

Benchmarking of parental control tools for the online protection of children SIP- Bench II

Aims

This report is the first of 5 reports presenting the results of the study – ‘Benchmarking of parental control tools for the online protection of children - SIP-Bench II’ - funded by the European Commission in the framework of the Safer Internet Programme. The study aimed to (i) provide end-users (notably parents) with a detailed overview of existing parental control tools; (ii) support end-users to choose the parental control tool that best matches their needs; and (iii) raise awareness of tools that protect children and young people from harm online. Note that this report concerns end-user tools for blocking and filtering, rather than network-level solutions.

Key Findings

Parental control tools for personal computers

- All of the tools tested allowed parents to block based on category and 84% of tools could be customised by parents to implement topic/URL/blacklist functions. The ability to block based on keywords was found in under half of programmes.
- 61% of the tools were able to block MSN Messenger but less than a half (46%) could block Skype.
- 80% of tools could provide parents with website visitation reports; none could report on peer-to-peer downloads
- The lower the level of both under-blocking and over-blocking, the better the tool. ‘Under-blocking’ refers to the failure of tools to block content which transgresses specified limits; ‘over-blocking’ refers to the blocking of content which does not transgress specified limits. Of the tools tested, 20% had a high rate of under-blocking.
- Content filtering tools are less effective when dealing with user generated content, which is difficult to categorise.

Personal control tools for mobile phone

- Two operating systems were tested: Apple iPhone and Symbian.
- The iPhone tool could only filter web content and the Symbian tool could filter only SMS, MMS and e-mail content.
- None of the tools were able to filter the use of applications; however the in-built iPhone parental controls were able to block applications (including web, e-mail and YouTube). There was no universal tool for filtering both content and access.
- There was a higher rate of web content over-blocking in the mobile application when compared with personal computer filtering software. The level of under-blocking was comparable.
- Filtering by content was most effective with ‘adult’ content, though certain categories such as ‘drugs’ and ‘crime’ were not filtered. Parents could also add URLs, but not keywords, to the blacklist

- The web filtering tool was less effective in dealing with user generated content, resulting in higher levels of under- and over-blocking.
- There are limited options for configuration of the tools from the mobile phone itself. Greater configuration options exist via the PC interface

Personal control tools for game consoles

- The study examined parental controls on the Sony PS3, Nintendo Wii and Microsoft Xbox.
- The PS3 and Wii allow users to browse the web. Tools designed to filter content use URL blacklists and topic filtering. There are no customisation options for parents.
- Similar to other devices, the filtering of user generated content is less effective.
- Internet access can be blocked by parents on all three consoles, though none of the tools, in-built or external, allow parents to monitor online activity.

Policy Context

The study was commissioned and funded by the European Commission in the framework of the Safer Internet Programme to evaluate the numerous parental control tools available and whether they are 'fit for purpose'.

Methodology

The needs of parents and the online activities of young people formed a framework for analysis. Researchers identified (i) the 3 main sources of internet access (personal computer, mobile phone, and games console); (ii) the most common parental concerns regarding online safety and access to harmful content; and (iii) the online activities most frequently undertaken by children. The identified activities were then replicated by researchers to test the effectiveness of 31 filtering tools and the results recorded in detail in this large scale, quantitative study.

Background

The efficacy of parental control products varies, resulting in users implementing software to prevent their children accessing harmful material which is ineffective, creating a false sense of security. There is a need for a rigorous and neutral review of parental control tools.

Sources http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/sip/docs/sip_bench2_results/report_feb11.pdf

Team coordinated by Innova Europe, funded by EU Safer Internet Programme

Contact information s.pietropaolo@innova-europe.eu

RH#9 has been produced by CEOP for the UKCCIS Evidence Group