**Research Methods 2012**

**Article review assignment**

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**25 March 2012**

**Word count: 1195**

**Assignment background**

This assignment offers a critical review of the article *Internet pollution discourses, exclusionary practices and the 'culture of over-blocking' within UK schools* by Andrew Hope (2008). This review begins by describing the focus of the research question before critically considering the methodology and findings, including the sites selected for data collection and potential sources of bias. The review also considers how the analysis is linked to the research question as well as suggesting opportunities for future development.

**Introduction and context**

In this article, Hope sets out to discuss how schools ‘protect their moral and social boundaries’ (Hope 2008:103) from what might be viewed as inappropriate Internet content or ‘pollution’. In addition he argues that a culture of ‘overblocking’ reduces the educational potential of the Internet in schools. The article begins with a helpful discussion of the concept of Internet pollution and its presence in schools.

From the outset, Hope acknowledges the culturally and contextually loaded nature of the concepts that form the basis of the research. This is useful in setting the tone for the article, advising the reader to expect discussion and exploration rather than ‘hard and fast’ rules or actionable conclusions. Hope also makes effective use of the metaphor as a device for exploring the concept of pollution in relation to Internet content in schools, helping the reader to conceptualise different types of information.

**Sites for data collection**

Having described the context and outlined the scope of the research, Hope moves on to describe the methodology used to address his research question. Hope sensibly recognizes that the age group of school Internet users could impact upon attitudes towards the appropriateness of information. In doing this Hope connects the data collection with the theory described in his introduction, a cohesive approach that is helpful in guiding the reader though his arguments.

Hope selected a range of different schools types as sites for data collection, from primary schools up to a post-16 college. The range within the data sample was intended to provide some ‘basis towards generalisation’ (Hope, 2010: 105) and adds to the dependability of the results (Robson, 2011: 270). A different approach in the future might be to consider whether the different type of school impacted upon attitudes towards Internet pollution. For instance, considering the strong connection Hope establishes between morality and attitudes towards pollution, it would be interesting to explore whether faith schools – with their emphasis on a moral and ethical education – might produce different findings.

**Methods of data collection**

The process of data collection was qualitative in nature and entailed three approaches: semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation and content analysis of school documentation. At this point, Hope seems content to limit description of this approach to highlighting the potential for triangulation to reduce bias (see Robson 2011:158). It would have been useful however to read a rationale for why he favoured this combination of approaches. Furthermore, the article does not describe how participants were recruited to contribute towards interviews, for instance were pupils put forward by their school or did they opt in? Were incentives offered? The inclusion of this information would enable the reader to consider the potential for bias within the collected data. The presence of the article in a recognised, peer reviewed journal offers reassurance that research was carried out in an ethical and rigorous way, however from the perspective of academic enquiry, additional detail would have been welcome.

An apparent strength of the data collection was the recognition that participants would be asked to discuss sensitive subject matter (such as pornography). By conducting interviews in the familiar setting of school, Hope intended to make participants feel at ease (citing work by Renzetti and Lee (1993)). Further reassurance was offered by making participants aware that they would be participating anonymously. In terms of future development, perhaps an online questionnaire survey might offer additional reassurance of anonymity. Or considering the sensitivity of issues such as child access to pornography, an e-mail interview might stimulate responses that would not otherwise be shared face-to-face (Robson 2011: 292).

**Addressing the research question within the findings**

It is apparent that the chosen approach to data collection was successful in producing information that was salient to the research question and aligned to the underpinning theory. Hope draws data from the interviews (for example differing attitudes towards chat forums between pupils and teachers) to examine the suggestion within the literature that attitudes to pollution will vary between different groups based upon their cultural and societal values. A similar connection can be seen between presented data and earlier cited literature on pollution discourses and social order and punishment.

For the most part, the presentation of findings within the article benefits from being measured in tone, whilst being linked to underpinning theory and accompanied by examples of relevant data from participant interviews and observed events. Towards the end of his discussion however (p107) Hope makes what appears to a bold statement by stating that ‘Rigid attempts to control Internet use are creating problems, fostering divisions in schools.’ It would be interesting to know whether specific reference to a ‘division’ emerged consistently from a study of language used in the interview transcripts (Robson, 2011: 482) - after all, none of the participants cited in the article use this terminology specifically. Indeed, the reproduced data gives the impression of disagreement rather than the more severe ‘division’. The absence of supporting literature at this point suggests that this is the author’s interpretation, based upon an overview of the collected data. Nevertheless, this statement merits further clarification and discussion, for instance where the division exists: is it between students and teachers, teachers and school managers or perhaps school managers and legislators? As per the rationale offered for data collection, the reader’s natural academic enquiry is left somewhat unsatisfied.

**Conclusion**

In this article, Hope combines a theoretical grounding with empirical data collection to argue that the overblocking of content has a detrimental effect on the education use of the Internet in UK schools. The data collection and references to the literature are aligned to each other and to the subject matter, combining to produce a coherent and focused response to the research question.

However perhaps an imbalance between theoretical grounding and the presentation of data reduces the strength of Hope’s argument. While Hope has undoubtedly raised interesting questions and stimulated debate on the subject, additional detail on his methodology would have further supported his ideas. This should be seen as gap within the reporting of data however, not necessarily a weakness in the undertaken research – indeed Hope acknowledges the limited space in which he has to describe his findings (p107).

The qualitative, explorative approach to data collection contributed towards the emergence of themes worthy of future development (yet of continuing relevance to the original research question). It would be interesting for instance to explore whether the cultural and moral character of an individual school can influence attitudes towards Internet use and overblocking. The emergence of these areas for future development demonstrate that Hope has successfully opened a debate on the overblocking of Internet content in schools.

**References**

[Hope, A. (2008)](https://www.vle.ed.ac.uk/webct/urw/lc4465719098021.tp4465716614041/displayContentPageTargetedResource.dowebct?tocID=-1&tocLinkID=-1&pageID=-1&newWindow=true&relativePath=/reviewselection/Hope2008.pdf) Internet pollution discourses, exclusionary practices and the 'culture of over-blocking' within UK schools. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education,* 17(2) 103-113.

Robson, C. (2011) Real world research: a resource for social scientists and practitioner-researchers. Chichester: Wiley.