Response Form

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| Contact Name | *Jacinta Hastings* |
| Name of Organisation (if applicable) | *Bodywhys: the Eating Disorders Association of Ireland* |
| Address | *PO Box 105, Blackrock, Co. Dublin* |
| Email address | [*ceo@bodywhys.ie*](mailto:ceo@bodywhys.ie) |
| Phone number | *01-2834963* |
| Date of submission | *18/03/14* |

*Please note that submissions received may be published. It would also be helpful if responses to each question are limited to approximately 500 words.*

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| Question 1 | *Is there a role for the State in regulating internet content?* |
| For most young people online technologies are a part of their everyday lives and a popular and widespread means of retrieving information. In Ireland, young people aged 16 to 24 years are the most frequent users of the internet. Data from the European Commission highlights the steady increase in young people’s use of the internet over the past seven years with 34% of young people reporting they had accessed the internet in 2005; In 2011, 92% of 16 to 24 year olds reported having accessed the internet. Of this group, 78% of young people accessed the internet on a daily basis (European Union, 2012). Similar figures have been reported in Australia, with 91% of 12 to 17 year olds reporting the internet as a ‘highly important aspect of their lives’ (Clarke, et al. 2013, p3).  In the context of mental health, results from the recent *My World Survey* (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012) carried out with over 14,300 young people aged 12 to 25 in Ireland, highlight the importance of the internet as a source of support for young people’s mental health and well-being. For young people aged 12 to 19 years in secondary school, the internet was the third most frequently reported source of support after friends and parents. For young adults aged 17 to 25 years (post-second level), the internet was the most frequently reported source of support for mental health and well-being, followed by friends and parents (*Ibid*). The findings from this study provide evidence that for young people the internet can be seen as a ‘tool and a setting for action’ (Blanchard, 2011) in improving their mental health and well-being.  In the context of this submission, an area of great concern is of websites and communities which have emerged wherein users can find material that actively promote unhealthy behaviours such as self-harm, suicide and pro-eating disorders (also identified as pro-ana and pro-mia sites). ‘While health professionals investigate causes of and prevention strategies and treatments for eating disorders and their poor health consequences, pro-eating disorder websites and communities have emerged wherein users can find material to support the progression and maintenance of eating disorders. Similar to websites that promote other equally unhealthy behaviours such as self-harm and suicide, pro-eating disorders websites (also identified as pro-ana and pro-mia websites) are of great concern’ (Borzekowski., et al, 2010).  Given the proliferation of usage it is imperative that the highest attainable standards be in place to ensure a safe environment for all users. In this regard, the state has a role in regulation of internet industries; ensuring internet content governance; safe online engagement; creating awareness of dangers and risks; and supporting safe alternatives. | |

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| Question 2 | *Are existing arrangements for regulation of internet industries adequate? If not, what additional arrangements are needed for internet content governance and better internet safety?* |
| In terms of cyberbullying, as discussed in the Oireachtas report ‘Addressing the Growth of Social Media and tackling Cyberbullying’, areas covered by existing legislation includes: incitement to hatred, data protection and the sending of menacing messages, the law does not however extend to social media. The *Communications Regulation (Amendment) Act 2007* needs to be reviewed to extend to social media and its related infrastructure including recognizing online ‘communities’ within the definition of cyberbullying.  In the context of eating disorders, Bodywhys – the Eating Disorders Association of Ireland, has for some time expressed concern in relation to ‘pro-ana/pro-mia’ websites. Pro-anorexia ('pro-ana') and pro-bulimia ('pro-mia') websites advocate anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa as a life-style choice rather than as serious mental disorders, and typically contain information on how to maintain or initiate new anorexic/bulimic behaviours and how to resist treatment or recovery (Norris et al., 2006; Harshbarger et al., 2008), which is clearly harmful, while at the same time being threatening, aggressive or bullying to those who express a desire to seek help. The most frequent motivation cited by users of these sites is to maintain motivation to accelerate their weight loss (anorexia), to get support (with their ‘lifestyle choice’) and to meet other people with eating disorders.  Such websites have been in existence since the development of the internet, but have grown significantly in recent years. The limited research available has shown that a significant number of young people visit these sites, in particular those at high risk of eating disorders. A substantial proportion of young people who already have an eating disorder also visit them, in particular those with a more severe form of the illness. Nearly all report learning new techniques from these sites. In some cases, the sites while warning users about distressing material also stated disclaimers about not being responsible for the site’s effects (Borzekowski., et al, 2010). Parents of eating disorder sufferers have a limited awareness of pro-anorexia sites and of their child's use of such sites (Wilson et al., 2006).  Bodywhys recommends that ‘pro-ana/pro-mia’ websites be recognised as having a serious negative impact on users and be monitored accordingly. Such safety mechanisms be developed to address the potential serious implications such usage may incur. Safety developments in this instance should include a facility to offer a safe alternative e.g. a ‘click through’ facility to BodywhysConnect or YouthConnect as a safe alternative for people affected by eating disorders. | |

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| Question 3 | *Is existing regulation and legislation sufficient to deal with problems of cyberbullying? If not, what else is needed?* |
| It is important to recognise that there are emotional and personal responses to incidents of bullying, including cyberbullying. Relying primarily on technical or technological methods to address this challenging area may not be an effective solution. A long term, pro-active approach, involving education and good practice, is required to address this complex area.  To counteract and prevent cyberbullying, the following may be worth considering:   * Actively encourage and promote the importance of early intervention such as the reporting of offensive material through the mechanisms provided on social media websites. In this context, social media websites and platforms must ensure their reporting procedures are transparent and easily accessible. * Develop and encourage personal resilience skills in young people. This requires a collaborative approach from teachers, parents and agencies. * Deliver effective mental health awareness information in schools. Support, signpost and divert those at risk to appropriate support services and local resources. Mental health professionals working in this area must also develop an understanding of the dynamics of social media to ensure that they are sufficiently ‘cyber-literate’. * Encourage young people to follow good practice on social media websites. This includes self-monitoring and caution when posting any personal information online. Where behaviour is upsetting and antagonistic, encourage users to report, disconnect, disengage, block, delete. * Implement social media and information technology (acceptable use) policies at school level. * Follow the recommendations of the Anti-Bullying Working Group’s Action Plan on Bullying. * Continue to work to eliminate the stigma and silence around disclosing mental health issues and further encourage support seeking behaviour. * Encourage parents to be aware of the content and how to be constructively but actively involved in their children’s internet use. | |

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| Question 4 | *Do we need additional measures to deal with the accessing by children and young people of content that may be age-inappropriate or harmful for their development?* |
| From a Bodywhys perspective, the main concern regarding inappropriate or harmful content is specifically in relation to pro-eating disorder websites and communities wherein users can find material to support the progression and maintenance of eating disorders (Borzekowski., et al, 2010). The internet offers access to websites that describe, endorse and actively support eating disorders. In the context of pro-ana/pro-mia websites, interaction is, in the main, by choice and the sites actively searched for and engaged with by users, albeit to seek out harmful material (images and prose intended to inspire weight dangerous weight loss), tips and tricks, and harmful behaviours. The tips and techniques are purposeful to foster eating disorder behaviours ranging from simple and seemingly harmless to intricate and potentially life threatening (*Ibid*).  In light of the above, it is important to point out that while these sites are not illegal, nevertheless, the content and the purpose is to encourage engagement with behaviours which impact negatively on users’ health – mental and physical – as well as actively discouraging health seeking behaviour. In the main, practically all of these websites are open to the public and most have interactive features although some are password-protected or invitation-only.  In terms of eating disorders specifically, Bodywhys provides a safe pro-recovery environment through online support groups for individuals between the ages of 13-18, and a separate group for those aged 18 and up. Both groups are facilitated by trained Bodywhys volunteers working within the framework of organizational policies and procedures, including child protection.  Additional measures need to be considered to support pro-recovery websites as a safe alternative to pro-ana/pro-mia websites. In this regard parental education is essential. | |

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| Question 5 | *Do you feel sufficiently informed about online internet safety? Do you know where to find the different educational resources and supports available to keep children (and young people) safe online? Do you believe these resources are easily accessible?* |
| As an organisation Bodywhys is aware of a number of sources regarding internet safety, for example, *The Office for Internet Safety* regarding advice and complaints procedures. It is unclear however, whether these resources are well known to parents and the general public. Additional efforts may be required to draw attention to their existence, purpose and function. With regard to the concern raised here in this submission regarding ‘pro-ana/pro-mia’ websites, it is worth noting that ‘after a 2001 request from several national associations of health professionals, the search engine Yahoo an MSN agreed to shut down websites that were overtly pro-anorexia or pro-bulimia. This led to the remaining sites concealing their purposes, going underground, and using other servers, proving that Internet content is extremely difficult to regulate’ (Borzekowski., et al, 2010). | |

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| Question 6 | *Do you have any other comments or recommendations on the safeguards that should exist to deal with internet content and/or activity that may be harmful or age-inappropriate?* |
| According to findings from O’Neill and Dinh (2014) *‘The proliferation of potentially harmful user generated content is another aspect of risk online that presents new challenges for educators, carers and policy makers. With 1 in 5 of all young people and over a third of teenage girls encountering sites containing hate messages, pro-anorexia content and other forms of negative content, there is likely to be significant concern for the quality of young people’s internet experience’*.  For over a decade, both the mainstream media and researchers have reported on the existence of pro-eating disorder websites, often described as pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia. Such websites include discussion forums, blogs, photographs, social media profiles and videos, advice and commentary centring on weight loss or control. Some mainstream media commentary has apportioned blame to pro-eating disorder websites for promoting and causing eating disorders.  In terms of pro-eating disorder websites, research studies have identified the following core issues:   1. The websites are heterogeneous and diverse. There is no unifying philosophy that underpins the online pro-anorexia/pro-bulimia community (Giles, 2006; Brotsky and Giles, 2007). Some websites aim to support recovery whilst others encourage the maintenance of eating disorder behaviours (Riley, Rodham & Gavin, 2009). 2. It is hard to quantify the number of pro-ana/pro-mia websites that are currently online. In the early 2000s, some websites were closed down, but ultimately relocated under a new identity. 3. New members may be met with suspicion or hostility until their credibility or authenticity has been assessed and accepted by existing members. 4. Some sites contain disclaimers and warnings. Websites may also contain information on weight loss and hiding behaviours, commonly known as tips and tricks (Mulveen & Hepworth, 2006; Csipke and Horne, 2007; Borzekowski et al, 2010). Some focus on thinspiration material (Borzekowski et al, 2010) or present anorexia nervosa as a lifestyle choice (Dias, 2003; Kleyn & Clark, 2009). Most recently, pro-anorexia information has been noted in videos posted on the video sharing website Youtube (Syed-Abul et al, 2013). Additional concerns noted by researchers, as pertaining to eating disorder blogs, included a fear of disclosure and discovery, feeling under pressure and encouraging eating disorders (Yeshua-Katz and Martins, 2013). 5. Postings on some pro-eating disorder websites range from innocuous to sinister ‘offering guidance on how to conceal anorexia from suspicious siblings and parents’ (Giles, 2006, p464). 6. Although one study noted that some pro-eating disorder chat rooms and websites have been seen to reduce feelings of loneliness (Csipke and Horne, 2007), another observed that the quality of support available is ultimately short-term relief, elusive, or a ‘social mirage’ (Brotsky and Giles (2007, p. 107).   Borzekowski et al (2010) found that the majority of these websites were maintained by adolescents (16%) and young adults (66%) and the internet’s easy accessibility allows user to tap into a site’s features at any time of day or night, making any monitoring extremely challenging. While recognizing that technological, political and cultural challenges would be significant, attempts must be made to recognise pro-ana/pro-mia websites within any consideration to regulate internet content. | |

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