

Council conclusions of 26 November 2012 on the European strategy for a Better Internet for Children

(2012/C 393/04)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

WELCOMES WITH INTEREST:

the adoption by the Commission of the 'European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children' ⁽¹⁾ on 2 May 2012 and ENDORSES the focus of the strategy on four pillars of action: (1) stimulation of quality online content for children, (2) stepping up awareness and empowerment, (3) creation of a safe online environment for children and (4) the fight against child sexual abuse material online;

RECALLS:

- the EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child ⁽²⁾ which sets as one of its objectives the achievement of a high-level of protection of children in the digital world, while fully upholding their right to access the Internet for the benefit of their social and cultural development;
- the importance of the Safer Internet Programmes through which the EU since 1999 has coordinated and supported efforts to make the Internet a safer place for children, as well as the crucial role of Safer Internet Centres;
- the Digital Agenda for Europe ⁽³⁾ the actions of which aim, inter alia, at enhancing media literacy ⁽⁴⁾, in particular digital competence ⁽⁵⁾, e-inclusion, as well as at encouraging technological innovation and job creation, thus contributing to the digital single market;

EMPHASISES:

1. the continued relevance of its conclusions of 2011 on the protection of children in the digital world ⁽⁶⁾ in which it

⁽¹⁾ COM(2012) 196 final — doc. 9486/12.

⁽²⁾ COM(2011) 60 final — doc. 7226/11.

⁽³⁾ 9981/10 REV 1 (COM(2010) 245 final/2).

⁽⁴⁾ Media literacy is 'the ability to access media and to understand, critically evaluate, create and communicate media content' (Council conclusions of 27 November 2009 on media literacy in the digital environment — OJ C 301, 11.12.2009, p. 12).

⁽⁵⁾ '(...) Digital competence requires a sound understanding and knowledge of the nature, role and opportunities of IST in everyday contexts (...) and an understanding of the opportunities and potential risks of the Internet and communication via electronic media (e-mail, network tools) (...). Skills needed include the ability to search, collect and process information and use it in a critical and systematic way (...). Individuals should also be able to use IST to support critical thinking, creativity, and innovation (...).' (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning (2006/962/EC), OJ L 394, 30.12.2006, p. 10).

⁽⁶⁾ OJ C 372, 20.12.2011, p. 15.

invited Member States, the Commission and industry to take actions to create a safe online environment for children, as well as to adopt necessary measures to combat illegal content, such as child sexual abuse images;

2. the adoption of Directive 2011/93/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography and replacing Council Framework Decision 2004/68/JHA ⁽⁷⁾, which Member States have to implement;
3. that since the Council conclusions of 2011 and the Directive 2011/93/EU cover actions extensively under the 3rd and 4th pillar of the European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children, these current conclusions will concentrate mostly on the issues raised under the 1st and 2nd pillars of the European Strategy;
4. that these conclusions and those of 2011 are complementary and constitute an overall response of the Council to the European Strategy proposed by the Commission;

TAKES NOTE OF:

1. the establishment, on the initiative of the Commission, of the 'Coalition to make the Internet a better place for kids' and its work plan to deliver progress and results in five areas of action (reporting tools, age-appropriate privacy settings, content classification, parental control, take down of child abuse material) ⁽⁸⁾;
2. the Commission proposals for a Regulation establishing the 'Connecting Europe Facility' ⁽⁹⁾ and for a Regulation for trans-European telecommunications networks ⁽¹⁰⁾ which envisage funding for the Safer Internet services infrastructure, both at European and national levels;

⁽⁷⁾ OJ L 335, 17.12.2011, p. 1, and corrigendum to the Directive (OJ L 18, 21.1.2012, p. 7).

⁽⁸⁾ Coalition is an industry led initiative whose members are European and global ICT and media companies (http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/docs/ceo_coalition/ceo_coalition_statement.pdf).

⁽⁹⁾ 16176/11.

⁽¹⁰⁾ 16006/11.

3. the Commission proposals for a Regulation establishing the 'Horizon 2020' ⁽¹⁾ which envisages funding for research, inter alia, in areas associated with the interaction of children and the Internet and for a Regulation establishing 'Erasmus For All' ⁽²⁾ which envisages funding for media and digital literacy initiatives in education;
4. the Commission's call for Member States to appoint a national digital champion whose work aims at promoting the benefits of an inclusive digital society ⁽³⁾;
5. the Council of Europe's work under its Internet governance strategy (2012-15) with regard to protecting and empowering children online;
6. the very positive achievements and practices of existing national level projects, supporting similar aims such as the creation of quality content online for children, or the protection of minors via for example control, awareness and empowerment tools;

HIGHLIGHTS THAT:

1. the interactive and ubiquitous nature of the Internet offers many opportunities for the development of media literacy, in particular digital competences, which support critical thinking, analytical skills, innovation and creativity. Developing media literacy, in particular digital competences, is important for children to safely adapt to constantly evolving new technologies, and more generally to shape their world in a safe and creative way;
2. the long-term effects on our societies of not investing enough in policies affecting children may be profound ⁽⁴⁾, which highlights the necessity to address the particular needs and vulnerabilities of children online, and to make the Internet a place of opportunity for all the children of Europe regardless of ethnic, cultural and social background, and for children with disabilities and special needs, with the aim of narrowing the currently existing digital gaps;
3. it is important to coordinate the implementation of activities launched under the European Strategy at both national and

European level, while promoting a multi stakeholder interaction involving notably children, government departments, competent institutions, NGOs and industry; an example of reinforced cooperation at the European level is ensuring continued and more intensive coordination of the work done within the EU funded network of Safer Internet Centres in the Member States;

4. self-regulation is important because the Internet is a fast changing environment requiring flexibility to avoid restricting its growth potential and ability to adapt; however to be effective, self-regulation needs to be independently monitored and evaluated as well as closely combined with awareness and empowerment initiatives;

RECOMMENDS TO TAKE ACTION IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS:

AREA 1: More quality online content for children

GIVEN THAT:

1. children are exposed to the Internet from an augmenting variety of devices and at an increasingly younger age, but they do not find sufficient quality content appropriate for their age;
2. the term 'quality online content for children' should be understood as the content that benefits children in some way — for example by increasing their knowledge, skills and competences with special emphasis on creativity — in addition to being attractive and usable to them, reliable and safe, and if relevant, content that makes advertising or commercial communication clearly recognisable as such ⁽⁵⁾;
3. the availability of quality online content for children can increase children's better use of the Internet and can significantly facilitate the penetration and active use of broadband Internet in EU households ⁽⁶⁾ and vice versa;
4. increasing consumers' (children, parents and educators) awareness, confidence and trust in using content across different countries and devices could reduce the fragmentation of the digital single market, while respecting the linguistic and cultural specificities of each Member State;

⁽¹⁾ 17933/11.

⁽²⁾ 17188/11.

⁽³⁾ For information: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/digital-champions>;

<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/about-0>

⁽⁴⁾ EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child.

⁽⁵⁾ Based upon: 'Producing and providing online content for children and young people — An inventory', http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/docs/competition/final_draft.pdf

⁽⁶⁾ Commission Staff Working Document of 23 March 2012 on the implementation of National Broadband Plans (SWD(2012) 68 final), p. 17.

5. promotion, production and dissemination of quality online content requires dynamic and close cooperation between public and private content producers, experts in child internet safety (for examples NGOs and online safety centres), internet service providers, and those who have a role in educating children (for example parents and teachers), as well as children themselves;

INVITES THE MEMBER STATES, COMMISSION AND INDUSTRY, WITHIN THEIR RESPECTIVE SPHERES OF COMPETENCE, TO:

1. encourage innovation through the use of open source software and open standards to produce quality online content by and for children by supporting projects and initiatives, including the development of interoperable platforms, allowing access to such content;
2. rate quantitative and qualitative aspects of online content through the development of age ratings and content classification systems (including classification based on user satisfaction and expert reviews) that are reliable and comparable across different countries and devices, while allowing for culturally based differences across Member States;
3. look into ways of dealing with the language barrier when creating quality online content such as through improved machine translations, thus contributing to the creation of the digital single market;

AREA 2: Stepping-up awareness and empowerment

GIVEN THAT:

- to enable children to use the Internet safely, it is necessary, on the one hand, to address the issue of technical tools that make safe navigation on the Internet possible, and on the other hand, to equip children with the appropriate knowledge, skills and competences to allow them to deal with the online environment in an effective and responsible way;
- the education sector as well as parents have an important role to play in helping children to exploit opportunities offered by the Internet in a beneficial and creative way, as well as identify and deal with risks encountered on the Internet. However, it is also recognised that teachers and parents themselves need support and training not only to keep up with the fast and unpredictable changes in children's virtual lives, but also the constantly evolving new technologies;

INVITES MEMBER STATES TO:

1. step up the implementation of strategies to include the teaching of online safety and digital competences in schools, encourage the use of the Internet across school subjects and in this respect support adequate teacher training;
2. reinforce parents' and children's acquisition of digital competences in the context of informal and non-formal learning, including in youth organisations through adequately trained youth workers;

INVITES MEMBER STATES AND THE COMMISSION TO:

3. actively support participation of children when developing national and pan-European awareness campaigns, legislation or other measures and activities, with an impact on children's online activities, for instance by continuing the support to the national Youth Panels operated by the Safer Internet Centres;
4. further develop media literacy, in particular digital competences, and promote awareness-raising at national and pan-European level;

INVITES MEMBER STATES, THE COMMISSION AND INDUSTRY, WITHIN THEIR RESPECTIVE SPHERES OF COMPETENCE, TO:

5. support public-private partnerships to step up awareness and empowerment, emphasising the opportunities offered by the Internet, at national and EU level, reaching parents and children across all social, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and children with special needs;
6. continue to provide evidence and understanding of the behaviours of children online and of the impacts of services and technologies on children's use of the Internet;
7. improve parental control tools so that they work efficiently on any device and are interoperable and available in as many languages as possible, and to develop strategies to make parents aware of the existence of parental control tools, having regard to children's right to privacy, information and freedom of expression;

8. coordinate a common minimum standardised reporting of harmful content categories and performance criteria for reporting procedures in order to make them comparable, transparent and usable across different countries and devices;
9. provide the necessary support for setting up, deploying and monitoring of effective reporting of harmful content and follow-up mechanisms, to strengthen cooperation within the industry and with government agencies, NGOs and hotlines and to ensure the use of mechanisms and relevant platforms and devices necessary for international cooperation;
10. implement and execute existing self-regulatory initiatives on online advertising and keep them updated on new forms of advertising;

INVITES INDUSTRY TO:

11. implement privacy by default settings and to develop and implement effective ways of informing children and parents about their online privacy settings;

12. further develop self-regulatory initiatives on online advertising;

In order to ensure an effective follow-up to these conclusions, THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION invites

1. the CEO Coalition to present to the Council its final report, expected for January 2013;
2. the Commission to provide frequent feedback and information on progress regarding the actions contained in the European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children, particularly in relation to benchmarking and evaluation processes to be carried out in order to evaluate the implementation of the European Strategy;
3. the Commission and the Member States, without prejudice to the negotiations on the multiannual financial framework 2014-20, to make appropriate use of existing and future EU funding programmes for achieving the goals of the European Strategy for Better Internet for Children in all four pillars and of these conclusions.