Insafe insights on… inappropriate content

The Insafe network of awareness centres, helplines and youth panels, in partnership with INHOPE (the International Association of Internet Hotlines, dedicated to the removal of illegal online content), operate Safer Internet Centres (SICs) in 30 European countries in the drive to keep children and young people safe online. Through a range of services, SICs respond to the latest online issues, helping to promote the many opportunities the online world offers, while also addressing the challenges. And while Europe's children and youth are the main benefactors of this work, BIK also reaches out to, and collaborates with, a range of other stakeholders - parents and carers, teachers and educators, researchers, industry, civil society, decision makers and law enforcement.

The "Insafe insights…" series draws on the experience and expertise of the Insafe network to tackle some of the most topical issues encountered in its day-to-day operations. Drawing on statistics and helpline case studies, this document aims to outline the issue and some possible responses, while also pointing to sources of further information and support.

Inappropriate content… a definition

Inappropriate content is a term used to capture a wide and ever-increasing number of different types of problematic content online. From hate speech to images of self-harm or pro-ana websites, alongside all of the amazing content that is available online there is some which is inappropriate for different audiences.

The EU Kids Online project classified online opportunities and risks for children and identified the following risks related to content:

- Advertising, spam, sponsorship.
- Violent, gruesome, hateful content.
- Pornographic, harmful sexual content.
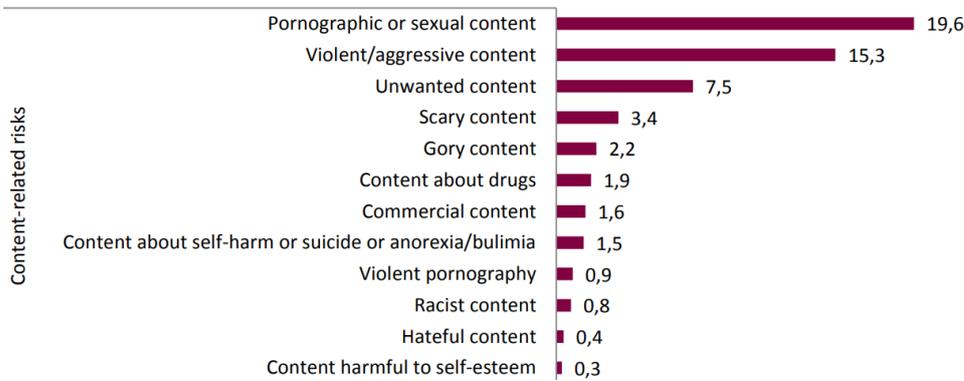- Racist, biased info/advice (e.g. drugs).

The EU Kids Online project also asked children and young people what bothered them when they are online. The graph below[1] shows the content-related risks that they identified.

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[1] https://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EU%20Kids%20III/Reports/Intheirownwords020213.pdf

EU Kids Online

www.eukidsonline.net

Figure 2: What were all the online risks children mentioned? (% of all risks)

Content-related risks	%
Pornographic or sexual content	19,6
Violent/aggressive content	15,3
Unwanted content	7,5
Scary content	3,4
Gory content	2,2
Content about drugs	1,9
Commercial content	1,6
Content about self-harm or suicide or anorexia/bulimia	1,5
Violent pornography	0,9
Racist content	0,8
Hateful content	0,4
Content harmful to self-esteem	0,3

There have been a number of recent research papers which have asked children and young people what bothers them most when they are online. The graphic below comes from a 2018 study[2] with almost 40,000 children and young people in the UK who were asked to identify the worst things that can happen online.

Self harm and suicide

Hate speech, bullying, fighting

Violent and obscene videos

Sexual approaches from adults

Animals being hurt

Being asked for nudes

Pornography

[2] https://www.lgfl.net/online-safety/hopesandstreams

INHOPE

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The Insafe helpline network deals with all kinds of inappropriate content from callers and some of the definitions they use are listed here:

Advertising/commercialism	Chain emails, phishing sites, misleading policies, terms and conditions.
Gaming	For any issues related to gaming content, possible addiction, etc.
Hate speech	Discrimination or prejudice against others on account of their race, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, disability or gender – this could include racist materials online or racist comments which have been made by a group or individual.
Potentially harmful content	Including terrorism, online prostitution, drugs, eating disorders, self-harm, etc. Including calls related to sites promoting suicide and explaining ways to commit suicide. This may include referrals to a hotline.

Clearly there is some content online which could be offensive or upsetting to individuals, but which could be perfectly acceptable to others. Some social media providers will warn users about such content which they describe as sensitive and such content will not be immediately visible to users. This has provoked criticism from some who have suggested that it simply highlights this type of content and encourages the curious or vulnerable to click on it.

Parents and carers have a lot of concerns around inappropriate content; they worry about the types of things that their children might be seeing online and the potential damage that this can do – the impact that it might have on their behaviour, health and wellbeing. Unfortunately, there is a lot of hype in the press around some of the risks, but they clearly do exist. Many parents will try and limit their children's exposure to inappropriate content by using filters and by restricting devices. This is important and definitely something that many parents do with offline issues. The problem with the online manifestation of inappropriate content is that it is much more difficult to manage. One parent may have successfully restricted their broadband and even locked down mobile devices but when a child spends time with other young people, we cannot assume that their levels of filtering and monitoring are the same or that they even exist. This is why dialogue and discussion are so important. What should children and young people do when they come across content that worries or upsets them – content that adults would think is inappropriate? We want them to speak to someone – ideally a trusted adult – but if the response to this would be to ban them from a particular platform or to take away their internet access, then this is perhaps not the best approach.

Experiences from the Insafe network

As seen above, inappropriate content covers a wide range of issues and Insafe helplines categorise it using various headings. Overall, inappropriate content could be said to be the main issue that helplines are dealing with as clearly cyberbullying and sexting (both the

subjects of previous "Insafe insights…" reports) involve content which is deemed inappropriate.

Inappropriate content is addressed at every Insafe Training meeting. Recently there were discussions about children and young people being exposed to inappropriate online challenges which, in some cases, had led to young people self-harming or committing suicide. Known as the Blue Whale Challenge, this was an issue which needed to be addressed quickly. Despite being a hoax, it was clear that young people were harming themselves as a result and authorities faced the dilemma of when to alert people to the issue: do it too soon and you can be accused of scare-mongering; too late and you're not doing your job. Discussions about this type of thing at a network level mean that a consistent approach can be applied and this was seen more recently with concerns over the Momo challenge. Helplines, awareness centres and social media providers met quickly following press coverage in Austria and the UK to devise a strategy for working with the media to provide useful information around the issue.

Safer Internet Centres that are part of the Insafe network enjoy positive relationships with many of the key social media providers. This is very important in being able to understand how best to support end users who encounter problems on the various platforms. Colleagues have a good knowledge of community standards/community guidelines and the most effective ways to have problematic content removed. One key piece of advice from social media providers is that users should provide as much information as possible when making a report. The more context that can be provided about an offending piece of content, then the more likely it can be dealt with properly.

Unfortunately reporting mechanisms on social media platforms have not enjoyed a good reputation in recent years with many users expressing their frustration that they reported some content, but that nothing happened as a result. Some platforms now keep users informed about action that has been taken on a particular report that they have made, and many platforms are keen to provide as much transparency as possible with regards to reporting processes.

Similarly, some of the major providers have also released transparency reports which show how they have dealt with specific types of content, how much they have removed, and so on. The figures are sadly quite staggering such is the volume of traffic that these sites attract.

Further statistics can be found at www.betterinternetforkids.eu/helpline-statistics.

Insafe helpline case studies

Many of the cases that Insafe helplines deal with could be classified as addressing inappropriate content, as can be seen from the following examples.

A teenage girl contacted the German helpline and explained that some of her friends at school had been talking about Pro-Ana sites. The girl was curious and went looking and found some sites herself. She started to worry that she was too fat and talked about hearing Ana's voice inside her head. She started to feel guilty that she was overweight and began throwing up after meals and becoming obsessive about her weight. The helpline counsellor had a

discussion with her about the potential risks of Pro-Ana sites and was very clear about the fact that Ana was not a friend and that anorexia was a serious illness. A range of associated issues were discussed including body image, beauty ideals, reasons for wanting to lose weight and potential warning signs. The girl was encouraged to seek further help (and suggestions of where she could find this were given) as soon as possible.

Quite often parents will contact helplines as they are worried about their children coming across or being exposed to potentially harmful content. The concerns often focus around games and gaming and many parents suddenly become aware of the risks when deciding to give their child their first tablet or smartphone. The example below from Luxembourg is quite typical of the types of queries that helplines will deal with regularly from parents.

A mother contacted the helpline to ask for some advice and support. Her son had just moved from primary to secondary school and was now asking for a smartphone. The mother had some real concerns about this and was particularly worried about the possible access to pornographic content, drugs and contact with strangers. She also had concerns about the Dark Net and was worried that her son might be able to buy things illegally there. The mother explained that she felt ill-equipped to deal with this as she was not an expert on internet issues and felt overwhelmed. The counsellor provided positive support for the mother and tried to empower her so that she felt able to address her concerns. She was also directed to a number of useful websites in order to find out more about the potential threats and challenges.

Sometimes, really young children make contact as they have been exposed to particularly unpleasant content online.

An eight-year-old girl contacted the Latvian helpline because she was frightened. She had been browsing the internet and had clicked on a hyperlink which led her to a pornographic site. Initially the girl was curious and so clicked on a few of the videos but, after a short time, she was worried and confused. She couldn't understand what the adults were doing in the videos or why they were doing it. She was afraid of speaking to her parents as she thought she would get into trouble. Because the girl was so scared and experiencing such negative emotions, the counsellor took the decision to undertake some crisis intervention. They explained that clicking on random links could lead to very unpleasant content. The counsellor also explained briefly (and in an age-appropriate way) what had been happening in the videos that the girl had seen. She was then encouraged to speak to her parents if she could and also try to get them to call the helpline so that someone could explain more about filtering and how this could be used to protect children from this type of content.

Insafe resources

Safer Internet Centres have developed various educational resources and awareness-raising videos aimed at helping teachers, parents and carers, and children and young people, to discover the online world safely. A selection of resources touching on issues relating to inappropriate content are detailed below:

- Slovenian Safer Internet Centre: About children, porn and other web "lies" An online safety expert and a popular Slovenian radio host at Val 202 talk about the important role of parents to equip their children with the ability to critically evaluate things they see

online, from porn to other inappropriate or fake online content. The video is aimed at parents.

- Dutch Safer Internet Centre: Experienced something unpleasant online? Install the Meldknop Sometimes children and young people experience something unpleasant online, such as cyberbullying or identity theft, and then look for advice on how to deal with this. It is also possible that they saw something that they want to somehow report. They can install the "Meldknop" in their browser, a special button that allows them to find tips and other helpful information on www.meldknop.nl at all times. The website covers a range of topics such as sexting, grooming, fraud, stalking and more. Meldknop.nl is supported by the Dutch police.

- Lithuanian Safer Internet Centre: We are against harmful content on the internet! A series of four videos encouraging users to report harmful content and explaining the role of the Safer Internet Centre.

- Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre: Ten myths about the "scary" internet A guidebook for parents describing some of the most common online risks for children and providing some guidance about how to talk with children in order to educate them to avoid this type of content online.

Many more resources are available from the full resource and video galleries on the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) portal, in a variety of languages, covering a whole range of online safety issues.

Further information and advice

For further information and advice, please contact your national Safer Internet Centre – check the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) portal for contact information.

To keep up to date with safer and better internet issues more generally, visit the Better Internet for Kids (BIK) portal, subscribe to the quarterly electronic BIK bulletin, or check out the Insafe Facebook and Twitter profiles.