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How can we empower youngsters to stay safe online? Innovative solutions in Europe

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Your Majesty,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honoured to be present here today during the Swedish Presidency of the European Union and to take part in this important discussion on children and the Internet.

I would like to thank Her Majesty, Queen Silvia, for inviting me to participate in this event, and to congratulate Her for the work of the World Childhood Foundation, which celebrates its 10th anniversary today. The Foundation contributes extensively to the protection of vulnerable children in Europe and beyond and encourages organizations and other stakeholders to get involved.

Today's theme is well-chosen: The Internet opens up enormous possibilities as a tool to help and assist children at risk - but some of those risks are also created by the Internet.

Youngsters use new technologies from a very early age. I would like to share with you a story I heard from a teacher.

A 10-year-old boy explained that he did not have broadband or internet access at home and that he did not have a computer or laptop as his family couldn't afford it. However, he still told his friends that he was using the Internet every night!

The fact is that he used his Nintendo to do this. He pointed out that he took the Nintendo to the local market to get it "chipped for about £10". This involved taking the back off, putting in a new microchip and allowing the Nintendo to download "home-brew" applications which essentially meant that you could browse the internet in a similar way to using a laptop or PC.

His next-door neighbour had broadband Internet access but as it was encrypted the boy could not use this. That's why he took some wire and wrapped it around a tin. This increased the wireless capability of his Nintendo.

So you can see: despite all potential barriers, this inventive 10-year-old boy managed to get online and his parents certainly did not know anything.

This story shows that the Internet is the place where all the children want to be and that hardly anything can prevent them from getting online. Despite restrictions and rules, despite social or financial difficulties, children will be online. This is positive, as the Internet brings about great opportunities for them and opens new worlds. What about preventing the dangers online?

Keeping children away from the Internet does not mean keeping them safe. They will find their own ways and means in order to get online.

We must work on innovative solutions to empower children to make them safe online.

The Safer Internet Programme and the new challenges ahead

Empowering and protecting children and young people is the main objective of the Safer Internet Programme, which also started ten years ago.

In 1999, when the popularity of the web among teenagers was on the rise, the European Commission launched the first Safer Internet Programme. The programme has been successful in bringing together industry, NGOs, public institutions, law enforcement bodies from all over Europe to discuss and work on joint projects in order to protect children and fight illegal content online.

Protecting children online is now an objective which is recognised at the highest level in the European Union. Last April, it was on the European ministers' agenda. A ministerial declaration was adopted, supporting the leading role of the European Union in ensuring a safe online environment for young people and combating child sexual abuse. 27 ministers agreed. Switzerland and Norway have also joined this declaration. A continent unites in order to protect its children. It is important to do so, because the challenges are important.

In the last ten years, there have been incredibly fast technical, market and social changes in this field. In the beginning, we were only dealing with static websites where users were mainly looking for information. In the last couple of years, users have become the main actors in the world of web 2.0 where they provide the information, they upload photos and videos, they blog, chat, and are experts in social networking.

Today's interactivity of the Internet brings about new issues such as privacy, and harmful conduct such as cyberbullying and grooming.

Ten years ago, if you wanted to go online, you had to sit down at a computer with a fixed connection. Nowadays, in Sweden, for example, 21% of youngsters have a mobile phone with Internet access.

A new challenge is brought about by the fact that youngsters use new technologies from very early ages: at the end of the 90s, only some older teenagers were online. Last year 75% of Europe's teenagers were online. Moreover, 42% of 6 years old are already online[1]. That is why we need to make a distinction between the protection of the very young users, and that of older teenagers. For young users we need high levels of safety and security and parental control. While children grow, we need to move on from "parental control" to empowerment.

At the same time, we have to take into account the specifically vulnerable children for whom we have to provide special care.

Innovative solutions to empower and to raise awareness

In order to raise awareness and empower young people we should use the Internet. Because our children are online, we need to meet them online. In 2008, 75% of youngsters visited a social networking site[2]. So we have to use social networking to raise awareness regarding internet risks and solutions.

It is important to run discussion forums online in order to allow children and young people to debate among themselves on online risks. Experience shows that young users seem to prefer peer advice, which is more personal and seems more "real" than adult advice.

It is possible for the social networks to be proactive and equip NGOs with a platform where they can engage with young people in need of their care services.

It is even possible to fight pro-anorexia and bulimia websites on their own ground, by developing websites with the same look and feel but providing reliable and medically tested information.

I encourage all industry, NGOs and public authorities to implement these kinds of action. These actions use the internet as an effective channel to reach young people, they involve young people themselves in an active way, they truly empower them.

I want to take the opportunity to congratulate the social networking site Bebo for the Be Well platform (www.bebo.com/bewell), and the Safer Internet awareness centres for promoting their activities online, through social

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[1] 2008 Eurobarometer results "Towards a safer use of the Internet for children in the EU – a parents' perspective"
[2] Comscore http://www.comscore.com/press/release.asp?press=2723

networks or other websites. I would like to mention in particular the Swedish awareness centre run by the Media Council for the My Life 2.0 project, which has generated a number of digital stories published online. I would also like to mention the Swedish helpline, run by BRIS (Children's Rights in Society) for the Discussion Forum where more than 27.000 submissions from young people, were processed and published in 2008. Let me finally mention the Spanish awareness centre for the creation of specialized websites such as www.anaymia.com (Ana and Mia), which reproduces the style and organization of a pro-anorexia and bulimia website but which actually informs young girls of the consequences of such problems.

Internet has also been used as a powerful dissemination tool **at pan-European level**. In February this year, the European Commission launched a campaign against cyberbullying, through a video clip with the message "Internet is fun! Keep it fun, Keep control! Block bullying online!" which aims to show that teenagers have control over what happens on the Internet. The video shows a young girl who is a victim of cyberbullying but who fights back and reports the problem to her social networking site.

The clip has been disseminated via television but also via the Internet. More than 200 national and regional TV channels and 230 websites and social networking sites participated in the dissemination campaign. The video has been broadcast more than 16.500 times in 22 European countries and has been viewed on the Internet more than 1.300.000 times.

Our surveys show that young people between 12 and 17 years old got the message of the clip: "you can report a cyberbullying incident by telling someone else about it, by reporting the incident to the social networking site or by contacting an organisation that can help you".

This is only one example of an action financed by the Safer Internet programme of the European Commission. There are many more.

Using the Internet as a tool for positive experiences is one of those.

The availability of positive content online has an effect on the reduction of online risks. This was highlighted in the report published by researchers from 21 European countries (EUKidsonline).

There are already a number of very interesting national initiatives in this field. A very good example is the high quality material (games, cartoons, films for children) disseminated by the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation to young people via the Bolibompa website.

In the Netherlands, Mijn Kind Online provides parents with the opportunity to set up a specific Internet browser (Mybee) for their children, which contains only those websites that the parents want. It also allows parents to evaluate websites and to share this experience with other parents. Mijn Kind Online also runs a competition to promote positive content and the organisation of awards to the best Dutch websites created by and for children.

In Germany, the FragFinn website allows children to browse more than 4000 sites that have been positively evaluated by educational experts.

However, not all European children have access to these kinds of sources of positive experiences online, either because they do not exist in their language or because they are not easy to find. This is why we need to stimulate the production, visibility and take-up of positive content online. The Commission has convened a stakeholders' focus group to identify good practices, effective business models, and needs in this area. The group will also assess whether services are perceived as positive by children, and will investigate ways to promote positive experiences for older teenagers. Based on the results of this focus group, the Commission might fund projects in this field.

More systematic education in schools on Internet safety

Another priority for is to promote education on Internet safety in schools.

Unlike their parents, children are "digital natives". Therefore, they also experience access to information, friendship and privacy differently from their parents, and we need to take this new situation into account.

Schools are well placed to teach children the digital literacy skills required to maximise the opportunities and to minimise the risks related to their use of online technologies. Through schools all children can be reached, and in particular the most vulnerable ones, who may not benefit from adequate parental supervision.

This is why in 2009 the Safer Internet Programme brings forward the theme of online safety education in schools, by making it the central point of discussion at this year's **Safer Internet Forum**, the conference which will take place in Luxembourg on 21- 23 October.

The forum will highlight good practices. Let me mention some very interesting experiences identified in Sweden:

The Swedish awareness centre runs the Young Internet Campaign. The core of the campaign is the regional seminar tour consisting of whole day training seminars on Internet safety for professionals working with children and young people (including social workers, school welfare officers, principals and parents). As a result of the regional seminars, a network of about 160 qualified ambassadors has been established to respond to the increasing demand for information on Internet safety for children and young people on a regional level.

Another initiative is run by the National Agency for Schools which developed a 5-step IT and media education programme, called PIM, which targets teachers. It consists of a combination of internet guidelines, training seminars and support. Up until now approximately 70 000 teachers in over 100 Swedish municipalities have passed the third level of the programme.

These initiatives, together with other good initiatives identified in Europe will be analysed in the context of the Safer Internet Forum. As a result, I expect to get an assessment of the level of Safer Internet education in Europe, and recommendations to the Commission on how to promote effective safer Internet education in schools throughout Europe.

Keeping children safe on social networking sites

The rapid take up of social networking sites by minors raises a number of challenges which need to be tackled by joint efforts of all stakeholders, in particular through awareness-raising and self-regulation. The Commission has taken initiatives in both fields, by funding the Safer Internet awareness centres in almost all Member States and by encouraging Industry self-regulation.

Let me give you as an example the work done on the question of **privacy**. Research shows that giving out personal information is the most common risky behaviour of teenagers online.

We must make sure that our children are aware that all the pictures and information uploaded on public social networking profiles can be accessed and used by anyone on the web and will remain permanently online. This is also one of the reasons why the European-wide theme of Safer Internet Day 2010, which will be celebrated on 9 February next year, will be **Personal Image Management Online.**

Privacy must, in my view, be a high priority for social networking providers and for their users. The profiles of minors must be private by default and unavailable to internet search engines.

In February 2009, the Commission brokered an agreement, signed by 20 social networking companies active in Europe such as Piczo, Facebook and Myspace. The **"Safer Social Networking Principles for the EU"** aim to improve the safety of minors who use social networking sites in Europe by implementing measures such as: making sure that the full online profiles of minors are set to "private" by default and not searchable, or providing an accessible "report abuse" button. Since then two other social networking services providers have joined the ageement, the Spanish Tuenti and the Estonian Rate.

So far, 19 companies have provided the Commission with explanations on how they implement this agreement in their safety policies.

The Commission has ordered an independent assessment of the implementation of this agreement, to be published by February 2010.

I am happy to see that the signatories to the Principles have realized that an active and visible safety policy is very beneficial. StudiVZ, the German provider, has organised a campaign in Germany about privacy: "Your data belongs to you!"

YouTube has recently launched the YouTube Safety Centre in 17 languages. The Centre features safety tips and multimedia resources from experts and prominent safety organizations to help teens and their parents learn about issues such as cyberbullying, media literacy, and hate-speech.

The initiative of the social networking sites followed the example of the mobile operators in Europe who signed a self-regulatory

agreement "The European Framework on Safer Mobile Use by Younger Teenagers and Children" in February 2007 to ensure that children and young people are safe when using mobile phones. In March 2008 and April 2009 GSM Europe published implementation reports which show that most European countries adopted national codes of conduct in order to ensure safer mobile use by young people. There are still areas in which the mobile operators have to improve their efforts for protecting children, such as the monitoring and review of access control to adult content systems, awareness-raising activities, and content classification. The European Commission will continue to follow-up the activities of the mobile operators to implement the European Framework.

EU actions fight illegal content and conduct online and promote international cooperation

Awareness-raising must go hand in hand with measures to protect children. We must set up the necessary legislative framework and we put into practice measures which keep young people safe online and protect them from serious risks, such as abuse or grooming.

In March 2009, the European Commission has made a legislative proposal for combating sexual abuse, sexual exploitation of children and child pornography. This introduces new criminal offences such as "grooming", and a requirement for each Member State to take the necessary measures to enable competent bodies to block access to websites containing child abuse material.

The Safer Internet Programme also funds research about offenders and victims. A project called POG, coordinated by the National Centre for Social Research from the UK, was set up in order to understand the process of online grooming from the offenders' point of view, through interviews in prisons with convicted online groomers.

In fighting against illegal content, the Safer Internet Programme can rely on the INHOPE network of hotlines.

The Programme also funds the CIRCAMP network of police forces, with the particular aim of increasing cross-border exchange of knowledge and best practices in this field.

International cooperation is particularly crucial to trace child abuse material, which might be produced in one country, uploaded and distributed from another and downloaded from all over the world. Cooperation with third countries is necessary to work towards an integrated approach for fighting illegal content.

That is why the INHOPE network of hotlines has members from all over the world such as the US, Japan and Korea in order to share experiences and best practices and update their knowledge of how to tackle this challenge.

In this regard, I am pleased that two hotlines active in Russia have recently joined the INHOPE network of hotlines.

In order to enhance international cooperation in broad Safer Internet issues, a conference assembling the relevant stakeholders is planned for November this year in Russia. It will be organised in co-operation with the Secretariat of the Council of the Baltic Sea States, based in Stockholm, with the help of Lars Lööf whom many of you will know. This conference will cover issues relating to child abuse images and children at risk as well as how to empower children and educate them to remain safe online.

Our work, our EU, would be without effect if there was not the practical help of the NGOs.

Conclusion

This is why I would like to congratulate Her Majesty, Queen Silvia, and the World Childhood Foundation for their precious work and for bringing all of us together to discuss how the Internet can be used to help and assist children at risk. I wish you success in your activity!

Thank you!