

Safer Internet initiatives

The new online technologies, new users and new usage patterns create new dangers and exacerbate existing dangers at the same time as opening a wealth of new opportunities. (European Parliament and Council: decision No 1151/2003/EC).

The ABA's Director, Industry Performance and Review, Andrée Wright, recently attended two international events that focused on safer internet initiatives: the European Commission's Safer Internet Action Plan Open Day and the INHOPE Internet hotlines workshop, in Luxembourg in September.



Andrée Wright, ABA Director, Industry Performance and Review with Javier Hernández-Ros, head of the Information Society Directorate, European Commission.

The Safer Internet Action Plan provides a coherent response by the European Union to illegal and harmful content on the Internet through its focus on the INHOPE hotlines, codes of practice, filtering, and labelling and community awareness initiatives. It aims to promote safer use of the Internet and new online technologies, particularly for children, and to fight against illegal content and content unwanted by the end user. Australia's co-regulatory scheme for Internet content, set out in Schedule 5 to the Broadcasting Services Act, takes a similar approach through industry codes of practice, community education initiatives and the ABA's hotline for reporting illegal and offensive content.

The European Commission's Open Day followed on from the two-day INHOPE workshop where 18 hotlines representing 16 countries addressed a number of topical Internet safety issues, in particular, the challenges posed by Internet-enabled mobile platforms, including third generation (3G) and 3G-like services.

INHOPE offers expert support on a variety of issues central to the creation of a safer Internet environment and its hotlines allow members of the public to report illegal content on the Internet. The hotlines then deal with the reports by

liaising with the appropriate bodies (Internet service providers, Internet content hosts, enforcement agencies, hotlines in other countries) in accordance with their operating rules. This helps to reduce the flow of illegal content and contributes to the effective protection of Internet users.

The consortium of INHOPE hotlines is an outcome of the first stage of the European Commission's Action Plan, which covered the period 1999–2003 and funded initiatives totalling 25 million euros. The action plan will now continue until the end of 2004 with an additional budget of 13.3 million euros. It is then likely that there will a follow-up program, the Safer Internet Plus program, to cover the period 2005–08. This program would continue to promote safer use of the Internet and new online technologies particularly for children, and pursue the fight against illegal, harmful or unwanted content building on the experience from the initial Safer Internet program. Its scope would be broadened to include new media and new issues such as spam, expand the network to accession countries, stimulate a multiplier effect, and broaden international outreach, with action directed primarily at the end user – parents, educators, and children.

There were 150 participants involved in the area of Internet safety at the open day acknowledging the achievements of Action Plan to date, the nature of the challenges that continue to be posed, and how they may be best addressed. New challenges are posed, both in quantitative (more illegal content) and qualitative terms (new platforms, new products). The program has therefore been extended to new online technologies: mobile and broadband content, online games, peer-to-peer file transfer, and all forms of real-time communications such as chat rooms and instant messages.

Internet-enabled mobile phones, including 3G and 3G-like services for example, are seen to pose an increased range of risks for younger users. Just about everything you can do from an Internet-connected computer you can also do from these new generation devices as they are also web browsers, instant messengers, game stations and email terminals.

In addition to exposure to illegal or inappropriate content, these devices create additional opportunities for children

to have contact with people they do not know. This exacerbates the potential dangers to children currently posed by Internet chat rooms, as parents are less able to supervise their children's access to the Internet via mobile telephones. Additional concerns arise because the technology includes an ability to accurately track the geographic location of handsets in real time; and the portability and 'always on' capability of mobile telephones provide more opportunities for contact. The incorporation of cameras in some mobile phone handsets also gives rise to privacy concerns, including the ability of children to be photographed in public areas without their knowledge.

Such challenges informed both the INHOPE workshop and the European Commission's Open Day, with the importance of preventive action emerging as a major theme for open day participants:

In the case of the Internet and real-time communications, action on safety issues has been largely reactive: much damage had been done by the time the risks were acknowledged. There is a strong case for preventive action with regard to emerging online technologies, which due to the limited take-up rate and, in some cases, content availability may not currently be the main area of concern, but for which major risk factors have already been identified. Several statements in this context supported the idea of proactive and preventive analysis of the safety risks linked to new or changing technology, which is already carried out in some cases. Suggestions in this respect included introducing a concept of accountability, by which industry would perform risk assessment at the stage of product development, for example as part of a self-regulation scheme. (to see a summary of the meeting go to <http://europa.eu.int>)

Previous experience in Australia and internationally indicates that there are benefits for industry and the community in implementing safeguards prior to new technologies being widely taken-up by consumers.

International Regulators Forum

An International Regulators Forum was held at the offices of the new UK broadcasting and telecommunications regulator, Ofcom, on 27 and 28 September. Professor Flint and Michael Gordon-Smith represented the ABA. More than 30 people attended, from more than 15 countries in Europe, Asia and Africa.

The regulators present differed in responsibilities. Some regulate only telecommunications, including competition, some cover telecommunications but without competition, some cover only broadcasting, and some were 'converged', covering both. However, there was a broad consensus that the growing connections across these industries required a more co-ordinated response. There will continue to be different responses and different institutional solutions. However, the current Australian debate of whether to combine the ABA and the Australian Communications Authority reflects widespread international consideration of similar policy and governance issues.

Despite substantial technical, industrial or political differences between the juris-

dictions, there was much in common in the issues confronting governments around the world.

Two days of discussion addressed issues ranging from options for dealing with policy problems raised by new media and transfrontier content flows, to facilities-based competition and the local loop; from cultural diversity through spectrum trading to the appropriate governance models for independent regulators. The differing legal structures and definitions make some problems unique to particular countries, but broader issues were strikingly similar. Particularly useful discussions evaluated the success of policies that limited competition in return for social policy goals such as 'roll-out', and canvassed possibilities for further international co-operation.



l-r: Sabine Frank (FSM hotline, Germany), Thomas Rickert (Chairman, INHOPE), Andrée Wright, ABA Director Industry Performance and Review, and Richard Swetenham (European Commission).