

Crackdown on racist chat

Social networking sites have exploded over recent months with everyone who's anyone 'tweeting' on Twitter, 'bigging up' on Bebo or getting in your face on Facebook.

Really, what did people do before the internet? But for all the benefits that it gives us – instant access to everything we could ever need to know, immediate communication with everyone we do (and many we don't) know – the availability of the internet has also opened up another can of worms.

For while many enjoy the opportunities it offers to learn, befriend and have fun, others are using it to mouth off. Online racism is just one of the most damaging side-effects for young users. It's great that people can share their thoughts at the press of a button, but what if these thoughts are nasty?

People can write anything they like – things they probably wouldn't have the nerve to say to someone face-to-face – and they can get away with it. Even though the media is meant to be more multicultural, it only takes two seconds online to find something really racist.

And with the internet being more influential on the younger generation now instead of newspapers or television news, more has to be done to stop the spread of online racism. The problem is not new. More than a decade ago, then Home Secretary Jack Straw called for a crackdown on racist material published on the internet, asking governments across the world to work together to remove illegal websites and prosecute those responsible.

Mr Straw said: "The internet offers exciting opportunities for global communication, but it is vulnerable to abuse, because websites and newsgroups are accessible from across international borders." This is still a big part of the problem, with people here in Derry able to read what's written by someone in Denver and vice versa, giving a voice to someone who would otherwise be insignificant.

Many young people have witnessed online racism themselves. Tom (16) said: 'I can't believe how racist some people are, some of the things you see on these websites are just crazy.' Laura (18) added: 'It's really sad that people in 2009 are still talking this way.' Ciara (19) said: 'Governments should do something to stop this going on. It's not freedom of speech if it's really offensive to most people.'

Young people themselves can make a difference by boycotting any website or social networking site that doesn't seem to do all it can to stamp out racism.

About this story

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