Effective protection of minors in the media is more important than ever

The pandemic with its restrictions on contacts and mobility dominated the year 2020 in terms of protecting minors in the media. Children and adolescents spent much more time online than usual. They went to school on the net, played more on the net, cultivated digital friendships, and pursued creative activities on TikTok, YouTube or Instagram. At the same time, they were exposed to more frequent and more serious risks associated with the use of these services.

Overstepping of sexual bounds, cyberbullying, hate and conspiracy theories, harrowing images of violence, violations of privacy, pay traps: all of these lurk just a few clicks away on most of the popular platforms. A particular phenomenon we documented in this past year was the array of so-called ‘corona challenges’, in which young people deliberately risk being infected with the virus.

In such times, effective conceptions for protecting minors are more important than ever. They reduce the dangers encountered by young people in the virtual world and thus allow for participation in the most productive way. They make it possible to remove illegal content quickly, and in this way prevent detriment to the personal development and integrity of young users. They provide support for safe and responsible behavior on the net.

The measures taken by providers, however, leave much to be desired. Many of them fail in their response to reports about violations. There is a lack of safe pre-settings that, if readily available, would protect and support children and adolescents. In the context of age requirements for apps, risks such as financial traps or bullying are not even mentioned – or are described in such non-committal terms as to hardly provide any orientation. In sum: there is a lot that remains to be done.

The medium is constantly expanding and developing, as are its modes of use; this calls for a flexible response in protecting minors – a rapid reaction to new problems as well as an anticipatory view of prospective developments and their ramifications. Surely, there will be innovative services, devices, and functions emerging in the near future. New challenges in social media or options such as live-streaming will be accompanied by new risks. And there will be more and more children flocking to the internet and docking in to the offerings they discover there.

Stefan Glaser
Head of jugendschutz.net
DANGERS AND RISKS

Depictions of child sexual abuse:
Pictures, secretly taken, are then circulated

Overstepping sexual bounds:
Inadequate protection on Instagram and Snapchat

Everyday images, sexualized:
Misuse of playlists

Children’s self-portrayal:
Private sphere is public and unprotected

Self-endangerment:
Online confrontation with a morbid ‘pull’

Challenges:
‘Corona dares’ on the rise

Drastic Depictions:
Sensationalism and curiosity trigger clicks

Anti-semitic conspiracy myths:
More and more widespread

Right-wing extremist agitation:
‘Safe haven’ on Telegram

Right-wing extremism and gaming:
Docking into young people’s everyday world

Anti-Muslim racism:
Motive for violence and terror
PROTECTION AND PARTICIPATION

More than 5,000 violations:
80 % removed by the end of the year

Media supervisory bodies:
294 cases handed over to the KJM

Social Media:
Still too unsafe

Age assessment:
Better to take interactive risks into account

Gaming platforms:
Inadequate age checks and protective settings

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Potential dangers despite SafeSearch

Transferring insight into practice:
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DANGERS AND RISKS
The risk-monitoring conducted continuously by jugendschutz.net focuses on sexual exploitation of minors, risky contacts, self-endangerment, political extremism, hate and violence. Dangerous situations and adverse effects are observed most frequently in interactions on highly popular messaging services, on video platforms, in social networks and online games.

Depictions of sexual abuse of minors are, worldwide, increasingly being disseminated online. Children and adolescents are being sexualized through the misuse of harmless photos and videos that strangers transfer into a lewd or suggestive context. Easily accessible content displaying various and overlapping types of self-endangering behavior draws young people’s attention, almost irresistibly.

Extremists have been taking advantage of the Corona pandemic and now increasingly utilize gaming areas to allure adolescents to radical ideas. Drastically violent videos are being circulated at lightning speed. They can shock and frighten children who, in their curiosity, come across them or unwittingly open files containing such material.
Depictions of abuse: Pictures, secretly taken, are then circulated

jugendschutz.net registered 1,896 instances in which sexualized violence towards children and adolescents was depicted: images of abusive acts that occurred offline, as well as photos and videos created specifically for online distribution.

In cases related to an online application, victims come into contact with perpetrators via online services, such as a video chat or messaging platform. The images are either produced under extortive pressure, or they exploit the naïveté of children and adolescents. The victims are not aware that the sexual acts performed on camera are secretly being recorded. Images that minors have trustingly exchanged with a partner or flirt also can end up being published without permission.

Frequently, in forums, previews appear that present a series of photos. These are intended to enkindle a response among individuals who are sexually interested in children. The complete videos are then offered as downloads by the file hosts.

Depictions of sexualized violence against minors are combatted by jugendschutz.net in the worldwide network INHOPE (International Association of Internet Hotlines). Using a mutually maintained database, jugendschutz.net reports foreign cases to the partner hotlines in the corresponding countries. The hotlines notify the national law enforcement agency. INHOPE includes 47 members in more than 40 countries. (inhope.org)
Overstepping sexual bounds: Inadequate protection on Instagram and Snapchat

On Instagram, jugendschutz.net documented attempts at establishing sex contacts that had been posted by (supposed) minors. They surface under certain profile names (“seeking_s.e.x._am13_boy”), in the corresponding descriptions (“boy 14 wanting to fuck”), or in posts uploaded by persons whose age is listed as under 18 (“photo exchange, sex chat, wank video, dick image, …”). People try to arrange meetings, but also to find individuals with whom they can exchange explicit images or sexual online experiences.

Sexual acts involving children under 14 years of age are prosecuted under German law as sexual abuse. Overstepping sexual bounds in contact with minors can also be prosecutable. Age information provided online makes it even easier to initiate abusive sexual contacts. It is unclear whether the profiles actually belong to underage users who are interested in gathering sexual experience, or there are in fact adults using fictitious profiles to gain access to images of minors.

Instagram, according to its Terms of Use, is only available to those over 13 years of age. But younger children can create a profile by simply lying about their age. Unsafe default settings and also safety settings than need to be activated manually do not provide sufficient protection against sexual transgressions. Profiles are public, without restrictions; direct messages and comments can, per default setting, be posted by all users.

Similarly, on Snapchat some users choose profile names that suggest a sexual preference for children. They may describe sexual acts with children or refer to abusive material, quoting terms used in the milieu relating to photo series of child sexual abuse.

In response to complaints, Snapchat has deleted some impermissible profiles, but others with comparable profile names remain. The more resolutely a provider enacts safety policies, the more effectively pedophiles are prevented from using the platform for their criminal networking. Word filters, for example, can help to identify abusive profile names.
Everyday images, sexualized: Misuse of playlists

In playlists, users collect and share videos on everything that interests them and that they may wish to call others’ attention to. These lists can be posted publicly, but also privately – in which case only the individual has access to them. Studies undertaken by jugendschutz.net indicate that, on YouTube, this function is sometimes misused to transpose everyday videos posted by young people into a sexual context. The sexualization of this everyday material is achieved by using suggestive playlist titles or through the selection of videos offered.

By combining sexualized adjectives (sexy, cute, hot, horny) with ordinary terms relating to age, size, or physical activities (young, small, gymnastics) in the search function of YouTube, such playlists can be located. Scenes with minors in bathing suits or gymnastics outfits are juxtaposed with videos of adults in erotic poses or involved in erotic acts. This makes it easy for those who are sexually interested in children and adolescents to gain access to images of this type, and it reduces the minors in the images to a status as objects and victims of sexualization.

Safe default settings can ensure that harmless everyday videos posted by minors cannot be transferred into a new, sexualized context. Such settings should be in place to prevent content from being misappropriated and circulated at will. One useful instrument would be, for example, excluding the possibility that one’s own videos can be added to another person’s playlists.

Giving an abusive ‘new twist’ to harmless photos of children is a way of sexualizing minors. (Source: YouTube; original not pixelated)
In the course of the Corona pandemic, for many children the digital component has become more significant in their family and living environments and their recreational activities. Despite the minimum user age stipulated in the Terms of Use – be it 13 or 16 years – on YouTube, TikTok and Instagram, there are many younger children moving about on the net. There, like the adults, they show who they are, what they can do, and whom they know. Friends, pets, sports and hobbies are their favorite topics. They follow the example of the influencers who serve as models: views and followers indicate popularity.

Without parental supervision – and given the lack of concern on the part of providers – this can be risky: research by jugendschutz.net reveals that many posts uploaded by children are publicly accessible. Seldom is there any reflection on issues of privacy. Unthinkingly, kids will ‘just start filming’ and capture private scenes, such as views from their bedrooms. But this is sensitive information that can be misused by others – for example, to locate an individual child offline.

Videos are rarely well prepared by children, nor are they edited before posting. Their mix-ups, slips of the tongue, and jittery images clearly can’t compete with the content published by professional influencers – making the children easy prey for mockery and bullying.

Most social media providers make no consistent effort to enforce age limits, and therefore do not differentiate user options according to age group. Moreover, there is a lack of appropriate, safe alternatives – online content that would be more suited to children’s interests and their participatory rights.
Self-endangerment: Online confrontation with a morbid ‘pull’

Children and adolescents can, in various phases of their development, be confronted with behavior that is self-endangering. On social media, in blogs and forums, problematic content is portrayed as harmless, or is even glorified – although it relates to risky behavior, drug use, eating disorders, self-injury, or suicide. Minors can easily misjudge the consequences, even presenting their own self-endangering behavior to a virtual community in order to gain recognition or find like-minded others.

There are different types of self-endangerment that are often linked to one another. Eating disorders or suicidal tendencies, for example, are often accompanied by self-injury.

Content that promotes self-damaging behavior is marked with hashtags familiar to users who are ‘in the know’, which makes it easy to find and encourages networking. But there are also harmless-sounding terms in use that have no compelling connection to the dire themes being presented. As a result, users who were not on the lookout for it can be confronted with dangerous content.

Depictions of self-endangerment that play it down or glorify it can induce young people to imitate it. They can cause emotional stress and reinforce unstable individuals in their own self-damaging behavior. An example: when depictions of bleeding wounds trigger a person’s impulse to injure him- or herself.

For those who have suicidal leanings, pro-suicide forums can have particularly grave, confirming and reinforcing effects. In 2020, 33 cases were observed in which persons were in immediate danger of death.

Social media providers and counseling services need to respond rapidly in such cases. jugendschutz.net therefore has updated its Guideline ‘Imminent Danger Situations on the Internet’ and added the contact data of the responsible police authorities in all the German-speaking countries. Organizations interested in having the guidelines at their disposal can request copies from buero(at)jugendschutz.net.
Many young people react to the current crisis creatively, setting up challenges such as #IstayHomefor. However, among these posts there are some dangerous suggestions to be found. At the outset of the pandemic, for example, on platforms that attract teenagers there were videos circulating with names like ‘Corona challenge’ or ‘Corona virus challenge’. As a way of proving oneself, they dared young people to lick objects in public places – toilets or hand grips on subway trains – deliberately running the risk being infected with the virus. Furthermore, invitations were extended to young people via social media services and groups to attend ‘Corona parties’, where social distancing and hygiene rules were ignored.

When it comes to net content about self-endangerment, there is often a fine line between playing it down and hyping it up. When harmful or dangerous actions are presented in a positive manner, without critical reflection, it can be very detrimental to the self-image, body image, or world view of children and adolescents. In such cases, depending on the gravity of the content, providers must ensure that it is not made accessible to users in the relevant age bracket under normal circumstances, resp. that content seriously detrimental to young people be available to adults only.

Content that is conducive to self-endangerment is banned on almost all the services, and options for reporting offenses are made available. But none of the services offer age-appropriate support ‘on the spot’: at the junctures where self-endangerment is being suggested or promoted, there are no direct references to counseling options such as hotlines. Particularly in the pandemic situation, it would be helpful if specific support were offered on location – right where minors encounter risky content online.
Drastic Depictions: Sensationalism and curiosity drive dissemination

On social media, one need not be looking for drastic content: it can come up anyway. Clicking on a live-stream or an apparently harmless hashtag, following a recommendation offered on a website can take the unsuspecting user to strange places, presenting shocking images or videos. In September 2020, a suicide video showing an ex-soldier named Ronnie McNutt went viral. He killed himself with a shotgun during a live-stream.

Subsequently, the video was posted on various platforms. The providers responded quickly and deleted the video. Nonetheless, jugendschutz.net received reports that minors had been confronted with the images.

The dissemination of such drastic depictions is furthered by so-called 'reaction videos'. Here, users publish their reactions to shocking or disgusting content. The original videos are usually not shown, or are at least pixelated. But often the videos are named, or there are links to other websites given in the reaction video, its title, or its description. That makes it simple to locate the originals.

On TikTok, there are any number of ‘warning videos’ listing search terms and (indexed) websites that people should not google or visit, so that they won’t be overtaken by anxiety. Videos under the hashtag #dontgoogle have already attracted more than 66 million visitors.

“Don’t google this!” Curiosity, once stimulated, can lead users to shocking content.
(Source: TikTok; original not pixelated)
A similar effect can be achieved by so-called “bleach for your eyes” accounts. Here, there are numerous posts to be found showing a bottle of bleach. In the comments, users are invited to relate horrible things they have seen and would like to ‘bleach’ from memory.

When children and adolescents pull up this type of content out of curiosity, they can encounter extreme depictions of violence. The unexpected confrontation and the drastic nature of the impressions may evoke feelings of disgust, as well as anxiety and deep disturbance.

Due to these mechanisms that ultimately widen its range, the website ‘Hoodsite’ has received a great deal of attention. Alongside the Ronnie McNutt video, it presented numerous other violent takes, including unredacted police and accident reports, brutal fights, and splatter videos. The website was placed on the index. It is no longer available online.

Social media providers continue to present too little resistance to impermissible, violent content. Only 46 % of 364 cases on seven services were removed after jugendschutz.net submitted a user complaint. Pinterest (87 %) and Tumblr (81 %) achieved the highest quotas on effective deletion. The lowest deletion quotas were those of YouTube (12 %) and TikTok (19 %). Follow-up initiated by jugendschutz.net in direct contact with providers improved the quotas on all the services. Still, on YouTube 50 % of the violations remained online (on our test procedure, see p. 25).

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<td>46 %</td>
<td>34 %</td>
<td>21 %</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*deviations from 100 % are due to rounding
Anti-semitic conspiracy myths: More and more widespread

Children and adolescents inevitably search online, in times of Corona, for information and explanations relating to the pandemic. Should they, for example via TikTok and the ‘Corona’ hashtag, happen upon a tendentious profile, then automatized recommendations lead them deeper into the world of conspiracy theories and anti-democratic thinking.

In right-wing extremist circles, the pandemic and reactions to it are subsumed into a narrative that postulates a Jewish world conspiracy. In like manner, hate directed toward Chancellor Merkel is stoked by the accusation that she is secretly striving to erect a dictatorial state.

Islamists, on their part, initially interpreted Corona as a toll for the oppression of Uyghurs by China; later as a punishment for all who do not live by Islamist standards, but instead are ‘immoral’ or ‘westernized’.

Conspiracy myths, like hate, vilification and extremist propaganda in general, present a challenge that transcends national borders. In the International Network Against Cyber Hate (INACH), jugendschutz.net cooperates with partner organizations in more than 20 countries.

Together, the partners develop effective measures against hate on the net. The aims are to delete illegal hate messages as quickly as possible and to support efforts at maintaining civil courage on the net. Internationally, INACH is an essential partner in combatting hate speech and an important negotiator with the European Commission (inach.net).
Right-wing extremist agitation: ‘Safe haven’ Telegram

The messaging service Telegram has emerged as a platform for the dissemination of right-wing extremist propaganda. The number of channels and groups there is steadily rising, with an ever-widening range of users. Some of the German-language channels have more than 170,000 subscribers. Available tools such as comment, share, survey, image and file transfer, audio and video posts increasingly turn Telegram into a full-functioning social network.

In particular, Telegram is being used for networking and the coordination of right-wing extremist campaigns or actions. Among extremists, it is regarded as a ‘safe haven’ because content is seldom moderated or deleted. Even drastic material can be distributed here without interference: explicit agitation, forbidden symbols, and also depictions of violence. For example, despite complaints submitted by jugendschutz.net, videos from the terrorist attacks in Christchurch and Halle are easy to locate on the platform.

Furthermore, there are Telegram channels that are used to promote the use of right-wing extremist terror. Potential targets for attacks are specifically listed, supposed enemies identified, and right-wing terrorists glorified. There are instructions given on how to build weapons and bombs. These can be understood as encouraging users to imitate the deeds or indulge in violence. The provider has, in fact, deleted a few of these channels. But a sustained and consistent effort to bar them is not to be observed.
Right-wing extremism and gaming: Docking into young people’s everyday world

Gaming is, for children and adolescents, a part of their everyday life and media culture. Platforms and services offer gamers entertainment, networking, and options for exchange. Gaming content is accessed by millions of young people worldwide. It is therefore hardly surprising that right-wing extremists tap into this culture with their propaganda.

Right-wing extremists make use of aesthetic elements of gaming when designing their propagandistic content. They also instrumentalize gaming services to gain a foothold within the gaming subculture. Some communities are ridden with misanthropic references or content that relativizes National Socialism. Right-wing extremists also develop their own video games to transport their worldview.

The online propaganda put out by right-wing extremists has even become, in itself, a kind of ‘multiplayer game’ promising adventure and a feeling of self-efficacy. The complex relationship between right-wing extremism and gaming has received public attention partly as a result of the manner in which right-wing terrorists in Christchurch and Halle staged their violent attacks online. In the corresponding internet subcultures, this has been taken notice of.

Service providers in the field of gaming are hesitant in their response to violations of rules that protect minors in the media. The gaming platform Steam, for example, only removed 57% of the 45 violations reported via the complaint option available to normal users. Not until an official complaint had been submitted did the provider delete all of the offensive content. On a positive note: in recent years, an increasing number of initiatives have taken a stand publicly. From within and as part of the gaming scene, they are speaking out against right-wing extremist activities and hate.

Gamers as a target group for right-wing terrorist organizations.
(Source: Telegram; original not pixelated)
Anti-Muslim racism: Motive for violence and terror

Racism directed specifically toward Muslims appears frequently on the internet – ranging from casually racist resentments to explicit animosity and threats. Right-wing extremists, in particular, instigate hate towards ‘Islam’ and Muslims or persons assumed to be Muslims. They are demonized as potential terrorists or assumed to ‘replace’ the population.

Right-wing terror, as demonstrated by the attack in Christchurch, is both an expression and a result of hostile agitation against Muslims and of conspiracy myths. This becomes apparent in the statements published online by the assassins. Similarly, the attack in Hanau was motivated by racism, as the police investigation revealed, and had the effect of adding new heat to the debate over racist issues in Germany.

There are various ways in which young people, as individuals, can be harmed by anti-Muslim racism. They can either be attacked personally by racists, or they can be influenced in their thinking by misanthropic and anti-pluralistic statements.

Islamists, for their part, instrumentalize attacks on Muslims and the experience of young Muslims who encounter racist discrimination: These experiences can be used to polarize opinions and win support for the Islamists’ own anti-democratic ideas and goals.

Right-wing extremists and Islamists thus engage in a reciprocal process of escalation. Children and adolescents, particularly those seeking a sense of belonging and identity, can easily be caught ‘between the fronts’.
Violations of young people’s right to protection on the internet must be addressed and resolved quickly, so that children and adolescents are not damaged by contact with offensive content. To achieve this, jugendschutz.net establishes contact with providers. Where sanctions are called for, cases with an identified German origin are reported to the Commission for the Protection of Minors in the Media, resp. to the state Media Authorities. If there is immediate danger at hand, jugendschutz.net informs the police directly. In addition, jugendschutz.net works together with partner agencies in other countries on individual cases.

Social media providers, in general, delete too few of the violations – particularly when complaints have been submitted by users. Fortunately, some providers have now made improvements towards a better protection of children and adolescents. Further means of optimization are suggested by jugendschutz.net on a regular basis.

In 2020, an analysis was undertaken to demonstrate in model form how interactive risks could be integrated into age classifications – a promising perspective that would enable parents and adolescents to assess risky interactive features more accurately and learn to handle them more safely.

Protection and participation, as well as more effective rules to ensure safety for young people coming of age with the internet, are currently being debated on an international level. On the topic of children’s rights, jugendschutz.net is contributing expertise to the Council of Europe. The Council’s “Guidelines to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child in the digital environment” provide recommendations and a handbook to the member states on offering children an inclusive and safe internet experience.
More than 5,000 violations: 80 % removed by the end of the year

In 2020, jugendschutz.net handled a total of 5,056 violations (2019: 6,950). 2,805 of them related to social media services: 17 % on Instagram, 14 % on YouTube, 13 % on Facebook, 12 % on Twitter, 10 % on Pinterest and 8 % each on TikTok and Tumblr.

Fluctuations caused by the pandemic make it difficult to compare developments directly with those of the previous year. That being said, it is nevertheless clear that the messaging service Telegram has gained in significance for the circulation of right-wing extremist content: 210 cases were registered on the platform, more than four times as many as in the previous year (2019: 51). On Snapchat (91; 2019: 13) and TikTok (218; 2019: 192) an increase was also observed. In addition, a high number of violations was discovered by jugendschutz.net on the gaming platform Steam (44 cases) and the streaming services Spotify (44 cases) and Twitch (35 cases).

In topical terms, 41 % of the violations were related to sexualized violence. The second largest thematic sector, at 21 %, was political extremism. The remainder was divided among pornography (14 %), self-endangerment (12 %), violence (9 %) and cyberbullying (3 %).

In 4,036 cases (80 %), actions taken by jugendschutz.net successfully led to the removal of the offensive content.
Media supervisory bodies: 294 cases handed over to the KJM

When violations are not corrected, jugendschutz.net hands cases over to the Commission for the Protections of Minors in the Media (KJM), which can then initiate proceedings against the provider. In 2020, there were 78 such violations (2019: 32), predominantly relating to pornographic or indexed content.

In addition, jugendschutz.net reported 216 cases to the KJM to be indexed by the Federal Review Board for Media Harmful to Minors (BPjM). Here again, the greater portion consists of pornographic images and other content in which a lesser or major endangerment to minors was to be assumed. Another weighty sector was related to depictions of cruel or inhuman violence or violations of human rights.

705 cases (domestic: 508; foreign: 197), about the same number as in the previous year, were referred directly to the Federal Criminal Police Office () because they were disseminating images of child pornography or prosecutable depictions of minors in suggestive poses, or because there was immediate danger to be averted. Furthermore, 481 cases were forwarded to INHOPE partners in other countries for pursuit there.
In 2020, jugendschutz.net again examined the measures in place to protect young users from risky social encounters – on YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest, Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr. The areas that were assessed included: reporting systems (e.g. easy access, rapid response), settings (e.g. default settings, easy handling of protective options), guidelines (e.g. completeness, clarity), support systems (e.g. practical help in an emergency, information on professional advisers) and technical mechanism (e.g. access differentiated by age, use of identification systems).

Once again, it emerged that the services are not making sufficient provisions to protect children and adolescents effectively. However, there were some improvements to be observed. TikTok, for example, set age limits for certain functions and introduced a ‘Family Pairing’. This enables a parent or guardian to manage essential safety settings.

Many of the services have made their guidelines stricter. To hold back hate speech, for example, YouTube now bans content that makes persons or groups the target of conspiracy myths, or that rectifies the use of violence. Instagram and Facebook now also forbid Holocaust denial or distorted depictions of the Holocaust.

All seven services offer options for reporting offensive content. On YouTube, however, a user without an account cannot submit a complaint – although most content is freely accessible to everyone. On Facebook and Pinterest there is still no option for reporting offensive profiles. On Twitter, it remains the case that pornography can only be reported in profile photos and title graphics – but not in individual tweets, where the greatest problems arise. Tumblr has done away with the reporting option for pornography while, on the other hand, tightening its guidelines on the same topic.
jugendschutz.net monitors the response to complaints in a two-fold procedure. In the first step, violations of the JMStV (Interstate Treaty on the Protection of Human Dignity and the Protection of Minors in Broadcasting and in Telemedia) are reported as a normal user complaint. If, after seven days, the content has not been deleted or blocked, jugendschutz.net identifies itself as an institution and formally requests that the material be removed, using special reporting channels for this second step. The violation is checked one last time after seven more days, and the outcome is documented.

Results: Of 1,913 violations reported, only 41% were deleted or blocked on the basis of a user complaint. Another 38% were deleted after jugendschutz.net had taken up direct contact with the service.

Overall, when the reporting steps were completed, the services had removed the content in 79% of cases – a few more than in the previous year (75%). YouTube only removed slightly more than half of the offenses reported on its platform, while Instagram and Pinterest both removed about 90%.

There were noticeable differences in the response of various services to user complaints, depending on the topic and type of offense, e.g. pornography: Twitter deleted only 2% of these cases, and Facebook 31%. YouTube, by comparison, already removed 90% after the first step (user complaint), and Pinterest removed 100%.

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</table>

*deviations from 100% are due to rounding
Almost all of the services examined set the minimum age for users at 13 years. Only YouTube has a higher age requirement – 16 years – for a self-administered account. For those under 18 years of age, the permission of a legal guardian is also a prerequisite. Often, however, the age categories for the use of individual apps on the services differ from the minimum age limits.

In 2020, there still was no service that had a reliable system for enforcing age limits during registration. But this is a fundamental requirement for any kind of age-appropriate protection for children and adolescents as users.

One improved protective mechanism is now in place on YouTube: To prevent minors from viewing videos intended for those over 18, an age check was introduced that requires registering a credit card or government-issued identity card. The mechanism is triggered when, upon starting such a video, YouTube’s technical system does not receive key signals confirming that the user is of age.

Content ‘creators’ can classify their own material. When they do, content designated for children, for example, is delivered without personalized advertising. Functions that involve contact or communication risks are not available (comment, live chat, push notifications, stories, “add to playlist”).

Deliberate disinformation relating to the Corona pandemic and efforts to stem it is expressly prohibited by TikTok, YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. On YouTube, for example, misinformation is not allowed that contradicts the medical advice published by the World Health Organization (WHO) or local health authorities. Facebook deletes “dangerous” misinformation, while conducting fact checks and adding warning flags to other dubious statements that remain on the platform. Twitter attaches warnings to questionable links on the pandemic topic. Most of the services offer general information about COVID-19 and refer to official sources such as health authorities.

None of the services has made substantial improvements regarding settings differentiated by age. But safely pre-configured accounts are essential towards protecting young users from revealing their personal information or being approached by strangers. Privacy settings are often complicated to handle and difficult for young users to comprehend.
Age assessments: Better to take interactive risks into account

Age recommendations are an important orientation tool for children and adolescents, parents/guardians, and professional educators. Traditionally, age designations for films and games are determined on the basis of risks related to thematic content. Other risks native to the internet – arising from communicative functions, user-generated content, advertising pitches or monetarizing strategies – have not been figured in, up to now. At best, they may be mentioned in product descriptions.

A feasibility analysis conducted by jugendschutz.net demonstrates a model for the integration of interactive risks into age designations. To achieve this, criteria were formulated and several of them were translated into questions to be asked of those offering internet content and classifying it themselves. This exercise was completed in a form of ‘role-play’ for three different services, working from the perspective of those offering content. On the basis of this data, age designations were ‘assigned’.

The outcome: Interactive risks, despite their complex nature, can indeed be taken into account when assessing suitability for different age groups. With such tools at hand, risky interactive features could be evaluated more reliably, and parents and adolescents could be offered better guidance.
Gaming platforms: Inadequate age checks and protective settings

Playing alone or together, celebrating a successful game via social media, chatting: the safety of children using gaming consoles depends on whether parents setting up the console have configured the account in a manner appropriate to the child’s age. If they have, then age designations attached to games or films can take effect, and restrictions can be placed on communication, playing time, or purchases. If, on the other hand, children and adolescents set up their own accounts and lie about their age, there may be risky (chat) contacts. There is no age verification.

On common PC gaming platforms – such as Steam, Battle.net, Origin, Uplay, and Epic – registration does not include any proof of age. This makes it possible, from the outset, to circumvent settings that protect minors and to download items intended for those over 18 from online shops.

Gaming platforms differ greatly in the protective measures they foresee for minors. Some offer basic protections, but these are usually spotty or simply non-existent. Communication tools then present interactive risks.

Unfortunately, effective options for protection – such as the ‘family view’ on Steam – are usually de-activated before purchase. On Steam, games cannot be blocked on the basis of age ratings or birth dates, and they can’t be suppressed in the shop listings. It is possible to filter out erotic material and violence within the shop, but not in the family view mode. If children and adolescents turn off the filter, they can watch games and trailers in the shop that are labeled ‘for adults only’. This makes a confrontation with violence and explicit sexual content possible.

It is therefore important that gaming devices and platforms offer safe settings that are readily accessible. Among them should be filter options that respond automatically to the age ratings of games. Functions that limit or block outside contacts are also important toward minimizing interactive risks.
Search engines: Potential dangers despite SafeSearch

In search engines, children and adolescents can easily encounter content that can impede and endanger their development. jugendschutz.net tested the efficiency of filters in the web, photo, and video searches of Google and Bing using 28 concepts from the areas of Islamism, right-wing extremism, violence, self-endangerment, and pornography.

For the most part, pornographic content is successfully filtered out. But search hits from the other topical areas tested are almost always displayed in full.

Although web searches with SafeSearch were sufficiently filtered for some topics on Google and Bing, the search for images sometimes produced drastic and disturbing depictions, such as beheadings, severed heads, and corpses. The incidence of drastic hits was higher on Bing than on Google, for example on the subject of eating disorders. If children and adolescents are interested in Islam, searching on both Google and Bing will take them to pages motivated by Islamist ideologies. The image and video search functions also lead in some cases to Islamist channels promoting hate.

Only if the safe-search function has been preset and activated will children and adolescents be properly protected. Google offers an app called 'family link', with which parents can manage protective options on their children’s devices, for example secure searching.

If a child is logged in on a Google account, the SafeSearch function can be set to disallow any change of settings. However, SafeSearch can also be used without any registration, and in that case there is no override protection, and a young user can simply deactivate the safety settings. By contrast: on Bing it is not possible to block changes in the settings, even when logged in on an account.

In order to better protect adolescents, it would be important to ensure that search filters work effectively in various different areas of endangerment. On the topics of extremism and self-endangerment, additional guidance should be displayed, for example support addresses or reliable sources of information – as is already the case for searches that bring up depictions of abuse. On hit lists in search machines, this kind of support information is displayed too far down the list and therefore tends to go unnoticed.
Transferring insight into practice: Online content and products

klick-tipps.net presents websites and apps that are appropriate for children and address pressing topics: among them, in 2020, were the Corona pandemic, children’s rights, and racism. Safety tips are provided for parents. For teachers, there is a video module suggesting methods for learning through play.

(Source: klick-tipps.net)

kompass-social.media (‘compass’) has been launched in a new, re-furbished edition. It uses a ‘traffic signal’ system to assess safety settings, reporting options, and data protection on popular service platforms. Articles on current topics inform young users about safety issues.

Risk assessment on popular services:
kompass-social.media

hass-im-netz.info (‘hate-on-the-net’) covers political extremism from the perspective of protection for minors. Focus topics, reports, ‘HiNweise’ (‘LooKheres’), and more discuss current developments – providing background, insights and tips regarding right-wing extremism, Islamism, hate and propaganda on the internet.

hass-im-netz.info
Information service for educators (FIS): Up-to-date knowledge and insights, tips and support

FIS has almost 200 education professionals on board. It provides information and tips for use in everyday pedagogical practice, including warnings about risky apps, political extremism, depictions of abuse, self-endangerment, and violent content. An addition to current news, there are links to more extensive educational materials and reports.

FIS is available free of charge via iFrame or as an RSS-Feed, and can be linked into other websites: fis.jugendschutz.net

Recommendations from the work group “Influencing Children”

Parents post seemingly harmless photos of their children on social media – Instagram, YouTube, TikTok – or the children themselves have channels where they present themselves and their daily lives. “Kinder-Influencing” provides behavioral recommendations that support parents in escorting their children on social media and encourage well-reflected and safe handling.

Work group: Media Smart e.V., Voluntary Self-Regulation of Multimedia Providers (FSM), Professional Association for Media Education, Media Literacy and Communication Culture e.V. (GMK), jugendschutz.net, Commission for the Protection of Minors in the Media (KJM), Leibniz Institute for Media Research | Hans Bredow Institute (HBI), and SUPER RTL. mediasmart.de/handlungsempfehlungen-kinder-influencing

(Source: mediamart.de)
Self-endangerment online: Phenomena are often linked to one another

To support parents and education professionals, jugendschutz.net has published advisory materials and composed a list of services that offer counseling, crisis intervention, and more. This graphic illustrates how different aspects of self-endangerment can overlap.

Right-wing extremists [&_ gaming cultures: Digital games and communities in the focus of propaganda and prevention

A digital publication (in German) of papers from an online conference, with contributions on the instrumentalization of games and playful environments, on right-wing extremist and anti-feminist attitudes in gaming communities, and more. Counterinitiatives are presented.

Project sCAN: International success against hate on the net

The report “Hate Speech – A European Comparison” summarizes two years of cooperation between jugendschutz.net and nine other European organizations. A list of the pooled resources and reports can be accessed via scan-project.eu. One of the outcomes is a six-week course (MOOC) called “Hate Speech – What to do?”, which ends with a certificate.
Coming of age with media:
Online for sure – and safe!

The advisory “Growing up well with media” has been provided for over 20 years by jugendschutz.net for the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs (BMFSFJ). The current edition addresses risks for children on social media. A clearly set-out guide explains options and risks for the most popular online platforms and gaming apps. There are tips from experts for parents and educators on how they can protect young people in digital environments and how to encourage media literacy.

The poster ONLINE DABEI – SAFE presents tips for safe behavior online in a form that is easy to understand. Also, there are two stickers for the whole family: the individual password key for creating secure passwords, and a webcam sticker to block digital cameras.

Order free of charge or download at: bmfsfj.de

Poster on safe use of social media, with webcam sticker to peel off. (Source: BMFSFJ)
**KEY FIGURES**

**VIOLATIONS REGISTERED**
- Germany: 16%
- Netherlands: 13%
- France: 4%
- USA: 7%
- Other: 61%

**DELETED BY END OF 2020**
- Political extremism: 21%
- Violence: 14%
- Sex/pornography: 14%
- Cybermobbing: 3%
- Self-endangerment: 12%
- Sexualized violence: 41%
- Deviation from 100% due to rounding

**Origin of violations by country**
- USA: 61%
- Germany: 16%
- Netherlands: 13%
- France: 4%
- Other: 7%
2,805 (55%) of the violations occurred on social media

- 17% Instagram
- 14% YouTube
- 13% Facebook
- 12% Twitter
- 10% TikTok
- 10% Pinterest
- 8% Tumblr (each)
- 7% Telegram
- 10% other

Deviation from 100% due to rounding

Activities towards deletion and prosecution of 5,056 violations

- 68% contacted providers and self-monitoring bodies
- 14% referred to crime prosecution
- 10% forwarded to INHOPE partners
- 6% handed over to KJM (federal commission)
- 2% other

Report: Protecting Minors on the Internet 2020
Enabling children and young people to flourish while growing up in a digital world

jugendschutz.net is the joint center of the German Federal Government and the federal states tasked with the protection of children and young people on the internet. jugendschutz.net looks closely at dangers and risks in internet services specifically popular among young people and urges providers and operators to design their content in a way that allows children and young people to use the internet free of troubles.

The German youth ministries founded jugendschutz.net in 1997. Since 2003, jugendschutz.net has been organizationally linked to the Commission for the Protection of Minors in the Media (KJM). The work of jugendschutz.net is funded by the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the federal states, the State Supervisory Bodies and the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

jugendschutz.net’s hotline accepts reports about violations of youth media protection laws. These can be reported at

www.jugendschutz.net/hotline