

Internet, Children's Health and Virtual Fast Food

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Macau APriGF panel

- 1) This is not a call for censorship, but for information, knowledge, awareness and ultimately education.
- 2) To understand the effects on children, we need to understand the nature of the medium, in particular, the mesmerizing, additive nature of certain kinds of content: what draws who to what content. In other words, the patterns and cause of consumption.
- 3) While the questions of a 'safe' Internet are of great concern, my interest is more that of a 'healthy' Internet. I am presenting preliminary, exploratory thoughts on the subject that I am only beginning to think about.
- 4) The question of safety are that of the direct, immediate and 'hard' effects: bullying, fraud, phishing, sexual predation. These are very much the concerns of media literacy and filters and regulation.
- 5) The question of health are that of the indirect, longer-term and 'soft' effects of the Internet: negative socialisation, unhelpful values and perspectives, trivialisation of the mind, individualism, superficiality, apathy, lack of connectedness and concern for the world. At the moment these issues are not on the agenda at all.
- 6) Even if are kids consumption of the Internet is safe, is it healthy?
- 7) I would like to offer a parallel between food and fast food, and the Internet and 'fast food' Internet.
- 8) Scientists now have identified why fast food does not work -- in the sense of its bad effects on health --- and how and why it 'works' -- in the sense of why we want it despite knowing that it is bad for us. It 'works' by tapping into our basic evolutionary adaptation to want more salt, sugar and fat: we instinctly want it EVEN IF we know intellectually that is bad. Of course, we sometimes don't even know that is bad.
- 9) The Internet offers something akin to fast food: fast food of the mind rather of the body. We seem to gravitate towards the superficial, the spectacular, the controversial, the moment, the bad news, and we seem to do so instinctively. It is not that the superficial, the spectacular, the controversial, the moment, the bad news is bad in itself. Rather it a question of proportion and moderation. To borrow the fast food metaphor, it is not that fast food is bad, but that eating nothing but fast food is. We need salt, sugar, fat -- indeed it is necessary for health -- but only in moderate amounts.
- 10) Over consumption causes the problems that I allude to: negative socialisation, unhelpful values and perspectives, trivialisation of the mind, individualism, superficiality, apathy, lack of connectedness and concern for the world. We all have an intimation of these problems, perhaps we have even be affected.
- 11) We have yet to understand much less tackle the problem of the over consumption of fast food of the mind. Why are we so drawn to it, do we need to fight it, and how do we fight it? Knowledge is needed. Perhaps self-awareness and some correction might follow, just as it could for the fast food of actual food.
- 12) Safety is important. But just as for actual fast food, so it is for virtual fast food: what is safe but not necessarily healthy. Ultimately, it will lead to obesity and ultimately morbidity of the the heart, mind and soul.
- 13) Media literacy programmes must address this virtual fast food problem.