



Digital Bulletin – Online Content

The recent inquest following the death of Molly Russell has posed serious questions regarding what online content young people are presented with and the role of large internet organisations such as Pinterest and Meta in policing their content. This bulletin will look at some of the issues that have arisen and offer some practical suggestions in keeping your children safe.

Freedom of speech vs policing online content

The inquest was significant as there was the opinion that it was the content itself that played a significant part in Molly's death. Mr Walker, the coroner for the hearing told North London Coroner's Court: "It would not be safe to leave suicide as a conclusion" and that "she died from an act of self-harm while suffering from depression and the negative effects of online content." This has stoked an argument as to whether there should be more stringent policing of online content, where others have suggested that this goes against the right for freedom of speech. Online safety campaigners feel that the main issue is that this kind of content actively pursues young people, appearing in their feeds and suggested content. In this way it is hard to avoid it. Other campaigners have described this type of 'pushed content' as 'legal, but harmful'. During the hearing, senior representatives from Meta conceded that some of the content that was sent 'violated their policies'; however, a great deal of other content was clearly lawful. The issue is set to be discussed in parliament and the case has highlighted the potential hazards of internet content and the way it is sent to young people.

Content

It is worth considering where the information that influences social media feeds comes from. Algorithms analyse internet usage, searches and interactions to form an understanding of which topics may be of interest to a user. With this in mind, all users, should consider what they click on, and whether this will impact their feed. Are you regularly, or frequently clicking on content that could be harmful, unhealthy or dangerous?

Suggestions on managing your social media feed

There are some measures that you can consider to minimise the amount of worrying, scary or distressing content on your child's social media stream.

- Have an open dialogue with your children about internet usage and content. Be interested in their viewing habits and which apps are most frequently used. Although social media will be seen as very much a private area, it is important to encourage honesty and openness.
- Be aware that internet usage is influenced by your current mood or emotions. This has been reinforced by the feedback from older students, who say that social media is positive if you are in a good frame of mind. However, if you are feeling low, it can make you feel even worse. Although this can be difficult, encourage self-reflection and whether it is a good time to look at a social media feed.
- Be aware of how internet usage influence social media feeds. If content has been clicked on which is negative, or even potentially dangerous, consider if this should continue. Discuss resisting the temptation to engage with this content and stop perpetuating the social media feed.
- If your child receives content which is disturbing, distressing or shocking, report it. If it is not appropriate for your son or daughter, why would it be ok for others? Social media platforms have a facility to report inappropriate content and indeed in the Molly Russell inquest it was accepted (even by Meta) that some material should have been removed.
- Encourage your child to seek help if they are uncomfortable with their social media feed. Help is available at school as well as at home. The school is always happy to help any student with managing their feed and to ensure that they are safe and happy.

If you have any further questions on how social media can present information to young people, or if you have any concerns on how this is impacting your son or daughter, please email me on the address below.