

## **Code of Practice on Parental Controls**

**BT, TalkTalk, Virgin Media and Sky**

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### **1. BACKGROUND**

Access to the internet is now an integral and fundamental part of children's lives, bringing with it a wide range of benefits but also a range of challenges. There are many positive aspects to life in the online world, but just as in the offline world there are services and websites that provide access to material that is only suitable for adults.

Although ISPs are perhaps the most visible element of the internet industry, in fact access to connectivity and the internet is comprised of a complex value chain. We are pleased that the Bailey Review "Letting Children be Children" calls for action from industry as a whole, looking to ISPs, device manufacturers, content providers and retailers in that regard.

However, as the four largest fixed line ISPs ("the ISPs") and the most visible face of the internet to our customers, whilst we recognise we can't solve all of the problems, ISPs are well placed to drive tangible progress to better protect children online, specifically through the advanced use of parental controls.

The signatories to this Code are therefore committed to working together to demonstrate that industry self-regulation can deliver more flexible and effective outcomes for consumers, and better reflects how customers want to see internet access regulated. In addition to committing to improve the effectiveness of information provided to parents, and to encouraging joined up thinking across industry and policymakers, the ISPs will work with Government, to implement the relevant recommendations within the Bailey Review.

In particular, this means that new customers will be presented with a enforced choice whether or not to use the tools provided by their ISP (whether network, router or PC-based controls - "Controls") to filter access to the internet at the point of purchase or installation/activation of the internet service ("Active Choice"). The introduction of Active Choice will empower parents, drive increased general awareness and communicate more widely the issues and concerns outlined in the Bailey Review.

The Code has been developed in consultation with Government, UKCISS and other key stakeholders to ensure that any concerns and comments could be taken into consideration in developing a Code of Practice that will derive the widest possible support. The Code and the measurable objectives within it will be subject to independent review.

### **2. OBJECTIVES**

The Code has three main objectives:

- In Ofcom's latest media literacy survey<sup>1</sup>, 39% of parents claimed to use parental controls on the home PC. However, the level of take up of Controls varies significantly in different pieces of research. As ISPs, we do not claim to speak on behalf of parents, or take a view on whether parents should install Controls. However, in line with the recent Bailey Review, we are committed to making it easier for those parents who do wish to use

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<sup>1</sup> Ofcom Media Literacy report October 2011– in 2010, 37 per cent of parents said they use parental controls compared to 43 per cent in 2009. Those that don't have parental controls mainly say it's either because they trust their child or because they are supervising them.

Controls to make an Active Choice whether or not to use Controls on their account. Many parents may choose not to apply Controls for a range of reasons, such as trusting their children or opting to supervise them in other ways, but we believe that providing an Active Choice to parents and carers is likely to improve the take up of Controls.

- In addition to promoting an Active Choice model, the ISPs will improve the communication of information explaining to parents and carers the benefits of installing parental controls.
- Reflecting the complexity of the internet value chain, information currently available to parents on internet safety and Controls is not consistent across industry, parents' groups, children's charities, law enforcement and Government. It should be noted however that at present only a fifth of parents obtain information about internet safety from ISPs<sup>2</sup>. The Code highlights how the ISPs will work with other organisations to align the information provided to parents and carers.
- The Code explains the measures that ISPs will take in relation to developing technology that could improve the effectiveness of Controls in the future.

The Code also acknowledges and makes provisions for all the ISP commitments to Controls to be subject to regular independent review and public reporting.

### **3. IMPROVING THE AWARENESS OF PARENTAL CONTROLS**

3.1 Many parents and carers use Controls to define which categories of content and applications that children have access to. However, the take up of Controls amongst parents and other customers appears to be falling. In response, we commit to presenting new customers with a clear Active Choice during the purchase or installation/activation process alongside heightened levels of publicity, communications and awareness raising for both new and existing customers.

3.2 New customers will be offered an enforced choice at the point of purchase or installation/activation of their internet service as to whether or not to use the Controls (network, router or PC-based) provided by their ISP to manage access to the internet.

3.3 This Active Choice process will be in place by October 2012 at the latest.

3.4 We commit to providing these controls free of charge.

3.5 All customers of the ISPs (including existing customers) will - subject to laws and regulations in relation to privacy and marketing - receive a regular reminder with links to help/advice on Controls at least annually, through a range of widely accepted customer communications channels.

3.6 We commit to making Active Choice, and the implementation/activation of Controls, as easy as possible, with suitable accompanying information. This will enable us to raise awareness of the new system of Active Choice when it is launched, and make it clear and understandable for all.

3.7 We will seek to make it easy for other organisations, including NGOs, schools and police that work in educating parents on internet safety, to communicate what is available for free from the ISPs.

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<sup>2</sup> EU Kids Online, Risks and Safety on the Internet: The Perspective of European Children, 2011. Parents get internet safety advice first and foremost from family and friends (48%), then traditional media (32%), the child's school (27%), internet service providers (22%) and websites (21%).

- 3.8 Together, we will work to produce customer research that provides Government, Parliament and policy makers with a deeper insight into customer awareness and perception of Controls.
- 3.9 Broader awareness of the availability of Controls will be measured by independent review.

#### **4. IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CURRENT INFORMATION AND EDUCATION INITIATIVES**

- 4.1 Following consultation with childrens' and parents' groups, it is clear that there is demand for clear, prominent, easy to understand, consistent messages from industry on how parents can protect their children online.
- 4.2 Whilst we commit to providing customers with such clear, prominent and accessible advice, it is clear that fixed line ISPs cannot solve this problem alone. Working through UKCCIS, the ISPs will work to produce a harmonised set of best practice guidelines to underpin communications to parents about protecting children online.
- 4.3 This objective is aligned and advocated by NGOs and UKCCIS' 'One Stop Approach' initiative being managed by CEOP.
- 4.4 The ISPs will work with key stakeholders to develop these Guidelines and implement them within communications once they have been presented to the UKCCIS Executive Board. This is expected to be no later than December 2011.
- 4.5 The ISPs will also continue to work closely with UKCCIS to promote clear, accessible channels for parents to report a suspected incident of abuse or inappropriate online behavior using existing channels such as CEOP Report Abuse to deliver this.
- 4.6 The ISPs will also promote a clear, easily accessible channel for parents to report problems with Controls to the relevant ISP. This feedback should help ISPs to improve both the Controls available to the public, and also the way in which we communicate the functionality of Controls on offer.

#### **5. REVIEWING OPTIONS OFFERED BY FUTURE TECHNOLOGY**

- 5.1 Just as consumer use of the internet is rapidly evolving, so are fixed-line and wireless technological developments that underpin delivery of the internet. In addition to presenting challenges, the pace of development of technology brings significant opportunities for ISPs to provide parents with more effective Controls to protect children.
- 5.2 ISPs currently offer a range of Controls, and there is agreement, that no one type of Control offers a perfect solution. As technologies develop so too will the available product offerings. It is important that stakeholders and industry are kept abreast of technological developments that could assist in the provision of Controls.
- 5.3 We believe that ISPs can play an important role in assessing these emerging technologies and Controls products. We are committed to working with wider stakeholders to ensure that these assessments properly reflect the relative merits, and appropriately consider important factors such as privacy, data protection and consumer choice.
- 5.4 We undertake to provide regular updates, as appropriate, to UKCCIS and related stakeholders to ensure that policymakers remain fully informed of these developments.

## **6. INDEPENDENT REVIEW AND REPORTING**

- 6.1 We are committed to being fully transparent about the Controls we provide to our customers, and to assist comparability between ISPs, we will look to present information on our offerings in a consistent manner.
- 6.2 Each of us will publish an annual update against the measures outlined in this Code, with the first report being made in October 2012.
- 6.3 We also believe it will be beneficial for there to be independent review and reporting of progress made against objectives set out in the Code. We will work with an independent body to conduct an annual review and public report on the take-up of and effectiveness of parental controls and our compliance with the Code. Where possible we will look to ensure that this review builds on work already undertaken by Ofcom in the Media Literacy Review, to provide a sense of progress against existing baselines.
- 6.4 We will explore opportunities which may arise from the review with Government, UKCCIS and the independent body.