Making the Internet
a safer place

European Commission
Information Society and Media

The Safer Internet plus programme promotes a safer use of internet and other online technologies, particularly by children, and fights illegal and harmful content ranging from child abuse images to racism.

Illegal and harmful content and conduct have concerned lawmakers, industry, parents and teachers since the Web put unregulated content only one click away from any Internet-connected PC.

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

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

Some content is sent to users against their wish. A large portion of all **spam** contains advertisements for pornography, some clearly illegal in all circumstances.

A survey from 2003 showed that 40% of children said that people they had only met online asked to meet them in person. In 2006 22% of them actually met the person - 51% of them never told their parents or teachers about this.

The Eurobarometer survey from 2005 showed that 60% of parents set rules for their children's internet use, but most set rules about what sites not to visit and how much time to be spent online. Two out of three parents think their child knows what to do if a situation on the internet makes the child uncomfortable.

FROM POLICY TO ACTION

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

The internet related issues, however, cannot be tackled by legal measures alone, and are generally greater than parents realise.

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

SAFER INTERNET *PLUS* (2005-2008)

To combat internet-related problems, parents and children need to be informed and educated. Action at Member State level is essential, while the EU can stimulate best practices and encourage the use of hotlines across Europe.

The €45m Safer Internet *plus* programme (2005-2008) supports cooperation among the different actors from mobile operators to child welfare NGOs.

The programme has a wide scope, covering technologies as diverse as 3G mobile phones, online games and chat rooms; dealing with content ranging from child abuse images to racism.

It follows the Safer Internet Action Plan which started in 1999 and ran until 2004. The Action Plan financed over 80 projects, with a €38.3m budget.

i) Hotlines: fighting illegal content

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

The **hotline network** set up by Safer Internet is unique and would not exist without EU funding. The present programme extends membership to the new EU Member States and candidate countries. The network has been very successful in reaching even outside Europe to countries with comparable problems, such as Australia, Canada, Korea, Taiwan and the USA.

ii) Raising awareness

There is overwhelming agreement that safer internet awareness among many audiences, particularly teachers, parents and children, is much needed.

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

A **European network of 'awareness nodes'** has been set up, building on experiences gained through previous projects funded under the Safer Internet Action Plan.
Nodes exist in 23 countries. They carry out awareness actions and programmes in close cooperation with all concerned parties at national, regional and local levels. A European coordination node ensures the exchange of best practices.

The ambition of Safer Internet *plus* programme is to extend the network to all EU Member States and EU candidate countries.

The network organises the **Safer Internet Day,** which has taken place each year in early February since 2004, and includes countries outside Europe. Almost 50 countries are taking part in 2008.

Since May 2006, European parents, teachers and children can get free information on the safe use of the internet through **EUROPE DIRECT, the**

European Commission's free information service. They can ask questions relating to online risks, ask for available tools to protect children and where to get more information.

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 benchmarking study was launched in November 2005;
- improve information exchanges and best practices on effectively fighting spam;
- continue to work on content rating, and give opportunities for child welfare specialists and technical experts to develop tools for protecting minors;
- facilitate cooperation between hotlines and law enforcement authorities.

iv) Promoting a safer environment

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

The EU emphasises a self-regulatory approach, allowing different Codes of Conduct to be developed in different fields. 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,** where industry, child welfare organisations and policy makers can discuss safer internet topics.

One area of activity has been child safety and mobile phones. As a result of the initiative of Mrs Reding, Member of the European Commission for Information Society and Media, the industry has agreed on a European Framework for safer mobile use by young teenagers and children.

STATE OF PLAY

The Safer Internet *plus* programme was adopted by the European Parliament and the Council on 11 May 2005. Calls for proposals were published in 2005, 2006 and 2007, and will be published in 2008.

For further information:

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