

Internet has hidden perils for teenagers – but spying on them isn't the answer

June 22 2015, by Jens Binder



All smiles - but who's watching what they're watching? Credit: LG, CC BY

The South Korean government has [required that teenagers install a spy app](#) on their smartphones. Having the app is compulsory for teens – their phones won't work unless it is installed. When installed, it provides parents with a means to see what sites are being accessed, block sites and send warning notifications.

Even in a society that is more accepting of such paternalistic state control than western Europe, in a culture regularly referred to as [collectivist](#), the Korean government's requirement to install its Smart Sheriff app or one of the government-approved alternatives has attracted lively debate. Is there a case for such measures?

In the West we have become used to patronising advice on food and health and safety-related prescriptions. We also generally accept some form of legislation where our long-term well-being is at stake, with special consideration given to minors. For example, rules about who is allowed to drive cars or consume addictive, harmful substances such as alcohol and tobacco.

But surely the [internet](#) is full of good and bad things alike? If we accept state-prescribed parental control over young people's existence online, why wouldn't we also demand full 24-hour CCTV monitoring of their offline existence too?

Learning life online takes time

There are some fundamental differences between online and offline spaces – and these touch upon how humans work psychologically. Imagine that a child ventures out, alone, into a large city of average safety. Whether you are comfortable or not with this thought, a number of factors lower the risks of harm.



Credit: Karolina Grabowska from Pexels

For example, the child will be visible and identifiable as a child to numerous people. The time the child is away is somewhat proportionate to the distance he or she can cover. The urban environment is segmented in a way that public space slowly blends into not-so-public space, and potential sources of harm are usually visible and well-defined.

But all of this applies only very weakly to the online world, where there is little resistance to those who wish to enter – or have stumbled across – harmful places. Virtual space is human-made and does not come with the natural physical boundaries and rules the world is otherwise automatically subject to.

Our early-years growth – and this is a process that takes years – is typically spent coming to terms with navigating the real, offline world. In contrast, making an assessment of the semantic content of a website is something that a lot of adults struggle with – let alone young beginners.

Guiding not spying

Maybe then this is simply a case for guided development? Sadly, researchers know very little about the development of internet literacy and, in general, current debate demonstrates that [neither parents nor politicians know very much about it either](#). Mediation by parents [plays a crucial role](#) in this development – but there are no simple recipes.

The underlying reasons for this state of misinformation could be very simple: while the internet facilitates and encourages content creation and sharing, it doesn't encourage the sharing of screen time. Sitting together in front of a computer or looking jointly at a smartphone display is only done for specific online activities such as showing each other content that has already been found. The process itself of navigating and searching the internet is far less attractive for sharing – users young and old are much more likely to interact on the internet than about the internet – so the process of learning is solitary.

There are other challenges associated with monitoring internet use. Controlling access by blocking particular websites and search terms doesn't account for what happens within widely accepted websites, such as social media giants like Facebook and Twitter. In fact it's in this very area that most research into the negative effects of online activities has focused, such as about the grooming of minors. While some sites are closed to younger users, they are only technically so – on the basis of legal [terms and conditions](#) that are rarely if ever enforced. Again, the way we communicate online has vastly reduced the physical, social and cultural constraints we experience face-to-face.

So it's close to impossible to monitor children's online activities within particular web services without demanding fundamental changes to these services. Simple address blocking of dangerous web sites will capture only a tiny part of risky online activities. And sending alerts to parents cannot be really effective if parents lack the skills and understanding to act on them appropriately.

This is the dilemma: rules and requirements such as South Korea's app are not merely examples of state oppression. The internet *is* different from the real world, and based on our current knowledge there is nothing to suggest that young users are well equipped to avoid harm online. But the Korean intervention, however, is not likely to be effective. For the moment, we're back to urging youngsters to browse responsibly.

This story is published courtesy of [The Conversation](#) (under Creative Commons-Attribution/No derivatives).

Source: The Conversation

Citation: Internet has hidden perils for teenagers – but spying on them isn't the answer (2015, June 22) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-06-internet-hidden-perils-teenagers-spying.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--