



Commission on Online Child Protection

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I. Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to appear before the Commission to talk about some of the Canadian initiatives that address children's safety online.

I will focus my comments on two areas: first, I would like to outline the key findings of the recent Canadian research that has looked at use and management of the Internet in Canadian families, and parents' abilities to address Internet safety issues; and second, I will provide a brief summary of a new Canadian education initiative that is designed to help young people become wise, safe and responsible Internet users.

Both of these activities have been developed by the *Media Awareness Network (MNet)*, Canada's national media education organization, whose mission is to support media and Internet literacy in Canadian homes and schools. *MNet's* work is based on the belief that, in today's dynamic and complex media environment, children and young people – indeed all of us – need to develop the critical thinking skills to help us know how to "read" *all* the messages that are informing, entertaining and selling to us daily.

In Canada, media education is now part of the core curriculum that is taught in schools. *Media Awareness Network* programs are designed to support teachers – both for their professional development needs to teach this new subject, and to provide teachers with ready-to-use classroom lessons that address the new curricular demands for media literacy education.

To support the inclusion of Web literacy outcomes in Information Technology curricula in Canada, the *Media Awareness Network* has developed a curriculum framework, *Kids on the Net: Critical Thinking Skills for Web Literacy*. This Web literacy framework is designed as a continuum, progressing from lessons in basic safety skills at the primary level to more in-depth knowledge and understanding in the high school years with students' examining more complex issues like human rights concerns and the tension between free speech and offensive content on the Net; the nature of electronic community and online identity; the potential of online democracy; government use of the Internet, to

provide information to, and collect information about, its citizens; and, the impact of technology on communication, the individual and society.

This framework for teaching Web literacy can be found online at <http://www.media-awareness.ca/eng/med/class/kidsnet2.htm>

II. Canadian research on Internet use in Canadian families: "Canada's Children in a Wired World"

At the beginning of this year, the Government of Canada, led by Industry Canada, contracted the *Media Awareness Network* to conduct the first phase of a research project entitled *Canada's Children in a Wired World*.¹

Industry Canada, which has connected all of Canada's schools and public libraries to the Internet, is increasing its focus on the challenges that young people face when they go online, with the goal of maximizing the benefits of the Internet for young Canadians.

At the outset of our research, we reviewed the research work done by the Allensbach Institute for the Bertelsmann Foundation, and the extensive work done by Joseph Turow, at the Annenberg Public Policy Center. While neither of these surveys has asked exactly the same questions, there are many similarities in the overall findings that we think are worth noting. The comparison that we did of the three studies – the Bertelsmann study, the Annenberg work, and our own research – has provided an international context for our work. One of the outcomes, we believe, is that the educational responses we are developing in Canada, to address the Internet challenges facing young people when they go online, may be of interest to a wider audience beyond our own Canadian borders.

We have developed a two-year research agenda in Canada. The first stage of the project took place in March 2000. Working with Canada's Environics Research Group, which did the data collection, *MNet* designed a survey questionnaire which addressed several areas:

- parents' awareness of, and competencies to address, the challenges their kids face online
- parents' perceptions about whether inappropriate and offensive online content can be managed and, if so, who should do it, and
- who should be responsible for educating parents, and their kids, about safe and responsible Internet use.

The key findings of this survey, which I discuss below, were released in May 2000. These findings, along with other related research and a comparative summary of the Bertelsmann, Annenberg and *MNet* studies, are online at

¹ While this document reviews only the research project, "Canada's Children in a Wired World", the reader may find other Canadian research of interest, notably: *Regulation of the Internet: A Technological Perspective*, by Gerry Miller, Gerri Sinclair, David Sutherland and Julie Zilber, March, 1999, and *Content Filtering Technologies and Internet Service Providers: Enabling User Choice*, by Michael Shepherd and Carolyn Watters, March, 2000. Both of these reports can be found at <http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/internet>

<http://www.media-awareness.ca/eng/webaware/netsurvey2000/index.htm>

The second phase of our research, executed in July 2000, has been to conduct a qualitative investigation among parents and children, on issues relating to child safety on the Internet. During this phase, focus groups were conducted with young people between the ages of nine and 16 who have access to the Internet, and who use it. Parents of children between nine and 16 were also recruited to participate in these exploratory discussions. Although the final report of this second phase has not yet been released, I will share below some of our preliminary findings with the Commission.

Our third research step, scheduled to take place this fall, is a nation-wide school-based survey to find out from young people themselves what they are really doing, and why they are doing it, when they go online. This will be followed by a survey of teachers and librarians working on the "front line" with young people who are accessing the Internet while in their care or under their supervision.

The initial findings of our research have provided us with rich layers of information that are informing the *Media Awareness Network* Internet education initiatives outlined in Section III of this paper.

While it was clear from the results of the March survey that Canadian parents understand the need for guidance of their children's Internet use, the *Media Awareness Network* study showed that Canadian parents do not fully grasp the implications of the Internet's communication and interactive capabilities. The following is a brief summary of some of our key findings.

Even though parents see the Internet as the way of the future, they want "the whole village" to take responsibility for their kids' safety online

Eighty percent of Canadian parents believe that if they and their children are not online, they will be left behind. Because of this belief in the Internet, and its relatively high level of use in families (over 50%) we were surprised when 44% of respondents indicated that they think others, outside the home, should have responsibility for the content that their children encounter online. (We had speculated that the higher the usage, the higher would be the notion that users should take primary responsibility.) In an open-ended question, parents were asked who should manage Internet content for children. The response was that they see this as a shared responsibility between ISPs (36%), users themselves (34%), government (32%) and Web site producers (23%).

Parents see the Internet as a tool or a toy - few see it as an interactive environment.

For most Canadian parents, the Internet is a tool, something that one uses for work, or to search out information. Parents' own use of the Internet is mainly in four areas: research (50%), browsing (32%), e-mail (32%) and work-related activity (26%). And, they think their children use it mostly as a tool for schoolwork (66%). Only 28% of Canadian

parents think their kids mostly go online to chat, while 18% think e-mail is the big draw for their kids.

Today's boomer parents in Canada, like many parents in the U.S. (according to the recent poll done for the National School Boards Foundation), don't fully grasp the interactive challenges, or the powerful potential for communication, posed by the Internet. They see the Internet more like television – that defining technology of their own life experiences – as a "flat" medium that provides information.

From the preliminary findings of our qualitative research with young people, we are beginning to understand that young people see the Internet as something more akin to an integrated "place" rather than as either as a toy or a tool.²

The ability and freedom to choose where to go, and with whom they will interact, can be a young person's first step towards identifying their own "communities" online. The impact of the freedom to identify with an online community is more poignantly understood when one considers the restrictions of movement placed on increasing numbers of Canadian children in the physical world as more and more parents involve them in scheduled and supervised activities. For these children, the Internet is neither a tool or a toy. It truly becomes "another world" where they can reinvent themselves, test out new identities, escape judgment based on appearance, and seek out people with whom they choose to interact (as opposed to the more structured, forced associations they have through involvement with team sports, or in an art class or dance lesson).

Safety – for parents this mostly means "stay away from bad sites"

The possibility of children accessing inappropriate sites and materials on the Internet was the greatest single concern, reported by 62 % of parents in the *MNet* study. The Annenberg study reported that 76% of American parents had similar concerns.

When Canadian parents were asked a series of questions regarding what personal information they would NOT allow their child to submit to Web sites, they gave high scores to photographs, phone numbers, postal addresses, names and birth dates (the "NO's" ranged from 80 - 95%). Surprisingly, only 67% of the parents said "no" to their child's e-mail being submitted on a Web site. This again shows a lack of parents' understanding about the dynamic interactive nature of the Net.

Twenty-one percent of Canadian parents said that they knew their child had come across sexually explicit material, and six percent said they knew that their child had been sent unsolicited pornography.

² Qualitative research is by its nature exploratory. It is designed to understand the range of opinions held within the topic area, not to measure the weight of those opinions among the general population. Therefore the results of research of this type may be viewed as indicative, not projectable.

This data is comparable to the findings in the Bertelsmann study, which found that 20% of both U.S. and German Internet users and 15% of Australian users have come into contact with "inappropriate pornographic depictions" while online.

Safety – for kids this means "staying in safe territory"

The preliminary findings of our qualitative research provide interesting insights into how young people perceive their own safety when they go online. While they freely admit to engaging in risky explorations and lying about themselves in chat rooms, girls in the 11 - 14 range also acknowledge it is almost impossible to maintain their lies after an extended period of time. Most kids told us they know how to get out of a "bad site", and since they feel they are more knowledgeable about the Web than their parents, they said they rarely discuss these issues with their parents.

The kids also talked to us about the comforts of staying in "safe" territory, like Yahoo!igans where they don't have to worry about bad things happening, and where they know they will only encounter "age appropriate sites" (their term, not ours!). One youngster suggested it would be better if there were two Internets – one for adults and one for kids. This implies to us that a strong child-friendly content rating system could be a key strategy in the Internet safety tool-box.

Supervision – what parents really mean

In our March survey, 53% of Canadian parents said they provide a "great deal" of supervision for their children's Internet use (compared to 41% of parents that supervise their children's television viewing and 27% that do so when their child is playing computer games).

We probed this finding during our qualitative research, to find out what parents meant by "supervision".

Again, our preliminary findings are insightful. When parents talk about supervision of their children's Internet use, they primarily mean three things: ensuring that homework takes priority over online play; negotiating online time between siblings competing demands and parents' own needs to access the Internet; and limiting time online so that the household's phone line is not tied up for too long. Very few of the parents we talked to knew what exactly their kids were doing online, other than in general terms such as "chatting" or "doing homework", etc.

Privacy – parents don't understand and kids don't care.

Five in ten Canadian parents think their kids don't know how to adequately protect their privacy online and only 15% of parents say they always read the privacy policies on the sites their kids visit.

Similar to the findings of the recent study done in the U.S. by the National School Boards Foundation, the preliminary findings of our qualitative research would suggest that kids have little concern about their own privacy. While they seem to understand that giving out private information to strangers is dangerous, their definition of "strangers" does not include corporations whose logos or brands they recognize – especially if there's a chance they might win a prize by entering a contest. None of the kids we talked to during our focus groups reported reading privacy policies on the sites they visited or when they entered an online contest.

Filtering – do it in schools and libraries

Our March survey showed 75% of parents think filtering software on school computers would be "very effective", and 78% of them think this would be a "very effective" measure in public libraries. Only 16% of parents reported using filters on home computers.

We intend to probe more deeply in this area for clarification as to why so many parents think filtering should take place in public institutions but not in the home.

Education – both children and parents need it

The *MNet* survey asked parents a series of questions that looked at different measures to control offensive content online. Sixty-five percent of Canadian parents rated education as the most effective measure. Fifty-four percent said they thought it would be "very effective" to educate parents, and 52% of them think it would be "very effective" if public libraries started to educate adults on how to manage Internet safety for children.

Eighty-six percent of Canadian parents said they think it's "very important", and another 11% said they think it is "somewhat important" that schools improve Internet safety of children using school computers. Seventy-two percent of the parents said they think it's very important, and another 21% said they think it is "somewhat important", for libraries to do something to improve Internet safety for children using library computers.

These findings validate the new Canadian education initiative – *Web Awareness: Knowing the Issues/La toile et les jeunes : Connaitre les enjeux*, which is described in the next section of this paper.

III. An Educational Response – *Web Awareness: Knowing the Issues.*

The *Media Awareness Network* has produced an Internet awareness program entitled *Web Awareness: Knowing the Issues*. This program, which has been endorsed by the Canadian Teachers' Federation, the Canadian Home and School Federation, the Canadian Association of Principals, and the Canadian Library Association, includes professional development slide presentations for workshops, a supporting Web site, and classroom programs for students. It is being delivered across Canada through public libraries,

schools and home and school organizations. At this time, the program addresses three issues:

- *Kids for Sale* helps people understand how online marketing and privacy issues affect young people
- *Safe Passage* looks at how to help make children safe from offensive and harmful online content and online environments
- *Fact or Folly* helps young people to learn how to authenticate online information.

Further research and production of resources that address issues of copyright, online ethics and responsible online behavior will take place in the upcoming year, and as new initiatives occur, such as an international content rating system, information and practical advice for maximizing their use will be integrated as appropriate, into *MNet's* program.

The *Web Awareness* program is being delivered across Canada through a two-phased strategy.

In the first stage, it is being used for professional development by school boards and public libraries to bring teachers and librarians up to speed with the challenges that young people face when they go online. We are in full swing across Canada on this stage of the program.

In the second phase of the program, public librarians will deliver the *Web Awareness* program to library clients and to the community at large, as a pro-active measure that will situate libraries not only as a place that provides public access to the Internet, but as a place that supports informed public use of the Internet. Also, during this second phase, we anticipate that teachers will begin to integrate lessons on Internet safety and wise online conduct directly into classroom lessons for students. And finally, the hard-to-reach parent audience is being targeted through an education program delivered by the Canadian Home and School Federation and by a public service announcement campaign which will be aired this fall by Canadian broadcasters, cable services and specialty channels.

Providing a Web site, filled with information and practical tips for safe use of the Internet can only go so far in its impact. We believe that launching a public education initiative that is designed to reach adults through mediators that have integrated the program into their ongoing work – public librarians, activist parent volunteers and classroom teachers – and which is supported by a media campaign, will have a much more lasting impact.

This is not a short term program – the *Media Awareness Network* anticipates three years of sustained work through its partnerships in the library, education and parent sectors. Already, Canadian libraries servicing two-thirds of Canada's population are in the final steps of making a multi-year partnership agreement, through the Canadian Library Association, to deliver the *Web Awareness* program. Six of Canada's educational jurisdictions, representing slightly more than a third of Canadian schools have listed the

Web Awareness program as a recommended resource for professional development (in-service) for teachers, and it is anticipated that further commitments will follow shortly.

Information on the *Web Awareness* program can be found at www.webawareness.org

IV. Concluding Comments

Prior to a public release of the findings of *Canada's Children in a Wired World: The Parents' View*, we held a series of briefing sessions for national leaders in the education, library and home and school sectors in Canada, to present the key findings.

We also met with a group of industry leaders to discuss the research findings – leaders from the ISP sector, as well as from the telecommunications, cable, and traditional broadcast sectors. At this meeting, one wise person suggested that if we believed that Internet problems facing young people could only be solved at the international level, then we should get on with developing made-in-Canada strategies, so that we would have something to contribute to international discussions for solutions.

Last September, I attended the Internet Content Summit in Munich, which was hosted by the Bertelsmann Foundation. The discussion focused on ways to move forward on collaborative initiatives internationally to protect children online. The Bertelsmann Foundation articulated the pressing need for a new culture of responsibility for industry, governments, community organizations, educators and the user community, to work together to protect young people online. At the time, I thought it sounded like a worthy, though vague, and possibly impractical, goal to strive for. Now, less than a year later, I can see that through our commitment to collaboration, research and practical education, we've begun taking the first steps in our own backyard in Canada towards this goal.

In closing, I would like to thank the Commission for the opportunity to make this presentation, and to share the Canadian approach to Web literacy.

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The following documents, referred to in this paper, can be found online:

Kids on the Net: Critical Thinking Skills for Web Literacy

<http://www.media-awareness.ca/eng/med/class/kidsnet2.htm>

Regulation of the Internet: A Technological Perspective, by Gerry Miller, Gerri Sinclair, David Sutherland and Julie Zilber, March, 1999

and

Content Filtering Technologies and Internet Service Providers: Enabling User Choice, by Michael Shepherd and Carolyn Watters, March, 2000

<http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/internet>

Canada's Children in a Wired World: The Parents' View

For key findings, related research and a comparative summary of the Bertelsmann, Annenberg and Canadian studies:

<http://www.media-awareness.ca/eng/webaware/netsurvey2000/index.htm>

Web Awareness: Knowing the Issues/La toile et les jeunes : Connâître les enjeux

<http://www.webawareness.org>