

Internet Governance Forum (IGF) 2014

Best Practice Forum on Online Child Protection

Executive Summary

The Best Practice Forum on online child protection was very productive. Participants shared broad consensus on many if not most issues. Discussions about protection and its definition settled on developing resiliency and capacity in children to equip them to deal with Internet content. Interventions focused on three key influence points: children, peers, and government.

One of the more challenging issues facing the forum was the definition of child. The age range encompassed by the term varies widely globally. It is influenced by societal, religious, and cultural norms. The forum chose an expansive and inclusive definition ranging from birth to the age of 18.

A second area of significant definition discussion arose over the nature of appropriate content. Like age, the idea of appropriate content is defined by parents who in turn are influenced by societal values. These vary widely globally though certain types of content e.g. child pornography is universally deemed unacceptable and a criminal offence in most countries. Participants demurred defining appropriate content for children and left that decision to families.

Major findings

Participants agreed that the starting place for developing resiliency was with children themselves. Educational resources, games, and interaction were all fruitful avenues. Educational institutions and educators were singled out as particularly important, as school attending children spend much of their daily lives in and with them. A wide range of curricula and programmes are available to help children develop their own resiliency and that of their peers.

The next focus area was the peers and caregivers of children. In some cases, these are other children, but this group also includes the various adults who interact with children in their daily lives. For adult peers, including parents, caregivers and teachers, media awareness training and coaching advice is highly effective in enabling them to better advise children. Participants however expressly noted that adults were sometimes less well versed in the use of the Internet than were children. Youth participants pointed out that this was especially true of older children. Participants agreed that some peer adults would greatly benefit from media training themselves. Furthermore, joint parent-child training might be especially effective.

Participants identified the legal and governmental area as an important area of focus. Governments define and identify some content as illegal. Beyond this class of content is content that is appropriate or inappropriate for children. Many governments successfully work with the private sector and civil society to develop standards and promulgate them to the community at large. Some governments also employ filtering technology to prevent children from accessing inappropriate content. However,

participants noted strongly that content filters were prone to failure due to dynamic content and active circumvention. Moreover, youth and adult participants acknowledged that content blocking frequently led children to seek ways to overcome blocking.

Finally, participants acknowledged that online child protection efforts to date emanated largely from the developed world and reflected conditions there. In countries with low levels of Internet penetration or expensive broadband service, online child protection might have a lower priority. In developing countries, online child protection vies with other issues of child violence, which may not exist or exist to a lesser degree in developed nations. Moreover, the infrastructure necessary to implement programmes and curricula may not exist. In such environments, governments and adult peers may choose to allocate scarce available resources to other programmes deemed to be more important. In such circumstances, it may be helpful to include online child protection programmes to other programmes that help children develop other facets of resiliency.

Similarly, while the developed world has invested significant research resources to map and develop useful programmes to build resiliency, relatively little research has occurred in the developing world. Participants recognized the need for additional research at the local, national and regional level in underserved parts of the world to help identify specific characteristics and tailor programmes appropriate to local conditions.

Suggestions for future work

Based on the broad consensus among participants, two major thrusts of work emerged from the discussions. Both of these sought to address clearly identified existing issues.

a. First, participants suggested that **efforts should be directed at encouraging research in underserved countries.** This research should first focus on mapping how local children interact with the Internet. After mapping the environment, subsequent research should be directed at adapting and examining the efficacy of existing online child protection programmes to local conditions or developing new programmes built specifically for local conditions.

b. Second, the Best Practice Forum should **develop a repository of online child protection interventions and linked case studies examining their effectiveness.** This would provide a single resource page of known and tested online child protection programmes for the global Internet community which might be adapted for local use. As such, it would be a valuable asset to Internet users around the world.

Report

1. Definition of the issue

a. Child. The term “child” is a culturally specific term reflecting local norms. There is consensus that interaction strategies with children vary greatly as does their cognitive and social development (e.g., pre-teens and teenagers). In some societies, childhood ends at age 18 but many societies confer adulthood at an earlier age. Many international organizations follow cultural norms and define the age range of children as ages 0 through 18. Child is a locally relative term.

b. Protection: Preserving the mental, emotional, and physical integrity of an individual. This concept is reliant upon local cultural norms and the appropriateness of content. Appropriateness is locally determined and varies widely, though some types of content (i.e., child pornography) are deemed universally abhorrent and inappropriate as well as illegal. Globally, different societies and families have different definitions of appropriateness. The method of determining appropriateness also varies greatly and different societies may not share methods and thus agreement (i.e., some societies) demand evidence-based studies to determine harm while others rely upon societal consensus.

c. Online: on the Internet accessed through any device.

The Internet is a useful source of information, a medium for communication, and a versatile educational tool making it an invaluable resource for the development of children. It affords children the opportunity to have interactions with the world beyond those which they might expect to come into contact. Parents, teachers, peers, and technology play an important role in facilitating and moderating interactions. Unmoderated interactions rely upon the faculties of the child user. As children grow up and become more independent, they tend to have more unmoderated interactions. Interventions to build resiliency through the use of good Internet practices should occur earlier rather than later in life through guidance and example. Many interventions facilitate the development of resiliency in child users through building the capacity for information contextualization and evaluation. Some interventions focus on helping children to socialize with others online. The task of helping children build their capacity for resiliency to navigate the online world is much the same as helping them in the offline world with many of the same challenges and opportunities.

2. Regional specificities observed

Internet adoption rates, the Internet’s accessibility to children, and cultural norms about childhood education are key factors for stakeholders allocating resources to child online protection. Socio-economic status and the level of societal violence also play a role in these decisions. Taken together, these factors influence the allocation and effectiveness of resources to child online protection programmes and activities.

One observation that might be drawn from these factors is that reducing the cost of online child protection interventions is crucial to their use and efficacy. Making it easier to protect children online is essential in locales where children, parents, organizations, and governments have more pressing concerns and where resources are scarce. Optimizing the use of existing and available resources is an important element of a holistic strategy.

Access is another crucial element. Children access the Internet in different ways and to varying degrees depending on infrastructure and cost. Group or individual access is also a variable. Identifying local modalities of child Internet access is crucial for formulating effective strategies of online child protection. Children who routinely use VPNs to watch content filtered by national ISPs are likely to circumvent the very same safeguards put in place to help protect them.¹

Efforts to facilitate child protection online vary significantly around the world. Below are some examples of such efforts:

a. Initiatives with Global Scope

A wide range of intergovernmental, commercial, and non-commercial organizations support research and interventions globally. Some of these organizations track and maintain the state of child online protection while others actively support interventions.

- i. Microsoft (USA, EU, UK, Latin America, Asia, Africa) www.microsoft.com/safety
- ii. International Telecommunication Union (ITU) <http://www.itu.int/en/cop/Pages/default.aspx>
- iii. FOSI <http://www.fosi.org/>
- iv. ECPAT <http://www.ecpat.net/>
- v. [http://youthandmedia.org/wiki/Child online safety in the developing world](http://youthandmedia.org/wiki/Child_online_safety_in_the_developing_world)
- vi. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) http://www.oecd.org/sti/ieconomy/childrenonline_with_cover.pdf
- vii. Connect Safely <http://www.connectsafely.org/>
- viii. Safer Internet Day <http://www.saferinternetday.org/web/guest/members>

b. North America

Significant academic research communities produce research addressing the topic of child online protection with rich political discussions. In the USA, legal governmental content filtering has been challenged in court due to the country's strong free speech rights leading to private-sector filtering options. Numerous organizations and educational programmes exist in the non-governmental and governmental sectors to help educate children and parents about online safety and child online protection.

- i. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children <http://www.missingkids.com/home>

¹ <http://www.k12blueprint.ca/sites/default/files/SSRN-id2378590.pdf>

c. Latin America

Efforts to protect children are emerging in the region in cooperation and collaboration with national governments. As in other parts of the developing world, wealthy states tend to be at the forefront.

- i. http://cpp.iicrd.islandnet.com/sites/default/files/Circle_of_Rights_Report_Brazil_-_English.pdf
- ii. <http://navegaprotegido.org>
- iii. Mexico - A Favor de lo Mejor <http://www.afavordelomejor.org/>
- iv. Brazil - SaferNet Brasil (www.safernet.org.br) and Internet Segura (<http://www.internetsegura.org/index.asp>)

d. Europe

Significant academic research communities produce research addressing the topic with rich political discussions. Content filtering by European states exists in accordance with national laws. Regionally, the EU has taken measures to apply and harmonize laws relating to child online protection. Numerous organizations and educational programmes exist in the non-governmental and governmental sectors to help educate children and parents. Multiple states employ differing combinations of regimes to address child online protection. Here are examples of key organizations and companies who have been addressing issues related to the protection of children online:

- i. Childnet (UK) <http://www.childnet.com/>
- ii. Internet Watch Foundation (UK) <https://www.iwf.org.uk/>
- iii. Safer Internet Centres – every EU country has a Safer Internet Centre, coordinated at European level by Insafe-INHOPE

e. Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

Strong differences exist between wealthy states such as those in the Gulf and their less wealthy regional neighbors. In the wealthy states, government ministries have embarked on child safety online policies. In less wealthy states, many of whom are emerging from or still under a state of civil unrest, child online protection receives fewer resources and attention. The ITU in cooperation with Arab states is developing a regional legal framework for child protection online.

- i. <http://www.thenational.ae/lifestyle/family/a-bid-for-keeping-children-safe-online>
- ii. <http://www.safespace.qa/en>

f. Sub-Saharan Africa

Resource scarcity in many countries drives the focus of attention on development. Many programmes exist to physically protect children with fewer focusing on child online protection.

- i. <http://www.southafrica.info/services/online-040612.htm#.U-PvyPldWSo>
- ii. <http://www.jidaw.com/childrencybersafety/>
- iii. <http://news.idg.no/cw/art.cfm?id=D30FB905-05B0-59F5-7EEA813D8FF3374A>

g. East Asia

Efforts to protect children in poorer nations focus on physical well-being. In an environment of scarce resources, physical safety receives greater attention than online safety. More developed and wealthier states tend to take a more aggressive stance.

- i. http://cpp.iicrd.islandnet.com/sites/default/files/Circle_of_Rights_Report_Thailand_-_Thai.pdf

h. Australia/New Zealand

Multiple programmes exist in a relatively well-researched and well-resourced environment. Internet adoption is high.

- i. <http://www.childwise.net/page/37/online-publications>
- ii. <http://netsafe.org.nz>
- iii. Australian Communications and Media Authority www.acma.gov.au
- iv. Alannah and Madeline Foundation www.amf.org.au

3. Existing policy measures and private sector initiatives

Existing policy tends to fall into three categories: child education, adult/peer supervision and support and regulatory remedies.

a. Child education

Programmes to develop children's capacity to contextualize information and enhance their resiliency exist in various educational and social contexts, including primary and secondary schools supported by local, national, regional, and international organizations. Creating mutually supportive networks of peers is helpful to building individual resilience.

b. Adult/peer supervision and support

The support of trusted adults in helping children learn to make sound decisions is important. Education provided by family on safer online practices and appropriate online conduct can be very effective in helping children develop effective coping strategies. Schools and others that have significant contact with children can provide additional encouragement to children as they develop resilience. To build this capacity, programmes to inform adults about child online safety are helpful especially in situations where adults may be less Internet literate than the children with whom they interact.

c. Government/legal remedies

Governments employ a range of measures including working with ISPs to remove illegal content, offer filtering technologies to make it difficult to access explicit content online, develop and implement regulation, and cooperate with the Internet industry more broadly to develop codes of

best practices and voluntary content-filtering solutions. Governments may also adopt laws criminalizing online exploitation of children. States and organizations sometimes cooperate to set age requirements for some types of explicit content. However, filtering technology should be used cautiously as it has a chilling effect on free speech, sometimes in adult populations.

4. What worked well, identifying common effective practices

Child education at the primary and secondary levels is effective. Integrated programmes in primary and secondary schools in media literacy and online safety provide education in an appropriate environment. Educators should receive training to help them present material to students. Schools should invest in professional development for educators.

Peer-to-peer education among children can also be an effective medium for sharing appropriate practices and helping to build resiliency. The strength of these interactions rests upon the education and support of each individual peer.

Inviting and integrating parents into these programmes to educate them so that they can serve as appropriate role models and aid their children to navigate the Internet safely builds bonds of trust and provides support to the child user. This is especially important for parents with low levels of media literacy.

Cooperation between organizations and government largely in the form of public-private partnerships to support and offer media safety programmes has a positive impact on their overall success.

In many cases, the private sector has played a positive role in providing technology and resources to support child protection online programmes. It must be noted at the same time that the private sector also provides a significant amount of the content deemed inappropriate for children.

Customization of programmes to acknowledge and respect local values is important to gain buy-in of local stakeholders and to the overall success of these programmes.

5. Unintended consequences of policy interventions, good and bad

Among some populations, the involvement of parents in the education process has educated them as well as their children, raising overall media literacy.

Transplantation of programmes into new geographic areas absent cultural translation can be problematic.

Child online safety programmes can be integrated into broader, offline child safety programmes.

Internet-filtering: Technologies to filter access to Internet content can be effective but are prone to two inherent flaws: under-blocking and over-blocking. Under-blocking refers to the failure of filtering to block access to all the targeted content while over-blocking refers to the failure of

filtering that blocks access to untargeted content. Both these failings occur because the Internet is a dynamic communication medium which changes constantly. Content and the routing to it as well as the filtering engaged to check it are all governed by imperfect algorithms developed by fallible people. They also have the potential to restrict free and open communications inadvertently or deliberately, and thereby may limit the free expression rights of individuals and groups.

Domain name seizures: Legal tools to seize Internet domain names have the same ultimate vulnerabilities as filtering. They rely upon the capabilities of users who provide content and law enforcement which seeks to take down illegal content. Additionally, they rely on the bureaucratic process of seizing a domain name.

Developing relationships between stakeholders can have an impact on the stakeholders' views of multistakeholder processes more generally.

Technologically inexperienced adults involved as parents or mentors may develop fears relating to the risks posed by technologies, hampering education. Care should be taken to avoid cultivating a fear of the Internet based upon online dangers.

6. Unresolved issues where further multistakeholder cooperation is needed

Significant research focusing on online risks to children outside the OECD is sorely needed. Policy interventions should address empirically identified problems.

Greater balance in understanding issues at an interregional level is needed to enhance cooperation between the developed and developing worlds.

7. Insights gained as a result of the experience

Risk-based approach rather than aiming for absolute safety: Children and young people cannot be made 100% safe online by blocking of content or other technological means. However, we can improve the safety of children and young people online by empowering children, teens, parents, guardians, educators and peers to identify and deal with potentially harmful content on computers, the Internet and mobile phones, and how to use technology both safely and responsibly, and by making available easy-to-use adjustable tools to help manage access and content. We should strive towards engaging children with the Internet at a gradual pace and use resiliency strategies to teach them how to cope with the online environment and its dangers. To this end, teaching children about the importance of “netiquette” and instilling in them the notion of “think before you click/tap/touch/swipe” should be our primary goal. The online and offline worlds share many of the same opportunities and risks. Encouraging children to make good choices in life whether online or off is the primary objective of education. The existence of the online world expands the range of interactions but varies little from the core lessons.

8. Proposed steps for further multistakeholder dialogue

The IGF Best Practices Forum on Online Child Protection should begin collecting a rich array of global case studies documenting interventions. Differing global norms suggest that these cases could be organized regionally or culturally at a minimum. There exists substantial research in many but not all countries establishing the status quo of Child Online Protection. This goal would not seek to collect existing norms, but rather identify practices that work and don't work, providing interested stakeholders with an array of appropriate interventions.

Secondly, the IGF Best Practices Forum should undertake to encourage new interventions and support research initiatives, especially in locations with low levels of existing work. Identifying regions where research is scarce helps researchers and advocates direct their efforts towards underserved populations.

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