

Netiquette and Netsmartz

Cynthia James

I was about thirteen. A clean-cut man in the front seat of a taxi turned and handed my friend and me a printed page. By the time my friend had said, "Let's give it back," I was raising the edge, eagerly pursuing what was happening between the lady and the dog. Forty years later, computers have upped the ante on pornography and sexual enticement of minors, and since we intend to generously provide schools with computers and encourage their widespread availability in homes, we had better heed the experience of societies that have had more serious issues to deal with than "The Worm."

Responsible use and protection from predators are two major issues surrounding new technologies. In the US, concern has spawned laws such as the *Digital Millennium Copyright Act* (DMCA), which targets illegal appropriation and use of Internet materials. The *Child Online Protection Act* (COPA) requires websites with sexual material to ask for proof of age. The *Children's Internet Protection Act* (CIPA) requires schools and libraries that acquire computers from federal funds to install software to block pornography. However, fair use and civil liberties challenges have led to the view that teaching cyberethics is one of the best approaches to inform as well as protect the young.

Thus, with regard to cyberplagiarism, in addition to honour codes, penalties, and detection software such as "Turnitin" and "PlagiServ," academic institutions also hold seminars on what is plagiarism and how to avoid it as part of Academic Writing 101. They have come to accept that at the very least teaching should precede presumption of guilt. Similarly, although many schools and homes invest in tracking, filtering, and blocking software such as "NetNanny" and "IamBigBrother," they have also turned to teaching netiquette and netsmartz.

The list of cyberperils that the young face from what *Business Week* calls "The Underground Web" is long. There is identity theft, gambling, extortion, privacy invasion with spyware, and sites that teach how to make bombs. There is enticement to enrol in scams such as Green Card lotteries and freebies. There is cyber stalking, harassment, and entrapment in chat rooms and on blogs from pedophiles who prey on emotional immaturity. And, of course, there is ubiquitous sexual and commercial SPAM. For these, netsmartz educates mainly with warnings backed up by true horror stories. The message is: Don't post individual photos, addresses, or telephone numbers on the web.

The upshot is that because of legal issues and parents' understandable paranoia, the potential of computers to transform the school curriculum has been stymied. One of the incentives of learning is the sense of ownership that comes from publishing what one has learnt; and so publishing group pictures that bear no names or school details to avoid being traced is quite a let-down for students.

Yet under the cover of a similar anonymity, children can also be their own worst cyber enemies. For this, netiquette is one educational approach. Cyberbullying, such as the infamous case of boys rating their female classmates on a private website, has spawned "Are you a good cybercitizen" sites such as <http://www.cybercrime.gov/rules/cybercitizen1.htm>

How far is Trinbago from needing netiquette and netsmartz? There is still the ill-informed view that the masses shouldn't have, can't appreciate, or can't afford the computer. To quote an untrained library assistant at a school where I once taught, "They can't even read self and they want to be on the computer." One of the beauties of Trinbago is you don't know who is who, since parallel histories join us. Since the computer is destined to become as commonplace among us as the cell phone and the microwave, we had better not wait. We had better get on with the cyberethics.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine