

Children's Charities' Coalition for Internet Safety



Rt Hon Jack Straw MP
The Home Secretary
The Home Office
50, Queen Anne's Gate
London SW1H 9AT

20th March, 2001

Dear Mr Straw,

Internet Safety Summit

The Children's Charities' Coalition for Internet Safety (CHIS) brings together in a unique joint endeavour all of the UK's leading professional child welfare organizations: Barnardos, ChildLine, The Children's Society, The National Children's Bureau, The National Council for Voluntary Child Care Organizations, NCH and NSPCC.

CHIS very much welcomes your decision to call an Internet Summit that will focus specifically on the issue of child safety on the Internet. We are sure it will be a very valuable platform through which the key players can engage in constructive discussions.

The agencies in CHIS have always seen the Internet as being a hugely valuable new technology that will greatly enrich all of our lives in a variety of ways. Children will be major beneficiaries of the Internet and we greatly approve of the huge effort the UK Government is putting into installing Internet connections in schools and the way it is encouraging or helping families to install Internet connections in their homes.

However, as is known only too well, the Internet is not without its hazards. CHIS wants the Internet to be, as far as possible, all promise and no threat for children and young people, but we are still a very long way from achieving that.

We believe the Summit should set itself an ambitious target: to establish the widest possible consensus as to the sorts of practical policies and measures needed to make the Internet a far safer place for children, linked to an agreed timetable for funding and implementing them. We very much hope that such a timetable will indicate a strong sense of urgency.

Of course no system is ever going to be one hundred percent safe one hundred percent of the time. Nothing in life is. There is therefore always going to be a need for vigilance and supervision on the part of parents and others, and a need for them to support and educate their children into good Internet practice and forms of online behaviour.

However, as we show in our attached Agenda for Action, which we would like to present to the Summit along with the text of this letter, we strongly believe that a great deal more could be done by the different parts of the industry to improve things and to underpin or reinforce the good Internet practice and forms of behaviour spoken of earlier.

We also believe that we need to think more carefully about how we now define "the Internet industry". Traditionally the industry was thought of as comprising only the Internet Service Providers, whereas today it is clear that there are very many more players engaged in providing services on or to Internet users of all ages. New ways therefore ought to be found to spread the burden of financing and organizing many of the wider or quasi-regulatory issues that this debate raises.

At the Summit, if we can settle on a broadly acceptable approach to all these questions at least for the reasonably foreseeable future, we can then look forward to moving on to the far more important business of closing the digital divide by extending Internet access to all children in the UK, regardless of the economic circumstances of their parents, and to focussing on how we can help every child to get the most out of it, both for their own good and for the economic and social good of the country.

International dimension

The UK media gave considerable coverage to the case of the men recently sentenced in an English court to various terms of imprisonment for their involvement with the 'Wonderland Club': a club based on the exchange of child pornography. The case highlighted the enormity of some of the problems still to be solved. It also emphasised the international dimension of the trade in child pornography and CHIS very much hopes that the Summit will be able to give some attention to this aspect.

As you will know, the great majority of child pornography reported to the British police originates outside the UK, the USA being the largest single source. In the Wonderland operation, worldwide 51 countries were identified as having members within their jurisdictions, or as being a source of material for the club, yet only 12 national law enforcement agencies in the end were able to participate in the joint police action in September, 1998, aimed at breaking up the club and bringing to justice those responsible for the terrible crimes against children which their pornographic images depicted. As one of those convicted said on UK television prior to sentencing:

"I'm sure the members who were not caught will regroup and start again."

We're afraid he is right.

We are pleased that the UK led for police forces across the world in the Wonderland case and we are also pleased that the UK police are playing such a prominent part in developing the G8 arrangements for dealing with international computer crime. Wonderland was a great triumph for British policing but progress has been painfully slow in terms of reaching out to many important countries to achieve the level of international co-operation and co-ordination needed if we are to have a hope of defeating this vile trade.

The importance of the USA

Much of the hardcore, adult pornography visible on the Net could not legally be displayed in public places in the UK, even though it would not be illegal to possess it. This kind of material is overwhelmingly based on US servers and is but two or three clicks away from being fully visible on any child's computer screen here in the UK.

We understand the limitations imposed on the US authorities by their 1st Amendment, but their continued inability to act to curb the display of this kind of material is causing great concerns in many other countries. A US standard for pornography is de facto becoming a global standard, via the Internet. That kind of hardcore pornographic imagery is now easily accessible over the Internet, with little or no efforts being made by its publishers to ensure that it is only visible to adult audiences.

The power and resources at the disposal of the US-based software, hardware and Internet companies, the way that US firms still dominate so much of the technical infrastructure on which the Internet depends, leads us to believe that it is essential for us to renew our efforts to seek to engage with the US in a major way if we are to begin the process of getting them to understand how strongly Europeans in general and the British in particular feel about having an Internet that respects our cultural norms and our national laws.

In the recent Yahoo case in the French Court of Appeal it was established very clearly that the Internet is emphatically not the new Leviathan which will make all national laws irrelevant, but it did show that there needs to be a strong will to confront the many powerful and well-resourced commercial and other interests involved in the Internet.

During their recent meeting at Camp David President Bush and Tony Blair discussed a range of matters in relation to crimes against children on the Internet. We very much welcome this level of concern. Perhaps the UK's special relationship with the US means we are singularly well placed to help establish useful working links with a range of US institutions to help move things forward.

UK Policing issues

We would very much like to congratulate the Government on the recent announcement of £25 millions for the High Tech Crime Unit in the UK. However we have a concern that, since the Unit will also have many other types of high tech crimes as part of its remit, combating Internet-based child pornography and online offences against children may slip down its agenda. Officers within the new Unit may have neither the time nor the resources to devote to building on and consolidating the expertise developed in the Wonderland case and we would therefore ask that consideration be given to establishing a special unit within or linked to the High Tech Crime Unit which can concentrate on that kind of work.

New training needs

For the High Tech Crime Unit to achieve the maximum possible success we also think it is vital that professionals working in allied areas also familiarise themselves with the new patterns of offending and behaviour which the Internet is facilitating. In that light

NCH, NSPCC, ACPO (the Chief Constables' organization), ACOP (Probation Service) and the ADSS (Association of Directors of Social Services) have recently agreed to formulate a joint programme of training for frontline staff across all the relevant agencies.

This project aims to ensure that staff working directly with families, children, or offenders, have the necessary knowledge of how the Internet works, how it might be misused, or how it might contribute towards patterns of offending or other difficulties, in order that they can better meet the needs of their clients and avoid or reduce further offending.

The funding and policy implications of this proposal are significant and they cut across various Government Departments, but principally they involve the Home Office, DTI, and DoH. We hope you will be able to help ensure the proposal receives the necessary support.

We look forward to playing a full part in the Summit.

Yours sincerely,

John Carr
Internet Adviser
Children's Charities' Coalition for Internet Safety