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# Seductions of risk and school cyberspace

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Drawing upon the cultural risk perspective and writings on risk taking, this paper seeks to develop ideas relating to the effective use of school cyberspace. It is argued that some individuals respond to exaggerated, yet seductive, discourses of online risks by over-blocking, unreasonably restricting students' Internet activity. At the same time, there are sensible, even compelling, motivations for teachers as well as students to use the school Internet to engage in low-level risk taking, fostering excitement, identity construction and networked media literacy. Connecting these seductive pushes and pulls of risk it is ultimately maintained that the fostering of trust through open communication is key in overcoming over-blocking whilst allowing for greater educational gains, realised in part through certain types of low-level risk taking in school cyberspace.

## Introduction

Driven by promises of innovative teaching and learning opportunities, there has been a recent exponential growth of school Internet provision within many countries. In the United Kingdom (UK) over the last decade more than £5 billion has been directed towards educational Information Communication Technology (ICT) use, through policies such as the National Grid for Learning (1998-2002), ICT in schools (2002-2005) and the Harnessing Technology agenda (Selwyn, 2008a). Such policies were reinforced by the European Union's Lisbon Strategy, requiring member states to facilitate broadband Internet services in schools (Hurd, 2009). In the wake of these initiatives has followed a wealth of research focusing upon the effective utilisation of school cyberspace (see Underwood et al., 2005; Somekh et al, 2007). Yet there remains a lack of engagement between discussions of the successful integration of this technology into schools and risk perceptions that often engender disciplinary responses to perceived online threats. Furthermore, as Notley (2008) argues, little research has attempted to explore the social benefits that students gain from 'risky' online activities. Responding to the call for social-cultural researchers to play a key role in identifying and exploring issues that underpin effective ICT use in schools (Somekh, 2004; Selwyn, 2008b), this paper explores these two dynamics, the risk engendered over-blocking of school cyberspace, and the benefits of encouraging low-level risk taking online. It should be noted that, answering Monahan's (2008) plea to not ignore embodied material conditions of virtual networks, the term cyberspace is used in a broad sense, to include both the virtual environment as well as the physical surrounds within which individuals interact with this technology.

Drawing upon the cultural risk perspective and writings on risk taking, this paper examines data from research into school Internet use, exploring how students might engage more effectively with school cyberspace. Central to the subsequent argument is

the idea that individuals might be seduced by risk. Jack Katz (1988; p. 3) drew attention to the seductive qualities of engaging in transgressive behaviour, arguing that such forms of expression could be interpreted as 'sensible, even sensually compelling, ways of being'. Such an argument finds resonance within work stressing the emotional rush of risk taking (Lying, 2004), wherein individuals seek 'an experience that transcends the convention of everyday life' (Ferrell, 2005; p. 143). Furthermore, following the punitive turn in many western societies (Garland, 2001), it could be argued that policy makers and practitioners can also be seduced, by sensationalist risk narratives, becoming enticed into over-reacting. Utilising these insights, this paper considers the seductions of risk from two points of view.

Firstly, it is argued that some staff might be seduced by unrealistic, exaggerated or distorted risk discourses surrounding school Internet use and subsequently over-react to student activity, blocking legitimate educational engagement. It is maintained that such action can be seen as a manifestation of a culture of over-blocking, a phenomenon that, whilst having a long history, may well be of increasing contemporary importance as schools attempt to foster a so-called Web 2.0 approach to networked learning. Secondly, there are compelling motivations for teachers and students alike to engage in low-level risk taking in schools, seeking to foster excitement, identity, social understanding and technological skills. Ultimately the impact of these seductive pushes and pulls on effective school Internet use is explored, with the fostering of trust through open communication been identified as the key process in combating over-blocking, whilst allowing for greater educational gains through low-level risk taking online.

## School cyberspace, risk and culture

In school cyberspace purity and danger co-exist, with material perceived as threatening to student well being or institutional reputation competing with real opportunities for networked learning. Whilst research has examined the threats facing young people in online environments (Byron Review, 2008; Livingstone, 2008; Ybarra, Mitchell, Finkelhor & Wolak, 2007), such studies have often treated risk as a calculative rationality, to be measured as an 'absolute truth' (Bradbury, 1989; p. 382). Such objectification of risk often neglects the social-cultural dimension. Significantly, knowledge about risks should be considered within the cultural context in which it is generated (Lupton, 1999; p. 29). According to this approach, knowledge is never value free, so debates about risks always involve questions of cultural representation, meaning, and political position. Douglas and Wildavsky (1982; p. 186) maintain that perceptions of risks and their levels of acceptability are 'collective constructs', something like language or aesthetic judgement. This is not to deny that real dangers exist but rather to make the point that a choice is made as to which hazards to focus upon (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982; p. 29). Hence, there is arguably a greater concern about young people playing violent online games than reading adult-orientated horror novels. Consequently, risk statements are an attempt to impose particular ways of seeing, with the resultant discourses potentially operating as coercive strategies (Lupton, 1999).

Bauman (1993) notes that failure to conform to certain risk narratives might lead to castigation and punishment. Any cultural analysis of risk should not ignore the outcomes, intended or otherwise, of the operation of dominant discourses or subsequent disciplinary practices. Thus, Notley (2008) observes that the Queensland

Government's Department of Education school filtering software blocked access to social networking sites such as *MySpace*, *Bebo* and *Facebook*, on the basis that such material had 'little educational value'. Yet, Robinson (2009; p. 505) argues that students who avoid online activities not directly related to schoolwork, nurture a taste for the necessary, 'making it harder for them to develop more sophisticated information-seeking skills'.

In early modernity the concept of risk was used in mercantile calculations, allowing for the possibility that risks could be both 'good' as well as 'bad' (Douglas, 1992; p. 23). Whilst this notion of a 'good risk' seems to have largely disappeared, with risk in contemporary western society often being used as a synonym for danger, there nevertheless exists a counter-discourse that stresses the benefits of risk taking (Lupton, 1999; p. 148). Stressing potential positive educational outcomes, Eastwood and Ormondroyd (2005) suggest that risk taking should form a central platform for inventive education as well as the teaching of creativity. After all, risk taking may engender an emotional rush (Ferrell, 2005), allowing for skilled performance (Lying, 1990) and the construction of a perception of control lacking in other aspects of an individual's life (Cohen & Taylor, 1992). Indeed Giddens (1991) argues that, following the dissolution of traditional influences upon identity construction in late modernity, the cultivation of risks is an increasingly important part of the process of identity formation. Given that far from being naïve victims, children are often aware of online dangers and well equipped to deal with them (Dunkels, 2008), an argument could be made for challenging entrenched institutional boundaries and encouraging learning activities that might be regarded as low-level risk taking in school cyberspace.

## Methods

The following data is drawn from an inductive research project, which examined school Internet risk discourses, institutional attempts to control 'net' use and student responses to such practices, in eight educational establishments in the north of England. A total of three years was spent carrying out fieldwork, with an initial research period running from autumn 2000 to summer 2002 (Hope, 2006), and a second phase lasting from winter 2005 until spring 2007. It is worth noting that despite the lapse in time between these periods, neither interviewee's opinions regarding online risk, student online behaviour nor school Internet controls changed markedly. This may reflect that, as Li (2007a) argues with regard to bullying in schools, whilst technological changes might be rapid, the underlying problems often remain disturbingly the same. The research took the form of semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. In order to provide some basis towards generalisation, fieldsites were selected to produce a diversity of categories and information (Schofield, 1993; Kennedy, 1979). As it was felt that the age of the students as well as the level of schooling might be an important factor in examining school Internet use, non-probability quota sampling was used in selecting educational institutions. Overall, eight educational establishments were chosen, including Avenue and Brooklands Primary Schools (for students from reception class to year 6), Canalside and Dalehouse Secondary Schools (years 7-11), Eastway and Forestfields Secondary Schools (years 7-13), and Hightree College (years 12-13) (pseudonyms).

Staff and students were selected using non-probability opportunity sampling, although attempts were made to factor in a quota element to allow for gender differences. Whilst those staff and students who were regularly involved in school

Internet use were the primary focus of the research process, limited efforts were also made to include those who professed to have little contact with the technology. Thirty staff (eighteen males and twelve females) and sixty-three students (thirty-two male and thirty-one female) spread across the eight educational institutions were interviewed. Interviewees were questioned about perceived online risks, their experiences of Internet use, and issues of control. As some of the issues addressed in interviews with the staff were potentially sensitive, the possibility existed that they might reiterate politically 'safe' risk discourses embodied in school policies, whilst repressing their own opinions. To ameliorate such possible problems, time was spent in schools building up rapport with staff, fostering what May (2001; p. 127) labels as intersubjective understanding. Furthermore, interviewees were guaranteed that all research data was confidential. Interviews with students often focused upon online risks, forms of Internet control operating within the school, and their responses to these.

Student claims regarding their online activities were verified through a process of observation. Over one hundred and eighty hours, spread throughout all eight institutions was spent observing student Internet use. Whilst in the primary schools non-participant observation took place in the classrooms, in the secondary and post-16 institutions the main focus was the large, open access areas, such as the Learning Resource Centres and the dedicated ICT suites. Additionally, Internet use was watched in peripheral areas, such as sixth form bases (exclusively for the use of years 12-13), which often lacked direct staff supervision. As it was recognised that students' online behaviour might differ in lessons and free time, a range of activities was observed throughout the school day, including after the end of teaching.

## School Internet risk discourses

In order to more fully understand the seductive pushes and pulls of risks surrounding school cyberspace, it is necessary to explore staff and student Internet risk narratives. This will enable a consideration of some of the dominant discourses and counter-discursive elements operating within these institutions, allow for an elaboration of some of the feared outcomes, as well as providing a context for subsequent discussion of over-blocking and low level risk taking online.

Within the eight educational establishments, staff risk discourses focused upon various online content and activities, including pornography, chat lines, hateful material, websites promoting experimentation with drugs or explosives, 'hacking' and copyright violation. Whilst other online activities such as cyber bullying (Li, 2007b) or the promotion of self harm (Whitlock, Powers & Eckenrode, 2006) might be labelled as a risk in broader society, interviewees did not raise these issues. Consequently, only risks that arose out of the research process will be considered in the following analysis. It was notable that not all of the online material labelled as unsuitable for school cyberspace was described in terms of risk. Thus, staff tended to be critical of video gaming sites, music webpages and educationally substandard content, but did not always berate students accessing such materials or eject them from the classroom. As Douglas and Wildavsky (1982; p. 29) suggest, this illustrates that a choice was made regarding which concerns to focus upon.

Whilst websites encouraging race hate and experimentation with drugs or explosives were discussed in terms of their 'corrupting effect', with one member of staff declaring

that sites promoting racism 'could be a bomb shell' (ICT manager, Hightree College), debate about such online materials did not dominate the risk discourses. Thus, only three staff expressed concerns about the former and two discussed threats offered by the latter. This is not to deny the potential negative impact of such sites (Buckingham, 2007), but rather to suggest that they did not have a significant impact on the staff risk discourses that engendered a culture of over-blocking online.

Rather, it was material of a sexual nature that formed the primary concern. Twenty-eight staff expressed worry about pornographic images and twenty-four were anxious about students using chat lines for sexual conversations. Distinctions were made regarding the nature of the risk. The Principal at Avenue Primary School related that:

> pornography is a concern, especially when you're talking about children, especially young children accidentally coming across it ... Young children tend to be quite impressionable so it's obviously important that we protect them from exposure to such unsuitable material.

Thus primary school staff were uneasy that online pornographic images might 'contaminate impressionable young minds' (Principal, Brooklands School). There was also some minor concern expressed in the post-primary institutions about the potential negative impact of pornographic material. As the ICT coordinator at Dalehouse Secondary School noted 'it is a worry that there's some pretty sick stuff online'. Yet, such views tended to be somewhat muted and peripheral in the secondary and post-16 establishments, with staff anxiety focusing primarily on students intentionally accessing online pornography. As one teacher remarked:

> The porn worries me to be honest only more from the [school] image point of view. The kids I'm talking about are accessing it outside, so any damage that is done to them is already done. But the damage that can be done to our image is enormous (ICT Manager, Greenswold School).

This view that students who intentionally accessed online pornography in the post-primary schools posed a risk to staff and the institution was often repeated. Thus, the ICT manager at Dalehouse School observed that 'it's a problem if they access porn. But more as a discipline issue'. Similarly, a design and technology teacher at Canalside School noted that 'porn can be a problem, you need eyes for twenty one kids, it's just impossible to see all the screens at once'. A geography teacher at Greenswold School related that 'first lesson I had in the computer room that [pornography] was all they were interested in'. Thus, depending on the age of the student the nature of the perceived risk outcome changed, from possible psychological harm to the children, to concern for the reputation of the school. As an English teacher at the Hightree College remarked 'we're not so much bothered about the impact of porn on the students because they're young adults, not children'.

In examining internet regulation policy, Oswell (1998) notes that distinctions are drawn between the 'child-in-danger' and the dangerous child. While the child-in-danger accidentally discovers potentially harmful material, the dangerous child is constructed as intentionally seeking out such content, with the consequence that 'whereas the child-in-danger is seen as passive and weak, the dangerous child is seen as active and aggressive' (Oswell, 1998; p. 281). Such distinctions may reflect that older children, leaving behind the innocence of childhood but not yet achieving the perceived social maturity of adulthood, tend to be labelled as youths, a category that evokes emotive and troubling images of 'uncontrolled freedom, irresponsibility,

vulgarity, neglect, deprivation or immaturity' (Muncie, 1999; p. 3). Whilst staff viewpoints were more complex than such simple binary distinctions, there was a tendency in the post-primary schools to label certain intentional online activities by students as risky insofar as they threatened the institutional image or staff authority. Such concerns fuelled a culture of over-blocking.

Twenty-four staff of the thirty staff interviewed were anxious about students using the school Internet to access chat lines. In the primary schools concern was expressed that children would be exposed to undesirable strangers and abuse. Thus, the Principal of Avenue School stated that 'I suppose it's always a threat that children might be enticed to meet up with someone they've met on a chat line'. One teacher drew attention to the use of offensive language, remarking that 'it's not that the Internet is crawling with paedophiles, but there are a lot of abusive people online' (ICT coordinator, Brooklands School). A degree of concern was also expressed in the post-primary schools about chat line use.

> It's going to happen somewhere eventually, it's going to happen isn't it. Some kid's going to get enticed out by the chat room whatever and something horrible is going to happen and the school will be blamed. I predict that now. I just hope it's not this one. But somewhere, sometime it will happen (ICT manager, Greenswold School).

Yet, this anxiety was tempered by a perception that older students misusing chat lines posed a risk to educational institutions. As the ICT Head at Eastway School noted '[w]ith younger students [using chat lines] you worry they'll come across language they shouldn't be exposed to… The older ones, they're probably the source of these conversations'. Indeed it was apparent that some older students were using the school Internet for online sexual conversations. Reflecting upon such occurrences, the Head of ICT at Canalside School declared 'it's not acceptable, what some students get up to on chat lines', whilst the ICT Manager at Hightree College related that 'we noticed what I would term very unsuitable language and very unsuitable topics of conversation. They were frankly obscene'. Although, such anxieties about potential youthful transgressions were notably absent from school cyberspace documentation, they formed an unwritten discourse, part of what Somekh (2004) identifies as institutionalised resistance, both in the bureaucratic organisation of school and in the informal everyday activities teachers, wherein new rules were created to contain and constrain ICT.

Staff risk narratives did not impact in a hegemonic manner upon student perceptions, however. After all, as Crawshaw (2004; p. 232) notes, young people construct their own situated discourses of risk in response to their environment. Indeed, the most noteworthy feature of the students' risk perceptions was the lack of verbally expressed concern. Of sixty-three students interviewed, only eleven discussed the issue of online pornography, five labelled chat lines as 'risky' and three raised the matter of network security. Rather students appeared to be much more anxious about the threat of punishment for perceived Internet misuse. Despite concerns about school discipline, some students seemed content to engage in 'risky' online activity and face the threat of punitive action. A female student at Hightree College told the ICT Manager that she felt using chat lines for sexual conversations in college was a 'rite of passage'. In this instance, it can be argued that the student was not failing to understand the staff risk discourse, but, as Douglas (1992) suggests, was expressing a preference. Such issues will be revisited when the focus shifts to risk taking in school cyberspace.

## Seductive pushes away: The culture of over-blocking

Although competing risk perceptions might exist (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982), individuals can become seduced by dominant discourses, embracing them in a hegemonic manner. Indeed Furedi (2006) argues that a culture of fear has emerged. Individuals become beguiled by 'privileged' anxieties, with the outcome that 'risky' possibilities come to colonise actual experiences in a dogmatic manner, giving rise to excessive cyberspace controls, limiting educational potential. In instances where such discourses overstate the actual dangers of Internet use in schools, institutions may over-react, fostering a culture of over-blocking, which unreasonably limits students' educational experience. Interpretations as to what constitutes unreasonable, limiting and an over-reaction will vary depending upon perceptions, those involved, the intended outcome and the cultural context. In practical terms, over-blocking might arise from acts such as restricting Internet access through passwords, using overly zealous filtering software, and evicting students from ICT classrooms. Insofar as over-blocking has seeped into aspects of school life, influencing practices and beliefs, it would be justifiable to argue that it operates at a 'cultural level', existing in 'the symbolic and learned aspect of human society' (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner; 1994; p. 98). In exploring the concept of over-blocking as it relates to cyberspace use in the fieldsite schools, virtual as well as physical barriers will be considered.

All eight schools utilised filtering software, which denied access to pre-determined websites as well as barring searches containing certain keywords. Whilst such technology was reportedly successful in keeping out much undesirable material, such as pornography, upon occasion it was overly zealous. At Eastway School a computer consultant attempted to show staff a website providing a digest of information for heads of departments. However, the filtering software barred access to the site and the consultant was unable to circumvent the restriction. Students at Hightree College using the Internet to research representations of sexuality in the mass media complained that the filtering software was frustrating, blocking searches using the term sex, problematising their legitimate academic enquiry. Whilst schools could add to the index of websites that were blocked, the initial list and day to day administration of it was undertaken by the internet service provider (ISP).

Filtering decisions made by commercial organisations, such as the ISPs, may help to construct a circumscribed online curriculum, whilst 'carving out new markets for high-tech companies' (Monahan, 2006; p. 110). Since, as Bauman (1993) observes, risk alleviation is a massive industry, over-reactions to perceived online risks may well be good for business. Whilst school staff did add websites to the ISPs' deny lists, occasionally there was a tendency to see risk where none existed. For example, a teacher related that '[a] kid found a site on cannabis. It was quite educational' (ICT manager, Dalehouse School). The website belonged to a category of information (drugs) that was perceived to be risky so it was subsequently blocked, despite having been labelled as educational and potentially useful for health studies students. Furthermore, the technology used to restrict access to specific websites was somewhat imprecise. Attempts by the ICT Manager at Hightree College to bar certain popular chat lines resulted in the attached search engines also being blocked. Significantly, such over-blocking needs to be considered in light of research into home Internet use, which found that 'the use of blocking or filtering software did not lead to significant differences in exposure' to inappropriate material (Fleming et al., 2006; p. 148).

In addition to virtual barriers, physical restrictions also fostered over-blocking. The practice of evicting 'misbehaving' students from classrooms and schools has long been used as an instrument of social control. Nevertheless, it was not uncommon for students to be denied Internet access despite their online activities being broadly educational. At Canalside School a group of students were thrown off the Internet by the ICT Head, for accessing sports car websites. The students' protests that they had actually been working on a project set by another teacher were ignored. At Forestfields School a male student accessed a video game site to copy some of the content for a website he was building. He was told that the Internet was for 'educational use only', before a teacher evicted him from the learning resource centre. Resnick and Miller (1996) suggest that the labelling of online content will vary depending on the supervisor, the student seeking the material and the intended outcome. Insofar as risk perceptions are social constructs (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982; p. 186), it should perhaps not be surprising that interpretative differences arise. Limited definitions of what constituted 'educational' Internet use can be seen partly as a response to seductive narratives, which seemed to foster the attitude amongst some staff that left to their own devices student online engagement would inevitably be wasteful or risky. Yet, as Robinson (2009) indicates, narrow definitions of what constitutes appropriate school Internet use actually inhibits students' educational development.

Such was the beguiling nature of staff anxiety concerning Internet misuse that upon occasion ICT rooms were simply locked or computers disabled to control student access. Thus, the ICT Manager at Greenswold School installed Internet software on over one hundred computers, yet due to fears that students would 'get up to mischief', the rooms in which the machines were situated tended to remain locked at break times, barring student access. In such situations, staff might not be reacting directly to actual risks, but rather responding indirectly through adopting what Furedi (2006) has labelled as a 'morality of low expectation', wherein individuals are expected to 'misbehave'. Such an effect is more likely where media coverage of risks is exaggerated and sensationalistic, fanning the flames of staff fear of Internet misuse, giving rise to what has been labelled as a moral panic surrounding cyberspace (Littlewood, 2003). Fear starts to influence staff responses to school cyberspace use and, as Holmes (2009; p. 1174) notes, an 'over-zealous risk discourse may prevent many benefits of online communication being experienced by young people'.

Fundamental to this consideration of seductive risk discourses and over-blocking is the assumption that restricting students' school Internet use in a reactionary manner matters. The rigid attempt to control Internet use is creating problems, engendering conflict between what Hargreaves (2001) labels as the moral and academic functions of school communities. Frustrated students, unable to access certain legitimate academic sources due to overly-protective filtering software and restricted from using school cyberspace for learning activities labelled by staff as 'non-educational', may be forced to seek alternative sites of online access or worse, stop using the technology. Consequently, digital inequalities may flourish (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). As Somekh et al (2007; p. 16) argue 'Internet protocols that safeguard learners' welfare without being overly prohibitive are required', in the current climate there are 'problems arising from overzealous blocking of sites, thereby inhibiting access to useful learning provision', ultimately schools require 'advice to help them avoid developing a risk-averse culture of Internet use'.

## Seductive pulls towards: Educational risk taking

While exaggerated risk discourses might result in over-blocking, with students being pushed away from using school cyberspace, the Internet simultaneously offers seductive pulls, encouraging teachers and students to be adventurous in their pursuit of knowledge online. Eastwood and Ormondroyd (2005) note that risk taking in educational processes fosters student individuality, whilst giving teachers greater pedagogic autonomy. Furthermore, as the Byron Review (2008; p. 20), an independent study commissioned by the UK government into the risks children face online, argued:

> Risk taking is part of child development – part of our drive to learn and succeed. Particularly in adolescence, risk taking is not only a developmental imperative but also a lifestyle choice… taking risks is something children need to do to reach self-actualisation.

Thus 'risky' activities, such as the utilisation of disturbing, yet educational, online video clips or engagement with emotionally charged, real life accounts of suffering posted on the Internet, could benefit students through developing such educational commodities as experiential knowledge, empathetic understanding and reflexivity. Furthermore, students may benefit from taking risks in other ways. Risk taking may engender an emotional rush (Lying, 2004), offering individuals a way to transcend the routine banality of everyday life (Cohen & Taylor, 1992). A textbook focused geography lesson about a distant country could be revitalised through using the Internet to access public space webcams or open communications with indigenous people. As Madge and Barker (2007) argue, the majority of children get pleasure from taking risks, it offers excitement, an escape from tedium.

Importantly, Rodrigues (2006) suggests that teachers should be encouraged to take risks, testing and deploying new technologies in a more open manner. Thus at Avenue Primary School, two year six boys in the process of constructing their own webpages were allowed access to a 'prohibited' wrestling website. Their teacher explained, 'I don't normally let the students go on that wrestling website, but they wanted to copy pictures of wrestlers for their website, so I explained that this was an exception' (ICT coordinator, Avenue School). Discussing the matter with the two boys, it was apparent that they comprehended why the website was normally restricted, with this appreciation informing their wider understanding of what constituted 'safe' Internet use. Such positive practice avoids the over-blocking of school cyberspace, whilst fostering student's critical media skills. Indeed, the UK Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) stresses the value of avoiding overly restrictive school internet access, arguing that 'pupils were more vulnerable overall when schools used locked down systems because they were not given enough opportunities to learn how to assess and manage risks for themselves' (Ofsted, 2010; p. 5). Yet in the current school politics of fear (Zembylas, 2009), staff who take such a liberal approach are taking a risk. A history teacher at Greenswold School related how students stumbled across a website blaming Jewish doctors for the creation of Gulf War Syndrome.

> [The website] had all tanks and people being injected, superb graphics. It just blamed Gulf War Syndrome on Jewish doctors…. A[dvanced]-level students can see it as propaganda whereas if you did it with year nine they might believe it (History teacher, Greenswold School).

If such material was accepted uncritically, then the possibility exists that it could foster race hatred. Indeed, the history teacher recognised that the potential educational use of such material might vary depending upon the age and maturity of the students. Nevertheless, he suggested that this website could provide an exciting contemporary example of hateful propaganda for history students studying the development of the Nazi State in Germany. It is worth noting that a misinterpretation of the educational rationale for utilising such material in schools could leave staff open to accusations ranging from callousness and a lack of sensitivity to racism or outright hate mongering. Yet, if teachers are willing to take risks in creatively stretching the curriculum then learning may prosper. Moreover if the Internet presents the possibility for propagating racism (Livingstone and Boder, 2005), then confronting children with such material so that they can critique it in a supportive atmosphere may be an essential part of the media literacy training in schools advocated by the Byron Review (2008).

Whilst school cyberspace might offer staff appealing opportunities to challenge learners and stretch the teaching process, students could also be enticed to test institutional boundaries. Some of these activities might fall outside of what constitutes acceptable school Internet use. For example, at Eastway School three male, year 13 students hacked into the school intranet, copied staff files and created a bogus account within which they stored this data. Once the security breach was discovered, the students responsible were identified and threatened with expulsion. Assuming that schools breed cultures of resistance that have a purpose in wider society (Willis, 1977), resistance to Internet controls 'might represent the development of attitudes that assist in successful integration into a world increasingly characterised by the growth of new technologies' (Hope, 2005; p. 372). Insofar as the incident resulted in the students involved gaining a reputation as risk takers, it could be argued that it formed an important part of the process of identity formation. Regardless of interpretative differences, it can not be assumed that all risk taking in school cyberspace is desirable or will have discernible positive outcomes. Indeed, the hacking incident served to undermine trust at Eastway School, resulting in greater Internet restrictions. Indeed trust is a key element in the effective operation of schools, without which educational establishments will not realise their full potential (Hargreaves, 2001; p. 490). Whilst a case can be argued for encouraging broadly acceptable low level risk taking in school cyberspace, students need to recognise that engaging in clearly inappropriate online behaviour will weaken trust and potentially lead to a strengthening of the culture of over-blocking.

## Conclusion: Risk and trust

As Livingstone (2006) notes, it is not that children lack imagination or initiative to engage creatively with cyberspace, but rather that institutions that control Internet access are highly constraining. Indeed Selwyn, Boraschi and Ozkula (2009) observe how children's future hopes for school ICT use tend to focus on transcending or escaping institutional restrictions. If it is accepted that the over-blocking of Internet access is detrimental, whilst certain types of low-level risk taking in schools may be positive, then the key issue becomes how to reduce the effects of the former while at the same time encouraging the latter. It seems likely that the fostering of trust is essential to both processes. Inherently, trust and risk are closely bound up with one another. If individuals are to confront risks and react to them in an effective manner then they need trust in both their local communities and in 'abstract systems' that

increasingly exert an influence on everyday life in global, networked societies (Giddens, 1990).

With regard to school cyberspace, an approach that privileges trust would have several elements. Staff need to take a more lenient view as to what constitutes 'educational' use, whilst rejecting a 'morality of low expectation' (Furedi, 2006), which fosters the view that students will inevitably 'misbehave'. Furthermore, communication that is more democratic is needed between students and teachers. Despite children's views regarding the Internet being very different from adults, it is adults who, often with little if any consultation, 'make up the rules and control the access' (O'Neill & Hagen, 2009; p. 235). None of the fieldsite schools involved students in the development of their Internet 'safety' policies. Yet, the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta) has long suggested that '[p]upils should be encouraged to contribute to the creation of school policies, with pupil representation on the school's Internet safety policy team and involvement in developing classroom rules' (Becta, 2005; p. 27). Not only would this allow students to draw attention to matters that they felt were important, it would also enable them to nurture a broader understanding of the issues, whilst developing a sense of ownership of the resultant policies.

At the same time students need to be aware that accessing material in school that is unambiguously defined as 'inappropriate' will undermine trust, damaging the potential for the school Internet to be used in a more creative educational manner. Additionally, those who create and monitor educational technologies, such as filtering software systems, need to foster a greater awareness of how their products might negatively impact on educational outcomes, at the same time factoring an element of trust into the operation of such devices. Future research needs to further examine the operation of trust within schools. Part of this process might involve the more comprehensive exploration of the culture of over-blocking, attempting to understand the conditions that give rise to it and the possible solutions. Ultimately, individuals need to be seduced by the immense potential for educational gains which a less limiting, less reactionary, less fear ridden use of school cyberspace offers.

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http://www.beraconference.co.uk/2008/downloads/BERA-2008-FP.pdf

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