

Making the Internet a Safer Place

The Safer Internet plus programme promotes the safer use, particularly by children, of the Internet and other online technologies, fighting illegal and harmful Internet content ranging from child pornography to racism.

Illegal and harmful content and conduct has been a concern for lawmakers, industry, parents and teachers since the Web put unregulated content one click away from any Internet-connected PC.

How **illegal** content and conduct is actually defined, of course, depends on the country – what is illegal in one country can be protected as free speech in another. Illegal internet content, moreover, may be produced in one country, stored in a second and accessed in a third, complicating law enforcement.

Harmful content, on the other hand, is content which adults responsible for children, such as parents or teachers, consider harmful to those children. Definitions therefore vary from one culture – and one person - to the next.

Some content, moreover, is sent to users against their wishes – a significant portion of all **spam** contains advertisements for pornography, some clearly illegal in all circumstances.

From Policy to Action

While the international context is complex, the EU has set certain standards across Europe, clarifying many legal issues (see box).

The problem, however, cannot be tackled by legal measures alone, and is larger than parents generally realise. According to a recent survey (www.saftonline.org):

- 40% of children say that people they have only met on-line have asked to meet them in person. Some 14% of them actually met the person - but only 4% of the parents were aware of this;
- Similarly, while 30% of the children have seen Web sites with violent material, only 15% of the parents think their children have done so.

With broadband access growing – both via PCs and new ‘third generation’ (3G) mobile phones – and with the Internet becoming an increasingly important part of children’s lives, these figures are not likely to become less disturbing without concerted action.

The Safer Internet hotline network is unique and would not exist without EU funding.

The European Commission is therefore launching a followup to its Safer Internet Programme, launched in 1999 as part of the EU’s response to the problem. The new programme - Safer Internet Plus (2005–2008) – represents both continuity and enhancements over its predecessor.

Safer Internet Programme (1999-2004)

The original €38.3m programme had a wide scope, covering **technologies** as diverse as 3G, online games and chatrooms; and dealing with **content** ranging from child pornography to racism.

By the end of the programme, it will have financed over 80 projects to:

- create a safer environment via a European network of hot-lines to report illegal content;
- encourage self-regulation and codes of conduct;
- develop filtering and rating systems;
- encourage awareness actions.

Safer Internet plus (2005-2008)

According to an external evaluation, the first programme made a significant contribution during its four years, but further action is still needed.

Relevant European Policies

- The **Recommendation on protection of minors and human dignity** (98/560/EC, October 1998) provides national legislative guidelines regarding illegal and harmful content over electronic media;
- The **Directive on Electronic Commerce** (2000/31/EC, June 2000) regulates important aspects of the liability of intermediary service providers for "mere conduit", caching and hosting;
- The **Directive on Privacy and Electronic Communications** (2002/58/EC, October 2003) put the EU in the forefront of the fight against spam, creating an EU-wide ‘ban on spam’ to individuals;
- The **Framework Decision on child pornography** (2004/68/JHA, December 2003), finally, sets out minimum requirements for Member States in the definition of offences and for sanctions.

The reporting of illegal content must be encouraged; best practice codes of conduct promoted; and parents and children must be informed and educated. Action at Member State level is essential, while the EU can stimulate best practices across Europe.

The hotline network set up by Safer Internet is unique and would not exist without EU funding

The €45m Safer Internet Plus programme (2005-2008) will therefore both build on its predecessor's achievements and meet new threats. It will bring together the different actors – from mobile operators to child welfare NGOs - whose cooperation is essential but who may not come together without the appropriate structures in place.

Four Action Lines

i) Hotlines: Fighting Illegal Content

Many people are reluctant to report illegal content directly to the police, but they will report to a hotline. Hotlines are therefore an important intermediary, passing reports of illegal content on to the appropriate body for action.

In many cases the host web site or content provider is in another country, so networking hotlines together is essential.

The hotline network set up by Safer Internet is unique and would not exist without EU funding. It has been very successful in expanding membership and has an international reach, involving Australia, Korea, Taiwan and the USA. The new programme will therefore extend it further, reaching the new Member States and candidate countries.

ii) Raising Awareness

There is overwhelming agreement that there is a continuing need for increased safer internet awareness among many audiences, particularly teachers, parents and children.

To make best use of available funds, the Commission will use multiplier organisations and electronic dissemination channels, and may consider using mass media and distributing information to schools and Internet Cafés.

A **European network of 'awareness nodes'**, for example, has been set up, building on experiences gained through previous projects funded under the Safer Internet Programme.

Nodes exist in 19 countries and several more will be starting soon. They are carrying out awareness actions and programmes in close co-operation with all relevant actors at national, regional and local levels. A European co-ordinating node ensures the exchange of best practice. A successful Safer Internet Day took place in 30 countries on 8 February 2005.

Under Safer Internet plus, the ambition is to extend the network to all Member States and candidate countries.

iii) Unwanted and Harmful Content

Technologies can be developed to limit the amount of unwanted and harmful content users receive, and help them manage it when they do. Projects will:

- assess the effectiveness and support the development of filtering technology – a call for tenders was published in December 2004;
- improve information exchanges and best practices on effectively fighting spam;
- continue work on content rating, and bring together child welfare specialists and technical experts to develop tools for protecting minors.

iv) Promoting a Safer Environment

There are many opinions on whether national rules should be harmonised – and by how much. Issues include freedom of expression, proportionality and technical feasibility.

The EU emphasises a self-regulatory approach, allowing different Codes of Conduct. However, they should all share essential features such as effectiveness, fairness and transparency.

To exchange best practices and encourage dialogue, the Safer Internet Programme set up the **Safer Internet Forum**, bringing together industry, child welfare organisations and policy makers. A plenary session of the Forum will discuss child safety and mobile phones on 14 June 2005.

State of Play

A first call for proposals for the new programme will be launched in June 2005 and an Information Day will be held on 13 June.

See Also:

- FactSheet 19: eContent Programme

All Factsheets and more can be downloaded from "Europe's Information Society: Thematic Portal", below.

Further Information

- **Safer Internet Programme Helpdesk**
saferinternet@cec.eu.int
- **Safer Internet Programme Web site**
<http://europa.eu.int/saferinternet>
- **Europe's Information Society: Thematic Portal**
http://europa.eu.int/information_society/
- **Information Society Directorate-General:**
Av. de Beaulieu 24, 1160 Brussels
info-desk@cec.eu.int