

Steering Committee on Media and Information Society



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Protecting children's rights in the digital environment

**The role of the Steering Committee on Media and Information Society (CDMSI) of
the Council of Europe**

by

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The Internet is an important tool for children's everyday activities, such as communication, information, knowledge, education and entertainment. Children must be able to safely play, learn, communicate and develop, as they have integrated the Internet and other ICT's into their everyday lives and in their interaction with others. The Committee of Ministers' Declaration on freedom of communication on the Internet, adopted on 28 May 2003, stresses that the exercise of such freedom should not prejudice the dignity of fundamental rights and freedoms of others, especially children.

The Council of Europe acknowledges that, despite the existence of risks, the Internet offers almost endless possibilities for children to learn, share, create and socialize. More needs to be done to prepare generations of active citizens committed to promoting and respecting human rights by giving children the tools to protect themselves against threats and become more aware of their responsibilities on the Internet.

Many texts adopted by the Council of Europe and other international organizations over the last decade emphasize the crucial need for empowerment of children through education, including digital literacy. More particular, the Internet Governance Strategy 2012-2015 of the Council of Europe, as well as the new Internet Governance Strategy 216-2019, sets out a coherent vision for a sustainable long-term approach, stressing that the rights of children and young people are not violated and that their human rights are respected in all areas, including on the Internet.

Council of Europe – Internet Governance Strategy 2012-2015¹

On 14 March 2012, the Committee of Ministers adopted the Internet Governance Strategy 2012-2015 in which they underlined that the Strategy is built on its Recommendation CM/Rec(2011)8 on the protection and promotion of the universality, integrity and openness of the Internet.

The Strategy identifies priorities and set goals for four (4) years (2012-2015) to advance the protection and respect for human rights, the rule of law and democracy on the Internet. Its main objectives include: a) protecting the Internet's universality, integrity and openness, b) maximising rights and freedoms for Internet Users, c) advancing data protection privacy, d) enhancing the rule of law and effective cooperation against cybercrime, e) maximising the Internet's potential to promote democracy and cultural diversity and f) protecting and empowering children and young people.²

The Internet Governance Strategy 2012-2015 has delivered many tangible results and more progress is expected. However, more needs to be done to reach the targets set and to address emerging issues, such as: a) to protect and promote the universality, integrity and openness of the Internet, b) to reinforce users rights including the right to effective remedies, c)

¹ Internet Governance is the development and application by governments, the private sector and civil society, in their respective roles of shared principles, norms, rules, decision making procedures, and programs that shape the evolution and use of the Internet.

² The Internet Governance Strategy 2012-2015, in the Action Line VI "Protecting and empowering children and young people" contributes to enhancing human rights aspects of the Internet for children by focusing on: "a) *strengthening international cooperation and mutual assistance to protect children and young people, in particular as regards the criminal offences of child pornography and "grooming", as well as the removal of online child abuse materials at source, b) developing criteria for trustmark and labeling systems to enable children and their families to identify suitable online content, c) sharing best practice on secure and age-appropriate spaces for children on the Internet (see par. 8 of Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on measures to protect children against harmful content and behavior and to promote their active participation in the new information and communications environment (adopted on the Committee of Ministers on 8 July 2009), including the development of age verification systems and access to quality content, d) training education professionals regarding the attitudes, skills and knowledge for learners to become responsible users and producers of content based on respect for human rights and human dignity, e) developing awareness raising activities for parents concerning the protection of children and young people on the Internet, in particular by updating and translating into different languages versions of Council of Europe Human Rights media literacy materials, such as the "Compasito" Manual on human rights for children, the "Internet Literacy Handbook" and the Wild Web Woods online game."*

to assist member-states to protect the Internet and users' rights, d) to empower users to understand their rights and responsibilities and to seek effective remedies and also e) to develop awareness especially for children and other vulnerable groups of their rights.

Protecting freedom of expression and human dignity in the information and communications environment by ensuring a coherent level of protection for minors against harmful content and developing children's digital literacy skills is a priority for the Council of Europe. As Digital literacy provides advantages for advancing children's rights and it is as important as reading and writing in modern society, the empowerment of all children in the digital environment is only possible through a sustained multi-stakeholder approach and cooperation, including the relevant Committees of the Council of Europe.

Pursuant to its terms of reference, the CDMSI is tasked with overseeing the implementation of the Council of Europe's Internet Governance Strategy with particular focus on the right to freedom of expression on the Internet and the right to impart and receive information regardless of frontiers.

For the coming year 2015, the CDMSI will focus on the delivery of appropriate legal instruments and other tools, such as key instruments and tools on net neutrality, transparency, free flow of Internet content through arrangements between governments, the private sector, civil society and relevant technical communities.

Steering Committee on Media and Information Society (CDMSI) and Internet Governance Strategy 2016-2019 – Priorities and synergies with other relevant bodies of the CoE

The CDMSI is currently discussing elements for a new Internet Governance Strategy 2016-2019 of the Council of Europe to be submitted to the Committee of Ministers.

Through its new Internet Governance Strategy 2016-2019, the Council of Europe will pursue its efforts with governments to build and reinforce the human rights dimension of Internet Governance and contribute to shaping the digital environment.

The new Internet Governance Strategy 2016-2019 hopes to contribute to equalizing forces to bridge the barriers, because Internet access must be seen as a fundamental right for children. Moreover, accessible Internet for children with disabilities is important to improving their quality of life by providing access to education and skills training, as well as the opportunity to participate in the economic, cultural and social life of their communities, because the future is already here, but...is very unevenly distributed.

The Council of Europe's Strategy on the rights of child 2012-2015 proposes vision for the Council of Europe's role and action in the protection of children and young people in the digital environment, taking into account the progress achieved and the needs expressed by governments and the challenges identified by the international community. A certain degree of

convergence with the Internet Governance Strategy has been identified and the Secretariats work in close cooperation to ensure that both strategies will be rolled out, as planned.

To this extent, and as the CDMSI can play an important role in facilitating many actions in the new Internet Governance Strategy 2016-2019, especially including the participation and protection of children and young people, it's imperative to mention that on 16 April 2014, the Committee of Ministers adopted a **Guide on human rights for Internet Users**, that aims at raising users' awareness of their human rights and fundamental freedoms on line, in particular their freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, the right to education, the protection of personal data, the protection and empowerment of children and the right to an effective remedy.

The Guide on human rights for Internet Users will serve as a blueprint for state and non-state actors alike to help users exercise and guarantee their right and freedom on line. To achieve the purpose of helping users understand their rights, the Guide adopts simple and direct language and its success will depend greatly on its implementation by the member states and other stakeholders, as well as by its translation into several languages and its dissemination to the public authorities, the private sector, the civil society etc.³

³ Recommendation CM/Rec(2014)6 of the Committee of Ministers to member-states on a Guide to human rights for Internet Users.