

Inquiry of the Lords Select Committee on Communications

The Internet: To Regulate or Not To Regulate?

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) and Self-Esteem Team (SET)

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents over 19,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary phase. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.
2. The Self-Esteem Team (SET) was founded in 2013 by Nadia Mendoza and Grace Barrett and over the last five years they have toured the UK's schools and worked with tens of thousands of young people, to help equip them with tools to navigate their mental health, manage the relationship with their bodies, and build self-esteem including how they behave and relate to social media.
3. ASCL and SET have jointly considered the impact of social media use by children and young people, children and young people's safety and mental health and regulation of the internet, particularly social media.
4. This hugely relevant issue is of crucial importance to us from both a school leader's and a young person's point of view. Both organisations welcome this inquiry in respect of regulating the internet for use by children and young people because we believe that for many children and young people this is an important issues that needs urgent attention.
5. School and college leaders and young people agree that social media can be a force for good but acknowledge that it also has a dark side. While it can help young people (and adults) connect with others in a positive way it is a technology which has grown at great speed without educators, parents, policy makers or indeed children and young people themselves understanding what the implications may be for their relationships, safety and mental health and wellbeing or how their data may be used now or in the future.
6. The recent stories about Facebook data harvesting call into focus huge questions about personal information and privacy and stories such as the Toby Young saga over his appointment to the Board of the Office for Students show clearly what one may have said on social media in the past could impact on a person's future chances

and opportunities. Children and young people have grown up with social media but there is no clarity as to how this information could impact on them in the future.

7. We believe that as a society there needs to be a much greater understanding of how social media can impact on us all and particularly on children and young people and we need clear strategies for how to mitigate against the negative impacts. These effects can be around wellbeing, mental health and self-esteem as well child protection and safeguarding and privacy now and in the long term.
8. ASCL members and young people themselves want government and the technology companies to do more to protect young people and to help them to develop healthy relationships on and offline so that they can enjoy social media safely and responsibly.
9. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) surveyed 460 secondary school headteachers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in January 2018. These headteachers lead a wide range of schools in both the state and independent sectors¹. They were asked about the impact on pupils of social media use over the past 12 months. The results are stark and unequivocal:
 - 95% felt that the mental health and wellbeing of a proportion of their pupils had suffered as a result of social media use.
 - 39% said more than half of their pupils were affected. 460 responded to the question 'Do you think the mental health and wellbeing of pupils has suffered as a result of social media use over the past 12 months?'

No pupils affected	0.00%	0
1% to 10% of pupils affected	5.87%	27
11% to 25% of pupils affected	20.87%	96
26% to 50% of pupils affected	29.57%	136
51% to 75% of pupils affected	21.52%	99
75% to 90% of pupils affected	12.17%	56
More than 90% of pupils affected	5.00%	23
Don't know	5.00%	23

 - Almost all (459/460) had received reports of pupils being bullied on social media and 40% said incidents were reported on a daily or weekly basis.
 - Almost all (457/460) had received reports of pupils encountering upsetting material on social media – such as sexual content, self-harm, bullying, or hate speech, with 27% saying such incidents were reported on a daily or weekly basis.
 - 89% had received reports of pupils being approached by strangers on social media sites.
 - 93% had received reports of pupils experiencing low self-esteem as a result of seeing idealised images and experiences on social media, with 22% saying that pupils reported such feelings on a daily or weekly basis.

¹ In January 2018 ASCL carried out an online survey circulated by email to the headteachers of secondary schools in England, Northern Ireland and Wales in. It was completed by 460 respondents. Most respondents (420) are from schools in England, with 25 from Wales, and 15 from Northern Ireland. They are from a wide range of schools including academies (48%), maintained schools (23%), independent schools (11%) and grammars (7%). For more information please contact richard.bettsworth@ascl.org.uk

- 96% had received reports of pupils missing out on sleep as a result of social media use, with 32% saying they received such reports on a daily or weekly basis.
 - 93% said that new laws and regulation should be introduced to ensure social media sites keep children safe
 - 77% said the government and social media companies should produce more information for parents.
10. In the survey, headteachers described a wide range of activities in their schools to teach children to stay safe and well online. These include personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) and IT lessons, discussion sessions, speakers and seminars, assemblies, and dedicated awareness days.
11. Headteachers said social media misuse occurs outside of school but the problems it causes then spill over into school time and distract young people from learning.
12. Many felt that parents should take more responsibility and needed more information about how to keep their children safe online.
13. Headteachers also reported how social media misuse led to severe welfare issues, such as young people self-harming.
14. Individual headteacher comments:
- “Whilst the school educates students and imposes limits of acceptable use, many parents are unable or unwilling to apply limits at home. A very small number of parents also behave badly on social media. When the school arranges e-safety meetings for parents there is very limited attendance. A national campaign to educate parents and alert them to the dangers of social media would support the education that is happening in schools for students.”
 - “Far too frequently parents join in with trolling or abuse incidents or model abusive or harmful social media behaviour to their children themselves; the classic example being parents wading in on social media with threats of violence or confrontation to 'protect' their own child.”
 - “The number of issues the school is having to resolve weekly and sometimes daily as a result of bullying through social media that occurs outside of school, has increased rapidly and substantially. Not only does this have a detrimental effect on the well-being of individual pupils, but it also is having an impact on learning and progress and is diverting valuable and scarce resources away from the classroom.”
 - “We regularly have to deal with peer conflict, which often extends amongst families and the wider community and which has started on social media out of school hours. This not only takes up valuable resources, but also detracts from our main purpose of educating young people.”
 - “Pupils' use of social media has accelerated in the past five years and at the same time, reporting of mental health issues, self-harming and threatened suicide have increased. Five years ago our safeguarding log had one entry per week at most - now it is daily.”

- “We have seen a big increase in cases of self-harm related to the use of social media. When in the past the first weeks after a break used to be quiet they are now much worse as pupils seek to settle arguments that have been enhanced over the holidays.”

15. In March 2018 SET put out a call on social media to garner thoughts from young people about what they love and loathe about social media. Some of the responses both positive and negative are reproduced below:

- ‘I actually have friends now! Proper actual ones whose birthday parties I go to who come to stay and it’s nice.’
- ‘It was Tumblr blogs that got me through the hell that was ‘coming out’. I had no LGBTQ+ education or community except for online.’
- ‘I found amazing opportunities through social media.’
- ‘I use twitter/blogs for screaming into the void.’
- ‘I have so many support networks I couldn’t get through without. Especially in the absence of professional help.’
- ‘There should be more info on block and mute functions. Social media was used by people I knew to tell me to injure or kill myself for being gay and there was nothing anyone could do either to support me or to deal with it. It’s also easy to find pro self-harm/ana/mia sites when searching for help.’
- ‘I always wanted more info on how social media and marketing interact.’
- ‘It is good for creative inspiration and feeling connected with the world but it can make you feel lonely or insufficient. It’s also good to pass time when you feel like doing nothing but can be a distraction at other times.’
- ‘Positive =uplifting pages like this one negative=there are loads it’s awkward I believe because this depends on what you allow and keep around starting with "friends" "mum friends " that are actually putting you more down and just being generally fake with no real "support" for you in mind to my surprise I've had more support from total strangers than people in my friends list and to realise that I was actually used to those bullies coz they wore a mask called friend or family’
- I think that social media platforms need more moderators online to remove comments, picture... that could be seen as offensive or hurtful to someone else.
- Definitely agree with previous comments about community and finding like-minded people. On the flip side, it can make you feel more alone; if you compare yourself to others/don't belong to an online 'group' you can feel left out. In a social/school setting more, so young people are thinking about it more consciously instead of being subject to the subconscious thoughts it gives

16. In October, the government launched a strategy to make Britain “the safest place in the world to be online” with proposals for a voluntary code of practice for social media providers.

17. You can see from the ASCL survey that headteachers are not convinced that a voluntary code will be sufficient with 93% saying that new laws and regulation should be introduced to ensure social media sites keep children safe. We believe that such a code is needed and it should be mandatory backed up by an independent regulator.
18. In the autumn 2017 crossbencher Baroness Beeban Kidron put forward an amendment to the Data Protection Bill calling for technology companies to be subject to “minimum standards of age-appropriate design”. Her amendments won the support of senior politicians across the political spectrum as well as respected children’s organisations including NSPCC, Parent Zone, YoungMinds, the Anti-Bullying Alliance, Child Health Information Services and the Children’s Commissioner.
19. The proposed amendments which would have required the Information Commissioner to create guidance after consultation which could include:
- high privacy settings by default for child users
 - not revealing their GPS location and minimal use of their data
 - not sending notifications during school hours or sleep hours
 - deactivating features designed to promote extended use
 - making sure commercially driven content is visible to and understood by a minor
 - reporting processes with an end-point and a reasonable expectation of resolution
20. Proposals such as those listed above look very sensible to us. They were withdrawn with a promise from government to further develop its internet safety strategy with the government minister Lord Ashton of Hyde referring to the governments Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper consultation and we are aware that government is currently analysing the feedback to this. We consider that a voluntary duty on the technology industry will not be enough.
21. While we recognise that the government is trying to find solutions we are not convinced that the current proposals go far enough. We would like to explore the options for more stringent safeguards and more public information for parents.

22. Answers to your questions (note we have not answered all Qs as we do not have the expertise to do so).

Q1 Is there a need to introduce specific regulation for the internet? Is it desirable or possible?

For the reasons stated in this response we believe that it is necessary to introduce specific regulation for child users of the internet particularly on social media platforms and any platform where they are able to connect with other people.

Q3 How effective, fair and transparent are online platforms in moderating content that they host? What processes should be implemented for individuals who wish to reverse decisions to moderate content? Who should be responsible for overseeing this?

We do not believe that online platforms are moderating content in a sufficiently rigorous way as evidenced both by what school leaders and children say as outlined above. We supported Baroness Beeban Kidron’s amendment described above which would have had the Information Commissioner create guidance after consultation but we are not experts on how this should be done.

Q4 What role should users play in establishing and maintaining online community standards for content and behaviour?

In the case of children and young people we think that self-moderation must only be part of the picture.

23. ASCL has also responded to the government consultation on Changes to the teaching of Sex and Relationship Education and Personal, Social and Health Education² ASCL members agree that schools should be teaching pupils about internet safety including the risks of accessing online pornography as well as teaching them what they need to know to be safe online, beyond what is already in the computing curriculum. But schools and colleges cannot do this work in a vacuum. ASCL has also responded to Transforming children and young people's mental health provision: a green paper³.
24. We do not have all the answers but we believe that a debate about the impact of social media on children and young people and the lack of its regulation that includes the views of children and young people is much needed. The evidence from our members and young people themselves clearly indicates that we should not carry on as we are.
25. I hope that this is of value to your consultation, ASCL and SET are willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

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² The ASCL response can be found here; <https://www.ascl.org.uk/utilities/document-summary.html?id=40F4CE91-B129-4BAB-8B3843BD40C7EE88>

³ The ASCL response can be found here; https://www.ascl.org.uk/policy/consultation-responses_news-detail.transforming-children-and-young-people-s-mental-health-provision-a-green-paper.html