

Maja Vreča

ARNES, Slovenija

Raising Internet Safety Awareness – The Role of ARNES/NREN

Abstract

With the growing use of the internet, safety issues have become something that cannot be overlooked. Children, teenagers and their parents encounter internet-related problems that they are not prepared for – they need expert support. As this is something that is not yet taught in school, many activities have been supported to raise awareness and empower users. In 1999, the European Commission launched the Safer Internet Action Plan, bringing together different stakeholders with some experience in this field. ARNES, as the National Research and Educational Network (NREN) of Slovenia, was asked by the Ministry of Education and Sport to participate in the project. Today, ARNES is a partner in the National Safer Internet Centre, while SI-CERT, the Slovenian Computer Emergency Response Team, which operates under ARNES, runs a more focused campaign on information security. We find that raising awareness about safety and security on the internet, and dealing with both the technical and increasingly the social aspects of internet usage, are a natural part of our activities.

Introduction

Internet safety, especially with regards to children, has often been a hot topic in European media. With growing concern, the European Commission launched an ambitious project called the 'Safer Internet Action Plan' with a number of working areas (awareness raising, filtering, hotlines, etc.). It was soon recognised that empowering users and raising the awareness of all key groups – children, parents and teachers – was most important. Over the years, the programme has spawned national projects in all European countries, with INSAFE and INHOPE as international coordination networks of awareness and hotline centres, respectively. This experience is shared on the EU level, and there is collaboration with countries outside the EU.

Slovenia was well-prepared to use this new opportunity to broaden activities that had already started in the early 1990s – the dawn of the internet age. ARNES was one of the first to join the project.

The role of ARNES

The Academic and Research Network of Slovenia (ARNES) was established in 1992 to provide network services to the research, educational and cultural communities in Slovenia.

One of the services ARNES provided from the very beginning was personal dial-up access to the internet for researchers and university professors. Our ministry of science soon realised that Slovenia, being a small country, could also use ARNES as a service provider for schools, not just for universities and research institutes, which was the more typical approach in the rest of Europe. Therefore, ARNES started to develop a partnership with the National Education Institute and the Ministry of Education, and maintained strong links with Slovenian schools, from kindergarten to university. Teachers, students and pupils alike could gain access to the ARNES network and services, including the internet.

At the beginning, the problems users were facing were mostly technical, but this soon started to change with widespread use in primary and secondary schools. It was obvious that children, even at a very young age, very quickly learned new skills, but they lacked certain social skills; as a result, it was not long before problems connected to this appeared. These users needed help with learning something new – 'netiquette'.

The next problem encountered was the rising problem of dependency, which moved from the 'real' world to the 'virtual' one with the new media. For ARNES, this was a challenging new social phenomenon as well as an opportunity to learn more about this issue and to become the leading expert in Slovenia in this field.

As internet services developed, the responses of the internet users changed. With the growth of the internet community, which changed from the closely connected scientific and technical community to a place that anybody could enter, the rules of communication changed as well.

We have followed these developments from the very beginning. The people using ARNES services come from almost all aspects of society, from young children in primary schools to university professors, from kindergarten teachers to researchers, from librarians to museum curators.

A natural part of introducing new technology to this very diverse community was user support and education about the possibilities as well as the dangers of this new communication media and about its proper and recommended uses.

In 1999, ARNES was asked by the Ministry of Education and Sport to take part in the Safer Internet project on their behalf, working as a partner in the European Schoolnet. Although Slovenia was not part of the EU at the time and could not receive funding for this, ARNES represented Slovenia as an associated partner in DOT.SAFE, an awareness-raising project.

The SAFE-SI project

In the following years, there were more and more activities in this field; as a result pressure was building on the European level to put even more effort into broadening the network of participants in these activities and to organising the actions in a more structured way. This led to the establishing of national Awareness Centres in 2005. The main goal of these centres is to promote the protection and education of children and teenagers using the internet and new online technologies.

In 2009, awareness-raising activities in Slovenia were complemented by adding a helpline component to provide counselling (via telephone and email) for children and adolescents who have come across inappropriate or offensive internet content or contact, have fallen victim to online harassment, identity theft or have other internet-related issues and dilemmas. The SAFE-SI project consortium consists of three organisations: the Faculty of Social Sciences, the Slovenian Consumers' Association and ARNES. The project is funded by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Information Society and Media, and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology of the Republic of Slovenia.

In close co-operation with national stakeholders, SAFE-SI develops informative material, organises events, such as Safer Internet Day, organises educational sessions such

as workshops and seminars for parents, children and teachers, and maintains a fully informative web page at www.safe.si. It also monitors and addresses emerging trends, while seeking to reinforce the image of the web as a place to learn. SAFE-SI endeavours to raise awareness of the need to report harmful or illegal content and activities. Through close cooperation with its partners and other parties, it aims to raise internet safety-awareness standards and support the development of information literacy for all.

SAFE-SI's activities are growing at a rapid pace and new stakeholders are joining. The project also trains educators to offer safety lectures more school children, their parents and teachers. These lectures are designed for the target group and they can be either general (presenting an overview of the hazards) or cover a specialised theme (e.g. social networks). SAFE-SI's web page is being increasingly popular with young children and their parents. There is a growing amount of video and other materials being produced, on the national and European level, from video clips dealing with specific safety issues (e.g. how to set your privacy settings on Facebook) to the educational cartoons and games for the younger users.

Safe-on-the-Internet campaign

In February 2011, SI-CERT at ARNES launched a new security campaign with a more specific focus, targeting the general public and small enterprises that cannot afford to employ their own safety experts. Although it mainly covers more 'adult' issues like safe online shopping, it works in close cooperation with the SAFE-SI project, as the problems are more or less of the same nature: identity theft, recognising hoaxes, and proper social behaviour.

Safety issues – trends

In recent years, we have noticed that the nature of the ICT-related problems has moved increasingly from technical to social issues. This trend has been visible for a long time, but in recent years the portion of predominately technical problems has dropped notably.

The other obvious trend is that children have started using the internet and other ICT tools at even younger ages. The use of the internet is not restricted to the computers anymore; it can be accessed with mobile phones, smartphones, tablet computers and other devices. This makes the prevention and safety education of children, their parents and

teachers even more important, since it is increasingly difficult to control children's internet use, as they no longer use it just at home or school.

The usage of social networks is also increasing and the age of their users is dropping, so it brings new hazards, from publishing sensitive personal data to 'hate pages' and harassment.

Hate speech is an ever-present problem and is even increasing, probably in connection to the economic crisis, but this is not the only reason. We observe that the growing internet community as a whole is lacking basic 'netiquette'.

Another very important issue is new media literacy. There seems to be a certain naiveté in the general public when it comes to trusting the information found on the internet. Adults were used to thinking that most information in written media and books was trustworthy, and some regulation that was present in most media channels (at least to a certain point). With the internet, this is no longer the case. Young children and teenagers, in contrast, still need to learn how to view media from a critical distance, as well as the skill of checking sources and comparing information.

Measuring the results

The goal of SAFE-SI is to have an impact on public knowledge, so measuring the results is important. Unfortunately, this proves to be much more difficult than it seems. ARNES and the SAFE-SI are using every possible means to reach their target audience, so merely asking where a person received information is not very relevant. In contrast, the internet is changing and developing so fast that it is difficult to compare research results. Social networks, for instance, were almost non-existent or at least unknown just a few years ago; now they are one of the main topics.

What we can measure is that increasing numbers of young people, their parents and teachers attending our lectures and workshops are already familiar with many of the more important matters. We are also increasingly recognised by the general public and by media as trusted experts when some new issue arises. ARNES is usually approached by the media when there are safety problems of a predominantly technical nature. In the cases that include more socially related subjects, SAFE-SI is called upon to share its knowledge.

Conclusion

The internet and new technologies are developing and growing much faster than our knowledge about how to use them. This brings new risks when using all this new technology unprepared. As we face new social phenomena connected to new ways of communication, understanding both the technology and the way it is used in everyday life is very important if we want to enhance general awareness about these issues. With its experience, ARNES as any other NREN can and should play an important role in this process, but there is a strong need for other parts of society to be involved.

Literature

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