



Ministry of Education, Science and Culture



Strasbourg, 31 March 2009

MCM(2009)014

**1st Council of Europe Conference of Ministers
responsible for Media and New Communication Services**
A new notion of media?
(28-29 May 2009, Reykjavik, Iceland)

Germany

“A Net for Kids”

With the project “A Net for Kids: fragFINN.de”, initiated by Bernd Neumann, Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, the Federal Government and private industry are working together to strengthen the trust of children, parents and teachers in the Internet and to protect children and young people better against harmful media.

The project consists of two pillars: Grant funding by the state to encourage new, high-quality Internet offerings for children, and the creation of a safe surfing area for children organized and financed by the industry.

I. Grant funding

Because the best protection for children and young people consists of a large quantity of high-quality, age-appropriate and interesting content, the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media has made annual funding of €1 million available for three years in order to encourage innovative, high-quality offerings for children (www.ein-Netz-fuer-Kinder.de). The Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth is contributing another €500,000 per year.

Grant funding is primarily aimed at non-governmental, small and medium-sized content providers. Grants of up to €200,000 are available for new, high-quality content for children. Projects are chosen at the suggestion of a ten-person expert commission.

II. Safe surfing area – “fragFINN.de”

For many children, using the Internet has become part of everyday life. Children use the Internet to communicate with friends, and they take advantage of the wide variety of games, entertainment and information it offers. But without supervision, children may come across content that is inappropriate for their age and level of development.

Children must be aware of possible risks they may confront on the Internet. They must be able to recognise them and deal with them. This means more than individual websites specially developed for children. To help children comprehend the overall structure and diversity of the Internet, they need a surfing area designed with their cognitive, social, moral and media skills in mind. Learning to surf means exploring the Internet actively and autonomously. To this end, children must be able to find Internet content that is suitable for them. What is there on the Internet for me? How do I find the websites that interest me? How can I get to the important websites quickly?

The website www.fragFINN.de offers children a protected area where they can surf without the risk of running into inappropriate content. The website is aimed at children aged 8 to 12. This surfing area is based on an extensive list of websites that have been checked by media pedagogy experts and that are suitable, interesting and useful for young Internet users. This “whitelist” solution is a positive, proactive approach, in contrast to the usual filters which are often based on blacklisting. Blacklisting can never be exhaustive, and compiling a whitelist avoids overblocking, a technical problem with filtering software.

The fragFINN project, which was launched by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel in November 2007, is an important contribution to better protection for children and young people against harmful media content.

The fragFINN motto: Learn to surf here! – The right way to search and find what you’re looking for.

1. Whitelist

Behind fragFinn is an extensive list of Internet websites that are both interesting and safe for children. Before a website is added to this “whitelist”, a team of media pedagogy experts checks it against a set of strict criteria, ensuring that children have access only to websites suitable for them.

As a “smaller version” of the Internet, fragFINN offers children content that is entertaining, exciting, fun, informative – and above all age-appropriate. Because each child has individual, very specific motives for using the Internet, the whitelist is organized according to various topics, such as language

& communication, politics & society, nature & technology, culture & history, leisure & entertainment, creativity & design as well as sport & health. The safe surfing area is big enough to offer something for every child. In this way, fragFinn helps children pursue their interests over the full length and breadth of the Internet and learn how to use the medium responsibly and autonomously.

For the first year, the media pedagogy experts have chosen about 4,000 domains – including 750 child domains – containing 30 million documents for the whitelist. And more are being added every day. On the one hand, the fragFINN media pedagogy experts are constantly on the lookout for new content; on the other, content providers and private individuals can suggest websites to be added to the whitelist. In the past three months children suggested nearly one thousand new websites.

New websites are added to the whitelist only after two media pedagogy experts agree that the content meets criteria for form and content and would make a substantive contribution to the surfing area. Criteria developed by experts include compliance with legal provisions, security requirements for chat rooms and games and rules for any advertising on the website.

Because hardly any other medium changes as rapidly as the Internet, keeping the “whitelist” up to date makes up much of the fragFINN team’s workload. In order to keep the surfing area safe, all websites on the list are regularly checked.

Such checking involves a combination of technical and manual control mechanisms. First, there is automatic recognition of pre-defined words and phrases which the editorial team has classified as problematic for children. If any of these words or phrases are found, the system sounds an alarm. In addition, all Internet content is subjected to regular manual checks. The length of time between checks depends on the rate of change and the potential risk that harmful content may have found its way onto the whitelisted websites.

2. Technical security measures to protect the surfing area

To make sure children have access only to checked websites and parents can be confident that their children can use the Internet by themselves, free child protection software can be downloaded from the fragFINN.de website; once installed, it closes off the surfing area.

In addition, adults have the option of adding or blocking individual sites. In this way, the surfing area can be specifically tailored to the skills and capabilities of the individual child.

Furthermore, the participating companies such as Microsoft and Deutsche Telekom are integrating the whitelist into their operating systems, and mobile phone service providers are planning to do so.

3. www.fragFINN.de – The website

The website offers a full-text searching engine. To keep children from being overwhelmed by lengthy lists of results, websites expressly intended for children are at the top of the list, and all results are displayed with screenshots and brief teaser texts.

In addition to the search function, the fragFINN website presents topics of interest to children in various boxes. The “surfing tip of the day” points to an especially interesting website; the “news box” contains three information services offering news about politics and society in a child-friendly form; the “kid chat” box offers moderated chat rooms; the “topic box” shows domains and events related to current topics; and the “grab bag” contains a selection of especially child-friendly websites.

Child-friendly access to the whitelist via the www.fragFINN.de website

Introducing children to Internet use through

- Surfing in the search area
- Editorial selection of links: topic boxes (surf tips, news, chat, games, etc.)
- Area for parents and teachers:
 - Parents: Information about safe surfing and downloads of free child protection software
 - Teachers: Teaching ideas for downloading



4. Financing and implementation

The fragFINN portal receives funding from AOL, Arcor, Cybits, Deutsche Telekom, Egmont Ehapa Verlag, 1&1, GMX, Google, Heinrich Bauer Verlag, Lycos, Microsoft, Telefonica O2, Symantec, Tessloff Verlag, Super RTL, Vodafone and WEB.DE as well as telecommunications and media industry associations. The media pedagogy experts are employed by the Freiwilligen Selbstkontrolle Multimedia-Diensteanbieter e.V (FSM), a registered association to oversee voluntary self-regulation.

The companies actively support this project and have committed themselves to building the whitelist into operating systems and child protection software as far as possible and to advertise the project on their websites.

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