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Second Assessment of the Implementation of the Safer Networking Principles

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There has been significant improvement since the first report, but the EU Commission raises concerns in certain key-areas with emphasis on protecting minors

The European Commission published its second report⁷ on the implementation of the “Safer Social Networking Principles”⁸, signed by 21 social networking companies. These Principles have been developed by SNS providers in consultation with the European Commission, as part of its Safer Internet Plus Programme, and a number of NGOs, to provide good practice recommendations for the providers of social networking and other user interactive sites, to enhance the safety of children and young people using their services. The purpose of this assessment was to investigate how well the Principles each SNS committed itself to implement have been put into operation on their corresponding websites. The services tested in this Phase were: Arto, Bebo, Facebook, Giovanni, Hyves, IRC-Galleria, Myspace, Nasza-Klasa, Netlog, One, Rate, SchuelerVZ (Vznet Netzwerke), Tuenti and Zap. It should be noted that it is for each provider to judge where and how far to apply the principles agreed since they are aspirational and not prescriptive or legally binding, but are offered to service providers with a strong recommendation for their use.

According to the main findings, Principle 7 “Assess the means for reviewing illegal or prohibited content/conduct” and Principle 5 “Respond to notifications of illegal content or conduct” were the best evaluated. In contrast, the poorest assessed principle was Principle 6 “Enable and encourage users to employ a safe use approach to personal information and privacy”. Furthermore, when the Principles were tested on the websites, a number of weaknesses were identified especially with relation to the use of minors, since their profiles could either be accessed by users beyond the minors’ accepted list of contacts (including both “friends of friends” and non-friends) and/or minors could be contacted (e.g. via personal messages) by these (adult) non-friends.

From the 14 services tested, all were found to provide at least some type of safety information and guidance on their websites regarding safe use of private information and potential violation of their rights including bullying, implication of divulging one’s personal information, reputation management, hate speech and pornographic and/or sexual content. Despite this, in only half of the SNS evaluated was this information both easy to find and to be understood by minors, but as the report admits these results have improved considerably in terms of the easiness of comprehension of the safety information provided.

In addition, the majority of the SNS have set up a minimum age requirement in order for users to be able to sign up to their services. Nevertheless, this instrument may be considered ineffective since minors could still sign up to those sites even without being asked to provide any proof or parental consent. Therefore, further parental control instruments shall be introduced towards ensuring a safe use of these services by minors. One of the outstanding findings was that only two of the SNS assessed make minors' personal information visible only to their friends by default, i.e. they display very little and non-identifiable information from the minor to non-users beyond the minor's approved contact list. However, with

regards to minors' profiles, in the majority of the sites, an external user could not find them via external search engines such as Google, Bing or Yahoo.

In order to prove the effectiveness of the reporting mechanisms available, through the assessment a realistic bullying situation was created on the SNS where a fake "bullied" child contacted the provider asking for help to remove offending content posted on her profile. Despite the improvement recognized comparing to the last year's assessment regarding the response received following the reports submitted, the tests showed that only in six cases was the inappropriate reported content removed from the site and in only four SNS some kind of action was taken against the "bullies" such as deleting their account or warning the offenders that this type of behaviour was not allowed on the SNS.

Finally, the test affirmed the SNS offer a range of privacy settings so that they can manage their experience on the websites but that was not the case for all of them regarding deleting a profile. Indeed, a user could always deactivate his profile at will but not completely delete it in three cases.

Case Study: Facebook's Assessment

Facebook's assessment regarding the implementation of the Safer Social Networking Principles was "rather satisfying" in the majority of tests and "very satisfying" in two cases. However, testing in both the English and the French versions of Facebook revealed that it does not react expeditiously to user's reports on inappropriate content/contact. Similarly, profiles of minors are not set to "private by default as defined in the Safer Social Networking Principles". Nevertheless, Facebook suggests "Recommended Privacy Setting" for minors where mobile phone number, home address, and e-mail address are restricted only to friends and are implemented by default when minors set-up a profile. Further measures have been adopted by Facebook through restricting access to certain services such as untraceable profiles by external search engines and the geo-location product "Places" which limits the visibility of users younger than 18 to confirmed friends only. In parallel, some advertising was considered as not appropriate for minors and no parental control mechanism was identified or any other relevant information that would enable the instalment of filtering software. Finally, the report concluded that a number of sections in the Terms of Use and the consequences of breaching these Terms were absent or not concrete.

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