

Children and online pornography – does the evidence justify calls for more regulation?

May 7 2012

Sonia Livingstone, author of [Media Regulation](#) and director of the [EU Kids Online](#) network, examines the current debate over children's access to pornography on the internet.



Findings from my EU Kids Online survey have been much quoted in the current debate over how online pornography should be regulated. But I worry about the policies that they are being used to justify. On one hand, the problems associated with online porn and children may be exaggerated. On the other hand, insofar as there is a genuine case to answer, the policy solutions on offer may not be an adequate response to harms we do not really understand. As I argue below, one difficulty is that there isn't any trusted body charged with limiting children's access to online pornography, and so opposing sides are forced to call attention to their concerns via the unsubtle language of media headlines.

My research shows that for UK 9-16 year olds :

- One quarter (24%) say that they have seen sexual images in the past 12 months, whether online or offline – this includes 16% who saw these images on television or DVD, 11% who saw them online and 5% who saw them on their phone.
- Among those children who saw online sexual images, 41% of their parents say their child hasn't seen this (although 30% recognise that they have and 29% don't know).
- Also among those children who saw online sexual images, 24% say they were bothered or upset by what they saw – or, to put it differently, 3% of UK 9-16 year olds say they have been upset by online pornography. Perhaps unsurprisingly, although 9-10 year olds are less likely to see sexual images online, they are more likely to be bothered or upset if they do see them.
- It's difficult to discover exactly what children have seen, but we did ask the 11-16 year olds about this – 8% say they have seen nudity online, 6% saw images of people having sex, 6% saw genitals and 2% saw violent sexual images.

Moreover, parents are pressing politicians to take action. New findings from EU Kids Online show that 31% of parents of 9-16 year olds 'worry a lot' about their child seeing inappropriate content on the internet. And nearly as many (30%) parents of teens worry about this as do parents of younger children (32%)

So it seems that there is a problem. But just how big it is, who is responsible and what should be done are all complex questions. The easy availability of pornography, including hard-core pornography that isn't behind a pay wall or otherwise restricted to over 18s – try typing the word 'porn' into a search engine and see what you get – marks a real change in the risks faced by children who, now, nearly all use the internet, most of them daily, mostly away from the scrutiny of their parents or teachers.

From the Daily Mail [headlines](#) (e.g. "Online porn: Now Labour joins battle for automatic ban on Internet giants 'exploiting children'") to MP Claire Perry's recent '[Independent Parliamentary Inquiry into Online Child Protection](#)', resulting in Lady Howe's proposed [bill](#), recent weeks have seen calls

on all sides for increased regulation. Whether something will be written into the long awaited Green Paper on Communications may depend on the effectiveness of industry self-regulation, and this is presently uncertain in terms of both implementation and results. What has been done so far?

- The mobile phone companies serving UK children have implemented an 'opt-in' [scheme](#) for several years now (i.e. only those who can prove they are an adult may get pornography on their phones).
- The government's [Bailey Review](#) called on the major Internet Service Providers to operate 'Active Choice', meaning that new subscribers (and, eventually, existing ones also) would be asked whether or not they wished pornography to be available online.
- Discussions are taking place to see how a similar regime might be applied to public WiFi [access](#).
- The UK Council for Child Internet Safety has [promoted](#) the wider [provision](#) of easy-to-use parental controls (i.e. optional end user filtering) as one key element of its [Click Clever, Click Safe](#) strategy.
- Most internet and mobile providers report taking down a range of content that contravenes their terms and conditions to their customers, though exactly what they take down is not transparent and plenty of online pornography is still readily available.

Some of these initiatives are more effective than others, and many anxieties remain – not just from parents but also political concerns about the effect on civil liberties and over-blocking of free speech, technical/practical concerns about the effectiveness and ease-of-use [of filters](#) (which are improving but still inadequate) and, last but not least, social concerns about take-up among ordinary families. Here the worry is that the children protected by opt-in solutions tend to be those with parents who are both confident in using the internet and conscientious in supporting their kids (in the UK, the EU Kids Online [survey](#) shows that 54% of UK parents of 9-16 year olds have installed filters at home). Since children living in disadvantaged or vulnerable circumstances may be ill-served by 'opt-in' or even 'active choice' solutions, the call by Claire Perry and others for 'opt-out' solutions (i.e. default blocking of online pornography) is clearly gaining support.

I suggest that one reason why this issue seems so prominent, so hotly contested, is that there is no established and trusted body charged with managing the availability of pornography on the internet. So those who want something done must raise their voices in the public sphere to keep online porn high on the agenda. But mass mediated debates tend also to be panicky and haphazard, and myths (e.g. of a generation of porn-addicted children) and misunderstandings (e.g. that all risk inevitably results in harm) abound.

Can there be, for the internet as for established media, a trusted body to help determine these questions (consider the work of [Ofcom](#), [BBC](#), [ASA](#) and [BBFC](#))? Both ATVOD and the IMF are working hard to establish trustworthy reputations regarding online content of specific kinds (video-on-demand and illegal child abuse content respectively), though neither has a remit to adjudicate in relation to the many websites springing up to provide free legal but explicit sexual content without any age-verification or pay wall. But remits can be extended, as the media landscape evolves, and extending the remit of any one of these bodies to help prevent or reduce children's access to pornography online – as already in place for other media – would surely allay fears and extend an already-successful regulatory strategy for the UK. It is important to note regarding current regulatory bodies that, not only are they generally trusted, but also their regulatory activities are generally evidence-based, transparent and accountable, the outcome of public consultation and deliberation. Such evidence-based deliberation is vital because matters are far more complex than any simple polarisation of civil liberties and child protection agendas would suggest. In addition to offering some facts and figures on the incidence of risk, the EU Kids Online network also argues that:

- 'Risk' is not the same as 'harm'. Rather, risk refers to the probability of harm. Seeing pornography online may be harmful to children but it may not. It depends on the nature of the

images and on the personal circumstances of the child. The minority of vulnerable children may be more at risk of harm from online pornography. Rather more may be more at risk of harm from pornography when it is abusive or degrading to women (or men). But conclusive evidence will always be **lacking** since we cannot ethically expose a random selection of children to pornography and monitor the outcomes for scientific purposes.

- Also complicating matters, risk may have positive as well as negative outcomes. For many children, some exposure to some risk is necessary to build resilience. We cannot wrap our children in cotton wool and protect them from the world forever, and we must allow our teenagers to explore their sexuality away from our often-disapproving gaze. But for some children, the same exposure may be harmful – depending on lots of factors, and this contingency – where much depends on the child, the online content, and the circumstances – cannot be avoided.

So we need strategies that allow for the complexity of the situation, and that's difficult in a heated debate with strong views on all sides. Currently, no-one bears the responsibility for this issue – so that would be my starting point. Give the problem of online pornography to Ofcom or ATVOD or another trusted body, and focus on managing what children in this country have access to, rather than who has jurisdiction over the source of the content. Then at least there would be a trusted organisation who could commission some research, ensure an inclusive debate, set a workable balance between the responsibility of industry and of parents, sidestep the heated realms of both the media and parliament, and reach a settlement whose outcome and effectiveness can be independently monitored.

Sonia Livingstone is Head of the Department of Media and Communications at the LSE.



About Sonia Livingstone

Sonia Livingstone is Professor of Social Psychology and Head of the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is author or editor of fourteen books and many academic articles and chapters. Her research examines children, young people and the internet; social and family contexts and uses of ICT; media and digital literacies; the mediated public sphere; audience reception for diverse television genres; internet use and policy; public understanding of communications regulation; and research methods in media and communications. Sonia Livingstone directs a 25-country network, EU Kids Online, for the EC's Safer Internet Programme. She serves on the Executive Board of the UK's Council for Child Internet Safety, and has, at various times, served on the Department of Education's Ministerial Taskforce for Home Access to Technology for Children, Ofcom's Media Literacy Research Forum, the Voice of the Listener and Viewer, and the Internet Watch Foundation. She has advised Ofcom, Department for Children, Schools and Families, Home Office, Economic and Social Research Council, BBC, The Byron Review on children's online risk, and Higher Education Funding Council for England. She was President of the International Communication Association (2007-8) and continues to serve on ICA's Executive Committee.