
Make the internet a safer place for young with values and clear rules

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Safer Internet Day (SID) is a global initiative that aims to promote safer and more responsible use of online technology and mobile phones, especially amongst children and young people. Observed around the world every year on the second Tuesday of February, SID was started in Europe in 2004. This year will mark the 3rd instalment of SID in Singapore with activities planned till May.

SID is one of the Media Literacy Council's (MLC) key activities. This is because the internet is an integral part of life today and there is a need to promote safe and responsible use of online technology.

In earlier phases of the internet, it was widely thought that the internet would sustain online social spaces that could be inhabited relatively independently from offline social relations or the 'real' world. One aspect of the internet was then referred to as "spatiality" which denoted the apparent ability of this new media to constitute a new domain often referred to as "cyberspace". Such an understanding assumes that technology drives culture when in reality, the relationship is more dynamic and can be equated to a feedback loop. It also assumes that the Internet is a unified phenomenon when it is in fact a diverse range of technologies that can be used differently and in different combinations.

Today the internet has evolved well beyond its earlier days and the term "cyberspace", which implies a distinct space from everyday life, has somewhat fallen into disuse to be replaced by terms such as the "online" world which is used in conjunction with the "offline" world. These latter terms acknowledge that both aspects co-exist and interact with each other. This stage of the internet's evolution has led to profound change and adaptation within societies that is set to continue.

A number of trends can already be observed or safely predicted as to how the interplay between the online and offline worlds will affect society and human interaction. One is the dilution of the separate identities that is made up of the different aspects of every person's life. For instance, we can already see the porosity of our work and personal lives as a result of mobile technology and social networking, making it more difficult to compartmentalise our lives.

Second, privacy will increasingly become an issue that society will have to grapple with because of the immense digital footprint that online users leave behind. Such information is already being used by businesses without the informed consent of users and the use of such information is likely to become increasingly sophisticated. In due course, commercial parties will have to make greater effort to ensure users that safeguards are in place to alleviate privacy concerns.

Third, the online world is proving very disruptive to many commercial enterprises because it has acted as a great equalizer and dis-intermediator. Many commercial enterprises will have to adapt or transform themselves to survive. Sadly many will choose not to do so, or try when it is too late. The irony is that some of the most successful are destined to fail because they have the most to lose from change and will therefore resist it the longest. Instead of using their position of strength to invest in transformation, they will engage in short termism to preserve their profit margins.

Fourth, just as the offline world offers a ripe setting for fraudsters and others who are bent on deviant conduct, the online world will prove no different. One cannot but notice that many offline scams and unacceptable conduct occur only too often in the online world. Examples include identity theft, bogus websites, phishing, 'smishing' (the SMS version of phishing), online grooming, addiction and cyberbullying. More and more, the world will have to grapple with cybersecurity and cybercrime.

Fifth, governance and public policy will be transformed. One advantage that governments used to have in their favour was informational asymmetry. This often allowed governments to shape the discourse. Again the online world is proving to be a great leveller. Greater access to information and alternative views, the ability for a large number of voices to oppose government policy and to self-organize are all potential game-changers in the relationship between government and governed. With these new realities, it is likely that in future open policy making has to be practiced for policies and governments to have greater legitimacy.

The above trends are by no means exhaustive but a number of implications in the context of SID can be safely discerned. One is that the interconnectedness between the online and offline worlds means that many of the values that are important in the offline world should also apply to the online world. Acts in the offline and online world have consequences, which is why values such as respect, empathy, responsibility and integrity are important values to be encouraged and nurtured both online and offline.

Second, safety and security in the online world are important issues just as they are in the offline world. Schools, civic and religious organizations all have an important role to play in education. In particular, parents need to play a larger role in guiding their children. Many of the things that parents instinctively warn their children about such as not speaking to strangers apply equally to

the online world. Parents who set clear rules about internet usage when their children are young are also more likely to prevent unhealthy attachment to online technologies later. On the other hand, liberal use of technology as a substitute nanny may set in place behavioural patterns that are more likely to result in unhealthy attachments.

Finally, it is worth remembering that the internet is ultimately neutral and dependent on how individuals and organizations shape it. While recognizing that it contains certain undesirable features, its ability to amplify what is positive about human society is also to be welcomed and celebrated. The internet can be a powerful tool for individuals and organizations that are making positive contributions to society and Safer Internet Day 2015 in Singapore will showcase some of them.

Visit www.betterinternet.sg to celebrate Safer Internet Day.