
Hughes Hubbard & Reed

Protecting Kids Online – Technology vs. Good Ol’ Fashioned Parenting

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The proliferation of Internet use by children has undoubtedly challenged online service providers and technology providers alike. Protecting children from the various risks posed by Internet use has been, and continues to be, a major concern, as safety issues including sexual solicitation, online harassment, bullying and exposure to illegal content become more and more prevalent.

On Wednesday, the Internet Safety Technical Task Force, led by The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, issued a report entitled “Enhancing Child Safety & Online Technologies.” The report was compiled at the request of the Multi-State Working Group on Social Networking, comprised of 50 state Attorneys General. The task force includes representatives from several well-known Internet social network and online service providers, including Google, AOL, Facebook and MTV Networks/Viacom. The report, which was a year in the making, sought to determine the extent to which currently-available technology could help to address online safety risks to youths in the U.S., with a primary focus on social networking.

The task force consulted with experts in the field of youth online safety and technology and sought input from the public upon which to base its findings. Most significantly, eight leading social networking sites (including AOL, Bebo and Orkut (Google)) provided submissions to the task force detailing their efforts to enhance online safety for children, including the development and implementation of technologies focused on age and identity verification/authentication, filtering and auditing, text analysis and biometrics.

While “cautiously optimistic” about the innovations they’ve observed, the task force cautioned against overreliance on technology, and noted that there is no one technological solution, or combination of solutions, that can provide complete online safety for minors. Rather (and probably one of the more obvious solutions), the task force noted that the importance of parental oversight and education in use of the Internet must not be underestimated. Ultimately the task force does not believe that the Attorneys General should endorse any one technology or set of

technologies, but should work collaboratively with all stakeholders in pursuing a multi-faceted approach in protecting children from the risks of Internet usage.

Above all else, it is important to recognize that child safety, whether online or offline, in the virtual world or the real world, starts at home. Putting that aside, it is definitely interesting to see social network providers coming around and taking a proactive role, particularly those that traditionally took a "hands-off" approach to filtering and monitoring the content on their sites and/or implementing security and safety procedures to protect minors.

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