

Protecting Children and Minors in the Internet: Perils of Cyber-Grooming in Virtual Worlds

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The EU has explicitly admitted to making the Internet a safer place for kids and minors [1]. The discussion in the EU on protecting children is finally focused on the question to just block or completely delete harmful websites. This is not targeted to online environments (like virtual worlds, browser games, online apps), but is stuck to an out-dated content-oriented (not: communication-oriented) view. Kids primarily explore the internet by starting to play games, not by surfing the Web [2]. Those online environments are especially attractive because of their possibilities to interact and communicate with other players (like shared game experience, chats). There are certain offers with a design and game mechanism that is particularly suitable for children, where they are especially exposed to enter close emotional relationships with others. Besides other legal issues, this is intensively exploited by pedo-criminals in a targeted manner [3]. Such initiations of sexual interactions with minors are called Cyber-Grooming [4].

This important, but not yet sufficiently covered topic was primarily addressed by the symposium “Protection of Children and Minors in the Internet – Perils of Virtual Worlds” on 19 September 2012 in Brussels. Starting from a criminological overview of the phenomenon, aspects of law, society and IT for protecting kids and minors against Cyber-Grooming have been considered by respective experts, and first experiences with virtual police offices in an online game for kids have been presented. In the following, the political consequences have been discussed with representatives of EU commission and parliament. All participants agreed that the Internet is an important part of today’s media reality, and that providing related skills as well as an adequate protection of minors are a central goal of our efforts.

As a result, there were identified shortcomings of law, investigation, prosecution, and prevention; and a first catalog of possible countermeasures was gathered. Among others, a new age rating (age levels, criteria, and responsibilities), an adequate media-related instruction of kids as well as training of other involved players (teachers, police men, state attorneys, system providers), and a general sensitizing of the society for the perils of interaction and communication in the Internet were proposed. Moreover, the development of technical means to detect and block suspicious activities in online environments were discussed, which need to be balanced between safety and privacy. Further efforts to elaborate and implement the mechanisms mentioned above will follow in the near future.

- [1] 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. Official Journal of the European Union, L 335/1, 17.12.2011.
- [2] S. Livingstone, L. Haddon, A. Görzig, K. Ólafsson: „EU Kids Online“, Final Project Report, 2011.
- [3] Susan W. Brenner: “ Is There Such a Thing as ‘Virtual Crime’?”, 4 Cal. Crim. Law Rev. 1, 105-11, 2001.
- [4] Kim-Kwang Raymond Choo: “Online child grooming. A literature review on the misuse of social networking sites for grooming children for sexual offences”, Australian Institute of Criminology, 2009.