



ASSOCIATION
OF HEADS OF
INDEPENDENT
SCHOOLS OF
AUSTRALIA

The Secretary
Mr James Catchpole
Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety
R1-109 Parliament House
P O Box 6021
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr Catchpole

INQUIRY INTO CYBER-SAFETY

Response by the Social Issues Committee of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA)

The environment in which students operate today is very different to that in which they operated in a decade ago. Digital communication is now extremely sophisticated, and this makes an additional range of opportunities available to students, and at the same time presents a number of issues which have negative implications.

I refer to these issues which need to be addressed by the Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety.

1. THE PERMANENCY OF INCORPORATED INFORMATION

Students need to understand that in incorporating material on to any social digital network, the material is incorporated "for life". Even if it is deleted from the network in question, it is likely that it will have been loaded on to other networks in a matter of milliseconds, and will be spread from one network to another with uncontrollable speed. Clearing material from one network may therefore not result in the clearing of material within all networks.

2. FREEDOM OF PUBLICATION

Students should be aware that total freedom of speech does not exist in Australia (as it does in the USA). Within this context it is very important to be mindful of the nature of comments made about other people. Any defamatory comments or inappropriate photographs are counter to the use agreements required to be acknowledged prior to using a particular network. Such breaches of agreements may be followed by removal from the network by the managers of the network. Comments which are highly defamatory may attract legal sanction.

3. MINORS AND AGREEMENTS

There is potentially an issue relating to minors (i.e. young people under the age of 18) being involved in signing up to the terms of an agreement associated with a social digital network. Is it legal for a minor, to be able to be made subject to the terms of an agreement, in the same way in which an adult is? What is the legal implication of a minor who "signs up" to a particular digital network usage agreement?

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4. BULLYING

Social digital networks open a range of possibilities for cyber-bullying to occur. This can take the form of defamatory comments or inappropriate photographs. It may also be conveyed through incessant, unwelcomed comments which are constantly up loaded onto a digital network. There is a strong possibility that this may be viewed (hurtfully) by the person about whom the comments are made, and by a whole host of people who are also connected to the digital network. Strategies for the safe and appropriate use of such sites would be a useful addition to both government publications and social network websites.

5. BLOCKS TO VIEWING INAPPROPRIATE MATERIAL

Many schools adopt a policy of actively blocking the access by students to inappropriate material. This is certainly a "fail-safe" method of approaching this continual problem. Other schools take the stance that students should be allowed to monitor their own access to digital material. These schools make it very explicit, as to what kind of material, students should not be accessing (e.g. pornographic or sexually explicit material). Such schools entrust decision making in relation to this aspect to their students, and expect them to only access appropriate material. It is common practice for these schools to also carry out regular checks on sites accessed by students, and in the event that students have "strayed" into inappropriate territory, severe consequences may result (e.g. suspension or school probation). This latter approach is adopted to educate students about inappropriate cyber use, and not to merely block.

An overriding philosophy taken on by schools emphasising the educative approach is to allow students to make mistakes within a safe environment. Within the world of the workplace, the consequences for accessing inappropriate material would be of a far more severe nature.

In conclusion, I commend the work of the Australian Parliament Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety and offer the above issues as being worthy of consideration.

Yours sincerely

For E R Tudor
Chair of the National Social Issues Committee of AHISA

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