[DE] Public Hearing on the Protection of Minors in the Media and Violent Computer Games

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Paul Göttlich
Institute of European Media Law (EMR), Saarbrücken/Brussels

On 26 April 2007, the Bundestag Sub-Committee on New Media held an expert hearing on “The protection of minors in the media and violent computer games”.

In his introduction, the Director of the *Kriminologisches Forschungsinstitut Niedersachsen e.V.* (Lower Saxony Criminal Research Institute - KFN) showed a number of violent scenes from computer games and described the aims of these games, all of which were to move up to a higher level in the game hierarchy. He then presented the results of studies that allegedly prove that extremely violent computer games make young people more aggressive. According to his remarks, there is a proven connection between the time that players spend playing a game and the marks they achieve at school. He pointed out that the average mark among the individuals tested, who came from all social strata, was 2.1 but was 2.8 for the group that played computer games. As a potential solution, the KFN Director proposed amending section 131 of the Criminal Code (portrayal of violence in printed works, broadcasting, the media or teleservices) and extending the ban on killer games. However, he considered there was no point in imposing a blanket ban on these games as there were always ways of circumventing such a ban. Instead, putting these games on the index, with the accompanying advertising and distribution restrictions, would be sufficient to achieve the main objective of curbing the development of violent games. However, to do this it would be necessary to considerably extend the indexing practice of the *Bundesprüfstelle für jugendgefährdende Medien* (Federal Review Board for Media Harmful to Minors - BPjM). That was currently not possible as it was de facto impossible to put a game on the index after it had been given an age rating by the *Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle* (Entertainment Software Voluntary Monitoring Agency - USK). He criticised the USK because its work was totally inadequate and its testers were too close to the industry. The agency’s Managing Director disagreed completely with this. In particular, he considered that the dialogue with the industry was both necessary and productive. It was the close contacts with the industry that made it possible to influence the design of games and also produce to a version of a specific game that is tailored to German needs. The spokesperson for the executive committee of the *Bundesverband Interaktive Unterhaltungssoftware e. V.* (Federal Interactive Entertainment Software Association - BIU) agreed. The USK representative pointed out to the meeting that most of the computer games concerned were in any case not released to minors

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or were given an age rating, so it was already prohibited to supply them to minors.

The head of the *Zentrum für Medien und Kommunikation* (Media and Communication Centre) of the University of Leipzig considered the present discussion to be more a part of the long-running debate on the constant change in personal values, which had always been on the agenda since the inception of new media. Instead of insisting on a ban on these games, he backed the idea of dialogue between parents and their children and saw an opportunity to bring families together again through play. In particular, by engaging in a mutual dialogue, children would learn to reflect on their actions. He also criticised the scenes shown by the Director of the Criminological Research Institute as being unrepresentative, a view shared in the following question-and-answer session by politicians from the CDU/CSU group.

The Chair of the BPjM defended the German system of protecting minors and said it was exemplary and without parallel. He added that, in particular, when compared with other countries, that system played a pioneering role. With a dig at Lower Saxony and Bavaria, each of which has a representative at the USK, she called on them to make use of their right of veto if they did not agree with the current practice. She did not believe the issue of violent games could be resolved by imposing a ban but rather by improving the competence of parents and teachers with regard to the media.

Following the hearing, MPs from all political groups said there was no point in banning killer games. The Chair of the Sub-Committee pointed in particular to the difficulties in enforcing the existing rules, which, in his opinion, represented the real problem.

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