

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'Safer Internet Programme (2009-2013)'**

(2008/C 325/14)

## THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- believes that the actions carried out so far need to be adapted to new requirements given the emergence of new technologies and services which generate fresh hazards and increase existing ones;
- recommends that at least an outline consensus on 'illegal content' be reached by comparing criminal law norms and seeing what they have in common. Actions should support the compilation of a European blacklist of illegal content and the promotion of its use by internet providers;
- calls for activities aimed at increasing the awareness among end-users to explicitly include local authorities and government, which are closest to the target groups and have the greatest potential for disseminating information and implementing concrete programmes and projects;
- recommends that awareness-raising centres should follow defined strategies in approaching children, parents and teachers and ensure that their measures are of a good quality. The programme has to support a more active media involvement in campaigns to raise awareness as well;
- believes that it is particularly important to have the closest possible collaboration between hotlines, law enforcement bodies and internet providers, and secure the involvement of other players, such as the appropriate social organisations and NGO's;
- urges actions to create teaching materials in information technology and media skills to cover safe online environments. Actions should also be aimed not only at protecting children but also at instilling an active mastery of safe internet use (empowerment).

**Rapporteur:** Ján ORAVEC (SK/EPP), Mayor of the City of Štúrovo

**Reference document**

Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a multiannual Community programme on protecting children using the Internet and other communication technologies

COM(2008) 106 final — 2008/0047 COD

**I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

**General comments**

*General remarks on the programme*

1. shares the view that in the period since the inception of the Safer Internet Action Plan, both the technologies and related uses have changed considerably. Children are active users of online technologies, and increasingly so. Protecting them from harmful content, curbing the distribution of illegal content and educating them to have a critical and aware approach to the internet represents a huge problem which politicians and law-makers, industry, end-users and particularly parents, carers and teachers have to tackle in a pro-active fashion;

2. agrees that among the most serious risks to children related to online technologies are: cases where they are harmed directly, as victims of sexual abuse, which is documented through photographs, films or audio files and then transmitted online; direct contact by people who befriend them in order to commit sexual abuse ('grooming'), or when they become victims of bullying in the online environment ('cyber-bullying');

3. takes note of the findings of the final evaluation of the Safer Internet Action Plan;

4. values EU programmes for a safer internet as the only pan-European initiatives addressing child protection in the online environment;

5. agrees that the actions carried out have been effective, but believes they need to be adapted to new requirements given the emergence of new technologies and services which generate fresh hazards and increase existing ones;

6. welcomes the fact that the new programme facilitates collaboration and the pooling of experience and best practices at all levels regarding child safety on the internet and thus enhances European added value;

7. is conscious of the difficulty of achieving a consensus definition of the terms 'illegal content' and 'harmful content', which are judged differently in different countries and cultures;

8. recommends, however, that at least an outline consensus on illegal content be reached by comparing criminal law norms and seeing what they have in common;

9. believes that the measures proposed will help to protect children using the internet and other communication technologies, will react to new developments and will curb distribution of illegal content online, especially online distribution of child sexual abuse material, grooming and bullying;

10. hopes that further activities will be aimed at stimulating and encouraging the development and application of technical solutions for dealing with illegal content and harmful conduct online, as well as at promoting cooperation and exchange of best practice among a wide range of stakeholders at local, regional, European and international level;

11. recommends holding annual guidance meetings for stakeholders at national, European and international level, enabling them to discuss current challenges and issues, exchange best practices and promote cooperation;

12. is disappointed that activities aimed at increasing the awareness of the public, in particular children, parents, carers and educators, about opportunities and risks related to the use of online technologies and means of staying safe online, do not explicitly include local and regional authorities, which are closest to the target groups and have the greatest potential for communicating important information and implementing concrete programmes and projects;

13. supports the creation and further development of a knowledge base to be used in tackling present and emerging risks and the consequences of internet use;

14. recommends coordinating investigation activities in relevant fields within and outside the EU and developing knowledge concerning the (evolving) ways children use online technologies, associated risks and the possible harmful effects the use of online technologies can have on them, including technical, psychological and social issues as well as giving positive examples of educating children to adopt a critical approach to the media;

15. fully supports linking efforts to the Safer internet plus programme, which should be improved;

16. calls on Community institutions and Member State governments to give tackling this issue the attention it deserves within the powers available to them;

17. hopes that implementing measures thoroughly will help to reduce the threat to children using the internet and other communication technologies.

## II. PROPOSED AMENDMENTS

### *Amendment 1*

#### **Annex I — Action line 1**

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
1. Providing the public with contact points for reporting online illegal content and harmful conduct. Activities should ensure that these contact points are effective and visible for the public, liaise closely with other actions at national level, and cooperate at European level to deal with cross-border issues and to exchange best practice.	1. Providing the public with contact points for reporting online illegal content and harmful conduct. Activities should ensure that these contact points are effective and visible for the public, liaise closely with other actions at national level, and cooperate at European level to deal with cross-border issues and to exchange best practice. <u>Support should be given to publicising hotlines among end-users and the potential of local government to disseminate important information should be exploited.</u>

#### Reason

Contact points and hotlines can only fulfil their function if the maximum number of end-users are aware of their existence. For this reason, they need maximum publicity and local governments are very well equipped for this.

### *Amendment 2*

#### **Annex I — Action line 1**

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
2. Tackling harmful conduct online, in particular grooming and bullying. Activities will aim to tackle online grooming, the process by which an adult befriends a child with the intention of committing sexual abuse, and bullying. Actions will deal with technical, psychological and sociological issues related to these issues and will promote cooperation and coordination between stakeholders.	2. Tackling harmful conduct online, in particular grooming and bullying. Activities will aim to tackle online grooming, the process by which an adult befriends a child with the intention of committing sexual abuse, and bullying. Actions will deal with technical, psychological and sociological issues related to these issues and will promote cooperation and coordination between stakeholders. <u>It is particularly important to have the closest possible collaboration between hotlines, law enforcement bodies and internet providers on the one hand, and secure the involvement of other players, such as the appropriate social organisations and NGO's, on the other.</u>

#### Reason

If effective countermeasures are to be taken, there must be a rapid and constant stream of information from hotlines to other players in the fight against illegal content and harmful conduct.

*Amendment 3***Annex I — Action line 1**

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
3. Stimulating application of technical solutions for dealing adequately with illegal content and harmful conduct online. Activities should encourage the development or adaptation of effective technological tools to deal adequately with illegal content and tackle harmful conduct online, for general use by stakeholders.	3. <u>Supporting and stimulating</u> application of technical solutions for dealing adequately with illegal content and harmful conduct online. Activities should encourage the development or adaptation of effective technological tools to deal adequately with illegal content and tackle harmful conduct online, for general use by stakeholders. <u>Actions should further support the coordination of work to compile a European blacklist of illegal content and the promotion of its use by internet providers.</u>

## Reason

New technical solutions need to be not just encouraged, but also supported. A European blacklist could help in preventing or possibly reacting to illegal content.

*Amendment 4***Annex I — Action line 2**

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
3. Stimulating the involvement of children and young people in creating a safer online environment. Actions will aim to involve children and young people with the aim of better understanding their views and experiences concerning the use of online technologies and on how to promote a safer online environment for children.	3. Stimulating the involvement of children and young people in creating a safer online environment. Actions will aim to involve children and young people with the aim of better understanding their views and experiences concerning the use of online technologies and on how to promote a safer online environment for children. <u>Actions should further include the creation of teaching materials in information technology and media skills to cover safe online environments and the dangers of illegal content and harmful conduct. Actions should also be aimed not only at protecting children but also at instilling an active mastery of safe internet use (empowerment).</u>

## Reason

A trained teacher can use interactive teaching methods to alert children to the dangers of internet use, while at the same time learning from their reactions about their views and experiences with online technologies.

*Amendment 5***Annex I — Action line 2**

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
4. Increasing information about adequate tools for dealing with harmful content online. Activities will aim to increase information about the performance and effectiveness of tools for dealing with potentially harmful content online and to equip users with information, instruments and applications adequately supporting them in dealing with harmful content across different platforms.	4. Increasing information about adequate tools for dealing with harmful content online <u>and informing end-users about available means of filtering harmful content.</u> Activities will aim to increase information about the performance and effectiveness of tools for dealing with potentially harmful content online and to equip users with information, instruments and applications adequately supporting them in dealing with harmful content across different platforms.

## Reason

Information about suitable or new means of tackling harmful content is important not only for specialists in the field, but for practically every end-user so that they can do their best to respond appropriately and as effectively as possible to new dangers.

*Amendment 6***Annex I — Action line 3**

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
1. Raising public awareness and disseminating information on safer use of online technologies. The activities will promote public awareness by providing adequate information about possibilities, risks and ways to deal with them in a coordinated way across Europe. Activities will encourage cost-effective means of distributing awareness information to a large number of users.	1. Raising public awareness and disseminating information on safer use of online technologies <u>and supporting a more active media involvement in campaigns to raise awareness.</u> The activities will promote public awareness by providing adequate information about possibilities, risks and ways to deal with them in a coordinated way across Europe. Activities will encourage cost-effective means of distributing awareness information to a large number of users.

## Reason

Both local and national media have a vital role to play in disseminating information on safer use of online technologies. Their inclusion in the process and in campaigns to raise awareness should therefore be encouraged.

*Amendment 7***Annex I — Action line 3**

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
2. Providing contact points where parents and children can receive answers to questions about how to stay safe online. Activities will be aimed at empowering users to make informed and responsible choices by providing them with advice on relevant information and precautions to be taken to remain safe online.	2. Providing contact points where parents and children can receive answers to questions about how to stay safe online. Activities <del>will</del> <u>should</u> be aimed at empowering users to make informed and responsible choices by providing them with advice on relevant information and precautions to be taken to remain safe online. <u>Actions should be aimed at making public awareness of these contact points as great as possible.</u>

## Reason

Contact points can only fulfil their role if the public at large or the end-users are aware of them and therefore know where to go for information and answers to their queries.

*Amendment 8***Annex I — Action line 3**

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
3. Encouraging enhancement of efficient and cost-effective awareness-raising methods and tools. Actions will be aimed at improving relevant awareness-raising methods and tools with a view to making them more efficient and cost-effective in a long-term perspective.	3. <u>Requiring awareness-raising centres to follow defined strategies in approaching children, parents and teachers.</u> <del>Encouraging enhancement of efficient and cost-effective awareness-raising methods and tools.</del> Actions <del>will</del> <u>should</u> be aimed at improving relevant awareness-raising methods and tools with a view to making them more efficient and cost-effective in a long-term perspective; <u>in so doing, efforts should be made to ensure that these measures are of a good quality.</u>

**Reason**

Awareness-raising centres play one of the most important roles in increasing public awareness, since the information they provide will be passed on, directly or through various information channels, to the public at large. They must therefore be able to point out dangers and offer responses. It is vital here to coordinate and collaborate closely with experts in media skills and media literacy.

Brussels, 9 October 2008.

The President  
of the Committee of the Regions  
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE

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