Children's Council 2007
Motion 3
The Government Should Protect Children from the Adverse Influence of Offensive Materials on the Internet by Enforcing Regulation and Education

Foreword

Offensive materials on the internet refer to materials that advertise obscenity and violence, or are unethical, for example, by encouraging suicide, gambling and spreading false information.

Currently some 70% homes in Hong Kong have installed computers, more than 60% of which have internet subscription. A wealth of information, the internet also contains a large amount of harmful material. Children may be adversely influenced if they have access to such information. Article 17 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children states that children have the right to assess appropriate information and materials. According to a questionnaire survey we have conducted involving 1,701 children, nearly 70% of them have had contact with offensive materials on the internet. This shows the gravity of the problem.

We hereby strongly propose that the Government should address the adverse influence of offensive materials on the internet on children and take measures accordingly.

Status Quo
1.   Access

The access that children have to offensive materials on the internet can be categorized into two types: active and passive access. Active access includes logging deliberately on to offensive websites, visiting related discussions, playing offensive online games, and exchanging offensive messages via messaging tools. Passive access, on the other hand, includes being forced to read advertising banners and pop-ups on the web and advertising emails, or accidentally opening offensive websites.

Our survey suggests that 24% of the children have shown interest or curiosity in offensive materials, and that they may be actively accessing such materials on the internet. However, more than 50% of the children obtain offensive materials from the internet via passive accesses.

2．   Ordinances

Ordinances in Hong Kong pertaining to offensive materials include the Control of Obscene and Indecent Articles Ordinance and the Prevention of Child Pornography Ordinance. It is against the law for anyone to publish, possess and advertise pornographic films, photos, magazines, computer-processed images or pictures that involve children under sixteen or appear under sixteen, or any materials that violate generally accepted standards of ethics.

In addition, though the ordinances do not explicitly specify the monitoring over the internet, they can still be interpreted as applicable to both real and virtual worlds. For instance,

the Societies Ordinance（Article 20 Chapter 151）states that it is against the law for anyone to recruit Triad members or claim to be a Triad member. Anyone committing this crime on the internet is also violating the law.

<u>Influence on children</u>
1．Inducing children to commit sex crimes
Currently, children have easy access to obscene photos and films. Certain pornography websites have recently set up an internet server in Hong Kong, opening a forum for discussions of sadism and masochism (S&M), even inviting people to participate in a private S&M party which it claims to be organizing. It was once reported that three Korean school children, under the influence of offensive materials on the internet, gang-raped a little girl. We can see that if children are exposed to pornography or offensive information for a prolonged period, they will come to have a wrong understanding of sex, even become interested in sex crimes, such as taking sneak shots with hidden cameras, or rape.

2．Advertising violence or inducing children to imitate
On the internet hides a wealth of materials that will possibly induce children to commit crimes or endanger their lives. There have been many clips on the popular youtube.com teaching different ways of unlocking doors. If children see these, they may imitate the acts for fun, and may actually commit burglary. Campus bullying has also been filmed and put on the internet. If children watch these films, they may do the same to others, and this will do great harm to the intellectual development of both the bully and the bullied.

3．Contaminating children's minds
Many people express libellous, intimidating and threatening or crime-inciting opinions on the internet. In a recent case, a teenager claimed he was a member of the "Triad Society" and set up a blog called *the Triad*, boasting about how he had taken drugs, blackmailed people for "protection fees", and taken part in gang fights. He was arrested as a result. But it is likely that children were already affected by reading the blog.

The internet is also flooded with offensive materials flaunting gambling and suicide. The continuous spread of these materials will create a vicious cycle and will contaminate children both physically and psychologically.

<u>Countermeasures</u>
1.　Strengthening monitoring
(1)　Improving monitoring by cyber cops via a reporting mechanism
The Cyber Patrol of the Technology Crimes Division is responsible for investigating cyber crimes such as sex crimes and gambling. However, certain "offensive materials", legitimate for adults but harmful to children, are not subject to monitoring. So we appeal to the Government to expand the scope of monitoring and to set up a reporting mechanism.

(2)　Restarting the internet Content Rating System
The Hong Kong Internet Service Providers Association have launched an Internet

Content Rating System (ICRS) Project to protect children on the internet as well as freedom of expression on the internet. The labelled websites are prohibited from publishing offensive materials. Since the system is of a voluntary nature, and does not carry legal effect, it relies heavily on self-discipline in relevant parties. Besides, supporting services planned for the system have long been suspended. Therefore, we appeal to the Government to revive this system.

(3) **Installing a Smart Identity Verification Devices**

We suggest the Government make it a rule for internet service providers to build Smart Identity Verification into websites they register in Hong Kong. The concept of the Smart Identity Verification Device is similar to that of the E-certificate and the size also similar to the normal E-certificate reader. Only users who are aged 18 or above need to purchase the Smart Identity Verification Device. Users are required to insert their Smart Identity Cards into the reader every time they browse adult or violent information on the internet. By ensuring the user is aged 18 or above, the device effectively blocks "unhealthy information" from children. We hope the Government can study the feasibility of the project as soon as possible.

(4) **Setting up an ad hoc committee**

At present, there is no specialized department in Hong Kong responsible for the monitoring unhealthy information on the internet, so complaints can only be made to the Television and Entertainment Licensing Authority. We sincerely ask the Government to set aside funds to establish an ad hoc committee to find ways to improve the situation.

Besides, the Government should keep exchanging experience with overseas governments on the monitoring of the internet and on criminal law and regulatory measures. Regulatory measures may include borrowing from the free American software, Web Browser for Kids, in which intellectually interactive games and 13 websites specially designed for children are installed. Children can only assess these websites when using the programme, but not other websites using links or by URLs. Moreover, parents can set up a password to stop their children from deactivating the software. It stops children browsing other websites freely or playing computer games when they are alone. This way, it ensures an absolutely safe environment in which children surf the net. And if it is adopted in Hong Kong, we hope that all the internet-labelled websites and the most outstanding websites will be covered.

2. **Education**

With regard to education, some voluntary institutions or related organizations have in the past organized different seminars and published leaflets to publicize the issue of "unhealthy information" circulating on the internet, but to little effect. We should strengthen publicity campaigns focusing to educate parents and children.

(1) **Education of parents**
(i) **Re-starting the Parental IT Programme**

The Education Bureau, the Committee on Home-School Co-Operation and the Hong Kong Council of Social Service co-organizd a Parental IT Programme from February 2006 to

31st August, 2007. The programme helped parents acquire necessary IT knowledge and skills to give guidance to their children and to understand the steps and approaches their children take in accessing the internet. Now that the programme has been suspended, we sincerely appeal to the Government to consider reinitiating it.

(ii)   Opening more special continuous courses

The Government should continue to organize special courses in collaboration with various NGOs. These courses can teach computer use and internet access, parent-child communication (even about sex), or how parents can set good examples through refraining from browsing "unhealthy information" in front of their children and accompanying their children in internet use, so that from childhood a appropriate attitude towards internet use can be cultivated. Such courses should be held continuously. Once a course is completed, the organizers can help participating parents set up a web filter and suggest that they place the computer within their sight to reduce the chance of their children accessing "unhealthy information".

(2)   Education of children
(i)   Reinforcing education

We suggest that Civil Education courses be offered in schools on a regular basis. Schools can send regular email massages to their students and make announcements through intranet on the consequences of browsing "unhealthy information" on the internet. In addition, parents and voluntary organizations have the responsibility to educate children, to cultivate in them correct values, a critical faculty, and the ability to distinguish right from the wrong.

(ii)   Peer sharing seminars

These are seminars to be organized and chaired by children. Using interactive teaching materials such as songs and films, children can offer analysis from their own perspective, in a relaxed atmosphere, the dangers posed by the pandemic of unhealthy information.

2.   Publicity enhancement
(1)   Promoting interactive learning

We suggest "Internet Knowledge Education" be used as the theme, under which various activities such as online games, quiz competitions, seminars and carnivals can be used to educate the public on the issue unhealthy information flooding the internet and to provide guidance on dealing with the issue .

(2)   Effective employment of the media

We suggest publicity be created through newspapers, posters, public transport (mobile broadcasting) and online advertisements and shows. The Government and telecommunications companies can also agree on delivering messages to customers to educate the public on the flood of unhealthy information on the internet. In the meantime, the use of the report mechanism should be encouraged through which citizens can join forces to tackle the problem via various effective channels such as hotlines, email or post.

(3) Selection of meritorious websites

The Television and Entertaining Licensing Authority have hosted 'Meritorious Websites Contests" to encourage children to browse healthy websites and develop a good habit of internet use. However, no notable effects can be observed. Therefore we hope there will be greater child involvement in the process of selecting the websites. In fact, children can take charge of the entire selection process including the voting, after which publicity can be given to winning websites. This way we can achieve the goal of educating children to distinguish between meritorious and undesirable websites.

<u>**Conclusion**</u>

To conclude, the internet is flooded with unhealthy information which may negatively impact children. Therefore, I, on behalf of the 20 child councillors of my group, move the motion "The government should protect children from the adverse influence of offensive materials on the internet by enforcing regulation and education" be passed.

References:

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Internet Content Rating System Project
http://www.tela.gov.hk/icrs/webpage.htm

Information Technology for Parents Project
http://www.cats.org.hk/pit/pit01.htm

Web Browser for Kids - Free at KidRocket.org - Internet Filter - Web Blocker

http://kidrocket.org/

Fun Discoveries: Web browsers for children: 100% safe and educational
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