should be adapted to address the particular needs of different age groups. The inquiry will focus on three main areas:

1. How the increase in use of and access to the internet is affecting the development and wellbeing of children in both positive and negative ways.
2. The responsibility of industry to develop and maintain controls, and the responsibility of users to practise self-governance
3. Legislation and regulation in this field.

Questions

The Committee would like to receive evidence which addresses the following list of questions. Witnesses are requested to concentrate on areas of expertise.

Risks and benefits

1. What risks and benefits does increased internet usage present to children, with particular regard to:
 - i. Social development and wellbeing
 - ii. Neurological, cognitive and emotional development,
 - iii. Data security.
2. Which platforms and sites are most popular among children and how do young people use them? Many of the online services used by children are not specifically designed for children. What problems does this present?
3. What are the technical challenges for introducing greater controls on internet usage by children?
4. What are the potential future harms and benefits to children from emerging technology, such as Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning and the Internet of Things?

⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/how-to-keep-your-kids-data-safe-online_us_56670295e4b079b2819014b8

Education

5. What roles can schools play in educating and supporting children in relation to the internet? What guidance is provided about the internet to schools and teachers? Is guidance consistently adopted and are there any gaps?
6. Who currently informs parents of risks? What is the role for commercial organisations to teach e-safety to parents? How could parents be better informed about risks?

Governance

7. What are the challenges for media companies in providing services that take account of children? How do content providers differentiate their services for children, for example in respect of design?
8. What voluntary measures have already been put in place by providers of content to protect children? Are these sufficient? If not, what more could be done? Are company guidelines about child safety and rights accessible to parents and other users?

Legislation and Regulation

9. What are the regulatory frameworks in different media? Is current legislation adequate in the area of child protection online? Is the law routinely enforced across different media? What, if any, are the gaps? What impact does the legislation and regulation have on the way children and young people experience and use the internet? Should there be a more consistent approach?
10. What challenges face the development and application of effective legislation? In particular in relation to the use of national laws in an international/cross-national context and the constantly changing nature and availability of internet sites and digital technologies? To what extent can legislation anticipate and manage future risks?
11. Does the upcoming General Data Protection Regulation take sufficient account of the needs of children? As the UK leaves the EU, what provisions of the Regulation or other Directives should it seek to retain, or continue to implement, with specific regard to children? Should any other legislation should be introduced?
12. What more could be done by the Government? Could there be a more joined-up approach involving the collaboration of the Government with research, civil society and commerce?

18 July 2016

ANNEX: GUIDANCE FOR SUBMISSIONS

Written evidence should be submitted online using the written submission form available at www.parliament.uk/children-and-the-internet-written-submission-form. This page also provides guidance on submitting evidence.

The call for evidence deadline is Friday 26 August 2016.

Short submissions are preferred. A submission longer than six pages should include a one-page summary. Paragraphs should be numbered. All submissions made through the written submission form will be acknowledged automatically by email.

Evidence which is accepted by the Committee may be published online at any stage; when it is so published it becomes subject to parliamentary copyright and is protected by parliamentary privilege. Submissions which have been previously published will not be accepted as evidence.

Once you have received acknowledgement that the evidence has been accepted you will receive a further email, and at this point you may publicise or publish your evidence yourself. In doing so you must indicate that it was prepared for the Committee, and you should be aware that your publication or re-publication of your evidence may not be protected by parliamentary privilege. Personal contact details will be removed from evidence before publication, but will be retained by the Committee Office and used for specific purposes relating to the Committee's work, for instance to seek additional information.

Persons who submit written evidence, and others, may be invited to give oral evidence. Oral evidence is usually given in public at Westminster and broadcast online; transcripts are also taken and published online. Persons invited to give oral evidence will be notified separately of the procedure to be followed and the topics likely to be discussed.

Substantive communications to the Committee about the inquiry should be addressed through the clerk of the Committee, whether or not they are intended to constitute formal evidence to the Committee.

This is a public call for evidence. Please bring it to the attention of other groups and individuals who may not have received a copy direct.

You may follow the progress of the inquiry at www.parliament.uk/children-and-the-internet