The Protection of Teenagers’ Online Rights and Interests in Social Networks

Li WANG¹ and Rong ZHU²,a,*

¹Li Wang, lecturer of School of Political Science and Public Administration in University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Yaan, Sichuan, China

²Rong Zhu, Graduate Student of Journalism and Communication Major in University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Linxia, Gansu, China

Email: s_peacock@163.com; xiguazhandui@163.com

*Corresponding author

Keywords: Social Networks, Teenagers, Online rights and interests, Protection.

Abstract. The teenage netizens constitute a significant part of the internet users. Since the end of last century, endless efforts were made to protect the online rights and interests of teenagers by all the countries around the world. With the acceleration of information globalization and the growing coverage of internet in the world, the protection of teenagers’ online rights and interests has become a hot issue worldwide. This paper discusses that in the current social net work environment, the protection of teenagers’ online rights and interests has been threatened in many ways, and has confronted with risks such as language violence, information security and internet addiction so on and so forth. In China, however, certain inadequacies exist in the protection concerning this area from various aspects like law, management and social forces now. This paper puts forward some preliminary measures and suggestions in light of the experience from abroad.

Introduction

According to the 37th China Internet Network Development State Statistic Report issued by CNNIC in January of 2016, up to the end of December of 2015, there are 688,000,000 netizens in China, and among them the number of netizens between 10 to 19 years old accounts for as many as 21.4%. In addition, The 2014 China Teenager Net Behavior Investigation Report, which was issued in February of 2015, shows that by the end of 2014, the number of teenage netizens has reached 277,000,000, taking up to 42.7% of total number of all netizens. As for the application of social network, the number of users under the age of 19 makes up 26.3% of the total number by the end of November of 2015. Therefore, teenagers have already become the backbone of Chinese netizens and they are especially active in social networks.

However, the information on the internet is of varying quality and the messages and services are of great diversity. When teenagers acquire knowledge and broaden their horizons through internet, their rights and interests are always being violated due to the limitation of subjective or objective factors such as age, mental maturity, family and internet environment etc. The question as to how to protect the online rights and interests of teenagers has become an important part of the management of the current virtual society.
Social networks, as the comprehensive platform for interpersonal communication, information publishing and knowledge sharing, are fantastic tools for teenagers to make use of during their growth with its unique advantage. According to a collaborative survey by US companies edWeb.net, IESD (Interactive Educational Systems Design Inc.), MCH (MCH Strategic Data) and MMS (MMS Education), 72% of the young men (18-29 years old) and 73% of the juveniles (12-17 years old) are crazy about social media. Among them, the number of children who registered in social media between 12 to 13 accounts for 55%, and the number of those between 14 to 17 makes up 82% of its total number. The application of social networks has gradually become a popular and arresting lifestyle among teenagers.

In terms of the impacts brought by social networks, based on the investigation of Pew Research Center in November of 2011, teenagers aged from 12 to 17 in the United States and their parents tend to believe that social networks have brought about positive effects on children. For example, they can acquire more information, or they can stay in closer touch with others, and it is much easier for them to build up confidence etc. Other surveys prove that social networks can be used as a teaching tool, and it can improve the ability of empathy; meanwhile, social networks promote healthy social relationships as well, and make those introvert teenagers participate in social activities in an easier way.

It is also undeniable that the rise of social network has brought in more challenges to the already complicated internet environment, for it is now faced with new risks in the protection of teenagers’ online rights and interests when they make use of the internet.

Firstly, language violence on the internet can cause psychological damages to teenagers, and even lead to psychological problems and crimes. Due to the openness of Weibo, these bestial words can be posted on the internet easily. It not only causes grievous personal harms to the parties concerned, but also exerts negative impacts on teenagers whoever have been exposed to these information.

Secondly, information security is fraught with hidden dangers. Due to the careless exposure of personal information, teenagers’ privacy rights are often being violated, and they will even be deceived and lead to the loss of property and personal safety. According to the statistics of The 2012 Report on Information Security of Chinese Netizens, 84.8% of Chinese netizens have run up against incidents concerning information security, with a number of 456,000,000; among these netizens, 77.7% of them have suffered different kinds of losses. Given the situation of a highly-developed social network where web anonymity dominates, some teenagers and parents of some juveniles are void of alertness, and they disclose their authentic personal information, whereabouts and family privacy out of their free will on the internet. Therefore, in order to gain profits, some illegal commercial organizations or individuals with other purposes will commit crimes like fraud or sexual harassment etc. by illegally collecting and taking advantage of the personal and family privacy of teenagers.

Thirdly, excessive addition to unhealthy network services or products, online games for example, will affect the physical and psychological health of teenagers. According to The 2011 Investigation Report on Teenagers’ Internet Addiction in China issued by CYAND (China Youth Association for Network Development) in August of 2012, the proportion of teenagers’ internet addiction has reached up to 26% in 2011 and that of the internet addiction tendency has reached up to 12%. The excessive consumption of time and energy on internet by teenagers will affect their regular study and life, thus is
bad for the physical and psychological health during the growth and development period.

**Drawing on Experience from Abroad about the Protection of Teenagers’ Online Rights and Interests**

The protection of teenagers’ online rights and interests has started quite early in foreign countries, and the development of their social networks is relatively mature. Although the management modes and principles differ from country to country, we can still gain some references.

**Improve Legislation, and Adjust Systems, Laws and Regulations with the Times**

In recent years, the United States has passed large numbers of acts to protect juveniles, such as *Communication Decency Act*, *Children's Online Privacy Protection Act*, *School Internet Filtering Act*, *Children's Internet Protection Act* etc., which have explicitly stipulated the rights, duties and responsibilities of information publishers, disseminators and operators on the internet, and the legal consequences one should bear if he breaks the law or does not fulfill his duties. Meanwhile, the timely adjustment and revise of these acts are necessary in order to apply them in the new internet environment with the network techniques constantly updating. For example, the US FTC (Federal Trade Commission) updated the 10-year-old *Children's Online Privacy Protection Act* in December of 2012, and expanded its scope of protection to new areas like social networks and the apps on smart phones etc.

Also, the *Dating Sites Restriction Act* was implemented in Japan since 2003 in order to solve infringement of internet on children, and stipulated that dating sites are explicitly forbidden to children. As the guardians, parents should know how to use software to filter the information which is unsuitable for the children. The *Teenager Internet Environment Act* implemented in 2009 explicitly stipulated the duties and responsibilities of internet operators and guardians as well.

**Clearly Classify the Information and Ensure the Rights and Interests of All Parties Concerned**

Many countries manage the information on the internet by classifying them into different levels. For example, Australia and the US adopt the general two levels of classification, the “Non-Restricted” and “X-Rated” for people above the age of 18; Germany, based on its classification of movies, employs the “Three Levels System” in order to classify the commercial contents, namely ordinary, above 16 years old, and above 18 years old; France announced in 2006 that it recommended Four Levels System, i.e. available for all, above 12 years old, above 16 years old, and above 18 years old, and distinguish the many services and products only available for elder teenagers from those available for “X-Rated” and younger teenagers.

**Network Operators Take the Initiative to Introduce Relevant Regulations**

The development of social networks abroad is relatively sophisticated. Many network operators also adjust management regulations in time and voluntarily protect the online rights and interests of juveniles. For example, the United States passed *Children's Online Privacy Protection Act* in 1998 which explicitly forbid the registration in Facebook and other social networks of juveniles under 13 years old. Facebook and MySpace signed a “Good Behavior Charter” in 2009, aiming at the protection of juveniles’ privacy safety by taking actual measures. Facebook also cooperated with 5 internet security agencies and established an advisory committee on
safety. And by cooperating with the chief procurator in each state, the committee will eliminate the disseminators of exotic information on social networks in order to protect the teenage users.

In terms of the information being shared and posted by teenage users, Google+ only allows them to share the information of their friends and the strangers will be blocked. During the process of sharing information, Google+ will warn its teenage users that strangers are likely to browse what they have posted. When a teenage user video chats with friends, if any stranger joins the chat room the teenage user will be removed.

**Build the Exclusive Social Networks for Children and Provide Network Products and Services Available for Teenagers Only**

Children’s social networks sprang up in 2005 from abroad, the United States especially is in the lead in this area. For example, the Club Penguin under The Walt Disney Company can be said as the pioneer of children’s social networks worldwide. It is a virtual community mainly for children around the age from 6 to 14. It is themed of online role play games and is available in 5 language, i.e. English, French, German, Portuguese and Spanish. It has 150, 000, 000 registered users from 190 countries across the world and 40% of its members are children in the United States.

Another example is Facebook—Everloop, established for children under 13 years old, with its services covering music, social games, videos, pictures and animation etc. Parents can supervise their children’s activities on it by taking advantage of the monitoring tool provided to protect their children from cyber-bully, filthy words and inappropriate information sharing. In addition, there are also other social networks designed only for children and are rather successfully operated, such as TogetherVille, ScuttlePad, Imbee, Fantage, Gaia Online etc.

**Problems and Suggestions on the Protection of Teenagers’ Online Rights and Interests in China**

In recent years, China has adopted the management mode by combining laws and policies, administrative measures and self-regulation, dedicating itself to the protection of teenagers’ online rights and interests, and has made a remarkable achievement. However, since internet develops so rapidly with each passing day and certain inadequacies still exist in China’s management system of internet, there are some deficiencies in the protection of teenagers’ online rights and interests. For example, there are relatively fewer laws and regulations concerning the protection of teenagers’ online rights and interests, and the level of legislation is low; the specific clauses are scattered and lack maneuverability; Secondly, management involves as many departments as culture, education, industry and commerce, public security and telecom etc. However, when it comes to actual law enforcement, there are few specific departments and clerks that are responsible for the protection of teenagers’ online rights and interests. Thirdly, there is no restriction or distinction between adult and juveniles for the access to network products and information.

Given this, the author offers some preliminary thoughts and suggestions in terms of the protection of teenagers’ online rights and interests.
Complete the Relevant Systems, Laws and Regulations and Promote the Supervision Mechanism of Social Networks

First of all, in terms of legislation, complete system of relevant laws should be built. In the second place, each functional department should be made clear that they must assume the corresponding responsibility with its scope of official duty and establish multi-sectoral communication mechanism and linkage system. Thirdly, the government should reinforce supervision, advocate and command the operators of network products and services to operate under the legal framework. The operators should make certain distinction and restriction about teenage users’ application and access according to its scope of operation so as to protect teenager from the violation of illegal information.

Enhance the Management of Internet Information and Apply Technology as Support

Apart from legal protection, the access to illegal information can be restricted by properly applying advanced network regulatory technology and improve the mechanism of censorship. In the first place, measures on access control should be taken into consideration when it comes to those internet information which is unsuitable for teenagers, such as adopting time-limited opening strategy and establishing specific zones for silenced services. In the second place, information control tools and healthy internet software should be developed for the protection of teenagers’ online rights and interests, which will efficiently filter the harmful information while teenagers use the internet.

Initiate Benign Commercial Modes and Provide Internet Products and Services for Teenagers

The current websites, exclusively built for the teenagers by all levels of youth league organizations, are difficult to sustain due to the problems of fund and personnel. The contents of these websites are unattractive for being too stiff, which makes it harder for them to compete with those influential and comprehensive commercial websites. Therefore, network culture products and services suitable for teenagers should be developed, built and promoted, and a sustainable commercial mode is suggested to be introduced. The market is dominated by internet enterprises that are relatively mature in marketing operation; therefore they should take the initiative to assume the social responsibilities in optimizing the internet environment for teenagers. Meanwhile, the government should provide more favorable policies and give more support, and especially put more emphasis on the development of network products for teenagers in mobile internet environment.

Acknowledgment

This article was financially supported by “Scientific Information Communication and Crisis Communication under the Perspective of Risk management” for humanities and social science fund from the ministry of education and “Research on Communicative Chengdu Based on the Perspective of Chinese Culture Going out” for Sichuan Social Funds (Project Number:SC15XS007).
References


[21] Apart from specific annotation, the rest of this part is concluded from Wikipedia.