Committee of Ministers: Measures to Protect Children against Harmful Content

IRIS 2009-9:1/3

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On 8 July 2009, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted Recommendation 5 (2009) on measures to protect children against harmful content and behaviour and to promote their active participation in the new information and communications environment.

In the Recommendation, the Committee first states that the protection of freedom of expression in the information and communications environment by ensuring a coherent level of protection for minors against harmful content is a priority for the Council of Europe. Content like online pornography, the glorification of violence, discriminatory or racist expressions could have a negative effect on the well-being of children. The Committee emphasises that it is necessary to provide children with the knowledge and skills to participate actively in social and public life, to act responsibly and to respect the rights of others. The Committee also recognises the need to encourage trust and promote confidence on the Internet. Therefore, the Committee recommends to the Member States three categories of strategies to protect children against content and behaviour carrying a risk of harm. The categories are as follows: providing safe and secure spaces for children on the Internet, encouraging the development of a pan-European trustmark and labelling systems and promoting Internet skills and literacy for children, parents and educators.

The Committee acknowledges the difference between protection from content in the offline world compared to the online world. The latter is the more difficult, especially considering that the restriction of access to content could be in conflict with the right to freedom of expression and information. The Committee states that parental responsibility and media education play an important role in protecting children. However, there are tools and methods that can assist parents and educators in protecting children from harmful content. Therefore, the Committee encourages Member States to develop safe and secure spaces on the Internet for children. An example of this would be the creation of safe and secure websites for children, by developing age-appropriate online portals.

The second strategy is the development of a pan-European trustmark and labelling systems. The labelling of content contributes to the development of safe and secure spaces for children on the Internet. The Committee drew up a list of

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criteria which a pan-European trustmark should meet. For example, the trustmark should be compatible with human rights principles and standards, labelling systems should be provided and used on a voluntary basis and any form of censorship of content should be inadmissible.

The Committee acknowledges that, even by creating secure spaces on the Internet and with the labelling of online content, it is not possible to completely exclude the possibility of children being exposed to harmful content. Therefore, the Committee recommends the promotion of media literacy for children, parents and educators, so that they can be prepared for possible encounters with harmful content. Member States are encouraged to raise awareness about the benefits and risks for children freely using the Internet. Children, parents and educators should also be informed about safe and secure spaces on the Internet and trustworthy labels for online content.

Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on measures to protect children against harmful content and behaviour and to promote their active participation in the new information and communications environment, 8 July 2009

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