

Chapter IV

Cyber Security of Children: Implications for Sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

This author discusses issues and threats to children's cyber security vis-à-vis access to useful children online literature and the implications for sub-saharan Africa. The author points out that whereas the benefits of online children literature are immense especially in Africa where there is paucity of print literature, increasing cyber security and crime targeting children is of growing concern to governments, school teachers, parents, and Internet service providers. The chapter observes that whereas the developed world has made attempts to put in place mechanisms and systems such as acceptable user policies and protection software to mitigate undesirable consequences of online insecurity to which children are the most vulnerable, Africa is lagging behind despite the pervading Internet on the continent. The author notes that censorship of online literature is not the panacea to cyber insecurity, but parents should work closely with teachers and service providers to find pragmatic ways of protecting children online. Africa could learn a lot from developed countries on how to balance between access to useful online information resources against the growing cyber crime targeting children. The author cautions that the future of online security with regard to children's safety in cyberspace is bound to become more complex as technologies become more advanced and online predators evolve sophisticated ways to circumvent online security measures, calling for the development of a proactive security strategy to protect children online.

INTRODUCTION

Today, the Internet is becoming increasingly an important source of information for *children* for the purpose of schooling, entertainment, sharing and exchanging experiences with other peers, meeting with adults, and learning about other cultures. In this chapter the word children will refer to 5-19 year olds. Learnerframe Inc. (2001) citing the Jupiter Communications (1997) estimated that there were about 10 million children in the U.S. who regularly used the *Internet* and World Wide Web. Of this 10 million, about 6 million logged on from home, and about 4 million used the Internet at school. Over 6 million of these children accessed the Internet at least once a week. Tables 1 and 2 show the predicted growth of Internet access by children in the U.S. from 1998-2002.

These statistics demonstrate that in the U.S. much of Internet surfing by *children* and students take place in schools or homes. These places often have some form of policing to determine what the students or children are doing online. However, in developing world especially in Africa where access to *Internet* is not widely available either in homes or schools, access is afforded largely through *cybercafés* which may not provide strong policing environment for children who venture online. The cyber environment especially in Africa does not offer children the necessary security to venture into *cyber space*. Consequently, concerns are being raised about the childrens' security in *cyber space*. Research done in the United States shows that a good number

of *children* have become addicted to the Web. In addition, a good number of them have been found to access inappropriate material and also make contact with inappropriate people. On the other hand, some schools, especially in Europe and the United States where most children gain access to the Net, have put in place acceptable use policies that define what pupils can and cannot do on the computer. Other schools have put in place *filtering software* that prohibits children from visiting sites that are deemed unacceptable to them (Rosen, 1999).

Despite concerns about exposure to children of inappropriate material, the *Internet* has widened the scope and diversity of *children's information* materials as well as provided a means of identifying *children's literature*. If the Internet is not being used as a source of children's information, it is being deployed to identify, select, and purchase the children's resources. In the United States of America, statistics showed in 1999 that one in five adults were online compared to one in three of the 12-19 year olds (Rosen, 1999). The influence of the Internet as a source of children's information cannot therefore be under-estimated. In Africa, the Internet has not pervaded the social fabric as it has done in the U.S. or Europe; however, developments on the continent are encouraging given the fact that all the 54 African countries have access to the Web (Jensen, 2001). The increasing use of the Internet by children worldwide has come to earn this group of people various names such as the Dotcom generation, Net generation, and so forth.

Table 1. Number of children online in the U.S. during 1998-2002 (Adapted and enhanced from Learnerframe Inc., 2001)

Children online (in millions)			
	1998	2002	Percent increase
<13 years	8.6 million	21.9 million	155%
13-19 year olds	8.4 million	16.6 million	97%

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