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Taking the fight against child trafficking online

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Communications technology, such as the internet and mobile phones, certainly make life easier: from online banking, to staying in touch, to news and weather on the go, and all the other benefits that have become such an integral part of our daily lives. Unfortunately, the same technology has also made it easier for criminals to prey on the young for purposes such as child trafficking.

Looking at international trends, it is unfortunately inevitable that we will see a similar increase in South Africa in the use of the internet by organised criminals to recruit victims. It is vital that anyone responsible for protecting children tackles the role of the internet as an enabler of criminal activity in order to successfully address the problem of child trafficking.

Around the world, human trafficking is in the top three criminal industries in the world, along with the illegal arms trade and the drug trade. It is profitable and growing fast, with estimates placing the annual revenue earned from trafficking at between US \$5 billion and \$9 billion. Earlier this year, UK children's charity Barnardo's said that children as young as 10 are being targeted by networks of criminals that are getting increasingly organised thanks to technology.

A 2006 Serbian study into the role of the internet in child trafficking, *Human (child) trafficking – a look through the internet window*, set out to discover just how vulnerable children are in internet chat rooms. They set up a dummy profile of a 15-year old girl, using very straightforward information. Within 50 hours, over the course of a few weeks, and without initiating any conversations themselves the profile was contacted 457 times. Men, up to 50 years old, initiated 86% of the contact and 27% of the conversations were clearly sexual harassment.

In South Africa, we are unfortunately no doubt going to see the same trend as internet use increases and our already high mobile phone adoption rate rises even further. And while child abuse and trafficking affects all levels of society we also have particularly vulnerable communities in some of our poorer neighbouring countries that could make easy targets for child traffickers.

A new local study carried out by UNISA's Youth Research Unit, on behalf of Vodacom and the Film and Publications Board, revealed some alarming statistics. The study, entitled *Online Victimization of Youth in South Africa*, showed that 21% of the youth sample (12-25 years old) surveyed had been exposed to unwanted conversations about sex online; more than 16% were asked for information of a sexual or personal nature; and 6% of the children were encouraged to leave their homes.

The solution?

Parents and teachers need to actively narrow the digital generation gap by learning about and using the technology their children have grown up with and are immersed in. If your child is on MXit or Facebook, you should be too. This will not only give parents better visibility of their child's online activities, but also

give them a better understanding of the technology and how their children are using it, allowing them to react more appropriately when they need to give their children guidance.

Parents and teachers should also realise that the internet that is accessed by mobile phone is exactly the same as the internet accessed via computer.

Another important guideline is to ensure their children are only accessing age appropriate services. So while services such as Facebook and Mxit might say they are suitable for ages 13 and older, related chat rooms or dating services might be only appropriate for adults. For more information and advice on a range of internet and mobile issues, parents can consult sites such as www.parentscorner.org.za.

Lawmakers and law enforcers need to look to countries with more advanced internet environments and learn from best practices there. A key component of these initiatives is a combined effort by major stakeholders to combat crime.

For instance, the European Union's guidelines, entitled *Safer social networking principles for the EU*, requires social networking services to put the following principles in place to protect young users:

1. Raise awareness of safety educational messages and acceptable use of policies to users, parents, teachers and carers in a prominent, clear and age-appropriate manner;
2. Work towards ensuring that services are age-appropriate for the intended audience;
3. Empower users through tools and technology with targeted, easily-accessible and up-to-date information;
4. Provide easy-to-use mechanisms to report conduct or content that violates the terms of service;
5. Respond to notifications of illegal content or conduct;
6. Enable and encourage users to employ a safe approach to personal information and privacy;
7. Assess the means for reviewing illegal or prohibited content/conduct;
8. Work collaboratively with law enforcement bodies to share their knowledge of social networking and to support investigations in line with applicable laws.

The reality is that with all the benefits we get from advancements in communications technology, there come some very serious threats. Awareness needs to be raised amongst parents, teachers and law enforcement alike, and stakeholders need to be organised alongside law makers and enforcers to protect the vulnerable, and make sure the benefits of technology outweigh the threats.