A POLICY BRIEF
CHILD ONLINE PROTCTION
IN GHANA

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Executive Summary

The internet is a vast and fast growing resource and, together with new technologies, it provides new opportunities for children and young people when it comes to education and skills development, communication, social interaction and entertainment. However, while the internet is acknowledged to be a powerful and invaluable resource, it is important that children and young people are aware of, and protected from, the risks they may encounter online such as exposure to sexual and violent content, cyberbullying, cybercrime, among others.

In Ghana there is practically no legislation or policy which directly guarantees children's safety online. Furthermore, the general public is largely unaware of the threats and risks the internet possess to children and young people. This means that there is still a long way to go to keep children safe online. Stakeholders must therefore come together and work collaboratively to improve the safety of children and young people within cyberspace.

This policy brief offers a contextual analysis of the current Child Online Protection (COP) environment in Ghana and gives important recommendations on how to ensure that children can utilise the opportunities the Internet offers without the potential adverse effects.

Introduction

The development of the internet has opened up unprecedented opportunities in the areas of communications, commerce, culture, and politics and in the exercise of rights. Access to the internet continues to increase across the African continent with enormous possibilities for Africans of all ages both at home and in the Diasporas. For children in particular, the internet offers opportunities to learn, communicate and have fun. In spite of these benefits, the use of the internet comes with its own threats and risks especially for vulnerable populations such as children.

As everyone else, children engage online as recipients, participants or actors. Any of these roles that is assumed by a child at any particular point in his or her online experience, exposes him/her to a variety of appropriate and inappropriate content, which can range from commercial information (unsolicited adverts, spam, etc.) to more aggressive content (bullying, harassment, hate speech, and other violent content). As recipients, participants or actors, children are also susceptible to sexually explicit content which may cause distorted and unhealthy values in young people about their personalities and relationships with others. Potential value-laden content such as prejudicial/stereotypical and misleading information which many young netizens may not be discerning enough to decipher, and other unacceptable activities such as online grooming for prostitution or terrorism, also endanger children in cyberspace. Online activities that make young people feel embarrassed, upset, depressed or afraid can damage their self-esteem and pose a threat to their psychological wellbeing.

Unfortunately, many children are unaware of these risks. However, for children to fully utilize the vast opportunities the internet offers while avoiding the negative consequences, it is

important that they feel confident that they are safe online and know how to protect themselves against potential threats.

This analytical piece highlights challenges affecting child online protection (COP) in Ghana in terms of policies and practices. The brief also outlines a number of recommendations for improving a safe online experience for children in Ghana.

Overview of Child Online Protection Issues in Ghana

In Ghana, as in other countries around the world, increasing numbers of children are gaining access to the Internet. They engage in chat rooms and share personal information when online. This makes them vulnerable targets for predators to abuse sexually and exploit for scams, identity theft, and other social vices.

Among the Ghanaian public, especially children, there is a general dearth of knowledge on the various threats associated with online activities. This is compounded by the fact that many young people do not have what it takes to stay safe online. As a result, children and young people are at risk of becoming involved in illegal or inappropriate activities such as buying and selling stolen goods, cyberbullying, online gaming and addiction, online fraud, privacy and identity theft, sexting, self-harm and radicalisation. Some are also at risk of being involved in the viewing, possessing, making and distributing pornographic images.

Policy Environment

Protecting children online is acknowledged to be a global challenge. Some countries have come up with policies and regulations targeted at protecting children online. The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) has also developed a global set of Guidelines for children; parents, guardians and educators; industry; and policy makers to be adopted and adapted to suit national and local realities. In Ghana however, there are no known policies or institutional frameworks, whether developed locally or adapted from the ITU Guidelines or other best practices, intended to protect and safeguard children in cyberspace. Even though the Information & Communications Technology for Accelerated Development (ICT4AD) Policy exists, it does not make provisions for the protection of children online. The sector regulator, the National Communications Authority (NCA), has also not developed any specific guideline or policy to guide industry players and users on COP issues.

The resultant effect of the lack of policy on COP is the fact that there is no clear guideline on how issues of online abuses or violations against children are to be addressed. So far, reported cases of online abuses against children have been interpreted as isolated cases of child abuse or young people's non-adherence to rules. Even though Ghana has ratified the UN Convention on the Right of the Child, and given meaning to the Convention by enacting the Children Act 1998, neither the Act nor the recently-introduced Child and Family Welfare Policy has online safety/protection considerations.

What is currently available is the Ministry of Communications' National Cyber Security Policy & Strategy Final Draft document (as at July 23, 2015) which makes the following provision in relation to COP:

Child Online Protection Policy measures will be implemented through multi-stakeholder working by government, industry, civil society, and relevant international child online protection agencies. Government will encourage dialogue at national and local levels to engage all concerned and create awareness of the possibilities and dangers of the Internet.

At a recent Africa Regional Conference on COP, the Director of Research, Statistics and Infrastructure Management at the Ministry of Communications also shared a roadmap and strategies being put in place to ensure that children are protected online. The four-point strategies make the following provision:

a) Development of a sound research base on COP issues and establishment of a stakeholder working group to serve as the leading expert group that advises government on formulation and implementation of a national COP plan
b) Capacity building and awareness creation among key stakeholders
c) Development of legal measures to review the existing child protection act to include COP
d) Establishment of an online COP Portal with child online education information and online forms for reporting COP incidents, as well as a call centre with special COP support numbers for the public to call for assistance

When implemented, the proposed strategies will help improve the safety of the country's young netizens. The cooperation of all relevant stakeholders will make the implementation less cumbersome and faster. Stakeholders, especially civil society, will have to conscientiously monitor closely the implementation of the roadmap to ensure that its objective is achieved. Periodic review and update of the strategies will also be appropriate.

Practices

Compared to other parts of the world, the number of Ghanaian children with access to the internet is relatively low. The few who go online, access the internet through school libraries, internet cafés, parents' computers and smart devices, and in some cases, the children's own devices. Many of the parents whose children are online do not know much about the technologies and platforms they use nor the threats associated with their online activities. This makes it difficult for them (parents) to provide guidance on safety measures for their wards. This is compounded by the fact that many of the young netizens themselves do not have the knowledge and experience to stay safe online.

Unfortunately, there is very little sensitisation from the media, civil society groups and educational institutions about online hazards in Ghana. Media reports about the internet and other ICTs have often focused on the benefits of these technologies. Unless specific issues of

online fraud, abuse or crime involving children come up, there is often little or no sensitisation for children about the dangers associated with online activities by the media.

On the civil society front, there has not been lots of work on COP in the country. Civil society organisations (CSOs) working on children-related issues in Ghana are mainly involved in the protection of children's rights and wellbeing offline. The Global Resource & Information Directory (GRID), an encyclopaedia of information maintained by the Family Online Safety Institute on worldwide Internet trends for children and youth, notes that there are practically no organisations actively involved in the provision of online safety information for Ghanaians. According to GRID, the few websites available focus more on improving access to ICTs and somewhat digital literacy. There are, however, few initiatives at the local front targeted at COP such as J.Initiative's advocacy and campaign for COP policy interventions. It has also worked collaboratively with World Vision Ghana Office to outdoor the Keeping Children Safe Online (KCSO) tool which is aimed at educating children, young people and parents in Ghana.

The government of Ghana, through the ICT for Accelerated Development (ICT4AD) policy, is gradually extending ICTs and internet accessibility to a number of educational institutions from basic to tertiary levels in partnership with corporate and non-profit organisations. ICTs education in many of the institutions is however limited to hardware parts, their uses and how to use browsers for studies and research. Sensitisation about the hazards associated with online activities is often neglected; sometimes because some of the teachers themselves have limited information on the reality of such risks.

Conclusion

The internet is indeed a great tool with which children are able to tap into a vast resource of information and educational materials. It also offers them the opportunity to interact with others, play and be innovative. In spite of the benefits derived from internet use, the threats associated with being online are real and children are often the most vulnerable because of their inexperience and gullibility. Unfortunately, Ghana does not have adequate institutional frameworks which can be used to protect and safeguard Ghanaian children online.

The introduction of the roadmap to COP by the Ministry of Communication appears to be a great start. There is however a need for a comprehensive national strategy/policy to protect the country's young netizens from online hazards. The strategy/policy will have to be developed using a multistakeholder approach to ensure that the final outcome document will meet the demands and expectations of all relevant stakeholders. It will also need to meet international standards and practices, and actually give meaning to all the conventions, agreements and treaties Ghana is signatory to regarding the protection of children.

Recommendations

With internet use rapidly increasing across the continent, it is important to shape internet-related policies to meet and protect the interest of all stakeholders, including children. A number of recommendations have therefore been made below to guide government, educational institutions, parents and civil society in addressing COP challenges in Ghana.

Government

Government has a duty to protect its citizens, including children, from harm both offline and online. A COP policy in Ghana is therefore overdue. The roadmap on COP in Ghana as presented by the Ministry of Communications is a positive step, but it has to be expanded to include implementation schedule with timelines for action, periodic monitoring and reporting, and roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders at the national, regional and local levels.

The COP stakeholder working group will need an advisory board made up of experts in technology and child development to provide leadership and guidance and inform policies through a sustained research programme. In addition, all relevant stakeholders must be roped in to the roadmap and other COP policy initiatives to get the commitment of ISPs, enforcement bodies, regional/local authorities, the private sector, civil society organisations, schools and parents/guardians even before implementation.

Policy measures that address different risks and initiatives of various stakeholders co-exist at different levels. It is therefore important to ensure that new ICT-related policy frameworks align with other policies to ensure consistency and effectiveness. This includes the harmonisation of all cross-ministerial initiatives on child online/offline protections for effective implementation.

It is also important for government to encourage public-private-partnerships in addressing COP issues in the country. Public-private partnerships have proven to be an effective way to encourage self- and co-regulation by industry players who are also very critical in restricting children's access to potentially harmful and inappropriate content without compromising their right to information and freedom of expression.

Educational Institutions

Internet use is recognised to be an important skill in its own right, in addition to its use as an educational information resource. The curricula for ICTs in schools, especially the basic level need to be expanded to cover COP issues. Since a number of teachers, especially those in the rural and remote areas often have little knowledge about ICTs and related risks, and many others find it difficult to keep adapting teaching materials to evolve with children's ages and new technologies, it is recommended that periodic refresher training should be organised to keep them up to speed with new technologies and associated risks.

Beyond the trainings, lesson plans and other teaching resources need to be developed and upgraded regularly to help teachers stay on top of COP and e-safety issues in order to educate their pupils/students on how to stay safe online. Equipment and facilities with internet connection should also be made available to all schools for practical demonstrations of COP challenges that are often taught in theory.

Industry/Private Sector

Industry players are another group of critical stakeholders in protecting children online. In most cases, they set up the standards that form the basis for e-safety. Operators in the sector are therefore encouraged to put in place measures that protect the privacy and personal data of children especially while respecting their right to free speech online. They are also encouraged to make their safety measures known to the general public particularly parents and children in easy-to-understand language. They must also provide procedures for reporting online abuse of children, including the setting up of hotlines just for COP issues. In line with reporting violations, it is important for sector operators to also liaise with law enforcement agencies in dealing with cyber grooming of children for prostitution and terrorism and other cybercrimes such as scam and identity theft. Industry players must also support research on COP issues to inform their in-house policies on the protection of children online. As much as possible, they should give parents the ability to control their wards' online activities while directly protecting children from age-inappropriate advertising as indicated in the ITU's Guidelines for Industry on Child Online Protection.

Parents

Technology is constantly advancing and evolving. As early adopters, young people are often fast in keeping up-to-date with technologies as they evolve. Many parents however find staying updated with technological advancements and what their children are doing online complex and challenging. But to provide guidance and safety tools for their wards, parents need to invest more in order to appreciate the risks associated with the technologies and platforms their children are exposed to. Education about child online safety should not stop in the classroom with teachers, parents have to take it up to ensure that children have some safety measures when navigating the online world.

Parents must therefore get themselves informed about COP issues and the range of options available to them – social and technical – to keep their young netizens safe online. For instance, parents will have to know and choose appropriate technologies for their wards, monitor usage, discuss online security issues with children and set controls until they are discerning enough to make their own decisions. They can also install safety tools on the devices of their children. Parents are also advised to resort to available guidelines for parents, such as the ITU's COP Guidelines for Parents, Guardians and Educators and J Initiative's Safety Information Guides for Empowering Parents and Families, Teenagers and Educators[i] for more guidance on how to safeguard their children online. Finally, they should use existing facilities such as the Police Service, the Ministry and Social Welfare Department to report any child abuse.

Civil Society

It is highly recommended that civil society organisations (CSOs) working on child's right and other children-related issues also get involved in issue of COP and also include such issues in their programmes and activities. This will help in creating more awareness about COP issues among parents/guardians and children of the hazards associated with online activities and how to protect children online. CSOs are also encouraged to engage industry players regularly to ensure that the interests of children are protected. They should also be proactive in engaging governments to ensure that new policy interventions take COP issues into consideration. In addition, CSOs should monitor and evaluate the implementation of all interventions, including

the roadmap presented by the Ministry of Communication, to ensure all activities are carried out creditably.

The academic community is also encouraged to inform COP policy with periodic evidence-based research and findings. They could also complement the work of other stakeholders with sensitisation activities in the classroom.

Children and the general public are encouraged to build their capacity around COP issues so they can adopt the right safety measures when in cyberspace. In line with that there is a need for sustained information sharing and public education by all stakeholders especially educational institutions and the media. As agenda setters and influencers of public opinion, the media are key stakeholders in promoting a culture of COP consciousness among children first, and then parents and guardians. The media are therefore encouraged to engage more in raising awareness, knowledge, skills and understanding around e-safety issues for children and the general public.

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[i] http://cybercitizenghana.com/downloadables/