

Content rating discussions reach summit heights

The global nature of the Internet and how to protect children online were subjects in hot debate at the Internet Content Summit in September in Munich. David Goldstein reports

The Internet Content Summit was organised by the Bertelsmann Foundation in cooperation with INCORE, the European Commission funded project that is developing a rating and filtering system for Internet content. The Summit looked at ways of creating a new culture of user empowerment through rating and filtering mechanisms, the international networking of hotlines and credible self-regulatory institutions developed by industry to deal with user complaints.

The background to the Summit was the "Memorandum on Self-Regulation" presented by the Bertelsmann Foundation, and was developed with the support of an international expert network that the Foundation has convened to examine these issues. The Memorandum contains key recommendations for the Internet industry, policymakers, law enforcement authorities and users. These recommendations are based on reports by leading experts from four universities around the world, and on the Internet User Survey that was carried out in Australia, Germany and the US.

The Summit discussed the implementation of an international self-regulatory system to deal with the protection of minors online, and examined this within four workshops:-

- self-regulation of the Internet industry;
- reporting hotlines for illegal content and law enforcement;
- self-rating and filtering; and
- Internet content and user perspectives.

Because of the technical, fast changing and global nature of the Internet, traditional means of law enforcement are ineffective. The Summit discussed a coordinated approach that included self-regulatory mechanisms that would be combined with law enforcement as a necessary back up.

Self-regulation and law enforcement

The role of self-regulation is important as it allows for better opportunities to adapt to the rapid technological changes that are taking place on the Internet. There are many challenges to developing an effective self-regulatory scheme, but

any self-regulatory scheme should:-

- ensure content and service providers act within the law;
- be enforced by self-regulatory agencies;
- involve coordination among agencies due to the global nature of the Internet;
- have the support of the law making bodies;
- include the use of rating and filtering technologies;
- include a reporting hotline for illegal content; and
- educate Internet users as to the methods to filter and block content.

Hotlines

The conference discussed the role reporting hotlines can play in protecting children online, and the role they play as an important communication channel between parents, self-regulatory bodies of the industry, and law enforcement. To assist with this, authorities have to cooperate across borders to fight illegal content and to back up self-regulatory mechanisms. Hotlines have three basic requirements; they must be available, transparent and reliable.

Rating and Filtering

The discussion on rating and filtering incorporated discussion of the INCORE project, and included an Experts Meeting that focused on the concerns of industry and content providers, along with the

... continued on page 18 ➤

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... continued from page 17

wider context of delivering a system internationally.

The INCORE meeting considered:-

- the use of “white” lists that would allow users to download a list of sites that would be considered acceptable by parents for their children;
- how to deal with illegal content in a self-rating system; and
- the longer term development of the rating system including how can a critical mass of sites be achieved to make the rating system successful.

The final result of this project will be published as recommendations to the European Commission at the end of this year and will be available from the INCORE web site (<http://www.incore.org>).

Within the Summit, discussions centred around the role filtering technology can play in empowering users by allowing them to select the kinds of content they and their children are exposed to. This technology has the ability to help shift control of and responsibility for harmful content from governments, regulatory agencies and supervisory bodies to individuals.

A good filtering system:-

- allows for end user autonomy;
- respects freedom of expression;
- respects a diversity of beliefs and values;
- is transparent;
- respects privacy; and
- has interoperability and compatibility.

Internet content and user perspectives

The necessity of an education and awareness campaign in promoting a self-regulatory mechanism was discussed, along with the importance of each of the central players, the Internet industry and government agencies. It was viewed as important that the Internet industry and government should cooperate in developing awareness of self-regulatory mechanisms such as filtering systems and hotlines. Schools also have a role to play in this environment in providing the necessary skills for children to understand the benefits and limitations of online information and to encourage greater self-control over problematic Internet content.

Over 200 people from five continents attended the Summit including a wide range of people from politics, the Internet industry, media and the user community. These included Ira Magaziner, the former Senior Advisor to President Clinton for Policy Development and Otto Schily, Federal Minister of the Interior in Germany.

The Summit examined the role parents must play in protecting children online and ascertained that any approach to protecting children

online must start with the parents.

The role of the Internet industry is vitally important as it has a role to play in empowering parents by providing tools to filter Internet content while at the same time protecting the free speech rights of adults.

The key messages of the Summit were that freedom of speech and child protection online go hand in hand, and that a coordinated approach is needed in a number of areas such as rating and filtering, reporting hotlines for illegal content, and law enforcement of illegal content online.

With its heavy emphasis on parental choice, the proposals that came out of the Summit are seen as ways of discouraging governments from intervening in content regulation while giving parents greater options in deciding what types of content they want their children to see.

The Memorandum is available, along with the keynote speeches and other information from the conference on the conference web site at <http://www.stiftung.bertelsmann.de/internetcontent>

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