Protecting children in the digital world

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution on protecting children in the digital world.

Parliament notes the fact that almost 15 % of internet users who are minors aged between 10 and 17 receive some form of sexual solicitation, and 34 % of them encounter sexual material that they have not searched for. Minors must be protected from the dangers of the digital world in accordance with their age and developmental progress.

It considers, in this context, the measures taken by Member States to prevent illegal online content are not always effective and inevitably involve differing approaches to the prevention of content that is harmful to children.

According to Parliament, the protection of minors in the digital world must be addressed at regulatory level by deploying more effective measures, including through self-regulation by engaging the industry to assume its shared responsibility, and at educational and training level by training children, parents and teachers in order to prevent minors from accessing illegal content. This is why they propose a strategy that seeks to strike the right balance between free access to the internet and combating illegal content.

A framework of rights and governance: Parliament points out that a new stage of protecting the rights of the child in the EU framework started with the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, together with the now legally binding Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, whose Article 24 defines the protection of children as a fundamental right. It reiterates the need for the EU to fully respect the standards of the relevant international instruments and urge the Member States to transpose and implement, in a smooth and timely manner, all legal instruments in the area of the protection of minors in the digital world.

Parliament welcomes the Commission's European strategy for a better internet for children and calls on the Commission to enhance existing internal mechanisms to ensure a consistent and coordinated approach to child safety online, underlining that **only a comprehensive combination of legal, technical and educational measures**, including prevention, can adequately **address the dangers that children face online**, and enhance the protection of children in the online environment.

In this context, several measures are recommended:

- the continuation of the Safer Internet Programme, with adequate funding to carry out its activities;
- research and education programmes aimed at reducing the risk of children becoming victims of the internet;
- close collaboration with civil society associations and organisations working inter alia for the protection of minors, data protection and education.

Media and new media: access and education: pointing out that the internet provides children and young people with immensely valuable tools, which can be used to express or assert their views, access information and learning and claim their rights, as well as being an excellent tool of communication, Parliament also highlights the inherent risks for the most vulnerable users: child pornography, the exchange of material on violence, cybercrime, intimidation, bullying, grooming, children being able to access or acquire legally restricted or age-inappropriate goods and services, exposure to age-inappropriate, aggressive or misleading advertising, scams, etc.

It underlines that the new information and communication options offered by the digital world, such as computers, TV on different platforms, mobile phones, video games, tablets, apps, and the level of diffusion of different media that converge in a single digital system, entail not only a host of possibilities and opportunities for children and adolescents, but also risks in terms of easy access to content that is illegal, unsuitable or harmful to the development of minors, as well as the possibility that data may be collected with the aim of targeting children as consumers, with harmful, unmeasured effects.

Parliament supports Member States' efforts to promote **systematic education and training** for children (from an early age), parents, educators, schoolteachers and social workers, aimed at enabling them to understand the digital world and identify the associated dangers. To this end, it encourages ongoing digital training for educators who work with students in schools on a permanent basis.

It also highlights the role of **parents and of the family** and urges the Commission to support awareness-raising initiatives aimed at parents and educators.

It also points to the role of the private sector and industry as regards their responsibility in relation to these issues as well as child-safe labelling for web pages, and promotion of 'netiquette' for children. In this context, it urges the Commission to include in its main priorities **the protection of children from aggressive or misleading TV and online advertising**. Special attention must be given to online marketing of harmful substances, such as alcohol, given that social networks facilitate the online marketing of this product.

Right to protection: Parliament outlines its vision of protecting children from the dangers of the internet. It focuses on the following measures:

1) Combating illegal content: in this regard, Parliament calls for:

- the collection, in the framework of its reporting obligation on the transposition of Directive 2011/92 /EU, of exact and clear data on the crime of online grooming ;
- further improvement could be achieved in connection with further harmonisation of the criminal law and criminal procedures of the Member States, including eventual proposals for material **EU criminal legislation** that fully respect the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality;
- the strengthened cooperation with third countries as regards the prompt deletion of web pages containing or disseminating illegal content, as well as the combat of cybercrime;
- the introduction and strengthening of **hotline systems** for reporting crimes and illegal content and conduct, respecting the rights of suspects and the improved information for children and families regarding national hotlines and other contact points such as "safety buttons";
- strengthened international cooperation between law enforcement agencies and the development of synergies with other related services, including police and juvenile justice systems;
- the dissemination of reliable instruments, such as warning pages or acoustic and optical signals to limit direct access of minors to content that is harmful to them;
- **a stronger commitment from digital content and service suppliers** to implement codes of conduct compliant with the regulations that are in force, to identify, prevent and remove illegal content based on the decisions of the legal authorities;
- the launch of **a campaign addressed at parents** to assist them in understanding the digital material that is being managed by their children;
- the proper implementation by Member States of the existing procedural rules for deleting websites hosting exploitative, threatening, abusive, discriminatory or otherwise malicious content;
- the consideration of possible legislative measures if industry self-regulation fails to deliver.

Parliament also regrets the failure to comply with the pact signed on 9 February 2009 between the Commission and 17 social networking sites, including Facebook and Myspace, which promoted the protection and security of minors online.

2) Combating harmful content: Parliament considers it urgent for the Commission to examine the effectiveness of the various systems for voluntary classification of content unsuitable for minors in the Member States and calls on it, as well as the Member States and the internet industry, to reinforce cooperation in the **development of strategies and standards to train minors in the responsible use of the internet**.

The following measures are recommended:

- the integration of the protection of minors into the respective by-laws associations of audiovisual and digital service suppliers
- the harmonisation by the Member States of the classification of digital content for minors (e.g. games by age-group), in cooperation with the relevant operators and associations, and with third countries;
- **the establishment of the 'European Framework for Safer Mobile Use'** by exploiting the options that facilitate parental control.

3) Protection of privacy: although Parliament welcomes the new proposal for a Regulation on personal data protection and its special provisions on children's consent and the right to be forgotten, which bans the preservation online of information on the personal data of minors, which may pose a risk to their personal and professional life, it calls for further clarification. It considers that owners and administrators of web pages should indicate in a clear and visible way their data protection policy and should **provide for a system of mandatory parental consent for the processing of data of children under the age of 13** . It favours ensuring that users have more information on how their personal data (and that of associated parties) are handled and consider that this information should be made available in a language and form adapted to the user profiles.

It calls for the promotion in every digital sector of **technological options which, if selected, can limit the websurfing of minors within traceable limits** and with conditional access, thereby providing an effective tool for parental control.

4) Right of reply in digital media: Parliament calls for the development and harmonisation of systems relating to the right of reply in digital media.

Right to digital citizenship: given the impact of digital technology as an important learning tool for citizenship, Parliament calls on the Member States to consider digital platforms as training tools for democratic participation for every child. Measures would have to be taken to take into account the most vulnerable. Lastly, it recalls that information and citizenship are closely linked on the internet and that what threatens the civic engagement of young people today is the lack of interest they show in information.