

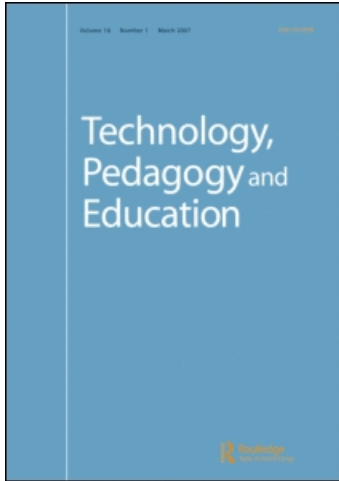
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Internet pollution discourses, exclusionary practices and the ‘culture of over-blocking’ within UK schools

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In the last decade, Internet provision has become widespread within schools in many economically developed countries. Proponents of such technology have stressed the potential benefits to be gained from innovative teaching and learning opportunities. Yet, herein purity and danger are seen to co-exist, with unregulated ‘pollutants’ competing with real opportunities for networked learning. Drawing upon social-cultural writings on pollution, this paper explores discourses of appropriate school Internet use and subsequent attempts to combat perceived dangers. In particular, the paper discusses how schools protect their social and moral boundaries from external threats through excluding certain online material, whilst engaging in internal practices of purification and punishment, mainly by restricting students’ Internet access. It is argued that excessive exclusionary practices, which can be understood as responses to pollution fears and interpretative problems, engender a ‘culture of over-blocking’ limiting the educational potential of school Internet use.

Keywords: Internet; schools; filtering; regulation; blocking; pollution

Introduction

Driven by promises of innovative teaching and learning opportunities, there has been an exponential growth in recent years of school Internet provision within economically developed countries. The educational benefits of the Internet have been marketed in a way that suggests restrictions of time and space are dissolving (Selwyn, 1999), facilitating access to the world’s intellectual, cultural and scientific heritage (Furlong, Furlong, Facer & Sutherland, 2000), while transforming formal learning into an ‘anytime, anywhere’ activity (Russell & Russell, 1999). Yet there exists a basic dichotomy in the perception of school Internet provision. On the one hand, it allows greater freedom in the teaching and learning process (Gur-Ze’ev, 2000); on the other, pornography, hate literature and inchoate ramblings are locatable using the same mechanism (Venezky, 2004, p. 17). Herein purity and danger co-exist, where unregulated pollutants, perceived as threatening to students or schools, compete with real opportunities for networked learning (Hope, 2006).

While research has explored the issue of barriers to effective Internet use in classrooms (Lawson & Comber, 2000; Wood, Mueller, Willoughby, Specht, & Deyoung, 2005), problems created by the closed system of technology, wherein ongoing technical solutions create new predicaments that drive a need for increasing technological intervention (Bauman, 1993), have been somewhat neglected. Addressing this deficiency, it will be argued that certain discourses within schools engender disciplinary practices, introduced with the intent of safeguarding against online pollutants, that create further problems. In this context,

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'discourses' not only refers to collections of related statements, but also suggests the exercise of power to influence ways of seeing and living (Foucault, 1977). Drawing upon social-cultural writings on pollution, notably the work of Douglas (1966), this paper examines perceptions of online content, before exploring attempts at boundary maintenance through practices of protection, purification and punishment. In conclusion, it is maintained that certain Internet materials and activities are defined within educational institutions as polluting; and that the exclusionary practices that emerge as part of this discourse, whilst providing certain safeguards, nevertheless result, through filtering software and human intervention, in 'over-blocking'.

Social-cultural perspectives on pollution

In schools with Internet access, it is not unusual for certain types of online material to invoke negative discourses, with an array of items from junk e-mails to pornographic websites being labelled as 'garbage', 'wasteful', 'corrupting', 'dirty' or 'foul'. The use of such terminology invokes thoughts of pollution, a concept that provides a social-cultural framework within which to explore the labelling and blocking of 'inappropriate' online materials and activities.

Simply put, to pollute is to make foul, corrupt or desecrate. Words such as 'foulness' and 'corruption' suggest that the concept of pollution is associated with that which is loathsome, inciting a negative emotion. Furthermore, there is the implication that pollutants can be potentially harmful. Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) draw a distinction between the purely physical and the symbolic dimensions of the concept of pollution. They note that in contemporary societies, the term pollution tends to be used in two senses (1982, p. 36). Firstly, there is a strictly technical sense, such as in air or river pollution, where a physical adulteration of an earlier state can be precisely measured. Beck (1992) questions such objectivity, noting that even with 'realist' technical judgements 'a social, cultural and political meaning is inherent' (1992, p. 24). Secondly, this concept can operate on a symbolic level, with pollution beliefs acting as analogies representing broader concerns, expressing views about the nature of social order (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982, p. 4). Thus, pollution can refer to a contagious state where a dangerous impurity is linked to moral violation of one kind or another.

From this viewpoint, pollution is the opposite of purity: it disturbs equilibrium, destroying or confusing desirable boundaries and states (Khare, 1996, p. 437). The threatening of borders is also evident with the concept of dirt, which Douglas notes can be seen as 'matter out of place' (1999, p. 109). Indeed, both pollution and dirt suggest two conditions: a set of ordered relations, and their perceived contravention. In this context, pollution behaviour can be seen as a reaction to objects, events or individuals likely to challenge the existing social order of things. It is worth noting that these two uses of the concept of pollution are not mutually exclusive. Rather, a pollutant can fulfil both a 'realist' technical role and a symbolic one. The issue is one of perspective. For example, a student's use of illegal drugs, manufactured using online information, raises the threat of bodily harm, while providing a symbolic challenge to social-legal rules.

Nothing is intrinsically polluting: the labelling of materials or actions is always culturally conceived and socially ordered. Referring to dirt, Douglas notes, '[t]here is no such thing as absolute dirt, it exists in the eye of the beholder' (1966, p. 2). Similarly, in any culture, there may exist competing ideas regarding what should be labelled as pollution. As Douglas remarks, 'since our common human condition does not give rise to a common pattern of pollution observances, the differences become interesting as an index of different

cultural patterning' (1999, p. 112). Value judgements concerning what should become labelled as pollution may conflict and change over time. Importantly, as Douglas (1992) notes, a refusal to take 'sound' hygienic advice is not necessarily to be attributed to a lack of understanding regarding pollution; rather, it can be seen as a preference.

The labelling of certain things as polluting reveals much about the sort of society in which individuals choose to live. Khare (1996, p. 437) notes that societies relate pollution rules to their moral values, with associated rites and practices aimed at reducing risk. Indeed, pollution beliefs may not only reinforce cultural and social structure, but can also serve to reduce moral ambiguity (Douglas, 1999, p. 111). However, pollution rules do not necessarily correlate with moral rules. Douglas (1966, p. 160) argues that some kinds of behaviour may be judged morally wrong yet not provoke pollution beliefs. Thus, pollution rules highlight only an element of morally disapproved behaviour. Despite such apparent contradictions, pollution operates within the classificatory system of societies, seeking to direct behaviour in a determinate fashion (Durkheim & Maus, 1963). Labelling certain practices, individuals or groups as polluting can be used to maintain social order. Yet pollution ideas can be seen as strengthening boundaries in a physical as well as symbolic manner. Hence, the formal suspension or expulsion of students physically banishes them from the school environment, while symbolically highlighting behaviour that will not be tolerated. Drawing upon Douglas (1966, 1992, 1999), it can be argued that communities may seek to combat pollution through protecting boundaries from external threats, while seeking to address the compromise of boundaries through 'purification practices' and punishment, possibly through expulsion. Such actions instil an identity of belonging to that which is included, whilst highlighting the 'difference' and 'otherness' of that which is excluded (Douglas, 1966).

In summary, pollution discourses are constructed through social processes, invoke negative feelings associated with perceived risks, are indicative of broader social goals, and tend to relate to morally charged issues. There is an inclination for these discourses to engender exclusionary practices, which may take the form of strategies of protection, purification and punishment (Douglas, 1966, p. 5).

Background to the research

The following data are drawn from a three-year inductive research project into Internet use in eight educational institutions. The research took the form of semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation and content analysis of relevant school documentation. Drawing upon insights from Schofield (1993) and Kennedy (1979), field sites were chosen to produce a diversity of categories and information, in order to provide some basis towards generalisation. It was felt that student age might be a key independent variable in the research, so institutions within different age sectors were chosen. Overall two primary schools (Avenue and Brooklands, reception class to year 6), two secondary schools (Canalside and Dalehouse, years 7–11), three secondary schools with sixth-form provision (Eastway, Forestfields and Greenswold, years 7–13) and one post-16 college (Hightree, years 12–13) were selected as field sites. Spread across the eight institutions, 30 staff (18 males and 12 females) and 63 students (32 males and 31 females) were interviewed. Whilst individuals who used the school Internet formed a primary focus, attempts were made to include those who did not regularly utilise online facilities.

Given the sensitive nature of potential topics, it was recognised that individuals needed to feel comfortable and in control of the situation (Renzetti & Lee, 1993). Thus, respondents were approached in their everyday settings, anonymity was guaranteed and an attempt was

made to establish rapport, fostering an intersubjective understanding (May, 2001, p. 127). Data triangulation – that is, ‘the use of more than one method of data collection’ (Robson, 2002, p. 174) – was also utilised to alleviate possible validity problems, with in excess of 180 hours spent observing Internet use in the field-site schools.

Reflecting upon the growing body of data, it became evident that a cultural analysis of pollution would provide a useful framework for exploring issues of Internet use, boundary maintenance and exclusionary practices. Although the work of Mary Douglas offered some key insights, her ideas about group and grid (wherein dichotomous views of both strength of organisational membership and degrees of social control are combined to develop a four-cell model; see Douglas, 1970, 1982) were ultimately disregarded. This choice reflected criticism of the model (Lupton, 1999, p. 51), as well as the desire to draw upon Foucault’s (1977) discussion of discourses and develop the analysis in a more post-structural direction. Despite not utilising the group/grid model, it is worth noting that Delamont’s (1989, p. 41) analysis of this typology gives rise to two points with wider analytical relevance, notably that the levels at which pollution perceptions are analysed, and whose perspective is adopted, matter. For example, it does not necessarily follow that students will label and respond to online material in the same manner as teachers.

School Internet pollution discourses

Judgements regarding the labelling of objects, acts or individuals as polluting are culturally constructed and mediated (Douglas, 1999). Thus, what is labelled as polluting in one social group may not be regarded as such in another. Furthermore, Delamont (1989, p. 19) suggests that ‘it is not the act itself which has absolute value, but the social classification of it’. Such categorisation may be influenced by various factors including social norms, individual/group status, legal conventions and the power of those involved in the classification process to enforce their viewpoint. Whilst perspectives may vary, Resnick and Miller (1996) suggest that in schools the labelling of online material depends on the supervisor, the student seeking the material and the intended outcome.

Although definitional and classificatory differences were in evidence within the schools, there was a tendency for staff to discuss certain types of material in terms relating to pollution. Staff concerns about the school Internet focused around a range of issues including online pornography, chat-lines, hate-engendering sites, websites promoting experimentation with drugs or explosives, ‘hacking’ and copyright violation (Hope, 2006). However, not all online material labelled as unsuitable for school Internet access could be categorised as pollution. Thus, staff tended to deride gaming sites, music webpages and educationally substandard content, but did not always react forcibly by invoking exclusion strategies. It might be argued that such material was better described as dirt; that is, matter out of place (Douglas, 1999), instead of ‘morally charged’ pollution. Such judgements could also reflect that dirt was not seen to threaten the moral function of the school, whereas pollution did. Indeed, Hargreaves (2001) argues that school communities have two main aspects, operating as academic communities that encourage intellectual excellence, as well as moral communities, fostering consensual elements of social and emotional life. In this context, the labelling of online material or activities as polluting can be related to the perceived threat that it offers to the school as moral community.

Material of a sexual nature formed the primary focus of what could be categorised as staff pollution concerns. Among the staff, 28 expressed anxiety about pornographic images and 24 were concerned by the potential for students to use chat-lines for sexual conversations. Distinctions were made regarding the nature of the pollution that might occur. For

example, with younger students, particularly those in the primary schools, staff expressed anxiety that online pornographic images might ‘contaminate impressionable young minds’ (male, head teacher, Brooklands). This illustrates a common, morally charged pollution theme, namely the need to protect ‘innocent’ children from corrupting influences within the adult world, while safeguarding the school as a moral community. However, in the post-primary schools students intentionally accessing online pornography were seen as a major cause of pollution, with one teacher remarking, ‘the porn worries me to be honest, only more from the [school] image point of view’ (male, ICT manager, Greenswold). Examining Internet regulation policy, Oswell (1998) noted a similar distinction commonly made between the child-in-danger and the ‘dangerous’ child. Though staff viewpoints were more complex than such simple oppositions, there was nevertheless a tendency in the post-primary schools to label students who engaged in certain intentional online activities as polluting insofar as their actions could generate negative publicity, threaten staff authority and undermine the school as a moral community.

While the issue of paedophiles on the web was a common concern, a similar labelling of younger children as victims and youths as a source of danger still occurred with chat-lines. Thus, one teacher observed:

With younger students [on chat-lines] you worry they’ll come across language they shouldn’t be exposed to... The older ones, they’re probably the source of these conversations. (Female, ICT head, Eastway)

The perceived threat to schools posed by older students misusing the Internet was a central theme in staff discourses in the post-primary institutions. However, such concerns tended not to exert themselves in a hegemonic manner upon student perceptions. As Crawshaw (2004, p. 232) suggests, young people construct their own situated discourses of appropriateness in response to their environment. Notably, the majority of students interviewed did not label the Internet as polluting. Indeed, a female year 12 student at Hightree reportedly told the ICT manager that she felt that using chat-lines in schools for ‘intimate conversations’ was a ‘rite of passage’. The ICT manager disagreed fervently, labelling such activity as obscene, suggesting that it should clearly be seen as polluting. In this instance, it can be argued that the student was not failing to understand the institutional discourse, but rather, as Douglas (1992) suggests, was expressing a preference. In certain cases, pollution discourses were intoned by students without any obvious disgust, which suggested that they recognised the labels attached by staff to particular online content without necessarily agreeing with them.

Staff pollution discourses did not exist within schools merely on a verbal level; rather, a range of disciplinary procedures and technologies were utilised, including parental pressure, acceptable use policies, filtering software and physical exclusions. Due to limits of space, subsequent discussion will focus primarily on the use of exclusionary practices to reinforce boundaries and maintain social order within schools.

Exclusionary practices and the school Internet

Douglas (1966) suggests that within a community pollution can endanger social and moral boundaries externally, internally (including inner contradictions) and through ambiguity at the margins. Whilst Douglas (1966, p. 5) infers that attempts to deal with pollution are likely to be exclusionary in nature, it is questionable whether all efforts to exclude can be seen as responses to pollution. In exploring attempts to control the school Internet using exclusionary

practices, protecting boundaries from external threats through the blocking of online material and safeguarding internal boundaries using purification practices and punishment, particularly the expulsion of students, will be considered in turn. In broader cultural analysis of pollution, both purifying and punishing transgressions are also strategies for dealing with external pollution (Douglas, 1966, p. 5). However, with reference to school Internet use, these two practices were primarily concerned with internal dangers posed by ‘polluting students’. This reflected that schools predominantly engaged in communal purification practices to reaffirm boundaries that students were perceived to have transgressed, while it was rarely practical to try to punish external polluters.

i) Protecting boundaries from external threats

In simple terms, to protect is to defend, guard or keep from harm. Various technological devices and services were available for schools seeking to protect boundaries from external threats by excluding the ‘polluting’ aspects of cyberspace. In addition to supplying the field-site schools with ‘firewalls’ – computers configured to prevent unauthorised access to private networks – the Internet Service Providers (ISPs) also offered a range of protective software. All eight schools adopted ‘deny lists’ that allowed students to search the entire web but blocked access to certain previously identified websites. These lists were provided and updated by the ISPs, with schools adding to them on an experiential basis. In addition to such site-based filters, the schools also utilised content-based software, blocking certain words or images. While keyword-matching systems barring searches and sites containing previously determined words or phrases were used by all eight schools, only Canalside and Forestfields reported using visual content management applications, which blocked online images featuring certain skin colours and textures. Overall, attempts to protect school boundaries from external threats using filtering software resulted in two main problems: the failure to exclude online material labelled as polluting, and ‘over-blocking’.

The filtering software utilised by the schools was not always effective in blocking material labelled as polluting. Thus, in all the post-primary institutions there were incidents of students accessing online material that was labelled as polluting, such as sexually explicit images. Nevertheless, there was a general belief in the schools that the software excluded much unsuitable material. Somewhat contrarily, this ‘effectiveness’ was illustrated when there was a total collapse of filtering devices at Greenswold, which meant that students ‘typed in sex.com and up it came’ (male, ICT manager, Greenswold).

All field-site schools experienced ‘over-blocking’, inappropriately restricting access to certain online material, which was partly a consequence of the somewhat unresponsive nature of the filtering technology. At Eastway, a computer consultant attempted to show staff a website providing a digest of information for heads of departments. However, the filtering software barred access to the site and the consultant was unable to circumvent the restriction. Other innocuous web searches were reportedly blocked because they contained restricted keywords. Students at Hightree researching sex and gender issues online for media studies complained that the software was infuriating, problematising their legitimate academic enquiry. The visual content management software was also seen as a somewhat imprecise tool. Discussing the decision not to use such a system at Hightree, the ICT manager stated:

You couldn’t block sites on the basis of flesh tones ... because with art students, the books they’ve got down there [in the art room] are full of human figures. (Male, ICT manager, Hightree)

Although institutional decisions regarding the labelling of particular material as art or pornography might be highly problematic, visual content software has the added disadvantage that it is unable to distinguish context. Such packages were reportedly too fervent in blocking images containing flesh tones.

Yet 'over-blocking' should not be considered merely a software design issue. It can be argued that the concept also has relevance with regard to staff interpretations of online material. For example, it was not always evident that the websites which staff added to deny lists were regarded as polluting. Discussing a drug-related site, a teacher remarked, '[a] kid found a site on cannabis. It was quite educational' (male, ICT manager, Dalehouse); nevertheless, it was subsequently blocked. In this case, the actual online material was labelled as educational, but it problematically belonged to a category of information (drugs) that was perceived to be polluting. From an educational perspective, the approach of blocking categories of material can be highly problematic. After all, following a change in context, the aforementioned website might prove to be a useful resource for students researching the effects of drugs for health studies. In such instances, the situational (Resnick & Miller, 1996), culturally constructed (Douglas, 1999) nature of pollution labels and the desire to protect external boundaries from online pollution could restrict the educational process, bringing the two principal outcomes of schooling, academic and moral development (Hargreaves, 2001), into conflict.

ii) Internal pollution threats, purification and punishment

While the filtering software attempted to keep what could be labelled as online pollution outside the school environment, there was a second group of exclusionary practices concerned with removing students from the school Internet. Drawing upon Douglas (1966, p. 5), it can be argued that school responses to internal pollution arising from student Internet (mis)use moved beyond simple protection, fostering practices of purification and punishment. Indeed these two practices were often deeply intertwined with purification, the removal of specifically defined uncleanness, and punishment serving to reaffirm moral boundaries whilst removing the 'pollutant'. Practically, such measures included the withdrawal of 'net' access, the blocking of Internet passwords and expulsion from school.

In all the field-site schools, students were observed being told to log off the Internet, having accessed what were deemed by staff to be 'unsuitable' websites. In the post-primary schools, Internet access was withdrawn from certain students for a time following incidents that were labelled by staff as polluting. At Canalside, Eastway, Forestfields and Greenswold, student Internet access was withdrawn for periods ranging from two weeks to a term following incidents where pornographic material was intentionally accessed. Such exclusions can be seen as an attempt to practically and symbolically reaffirm moral boundaries (Khare, 1996) through purification, removal of the pollutant, and punishment, restricting students' online privileges. In the post-primary institutions, passwords were disabled when 'polluting' students had their Internet access withdrawn. Problematically, passwords are not always effective in excluding students, particularly when they are able to borrow or steal another (Hope, 2005). Only at Hightree was a student permanently excluded for Internet misuse, specifically for accessing images of naked females on the *FHM* magazine website. The ICT manager at Hightree declared that the decision was made primarily to send a clear message to other students regarding appropriate Internet use. Given that the incident occurred soon after Internet access was introduced to the college, in what the ICT manager perceived to be an atmosphere of irresponsible online usage, it is not surprising that the symbolic aspects of the expulsion were privileged. The

'effectiveness' of excluding students for Internet 'misuse' depends largely upon the monitoring of online activity. It is worth noting that students develop a variety of strategies to resist such surveillance (Hope, 2005).

A key problem with reaffirming boundaries of acceptable Internet use within schools using purification and punishment practices was the tendency towards 'over-blocking'. In numerous cases, the interpretation of 'unsuitable' Internet use seemed to be broader than just material and practices labelled as polluting. Thus, at Canalside a group of students were sanctioned for accessing sites featuring images and information on sports cars. Although the students had actually been working on a project set by their teacher, the ICT head had misconstrued this legitimate educational activity as play. Similarly, at Forestfields a male student accessing a video game website was told that the Internet was for 'educational use only', before eviction from the learning resource centre. The student had reportedly been seeking material to include on a website he was building. As these examples illustrate, 'over-blocking' through student exclusion tended to take the form of students being told to leave Internet-enabled rooms, rather than long-term withdrawal of Internet access or expulsion. It can be argued that the tendency for staff to 'over-block' was a direct response to pollution fears and (mis)interpretations of dirt, potentially leading to a conflict between the school as a moral and as an academic community.

Pollution, 'over-blocking' and culture

Considering discourses of 'inappropriate' Internet use in terms of the social-cultural framework offered by the concept of pollution provides various insights. It serves to highlight the socially constructed nature of such discourses, as well as allowing for consideration of their contextual and contested nature (Douglas, 1999). Thus, although students were aware of staff pollution discourses, they did not always agree with them. Nevertheless, it was possible to find an overriding concern within staff Internet discourses that focused upon the possible negative impacts of material of a sexual nature, in particular pornographic images and sexual online conversations. This anxiety with problematic sexualised activity online illustrates that societies often relate pollution ideas to their ethical concerns (Khare, 1996). Discussions about pollution reveal much about perceived threats to society (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982). In the case of school Internet 'misuse', there was a tendency for staff to differentiate between children at risk and 'dangerous' youths threatening the school as moral community. Albeit with regard to infection, Douglas (1992, p. 119) seems to suggest that there is a temptation for the central community to focus on protecting its own integrity rather than the vulnerable. Such a consideration could help to explain tendencies towards 'over-blocking'.

Douglas (1966) observes that pollution concerns give rise to rites and practices aimed at reducing risk, through protecting external boundaries, purifying the polluted and punishing transgressors. With regard to school Internet use, such processes predominantly took the forms of the blocking of online material and the exclusion of students. Shortcomings relating to the filtering software meant there was a tendency to 'over-block', mistakenly barring access to material that would have been of educational benefit. In terms of the role of commercial organisations in blocking access to online material in schools, it is worth recalling that ISPs play a significant role in the creation as well as the maintenance of 'deny lists' utilised by the schools. Such judgements as to what constitutes pollution are always political in nature (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982). Indeed, Hartley (1998) warns of a hidden curriculum arising from a 'technological fix' of panoptical pedagogy, where school practices might be influenced through seemingly value-neutral technology. Yet 'over-blocking' was

not solely a software issue; rather, it was also a prominent feature of staff interactions with students using the Internet. Thus, students working online were told to log off the network by staff who labelled their activity as non-educational. To some extent, this was an issue of (mis)interpretation, labelling something as out of place when it might not be; and partly it was a reaction to pollution discourses within the schools.

Climates of unease, like *disease*, tend to provoke over-reactions. Furthermore, fear that boundaries will be compromised may lead to proactive actions, pre-empting perceived problems. Indeed, if there is an inclination to classify the individual instead of the online material as the primary pollutant, then the temptation exists to see the label even when the Internet is not being misused. It can be argued that staff discourses form part of what Somekh (2004) labels as institutionalised resistance, both in the formal bureaucratic structures of school and in the informal microstructures of teachers, where new rules are created to contain and constrain ICTs. Thus, staff pollution discourses, as well as related practices of Internet protection, purification and punishment, attempt, through the exercise of power, to define, and thereby restrict, the nature of educational online activity. These discourses not only influence the manner in which staff react to material or activities defined as 'polluting', but also engender reactionary disciplinary practices with regard to other online content. Due to the dynamic nature of the World Wide Web, attempts at categorisation of polluting material are unlikely to be comprehensive. Instead, it is easier to use a single label when referring to acceptable online material, which in the context of schools is likely to be 'educational use only'. Herein the problem of interpretation again arises. If staff fail to see the educational benefit of students' online activities, they may define the material as 'dirt', matter out of place, and curtail Internet access.

Central to the discussion of pollution and 'over-blocking' is the assumption that restricting students' school Internet use in a reactionary manner has negative consequences, which urgently need addressing. Rigid attempts to control Internet use are creating problems, fostering divisions within schools. Thus frustrated students, unable to use the school Internet for learning activities labelled by staff as 'non-educational', are forced to seek alternative sites of online access; or, worse, stop using the technology. Hargreaves (2001, p. 490) suggests that a key element in generating social capital in schools is trust, without which schools will not realise their full potential. Arguably, pollution Internet discourses with the resultant practices of protection, purification and punishment not only serve upon occasion to undermine trust but also generate conflict within schools between their functions as moral and academic communities. This conflict, and the role of trust in school Internet use, are issues that future research needs to explore.

In discussing risks within contemporary society, Furedi (1997) suggests that a culture of fear has emerged, centred on blame, which engenders a morality of low expectation. Though such an observation might be criticised as overly harsh and dystopian, it can nevertheless be argued that fears arising from pollution discourses, and subsequent interpretative problems, create an atmosphere within which a 'culture of over-blocking' develops. Culture, in this sense, signifies the symbolic and learned aspect of human society (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 1994, p. 98). Insofar as 'over-blocking' has seeped into aspects of social life, influencing practices and beliefs, it could be argued that it operates at a 'cultural level'. Yet the 'culture of over-blocking' may not be a new phenomenon, rather predating the growth of new communications technology. Thus, in the UK the struggle to remove perceived restrictions concerning teaching about alternative sexual lifestyles could be interpreted as an attempt to overcome a particular manifestation of the 'culture of over-blocking'. Indeed, as schools are inherently institutions of control, the 'culture of over-blocking' may have a long history waiting to be explored.

Conclusion

Discussion about pollution reveals much about cultural values and desires (Douglas, 1999). With regard to educational institutions, the social-cultural framework of pollution has wider applications than Internet use, offering potential insights for researchers, practitioners and policymakers into such diverse subjects as junk food, drug abuse, disciplinary technology and the social isolation of students. Limits of space have meant that it has not been possible to fully explore ideas of the school as moral community, the role of trust, nor the interrelationship between purification practices and punishment. Nevertheless, the writings of Mary Douglas should provide a useful starting-point for the future development and application of these concepts. While privileging aspects of Douglas's work, an attempt has also been made in this paper to conceptually move pollution from a rigid, structural functionalist form towards a Foucault (1977)-influenced consideration of discourses. Future research and debate about a 'culture of over-blocking' may help to make overt certain pedagogic problems relating to what Hartley (1998) infers is the hidden curriculum of the 'technological fix'. Chief amongst these issues is likely to be the need for greater flexibility in school Internet use, allowing for a broader, less reactionary conceptualisation of what constitutes education in the twenty-first century.

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