

Study casts doubt on whether internet filters in the home protect teenagers online

March 14 2017



Credit: Jourden C/public domain

Internet filters are widely used in homes, schools and libraries

throughout the UK to protect young people from unpleasant online experiences. However, a new study by Oxford casts doubt on whether such technologies shield young teenagers after finding no link between homes with internet filters and the likelihood of the teenagers in those households being better protected. The research paper, published in the *Journal of Pediatrics*, says the effectiveness of internet filters is 'dubious' and suggests that resources would be better spent trying to develop the resilience of teenagers to such experiences.

Researchers from the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) at Oxford University analysed Ofcom data from 1,030 interviews in the homes of 515 [teenagers](#) aged 12-15 years across the UK. There was broadly an equal number of boys and girls in the sample. Their parents were also interviewed about whether they had used technical tools to control or manage their child's access to [online](#) content. Nearly one in six (or 14%) of the teenagers interviewed reported they had had at least one negative experience online in the past year that they would class as significant; 8% said they had been contacted by someone online who they did not know and wanted to be their friend. Around 4% said they had encountered another person pretending to be them online; 2% saw something of a sexual nature that made them uncomfortable; 3% reported seeing or receiving a scary video or comment that made them feel scared.

Meanwhile only one-third of the parents said they used content filters, with two-thirds (66%) saying they had not. One quarter (24%) of the parents did not know or were unaware of the filter technology at the time of the interview.

The findings show that the use of internet filtering in the home did not appear to mitigate the risk of young people having unpleasant online experiences and that technical ability to bypass these filters had no observed effect on the likelihood of such experiences. The paper says

the findings are unexpected as they do not support the clear presumption that internet filters in the home effectively protect teenagers.

Major British internet providers now add filters to new household connections as a matter of course, notes the paper. It says such technology is costly to develop and maintain, and even sophisticated filters can accidentally block legitimate content. The researchers say their main concern is that such filters may 'over-block' searches for information about issues that are important for teenagers, such as alcohol, drugs, sexual relationships, health and identity, and may even have 'disproportionate' effect on vulnerable groups such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender teens. They also note that the use of filters could lead to 'chilling effects' whereby young people pre-empt filtered results by self-censoring what they view.

Instead of a policy emphasis that prioritises internet filters in the home, the paper suggests we need more focus on educating and supporting teenagers to view online material responsibly, especially given increasing use of mobile devices outside the home. The main emphasis should be on how teenagers manage online experiences that make them feel uncomfortable or scared, it concludes.

Lead author Dr Andrew Przybylski, from the Oxford Internet Institute, said: 'Parents may feel reassured in knowing they have internet filters in their home, but our results suggests that such filters do not safeguard against young people seeing things that may frighten or upset them. We strongly believe that there is a need for more evidence to provide guidance on keeping young people safe online so policymakers, parents and those concerned with educating young people can support them in an appropriate way.'

'The data suggests that future research needs to look carefully at the long-term value of filters and see whether they protect [young people](#) at a

wider range of ages.'

More information: 'Internet Filtering Technology and Aversive Online Experiences in Adolescents', by Przybylski et al *Journal of Pediatrics* March 14, 2017.

Provided by University of Oxford

Citation: Study casts doubt on whether internet filters in the home protect teenagers online (2017, March 14) retrieved 17 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-03-internet-filters-home-teenagers-online.html>

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.