Submission by the Australian School Library Association to the Coalition's Review of Online Safety for Children

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Introduction

The New Media Consortium's Horizon Project is an ongoing research effort that identifies and describes emerging technologies and the impact on teaching, learning, research or creative expression within education. In 2010, *The Horizon Report: 2010 K-12 Edition* identified the following critical challenge – 'Digital media literacy continues its rise in importance as a key skill in every discipline and profession' (Johnson et al 2010, p. 5). This challenge was restated in *The NMC Horizon Report: 2011 K-12 Edition* (Johnson et al 2011, p. 5). The report states that 'this challenge is exacerbated by the fact that digital literacy is less about tools and more about thinking' (p.5).

Digital media literacy can be defined as the ability to locate, access, organise, understand, evaluate, analyse and create content using digital media (Wikipedia; Australian Communications & Media Authority 2009a). Digital literacy emphasises the interaction between technologies and information literacies. Students engage with information online personally, socially and in an academic context. In addition, digital literacy supports an inquiry based approach to teaching and learning. It is inclusive of social responsibility and ethical behavior in the personal creation of information and awareness of the impact of one's digital footprint. It is important to make explicit links to cyber-safety, which is an integral part of digital literacy.

Digital literacy is a critical skill set in the development of active, productive and socially responsible digital citizens and cannot be ignored in the development of school library programs integrated into the curriculum programs of schools.

The mobile devices students use to access the Internet are multi-functional and make information easily accessible. As indicated in the *Horizon report: 2011 K-12 edition*, "mobiles have moved to the near-term horizon because of the rise of a new class of devices, led by the category-defining blockbuster that is the Apple iPad" (Johnson, et al 2011, p. 14). With *always-on* Internet it is imperative that the skills required to help young people to safely explore, communicate, create and collaborate using digital technologies is paramount.

Educators cannot assume that because students *own* mobile devices and have a familiarity with the technology that they possess sophisticated digital literacy skills. Being *tech-savvy* does not automatically mean one is digitally and information literate. Students need to be aware of the personal safety issues and security of using the Internet. The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) Cybersmart (2009b) web site hosts information and activities for students, parents and teachers. This information supports and fosters greater understanding of safety issues. The four-part course gives teachers an insight

into the issues with online communication, and information on how to manage school based issues relating to cyber-safety.

The potential of teacher librarians to contribute to better outcomes for students within safe learning environments is untapped. Teacher librarians can be accessed to explicitly teach these crucial skills in the context of the content of the curriculum through collaboratively developed classroom learning activities, authentic assessment and research tasks within a well resourced school library environment. Teacher librarians are the 'apomediaries' in the digital context (Gasser et al., 2012, p. 77). Instead of being intermediaries that stand *between*, they *stand by* as guides, advisers and coaches. Unfortunately, not every school library is staffed by a qualified teacher librarian.

Evidence of risks

The Internet has become a key medium for young people. In 2009, 79 per cent of children five to 14 years old used the Internet. "Internet access was available in more than 65 % of households with 3-4 year olds, 87% of homes with 8-11 year olds, and more than 90% of households with 12-17 year olds" (Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety 2011, p. 10).

"Information gathering has been shown to be a more popular activity among teens (ages twelve to fifteen) than social networking, online communication or content creation" (Gasser et. al. 2012, p. 36).

With the increased and diverse range of information online, the lack of traditional gatekeepers and standards to ensure access to *quality* information, and the lack of digital literacy skills of our youth, it is imperative that education address the latter to ensure young people develop the skills to survive and thrive in an online world.
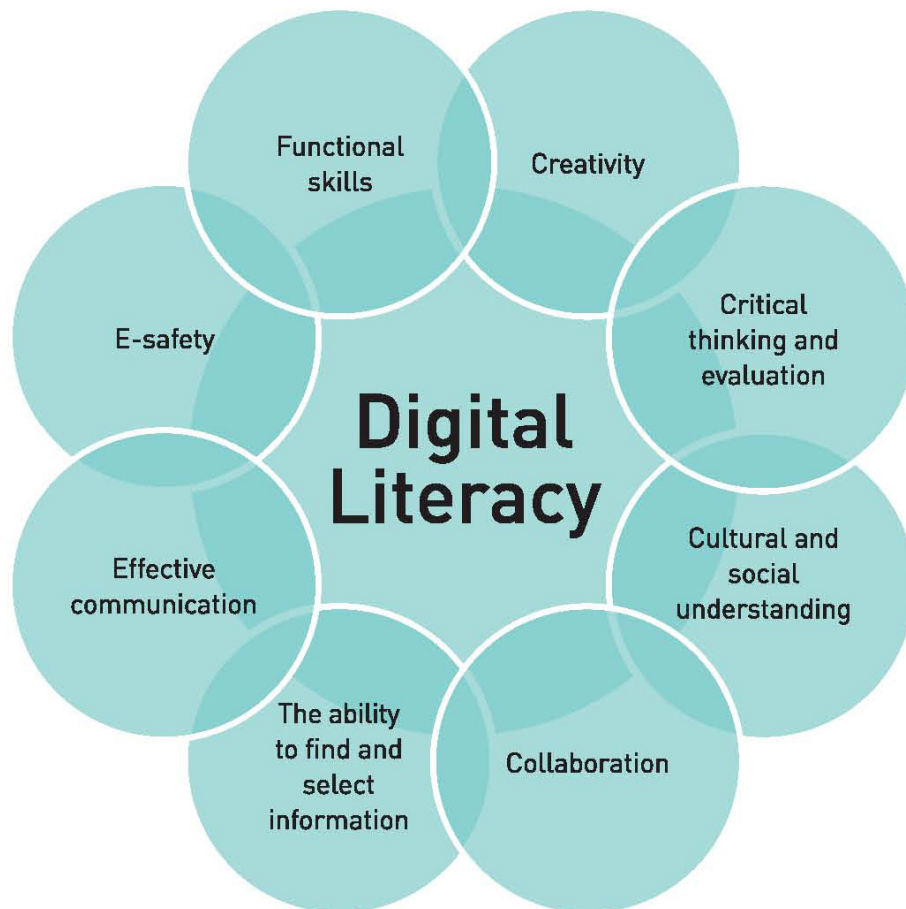
The vulnerability of young people in an online environment is exacerbated by their limited life experiences, their stage of cognitive development and their level of social and emotional maturity (Gasser et. all. 2012).

Two Australian reports, *Loddon Mallee Cybersafety Project: Bendigo Region Report* (Reid et. al. 2010) and *High-Wire act – cyber-safety and the young: interim report* (Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety 2011), include significant findings on identified risks by young people and relevant recommendations for cyber-safety actions. The aim of the surveys in these reports was to capture a current picture and understanding on young person's online use, behaviour, attitudes and ethics and to identify the needs and risks. The Loddon Mallee Cybersafety Project covered the four regions of Bendigo, Kerang and North Central, Madecon Ranges and Mildura. The Joint Select Committee survey was Australia wide.

Address the gaps: role of teacher librarians

The following diagram from the United Kingdom work of Hague and Payton (2010) provides a graphic overview as an example of some of the dynamic components of digital literacy that draw together the multiplicity of skills that could apply.

Hague & Payton 2010, p. 19.

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Functional skills

Being able to operate various digital technologies gives young people the opportunity to use these tools to collaborate, communicate and create. Teacher librarians have invaluable expertise and skills they can use to help students apply information and communication technologies (ICTs) to research tasks. Even though students use Google, research shows they have limited fluency with its full functionality. They lack the ability to discern between commercial and non-commercial information, free and paid information, organic results and sponsored adverts, and the 'cues' which signal a need for caution.

Ability to find and select information

Young people often engage in 'fortuitous searching' and 'satisficing'. They will jump from link to link, use the first couple of web sites they find, use the same web sites over and over,

or reach a point where the information they have found is *good enough*. They engage in cut-and-paste and plagiarism, which raises the concern of whether effective learning has actually taken place.

Students need to learn skills to critically evaluate the information they source to judge the value of information. Having evaluation skills to check for reliability, relevance, credibility, authority, for example, is a valuable life-wide skill in an online world.

Critical thinking and evaluation

Developing the ability to question, analyse, interrogate, scrutinise and evaluate information is essential for any user to stay safe. These higher order thinking skills allow one to evaluate the view of others in the context of how these views may shape the social and cultural environments of young people or the world around them.

Collaboration

"Learning involves dialogue, discussion and building on each other's ideas to create shared understandings" (Hague & Payton 2010, p. 28). Digital environments such as wikis and Google Docs are shared spaces in which young people learn collaborative skills – cooperation, compromise, flexibility, participation, negotiation. In a mutually supportive learning environment they learn to establish group rules to achieve an end result. Collaborative skills provide a foundation for developing coping strategies when in unfriendly environments.

Creativity

This component involves critical thinking and creative production. Young people need to develop skills to be critical consumers of the digital media. They need to know how information is produced in the digital environment so they can learn to question how digital media is created by others. By engaging in the creation of their own products or knowledge they learn to identify what is effective communication to achieve a purpose with the identified audience. Many are already involved in this area through their personal social networking environments, e.g. posting on Facebook, editing profile pages, uploading photos.

With the implementation of the National Curriculum, student use of ICTs is imperative. Student access to online information and facilities are part of every key learning area, and the use and creation of digital works is a requirement of their assessment. There is a *digital pedagogy* for teachers and, as Churches (2009) indicates, the concept of a 'Digital Taxonomy'. The 'Communication Spectrum' mentioned by Churches covers all the skills students need in order to improve their digital literacy and includes skyping, net mapping, video conferencing, posting, blogging, emailing and twittering. Without an understanding of safety issues involved in enacting higher order thinking skills in these environments, students are at risk. Teacher librarians work with students to develop these skills and are very aware of the potential problems in using these digital formats.

Effective communication

It is critical that young people develop the skills to be able to choose the most appropriate communication tool for the task and to also know how to use that tool effectively. Learning to identify the audience and their needs and then to determine the most appropriate format, content and medium for communication will help them to be more discerning of the types of communication they might experience in their personal online encounters. As indicated by Hague & Payton (2010, p. 31), discussions can focus on the relevance, suitability and security of information, their digital footprint and the permanency of online information.

Cultural and social understanding

The *always-on* Internet exposes young people to a worldwide information environment. It also connects them to a global community where interaction can be influenced by social and cultural backgrounds which may not be familiar to the individual. In younger students, the concept of digital communication is not necessarily fully understood, nor the global interaction which can occur while online and the implications for their involvement. They need to learn how information and actions can have different meanings in different cultures. Being able to discern and understand the social and cultural practices and how these influence communication is an important skill.

E-safety

"When seeking to develop student's digital literacy, is it important that teachers make explicit links to e-safety – whether this be about age appropriate content, concern over the predatory behaviour of adults, acceptable use and cyber-bullying or issues of plagiarism, copyright and virus protection" (Hague & Payton 2010, p. 44).

It is imperative that young people are provided the opportunity to take charge of their personal safety. Supporting them to develop skills, knowledge and capabilities that will help them to make informed decisions about their online behaviour and how to protect themselves when online can be a positive learning outcome.

Recommendations:

1. That a national digital literacy learning continuum be developed for schools to support the delivering of the curriculum and include national core standards for cyber-safety education.

2. That sufficient funding is available to ensure the Australian Communications & Media Authority can produce relevant cyber-safety programs and resources for schools.

3. That funding be allocated to the training and employment of teacher librarians to deliver nationally developed programs (e.g. Australian Communications & Media Authority) in conjunction with digital literacy integration in schools.

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