

NEWS RELEASE

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Technology To Die For?

Mobile Frontiers: Past, Present and Future Internet Safety

Emerging mobile phone technology could be placing young children at increased risk from paedophile activity according to a conference proceedings report, published by the Cyberspace Research Unit* at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan).

The report, which gathers together the views of key speakers from a national conference which was held in Blackpool during May, is being circulated to a wide range of relevant bodies including the Home Office, DfES, Children's Charities and mobile phone companies. The full report is also available at www.uclan.ac.uk/host/cru.

The focus of the document centres on issues surrounding emerging technologies, utilising the latest experiences of experts in the field.

Rachel O'Connell, Director of Research at the Cyberspace Research Unit, commented: "The crux of the report urges government agencies to fast track the implementation of parental guidance procedures concerning the use of mobile phones by young children. We must learn the lessons of the Japanese experience where the implementation of this new technology has seen a rapid increase in the number of child prostitution cases and paedophile activity involving the use of mobile phones."

The report proceedings issue the following action points:

Revisit the issue of industry and (self) regulation

A more specialised approach to the issues associated with preventative and investigative strategies for both fixed and mobile Internet protocols, explored and developed by those with in-depth expertise of Internet architecture, product developers and network engineers would be a valuable step towards more proactive industry regulation.

Continuing and evolving programmes of education

One of the most significant crime preventative tactics in this arena is to empower children and young people with the tools, knowledge and skills they need to use the Internet and other communication technologies safely.

Parents, carers, teachers, and all those who work with children on a regular basis ought to be catered for with appropriate programmes of education designed to raise awareness of issues such as cyberexploitation and grooming, and to introduce practical strategies they can use, and make them aware of further sources of help and support. Programmes of education ought to be developed for the law enforcement sector in terms of operational policing and also for the criminal justice sectors.

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Support and guidance for victims

A practical strategy as regards the provision of sources of help for children who have had negative experiences would be the establishment of a 'one-stop shop', possibly a help line so that children have a contact point, a source of help if they have had negative experiences as a result of either the fixed or mobile Internet.

Increasing awareness of educational programmes and initiatives

Many schools are not aware of the resources that are available to them, such as the Internet Proficiency Scheme. Greater consistency in awareness raising of the materials available would benefit schools in choosing the sources and types of materials most appropriate.

Issues faced by mobile carriers

Mobile phone companies need to reconsider their position and approach to children and young people using their services and devices. They are all aware that young users are a huge and valuable market and they need to strive to ensure that adequate measures are put in place in order to protect children and young people.

Consultation papers would be useful at the product development and software engineering level within mobile phone companies to ensure that the issue at the top of their agenda is child safety, in particular how to reduce risk, whilst also prioritising the investigative and evidential perspective to ensure that crimes can be traced.

Notes to Editor

The Cyberspace research Unit was established in 2000, and the work of the Unit covers 2 main areas:

Researching how children and young people use the Internet and other communication technologies, and developing programs of education to empower them with the knowledge, tools and skills they need to navigate the Internet safely (see www.fkbko.net). This began with the ONCE Project (see www.once.uclan.ac.uk) funded by the European Commission and continues with the Safer Internet campaign, also funded by the EC.

Exploring how criminals, particularly paedophiles, use the Internet as a vehicle for abuse, and examine the implications of this for investigative strategies.

The Cyberspace Research Team are in a unique position in relation to the development, delivery and evaluation of Internet safety training courses and the Unit has experience of tailoring education programmes to suit different audiences. Members of the Cyberspace Research Team currently sit on the Home office Internet Task Force and the Department for Education and Skills Schools Internet Safety Strategy Group, and have conducted research for a variety of organisations, including the European Commission, the Home Office and BECTa (British Educational Communications and Technology agency). The For Kids By Kids Online website was recently nominated for the New Statesman New Media Awards 2003 where it reached the Finalist stage.

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22 September 2003
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