



Westminster eForum: Next steps for online regulation

Latest progress on identifying and tackling key challenges online: initiatives, intervention and education.

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We have not made the progress we need to

I don't often find myself arguing that we need more regulation and legislation. But that's what I'll do today. Because, despite all our best intentions, industry has proved unable to provide a coherent or comprehensive response to the raft of challenges that the online world has created.

The evidence is clear.

At the very worst extremes of social harm, the extent and severity of child sexual abuse online continues to increase. The last IWF Annual Report showed a 37% increase in URLs that provide access to those images and the worst (category A) content is up by 5%.

At the same time, social media companies have struggled to self-regulate the many different forms of harmful and offensive content that appear on their platforms. One third of 12-15 year olds in Britain say they have encountered sexist, racist or discriminatory content online. And it's not reasonable to expect the social platforms to make all the judgement calls themselves about when this is ok and when it's not. That isn't what we expect of any other sort of media company. That's why we have independent regulators.

In economic and commercial terms, regulation is also messy. There is still no real clarity about the extent to which online platforms should be liable for protecting the copyright of creative companies and individuals whose content they host. And there are wildly different regulatory standards in play. So that when Amazon buy a package of Premier League rights the that applies is different to what its competitors - Sky and BT - face.

And we can add to all of this a set of wider regulatory anxieties, all unresolved, about whether the digital advertising market works effectively, the extent to which user data is being used to create and defend market power, and what the regulatory and ethical standards ought to be for the future use of AI.

In that context, the strands of current Government activity are very welcome - including last week's Furman review on competition in digital markets, the Cairncross recommendations on sustainable journalism, and the imminent White Paper on Online Harms. But there is a risk that these are disparate and disconnected when what we need is a single framework to pull them all together and re-think the regulatory system in a more fundamental way.

BT itself has invested a lot of time and money in trying to address the challenges of the online world. But there are limits to what we - or any ISP - can do.

Between our brands - BT, EE, and Plusnet - we have more than 9 million broadband customers with nearly one third of these customers being households with children. And 19 million more mobile customers, with around a quarter of these customers in households with children.

To a large extent, our focus has been on trying to make sure those children are protected from the worst excesses of harmful content that appear online.

We do that in three ways.

First, we work closely with the National Crime Agency and other law enforcement organisations - to do whatever we can to help them use our technology to pursue the criminals who perpetrate and disseminate child sexual abuse online. Second, we try to provide our own customers with appropriate protections, filters and options to shield them from harmful and offensive content:

- We were a founding member of the Internet Watch Foundation and worked with it to develop "Cleanfeed", the world's first system for blocking online child-abuse images. We have since made the technology available free to other ISPs across the world.

- We provide parents with filtering tools such as parental controls for both fixed broadband and mobile customers, and we promote awareness and take-up of those tools.
- We are now looking to develop new technology that can help ensure that younger children gain parental consent before they make certain categories of online purchases and downloads.
- As a precursor to that, we will shortly begin to block our customers' access to any pornographic websites that do not comply with the new age verification requirements of the Digital Economy Act. That should help to prevent children accidentally accessing unsuitable content.
- We already allow our major wifi customers – companies like Starbucks - to block pornographic material that could be viewed over the free public wi-fi that is provided in spaces such as cafes, restaurants and shopping centres.

Third, we invest in wider efforts to promote better education and awareness of the dangers that exist online. Because we know that the focus of parental anxiety, in particular, has shifted. It is now less about porn and about more about a wider set of online behaviours including bullying, grooming and sexting. And whether kids have the resilience to navigate a world where many of them put almost their whole lives online, all the time.

Some of the work that we have done together with Baroness Kidron and 5Rights, for example, illustrates the risks of addiction. Companies targeting children at a very early age in order to suck them in to their service. Problems with gaming and other compulsive behaviour affecting children's' mental health and their sleep patterns.

BT and the other major ISPs – Sky, TalkTalk and Virgin – have invested more than £6m in setting up and supporting an organisation called Internet Matters to educate parents about how to keep children safe online. There are over 2.6m visits each year to the Internet Matters online portal. After visiting, 76% of parents say they are more likely to talk to their child about keeping safe online, and 84% of parents feel better prepared to handle issues that might come up in the future.

And alongside Internet Matters, we also fund and manage Barefoot Computing - a partnership with British Computer Society. This provides primary school teachers with free resources to help them deliver the computing curriculum, preparing their pupils for the digital world. It includes simple games that help children to understand how to keep safe online and protect their personal data. Over 2 million children have been reached through 70,000 teachers in over 60% of primary schools across UK.

But we need to recognise that changes in the market have been far more fundamental than the response from industry and government.

The traditional ISP model is not about hosting content. We provide our customers with access to content produced by others - by enabling people to transmit data and information across our networks. That allows us to act as an intermediary, blocking and filtering content.

Newer digital business models are totally different. They depend on the hosting of user-generated content and the accumulation and monetisation of users' data; but they do not accept liability for that content in the way that any traditional media company would.

Regulation and legislation needs to catch up and get ahead.

It may be that the current set-up of regulators and their duties needs to be re-thought entirely if we are to make competition, consumer protection and content regulation effective in a market dominated by global digital platforms.

There are some challenges for all of us to take on

We need to join things up. There are more than 20 organisations out there that aim to protect children online in one way or another. There is obvious potential to have more impact by working together.

We need to think ahead. The market will not stop moving. For example, as things stand, the next generation of web browsers will not automatically allow web blocking and parental controls. We need to keep on top of these developments.

We need to level the playing field. For media companies in particular, this is crucial – given the need to compete for customers and for ad revenues. But it's important for democracy, too, that we find ways of supporting and promoting high quality, well-regulated journalism and helping people to understand where to find it and how to differentiate it from the deeper pool of gossip and opinion.

We need to rethink the regulatory structure. The House of Lords Select Committee pointed out that there are 12 separate existing regulators operating in this space. There is clearly scope to rationalise.

Finally, we need to empower as well as protect. The original West Coast ethic of the internet as a totally free and private space may not work in today's marketplace. But there are dangers too in trying to over-regulate or over-protect every aspect of the online world. The freedoms and potential brought by online innovation – including social media – are astonishing and liberating for millions of people, and must be protected. For children in particular there are big differences between the options parents may need to help manage their 8 year-old's internet use and what's appropriate or helpful for a 15 year-old. At BT, we have had some long-running internal debates about some of this, and we are still working to try to find the right balance for our customers.

Of course, it's easier to point all of this out than it is to find ways to solve these problems, but there is an increasingly urgent need to do so.