# 6

# Other significant cyber-safety complexities

6.1 In addition to the cyber-threats set out in the two previous chapters, a number of other online concerns were raised in the evidence.

6.2 This chapter considers the validity of the term 'technological-addiction' and the online promotion of undesirable and/or illegal behaviours and practices, which may include exposure to violent and sexually violent online games as well as sites promoting suicide, self harm, anorexia and drug/alcohol abuse.

## 'Technology addictions'

6.3 Parents/carers are becoming more aware of the time children spend online.[1] Addiction to various forms of technology is seen by some parents/carers as a problem for some of their adolescents. Gaming is seen as a 'really big issue' for many young boys, for whom it is their social networking site.[2]

6.4 For example, a concerned parent wrote about a child who, like some of his friends, is 'games obsessed; his behaviour in relation to computer gaming looks like addictive behaviour.' They engage virtually via gaming consoles connected to the Internet. Many of the games are M-rated. The M15 games some children play, despite their ages, were supplied by their parents. They play 'for many hours each day', longer when not at school, and 'live

---

1   Mr Craig Scroggie, Vice President and Managing Director, Asia Pacific Region, Symantec Corporation, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 July 2010, p. CS3.

2   Dr Judith Slocombe, Chief Executive Officer, Alannah and Madeline Foundation, *Transcript of Evidence*, 11 June 2010, p. CS48.

talk' takes place as they play. The well-being of children when they are 'playing' together in such violent environments is a matter for concern.[3]

6.5    The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists stated that 'problematic Internet use' (PIU) was first described in the late 1990s through case studies and scientific papers. At present, there is no official recognition of PIU by authorities or psychiatrists in the United States, Europe or Australia. China and other East Asian countries, who consider it a major public health concern, recognise it and provide extensive government funds for research and treatment.[4]

6.6    Although it is clear that there are significant impacts on some people, the College noted active debate about the recognition and classification of PIU. This included whether it merited inclusion in the forthcoming (2012) Fifth Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. The term 'technology addiction' has negative and derogatory connotations, is scientifically incorrect and could lead to panic or undue worry. The College recommended that the term 'problematic Internet use' be used in place of 'technology addiction(s)' wherever possible.[5]

6.7    Appearing for the Australian Psychological Society, Dr McGrath confirmed that there is pressure, particularly in Asian journals, for adding 'technology addiction' to the list in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. She did not believe that it is a different manifestation, and noted that there did not seem to be any evidence it is widespread.[6]

6.8    The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition referred to the promotion and sensationalising of internet addiction in the media and the lack of clinical validity.[7] Similarly, the Alannah and Madeline Foundation noted that, while there is a large commentary on the subject in the media, there is at present neither sound research evidence nor convincing theoretical support for such a syndrome:

> Although a small number of writers and researchers (the commentary particularly from writers in China, Taiwan and Korea) claim that this is an identifiable behavioural syndrome, there is neither sound research evidence nor convincing theoretical support for such a syndrome at this time. It has been suggested

---

3    Anonymous correspondence received on 14 December 2010.

4    Royal Australian & New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, *Submission 120*, pp. 5, 8.

5    Royal Australian & New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, *Submission 120*, pp. 5, 8.

6    Dr Helen McGrath, Psychologist, Australian Psychological Society, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 December 2010, pp. CS63-64.

7    Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, *Submission 28*, p. 6.

that 'internet addiction' is a term that has been promoted and sensationalised by the media but so far has little clinical validity.[8]

6.9     Professor Sheryl Hemphill expressed the view that it was not clear how prevalent this addiction was, or whether it did exist.[9] In its submission, the Murdoch Children's Research Institute drew attention to the debate about its existence, and to the amount of information about 'technology addiction'. It noted that, while further research is required, an array of responses was also required to deal with the problem.[10]

6.10    The Alannah and Madeline Foundation also noted that there had been speculation that some unique aspects of the Internet may lure people into difficulties that they might otherwise avoid, such as online gambling and accessing pornographic sites. There is no research evidence that a passion for the Internet is long lasting, or that excessive usage is not simply a reflection of other social problems. Moreover, many of the strongest proponents for establishing a separate category of Internet addiction had some commercial interest in doing so. At some later time, however, excessive Internet usage may be given as another example of an Impulse Control Disorder, such as gambling, kleptomania, pyromania, etc.[11]

6.11    While there are examples of young people who become 'addicted' to online activities such as Facebook or online games, it is necessary to be more aware of what they did online rather than blocking or only allowing access to specific sites.[12]

6.12    Mr Geordie Guy stated that, when individuals ignore pressing life problems by immersing themselves in online games or other online behaviour, this habit itself does not reflect problems with the online behaviour. Rather, these are symptoms of social problems.[13]

6.13    Mr Bruce Arnold believed that the notion of what he called 'cyber-addiction' had been strongly promoted by some therapists, tabloid journalists and totalitarian governments. He suggested that some adolescents had an over-engagement with electronic games or the Internet, in the same way that others over-engage with sport, comics, TV or a range of other activities.  He also noted that there is very little

---

8    Alannah and Madeline Foundation, *Submission 22*, p. 24.
9    Associate Professor Sheryl Hemphill, Senior Research Fellow, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 December 2010, p. CS21.
10   Murdoch Children's Research Institute: *Submission 111*, p. 3.
11   Alannah and Madeline Foundation, *Submission 22*, pp. 25- 26.
12   Mr John Pitcher, Director of Strategic Business Development, Netbox Blue, *Transcript of Evidence*, 8 July 2010, p. CS17.
13   Mr Geordie Guy *Submission 105*, p. 10.

recognition within medical and legal communities of 'television addiction, videogame addiction or cyber-addiction', suggesting that these are essentially 'phantom disorders'.[14]

6.14   The Internet Industry Association quoted American research that urged proponents of safety education to study the history of youth drug and alcohol abuse prevention. It noted 'striking similarities' in the contexts of the two initiatives and the intensity of public concern. There were 'parallels in the eagerness to prevent Internet victimisation with the early, rushed efforts to prevent youth drug abuse' in the 1970s and 1980s. It was argued that such messages did little to change behaviour.[15]

6.15   The Consultative Working Group on Cybersafety, however, considered that computer gaming addictions are likely to be significant and have serious implications for Australian society. It stated that over-use of video games is most commonly seen among massive multiplayer online role playing game players, 'who can be somewhat marginalised socially'.[16]

## Online gambling

6.16   While also not included in the Terms of Reference for this Inquiry, access to online gambling raises concerns for young people.

6.17   The past ten years has seen greatly increased and sophisticated ways for individuals to gamble, including access to 24-hour gambling through the Internet, mobile phones and interactive television. According to the Australian Psychological Society, there is evidence that young people are significantly more likely to participate in most forms of gambling, except lotteries and bingo, than older people.  It believed that under-age gambling is 'particularly common': about 60 percent of those 13 to 17 years old reported gambling at least once a year.[17] While gambling on interactive sites, such as online casinos, is not legal in Australia, use of the Internet for approved gambling on, for example, sporting events is allowed.[18]

6.18   The Youth Affairs Council of South Australia stated:

---

14   Mr Bruce Arnold, *Submission 60*, p. 5.
15   Internet Industry Association, *Submission 88*, pp. 5-6.
16   Consultative Working Group on Cybersafety, *Submission 113*, p. 14.
17   Australian Psychological Society, *Submission 90*, p. 11.
18   Mr David d'Lima, South Australia State Officer, Family Voice Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 February 2011, p. CS53.

> In light of this, and the fact that there is still some debate as to whether internet addiction should be a diagnosable condition, YACSA will refrain from offering specific comment on the efficacy or otherwise of potential treatments for internet "addiction." However, we note with interest developments overseas, for example a dedicated technology addiction clinic in the UK28, and would encourage the government, in conjunction with the non-government sector, to explore these developments as well as any methodologies that specifically confront excessive and damaging technology use in young people.[19]

## Violence

6.19    The Victorian Office of the Child Safety Commissioner noted that the high level of sexualised imagery and violence in computer and online games is currently being considered in the Minister for Home Affairs discussion paper .[20] The Alannah and Madeline Foundation commented:

> Many children have unrestricted access to violence on the internet, through a variety of media, including videos, and violent games. Recent studies show that increased access to violence normalises this behaviour within young people's social groups and can in a minority of cases lead to increased levels of violent behaviour.[21]

6.20    The Association of Parents and Friends of ACT Schools referred to the lack of 'shockability' due to desensitising through exposure.[22] Similarly, Ms Catherine Davis from the Australian Education Union commented:

> The harm that is being done by the promotion of violence through some of those games, not only violence per se, but also sexual violence in the sorts of computer games that are out there at the moment are mindboggling, and the effect that that has on both boys and girls and issues of online addiction and gaming and those sorts of things should be thrown into the mix today.[23]

---

19    Youth Affairs Council of South Australia, *Supplementary Submission 25.1*, p. 12.

20    Victorian Office of the Child Safety Commissioner,  *Submission 30*, p. 3.

21    Alannah and Madeline Foundation, *Submission 22*, p. 23.

22    Ms Kate Lyttle, Secretary, Australian Parents Council, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 June 2010, p. CS25.

23    Ms Catherine Davis, Federal Women's Officer, Australian Education Union, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 June 2010, p. CS25.

6.21    Concern was also expressed in relation to online advertising and the games available on line and it was suggested that legislative restrictions be considered.[24] The Australian Psychological Society advised:

> The evidence strongly suggests that exposure to violent video games is a causal risk factor for increased aggressive behaviour, aggressive cognition, and aggressive affect, and for decreased empathy and pro-social behaviour.[25]

# Online promotion of inappropriate behaviours

6.22    Inappropriate social and health behaviours promoted in the online environment can include under-age drinking, drug use, suicide and anorexia.

## Online availability of alcohol

6.23    NSW considered the issue of underage access to alcohol via the Internet in 2001. To address concerns, reforms were made requiring NSW-based licensees selling liquor over the Internet:

- To display liquor licence numbers prominently on their websites, and in any advertisement connected with Internet sales;

- To display a notice stating that it was an offence to sell, supply or obtain liquor on behalf of someone under 18 years of age;

- Prospective purchasers to supply their dates of birth; and

- Give written instructions to the person delivering the liquor requiring delivery to the adult who placed the order, or to another adult at the premises who undertakes to accept it on behalf of the person who placed the order.

6.24    These and other provisions were included in the *Liquor Act 2007* (NSW). NSW liquor laws cannot be used to regulate liquor sellers' activities if they were not located within that State.[26]

---

24    Ms Dianne Butland, Executive Member, State Council, Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales, *Transcript of Evidence*, 30 June 2010, p. CS 34.

25    Australian Psychological Society, *Submission 90*, p. 10.

26    NSW Government, *Submission 94*, pp. 11-12.

## Online availability of drugs

6.25    The Australian Customs and Border Protection Service noted that a range of prohibited goods, including illicit drugs, can be ordered via the online environment, in addition to:

- Guides to using/preparing drugs and expected experiences;

- Guides on making narcotics with household items, including concealing them and avoiding attention from law enforcement;

- Detailed instructions on constructing explosive devices and improvised firearms;

- Use of over-the-counter drugs to produce a desired effect;

- Techniques for obtaining requirements for the production of narcotics, including theft; and

- Advice on the use of money transfer services when buying pharmaceuticals overseas.[27]

## Suicide

6.26    Although not included in the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, online encouragement of suicide was a concern raised by some participants. Distribution of material that counsels, promotes or provides instruction on methods of suicide is illegal.[28]

6.27    The Alannah and Madeline Foundation noted that pro-suicide sites contain 'more than detailed' information on how to commit suicide. Many incite the reader to 'end the pain', to 'achieve the bliss of death'. Others hector and harass the reader, telling her/him how worthless their life is and how worthwhile it will be to end it.[29]

6.28    Family Voice Australia argued that the basic principles of law should apply to the online environment as they apply to human communities in general. If necessary, the nature of this environment may require specific applications of these principles to ensure that they are applied effectively in a particular context.[30]

---

27    Australian Customs and Border Protection Service, *Submission 109*, pp. 4-5.
28    Attorney-General's Department, *Submission 58*, p. 6.
29    Alannah and Madeline Foundation, *Submission 22*, pp. 22-23.
30    Family Voice Australia*: Submission 50*, p. 2.

6.29    Family Voice Australia drew attention to the suicide of two young people, in Melbourne in 2007, who had followed detailed instructions from a suicide website in the Netherlands. It believed that if young people were to be protected from harm, it had to be recognised that the online environment internationalised things such as the encouragement or promotion of suicide.[31]

6.30    Family Voice Australia are critical of the adequacy of the current 'take-down' orders which do not protect young people from harm on sites hosted overseas, and that Australian laws were 'lagging behind'.[32] headspace added that:

> There are potential dangers with tribute pages when a person has suicided. We have found in the situation where a young person has suicided, the tribute page inadvertently glamorises suicide. Some pages also give details of the way the person killed themselves.[33]

6.31    headspace suggested the establishment of a set of guidelines in relation to the reporting of suicide on-line and especially for social networking sites. headspace suggested this could be an extension of the current Mindframe National Media Initiative.[34]

## Anorexia

6.32    Open question forums provide a range of advice from bloggers on a range of subjects, including anorexia and drug usage.[35] For example, a simple search via Google leads to 'anorexia tips', and these included 'the thin commandments'.[36] The Alannah and Madeline Foundation stated:

> Another content risk for children and young people are sites advocating for a range of unhealthy life choices, including pro-anorexia (pro-Ana) sites. A quick search brings up dozens of such sites, many of which offer 'thinspirational' tips such as 'creeds', motivation, tips and tricks and advice on how to stay thin.[37]

31   Family Voice Australia: *Submission 50*, p. 3; Mr Richard Egan, National Policy Officer, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 December 2010, p. CS53.

32   Mr Richard Egan, National Policy Officer, Family Voice Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 9 December 2010, p. CS53.

33   headspace, *Submission 127*, p. 4.

34   headspace, *Submission 127*, p. 4.

35   Alannah and Madeline Foundation, *Submission 22*, p. 23.

36   Mr David d'Lima, South Australia State Officer, Family Voice Australia, *Transcript of Evidence*, 3 February 2011, p. CS52; Alannah and Madeline Foundation, *Submission 22*, p. 22.

37   Alannah and Madeline Foundation, *Submission 22*, p. 22.

6.33    It was also noted that the Internet can provide a source of information assistance and support for people contemplating these behaviours:

> Exposure to promotion of inappropriate behaviours can have negative implications for young people but equally the Internet provides a safe space for young people experiencing difficulty to express their views and access support online. Responses to this issue need to focus on helping young people to develop coping mechanisms and be aware of support available from parents and services in the community.[38]

6.34    Internet service providers also have in place some measures in relation to these sites:

> Facebook employs a reporting infrastructure to prevent self-harm content on their pages, wherein content is reviewed by the Facebook team and removed if necessary. MySpace also takes proactive steps to prevent self-harm material appearing on its users' profiles and encourages groups to help with recovery from eating disorder problems. MySpace's Terms of Use prohibits material promoting eating disorders and self-harm. MySpace bans and removes content that "promotes or otherwise incites…physical harm against any group or individual." These are just a few examples of how some global companies work to protect children from harmful content online.[39]

## Committee views

6.35    It must be recognised that, for most users most of the time, the online environment is a prominent, useful and important part of their lives. In considering any changes to current structures and practices, it is important to seek to reduce risks for the protection of all users, rather than introducing onerous restrictions in an attempt to protect the minority. It is also important to address causes of abuses rather than their symptoms.

6.36    To be effective, cooperative national solutions must be devised and implemented. Improvements for all users must be drawn together to involve professionals (such as researchers, teachers, police, youth workers), parents/carers and, most importantly, young people. Above all, best practice must be implemented.

38    Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, *Submission 28*, p. 6.
39    Family Online Safety Institute, *Submission 38*, p. 7.

6.37    Conclusions about the means of correcting abuses, and the recommendations that may follow from them, will therefore be addressed later in this Report.