Mares, Peter. (2007). NetAlert accentuated the negative.

Published as:


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NetAlert accentuated the negative

Research obtained under freedom of information laws raises questions about the accuracy the Howard government’s pre-election advertising campaign on internet safety.

By Peter Mares

Internet industry professionals have raised doubts about the accuracy of statistics used in the Howard government’s multi-million dollar internet safety campaign.

In the months prior to the federal election, the NetAlert campaign used TV spots, newspaper advertisements and billboards to warn of the risks to children and teenagers online.

One advertisement said that a survey had shown that over half of 11 to 15 year olds who chat on line are contacted by strangers. Another claimed that a survey had shown that almost half of 11 to 14 year old children had viewed websites their parents would find alarming. Similar statistics were quoted in the NetAlert information booklet that was sent to every household in Australia.

The communications minister at the time, Senator Helen Coonan, said the statistics were drawn from an independent study commissioned by the federal government. However she refused to make the research public, saying that it contained “some quite personal information”.

ABC Radio National’s National Interest program has now obtained the research under freedom of information laws. The research does not contain any personal information.

A snapshot of the online behaviour and attitudes of children (Wallis Consulting Group, July 2007) analyses the results of a random telephone survey of 1000 young people aged between 8 and 17.

A confidential analysis prepared a leading interactive media organisation identifies a fundamental error in the research. It criticises the survey for failing to distinguish between unsupervised chat rooms and more popular forms of online communication like instant messaging and social networking.

Unsupervised chat rooms are considered the highest risk sites for children and teenagers. For young people, however “chat rooms are completely
different to chatting online”, which is more likely to involve instant messaging or communication on sites like MySpace, Bebo and Facebook.

The claim in the NetAlert advertising campaign that over half of 11 to 15 year olds who chat online are contacted by strangers does not appear in the government commissioned research. The documents show that the question was not posed in this form.

Participants were asked: ‘When chatting online, have you ever been contacted by someone you haven’t met in real life?’ More than half of the survey participants answered ‘yes’ to this question.

However when asked who they chat to or message with online, respondents said their communication was mostly with friends (96 per cent), friends of friends (31 per cent) or people met online who their parents had said ‘it is alright to talk to’ (20 per cent). Only 14 per cent of survey respondents chat or message with ‘just a mixture of people including strangers’.

The industry analysis criticises the NetAlert research for including ‘friends of friends’ and anyone not met in the physical world in the category of strangers. It says this inflates the statistic and does not give an accurate picture of contact by ‘a genuine stranger’.

Adolescent mental health expert Dr Jane Burns says unsupervised chat rooms do pose dangers, and young people should always take care when communicating online. However she says popular social networking sites can help young people to make positive links with their peers.

Dr Burns is an adviser to the Reach Out! website (http://www.reachout.com.au/home.asp) that provides support to young people dealing with personal problems or mental illness. She says online contact with a ‘stranger’ in the form of a health professional, counsellor or peer can often be a positive outcome for young people.

The survey data provides only partial support for the NetAlert campaign warning that ‘playing online can lead to straying online’ with the accompanying statistic that ‘almost half of 11 to 14 year old children said they had viewed websites their parents would find alarming’.

Again the survey questions were posed using a different form of words. Children and adolescents were asked whether they had accidentally viewed websites that ‘mum or dad (or a guardian) wouldn’t want you to
see?’ While 43 per cent of respondents answered ‘yes’ to this question there is no evidence how long they stayed on the site or whether they immediately closed out of it.

Only 12 per cent said of survey respondents said that they had ‘deliberately’ visited a site that ‘mum or dad wouldn’t want you to go to’.

Dr Jane Burns says the overall picture that emerges from the Wallis Group research is far more positive than the messages of ‘danger, risk and fear’ that characterised the NetAlert campaign.

When asked what sort of things they do on the internet, children and teenagers cited looking ‘for information for homework or study’ ahead of all other activities, including playing games, chatting and messaging.

The survey also revealed that well before the NetAlert campaign almost three quarters of parents had already talked to their children about ‘keeping safe online’, which Dr Burns describes as ‘an amazingly positive finding’.

*Peter Mares presents the National Interest, Sunday at midday on ABC Radio National.*