

Written evidence submitted by Mrs Pippa Smith (COR0173)

A. Background:

We held several conferences in Parliament relevant to the online harms situation we face today:

1. November 2008: 'Conference on the Harmful Effects of Violent Films and Computer Games on Young People's Behaviour, and Effective Preventive Action'

Chaired by Rt Hon Keith Vaz MP whose constituent, 14 year old Stefan Pakeerah was murdered by his 17 year old friend who was obsessed with the video game 'Manhunt'.

As a result our main speaker, Kevin Browne, Professor of Family and Forensic Psychology, Nottingham University, gave oral evidence to the Home Affairs Committee Inquiry on Knife Crime, Seventh Report of Session 2008/2009 HC112-1, Pages 35 – 36, under 'Exposure to Violent Entertainment Media'. In its Executive Summary the HAC Report concluded that 'violent DVDs and video games exert a negative influence on those who watch and play them', especially on 'individuals who are already predisposed to violence because they grew up in a violent environment.' (Para 88). It recommended (Para 43) a ban on violent DVD and video games in secure units and young offender institutions. His evidence is just as important today.

P. 88 David Gustave, said that the focus should not be on the weapon in the hand, but the mind behind the weapon.....Kid's Company has done research about brain development and the fact that damaged young people cannot empathise as a result of their experiences.

P. 89 Sean Benson, Young black people do not have many role models. Young people do not read books or watch the news and the media have desensitised them to violence. Young listen to music every day which is saying 'make money', 'sell drugs'.

2. November 2010: 'The Harm that Pornography Does; Its Effects on Adults and Children and the Need for Regulatory Reform'

As a result of this conference Claire Perry MP invited Safermedia to work with her on the '**block porn campaign**'. For example, Safermedia provided Ed Vaizey with 1000 emails of support at his round table meetings with the 4 major ISPs. **Despite their extreme reluctance to have network level filters citing, as the big platforms do today, freedom of speech, legal fears etc., family friendly filters were eventually agreed, but default 'off'**. David Cameron's support helped.

Sky went further and brought in their default 'on' Broadband Shield. This proved much more effective with approx. 60% take up against 10% and in some case less for the other three. Looking at the maths, there is still a significant gap and children are at risk.

3. April 2014: The Pornification of a Generation: The Under 30s' Perspective

All the speakers were under 30 and gave their experiences of pornography.

4. October 2016: Child Safety Online: Keeping Ahead of the Game

<file:///D:/RescuedData%2023.05.2019/Downloads/Symposium%20Booklet%202016.pdf>

5. Current conference, not in Parliament but in Nottingham:

Thursday 26th March 2020, 'Knife Crime and Youth Violence: Prevalence, prediction, prevention', East Midlands Conference Centre, Nottingham, NG7 2RJ

Postponed because of Covid-19 until October 20 (another delay likely because of Covid).

[COR0173]

Programme can be viewed here:

<file:///C:/Users/Owner/Downloads/Programme%20-%20knife%20crime%202020%20v.19.pdf>

In this conference we have speakers discussing online harms, in particular online gaming and grooming (see link above). Prof Kevin Browne will be bringing new research evidence to the Conference.

NB. I am involved in this as part of the Lords & Commons Family & Child Protection Group.

Please see a description of a violent video game at Annex A

B. The nature, prevalence and scale of online harms during the Covid-19 period;

We are aware that CSEA content, fraud, scams and misinformation have all increased during Covid.

Exposed to a toxic culture

What we are particularly concerned about is the specific culture that young people and children inhabit online on social media platforms like Facebook and Messenger Rooms, Messenger Kids' App, YouTube, Instagramme, TikTok, Houseparty etc; chat rooms like Omegle: 'Talk to strangers'; user-generated content whether it be sexting, posing with weapons, glorifying violence; interactive and virtual reality gaming, especially violent games; pornography; gambling; websites that sell drugs, weapons; self-harm websites; suicide websites; coverage of school shootings; grime music; cults; radicalisation; the list of harmful content is long.

It is a highly addictive, adult free, 'Lord of the Flies' parallel universe, designed to draw young people in. Parents, as you know from Ofcom reports, are not up to speed, not surprisingly.

During Covid-19 increased time spent online means children and young people are, for example, suffering ill health through lack of exercise; sleep loss; bullying; depression; lower attention span, lowering of empathy; increased anger and less self-control; addictive behaviour etc. They are more susceptible to grooming and abuse, and you have the statistics.

Smartphones have added to this problem during Covid-19.

It is an invisible anonymous world.

Young boys especially are easily reached by gangs and criminals in their own homes, without parents realising. They are leaving their homes at night to meet up with others and possibly drug dealers; they can also communicate with each other and drug dealers across a park without even meeting up close.

It has to be understood that the porn industry, XBiz, a few years ago stated that they wanted to monetise using mobile phones. They have been very successful!

I will not be the first to suggest this, but until the internet is made safer, under-16 year olds should be discouraged from having phones. The industry would not like this as they like to capture their future 'consumers' as early as possible - their stated target being 12 – 17 year

olds. Parents need help because they cannot control what is happening. The most vulnerable as always being the most at risk.

Scale and effects

There is an enormous body of research evidence showing the harms of pornography, violent games, large amounts of time spent online, and the effects on young minds. Just a few examples follow:

Research

Pornography & Public Health Summary, National Centre on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE), 8 June 2017

‘Mind your Head, what the electronic age is doing to our brains’, New Scientist 21 April 2007

In 1994, the then Professional Association of Teachers (now VOICE), did a survey into teachers’ perceptions of the effects on children of the new entertainment technologies, entitled ‘The Streets of the Pied Piper’. Among their findings: children spent 5 hours a day (more at week-ends) in front of screens; that very young children were watching totally unsuitable films; that children were displaying more violent, obsessive, anti-social behaviour, becoming desensitised and lacking empathy etc. This was 16 years ago and the ‘virtual life’ media environment that children now inhabit is even more pervasive and damaging.

A new survey would be a good idea.

‘Generation Me – Since the 1980’s undergraduates have lost almost 40% of their ability to share with others’ feelings. Sarah Konrath, University of Michigan Institute for Social Research: “This generation of college students grew up with video games, and a growing body of research is establishing that exposure to violent media numbs people to the pain of others.” [Daily Telegraph 29.5.10]

The number of hours (up to ten hours daily according to The Kaiser Foundation) spent in front of a screen harms brain development and language development, for example, ‘Hi-tech maps of the mind show that computer games are damaging brain development and could lead to children being unable to control violent behaviour’ [Prof Ryuta Kawashima, Tohoku University, Japan 2001].

A study by two Swiss human rights organizations, Projuventute and TRIAL, have analysed twenty video games depicting war to see if the conflicts they portrayed and what players can do in the virtual theatres of war, were subject to the same limits as in the real world. “The practically complete absence of rules or sanctions is...astonishing”, said the study. The study condemned **the games for violating laws** by letting players kill civilians, torture captives and wantonly destroy homes and buildings including churches.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1042467/DR-ARIC-SIGMAN-How-seeing-movies-like-Batman-turn-children-violent.html>

DR ARIC SIGMAN: How seeing movies like Batman can turn our children violent

By Dr Aric Sigman Last updated at 11:21 AM on 7th August 2008

Lt Col Dave Grossman, Director of the Killology Research Group (www.killology.com). His books below quote exhaustively the available research on the effects of violent media, and give examples of what can be done.

'Assassination Generation: Video games, aggression and the psychology of killing'. Lt Col Dave Grossman.

'Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill', Lt Col Dave Grossman and Gloria de Gaetano

'Inside the Mind of a Teen Killer', Phil Chalmers

'Why kids kill: Inside the minds of school shooters', Peter Langman, PhD

'Reflective practice in child and adolescent psychotherapy: listening to young people', by Jeanine Connor, Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist. Also article, 'Where Lunatics Prosper'

<https://www.routledge.com/Reflective-Practice-in-Child-and-Adolescent-Psychotherapy-Listening-to/Connor/p/book/9780367149406>

B. Steps that could be taken to mitigate these concerns:

1. Examine the harmful role of anti-social and violent media content and 'entertainment' in the rise in knife crime and youth violence. It is largely internet, social media, videogames, films, TV and music that form youth culture, and currently much of this normalises and glamorises lawless and violent behaviour, while undermining authority especially that of parents, teachers and police.
2. A Royal Commission be set up. The use of violence has become epidemic and it is imperative we look at what goes on in the minds of those young people to cause them to resort to killing and violence.
The incidence of knife and gun crime on our streets and the fact that even very young people are able to actually kill another human being is very shocking and normally only found in war torn arts of the world.
3. A tax on violent video games, as suggested by Richard Taylor, the father or Damilola Taylor.
4. Home /family environment - Fathers are crucial
file:///C:/Users/Owner/AppData/Local/Temp/Temp1_Fatherhood_Survey%20%20%20from%20Richard%20Keeble.zip/Annual-Fatherhood-Survey.pdf
5. **Follow the lead of schools which have taken action to minimise the effects of technology and encourage nationwide.**

For example a) in 2006, Duncan Harper, then Head Teacher of New Woodlands School in Bromley, raised standards in the school by confiscating bedroom televisions, computers, Xboxes and playstations from the homes of the under-performing, with the agreement of parents.

He said, “ It’s about building up the esteem of parents too, and putting the power back in their hands.”

b) “Digital drop-off” voluntary scheme - children and parents encouraged to bring in smartphones, tablets, Xboxes and computer games to be locked in a school safe for the holidays. Katherine Birbalsingh, Head of Michaela Community free school in Brent also confiscates mobile phones brought onto the premises.

The school offers to install the Screentime app, which regulate how long children spend on iPhones for parents who do not know how.

6. **Clever software’, default 'on',** should be installed **on all internet-enabled devices:** filters to block inappropriate content including apps; location tracking; time limits; monitoring of social media use etc.

According to Leigh Porter from YaanaTech, current default ‘on’ parental controls on mobile phones are only 'mildly' effective.

Device manufacturers would contract out to someone who already had that expertise and rebrand it, such as Qustodio or NetNanny. The cost could be incorporated into the cost of the phone/device, say around £5 extra per device (rough estimate only).

This is now being considered by NCOSE in USA.

- C. **The adequacy of the Government’s Online Harms proposals to address issues arising from the pandemic, as well as issues previously identified.**

1. Ofcom is proposed to be the independent regulator. Ofcom is not robust enough and is very large already. We have already suggested an independent online safety commissioner.

To maintain the regulator’s independence from the industry there should be a levy on Tech organisations, depending on the size of the business.

2. New ‘Online Protection Code’. This is a vital tool to help keep children safe online, however the Government’s lack of urgency is greatly worrying.

We add our voice to the work of Baroness Howe and others in the House of Lords, in particular the call by Baroness Kidron and CCHIS for the Govt not to delay. The big tech companies must be brought into line.

Freedom of speech of the individual is very precious but in the hands of powerful tech companies it is more about money and exploitation. There needs to be the right balance. The Government revenue from the tech industry is huge, but this consideration should not be put ahead of the well-being of our children and their future. The human and social cost of that will be so much higher.

Annex A Examples:

Grand Theft Auto and 2011 riots:

“As dusk fell people were told to get off the streets for their own safety. “Go home, get a takeaway and watch anything that happens on TV,” one constable advised. “These are

bad people who did this. Kids out of control. When I was young it was all Pacman and board games. Now they're playing Grand Theft Auto and want to live it for themselves." [8 August 2011, Evening Standard]

See here: <http://www.listal.com/viewimage/282475h>

Grand Theft Auto and Naval submariner rampage:

A Royal Navy sailor went berserk with a semi-automatic rifle on a nuclear submarine, shooting dead one of his commanding officers and attempting to kill 3 others. He had told a colleague that he wanted to "start a massacre in the control room".

Donovan, described as shy and immature, had written violent rap lyrics and "joked" about copying the computer game Grand Theft Auto, in which players win points for shooting people. [20 September 2011, The Daily Telegraph]

Video game player attacks teenager in real-life 'revenge':

A 46 yr old man, who had been playing the game Call of Duty all day in a simulation game with a teenager online, went round to the house of the 14 yr old who had killed his virtual character, and attacked him. [30 September 2011, The Daily Telegraph]

Example of a popular video game:

The directive is simple: You are a police officer embarking on your first day in uniform.

"Finish your first patrol," Postal III instructs you, and don't f--- it up! Simple!"

You begin strolling around a virtual city, complete with stray cats, parked cars, mon-and-pop shops, and a collection of people gong about their business. It could be any city in America, and you look like the consummate police officer proudly protecting the public.

You hear sounds of a struggle in the distance. As you move toward the commotion, you realise that you are witnessing a mugging. "Don't kill me!" the female victim yells to her male attacker, "I'm a virgin!" You move fast to apprehend and handcuff the mugger.

He's neutralised, lying on the ground. You begin to beat and kick him. Then when you get tired, you pour gasoline on him and light the man on fire.

"Man, that smells kind of good," you say as his flesh boils and melts away from his bones.

"Bacon, bacon, bacon!"

At this point, you note that your bladder is full, so you begin to piss on your victim, whose skin blisters and chars as he dies.

You start to walk away, but since you aren't quite finished, you stop to piss on a woman innocently sitting on the bench next to you. She reacts with horror. You note, "Now the little flowers will grow!"

A short while later, you see two teenage boys who appear to be fighting in the street. You yell, "No fighting, children! Detention for everyone!" before grabbing a stray cat and stuffing a grenade up its ass. "Hold still, little gato explodio!" you say, proud of your ingenuity. "This will only hurt for a se cond." You hurl the cat at the teens. It explodes, sending the boys' and the cat's body parts and blood spattering across the street.

Unaffected by the scene, you continue on your patrol and see a man vandalising a parked car. Clearly, this must be stopped. You throw a series of grenades at the car, blowing it up along with the vandal and a handful of pedestrians and onlookers. You watch their bloody limbs and chunks of flesh fly through the air. "Oops. Hunting accident," you say.

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You pick up a severed human leg and casually toss it at a woman standing on the sidewalk. A snappy 1980s electronic pop music soundtrack starts to play in the background, ushering you on through the rest of your patrol. Don't worry. There are hours of fun ahead.

- First 15 minutes of gameplay in Postal III (2011)

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