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How to protect our children in a digital environment

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Audiovisual media are a pillar of Europe' s dynamic and democratic societies. They empower people to express themselves freely and make well-informed decisions. They help us educate our children and prepare them for their future. And of course, the media industry generates valuable jobs and innovations.

At the same time, audiovisual media provide a window to the shadow side of society. With the same convenience with which we access cat videos, we find shocking depictions of rape, brutal violence, human suffering, and war scenes. These are disturbing to us as adults, but, more importantly, damaging to minors.

There is ample research that shows that watching harmful content has a lasting, damaging impact on the social and emotional development of minors, particularly gifted children and children from socially vulnerable environments. It affects their self-care, their relationships and their parenting, meaning harmful content not only damages the individual, but society as a whole as

well.

Linear media currently provide sufficient levels of protection. In cinemas and on TV, there are classification systems that tell parents what is suitable to their minor. But in a world of portable devices and converging technologies, there is no single effective approach. Across the non-linear production and online distribution chain of audiovisual media, there are many gaps for damaging content to seep through.

Two things make the situation even worse. First, parents have long been unaware of the exact nature and reach of converging technologies. They did not know that for every cute cat video, there is also a video of a beheading or images of sexual assault. And they did not know that it is child' s play to access this content, that it just takes a few clicks to find.

A second issue is that non-linear and online media have not tried hard enough to block harmful content. They have long argued that they are not responsible for the content uploaded by others or that they are unable to identify harmful content in a sea of cat videos. And while some parties have taken protective measures, these tend to be ineffective and fragmented. This is especially the case when audiovisual media services are distributed over the open internet.

The bottom line is that minors are not receiving the protection they need. Which is why last year, ERGA published an in-depth report on the protection

of minors. I am proud to say that many of our recommendations were incorporated into the proposal for the revised directive. And recently, ERGA began mapping existing systems of protection across various platforms and devices in a number of European countries. This will enable us to identify good practices, suggest building blocks of a protection system and detect specific gaps and loopholes.

It is important to identify these gaps, because the illusion of security can be more damaging than actual lack of security. Something parents across Europe are beginning to realise. They are waking up to the dangers of harmful content and are growing frustrated that they are not able to protect their children. What they need are effective tools and technologies. Tools that are easy to use, affordable and that work across any platform and device used in the converged media value chain.

It seems the media industry is also beginning to wake up. Content creators, app developers, online portals and user generated networks are realising they are jointly responsible for effective protection. And they are realising that unhappy parents are bad for business. Simply put, if the media industry does not quickly empower parents to protect their children, parents will take their business elsewhere.

Now, the proposed directive marks a new chapter in the protection of minors. ERGA believes that it offers a clear framework within which all stakeholders

can work together to finally give our minors the adequate protection they deserve. Hard regulations still protect minors against the most harmful of content, but the directive allows less harmful types of content to be dealt with through co-regulation. This approach puts the onus on the private sector, with backstop powers available to regulators should they fail to act.

It is too early to say anything definite and very specific about what such a system should look like. I do know, however, that a chain is as strong as its weakest link. Meaning that we need to have full and comprehensive co-operation across the value chain. Individual and isolated actions are ineffective, so all parties involved in the creation and distribution of harmful content need to work together.

I also believe that any solution needs to be based on a harmonized approach and must be applicable in all European countries. After all, online media do not stop at a member state's border. The industry will need to ensure the same level and type of protection across the entire continent. In its report ERGA recommended a harmonized content categorization with an age classification that differs per country in order to respect local and cultural differences.

As you can see, ERGA is willing and able to contribute to the solution. Our members are independent regulatory authorities from across Europe and we work together to collect best practices, experiences and tools. We have an

independent bird's eye view of the entire continent and use that position to provide both the EC and the private sector with crucial insight.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is not easy to protect minors in a converged environment. There are many players across many countries and technology is evolving much faster than we can organise meetings such as this one. And the proposed directive still needs to be approved and fully implemented, which could very well take years.

But this is time we do not have. Our children live and breathe on-demand and online content. They socialise online, influence each other online, and create their own video's online. Which means they are learning about life and what matters online. The longer they stay unprotected, the bigger the price they - and we - will pay later in life.

So the time for window dressing, lips service and denial is gone. The time for taking years to do research and sit on committees is gone. There is an urgent need to act quickly and decisively. The Directive gives the media industry a once in a lifetime opportunity to do what is necessary. I sincerely hope that the media industry shares my sense of urgency and is willing to commit its ample resources to this pressing social challenge.

Thank you.