Building a Safe Online Environment for Children
February 8-9, 2018 in Bangkok

The Thailand Chapter of the International Institute of Communications (IIC) held a forum on "Building a Safe Online Environment for Children" on 8-9 February 2018 in Bangkok. The forum, supported by the Electronic Transactions Development Agency of Thailand (ETDA), Chulabhorn Royal Academy, and the Academy of Public Enterprise Policy & Regulation (APaR), School of Law, University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, drew participants from internet companies, regulators, educators, civil society groups and users. It discussed ways to build an internet that offers a safe environment for children, while affording them all the advantages of the digital ecosystem. Children can be exposed to an array of online harms which include cyberbullying, online threats and exploitations. The speed and anonymity of internet make it difficult to render effective protection to children. The forum addressed key initiatives in public policy frameworks, private initiatives, and communications literacy that help protect young people and enable them to reap the benefits by the digital transformation of their economies and of society.

Participants discussed legal instruments at the global, regional and domestic level. In addition to the traditional protection afforded by international instruments such as UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child and Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, there are also soft law measures (i.e. guidelines from Council of Europe). However, protecting children in an online context requires a different approach since children are exposed to more risks when they use online resources for their daily activities. Internet regulation is becoming more domestic due to its pervasive nature in public and private spheres, including information assimilation and privacy. In the EU, media content regulation is in place through the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) which aims to safeguard children from hate speech and harmful content. The challenge is to balance protection without creating a chilling effect on businesses. The AVMSD is currently under review (since 2016) to streamline regulation that can achieve that balance.

In terms of domestic regulation, Australia's e-Safety Commission launched the Enhancing Online Safety for Children Act in 2013 to impose a compliance scheme to minimize online harm to children (reporting through complaint portals and notice and take down of harmful content). The Commission also works with education institutions in developing digital literacy programmes such as creating a safe online environment, good digital citizenship, and the use of social media. However, there are challenges as online victims may be reluctant to lodge complaints and people are not always aware that this scheme exists. Elsewhere, the UK proposal of AgeID requirement (part of the Digital Economy Act) is also controversial for privacy reasons as it requires a user to reveal their identity when accessing a pornographic website.

Apart from legal devices, several private firms also develop tools to make a safe online environment for users by developing policies, community standards, and partnerships with communities and local organizations. Parents and children are provided with online tools and support (security and privacy setting, reporting and support centre, parents' portals). These include technology to screen out a post or the sharing of child exploitation images. They also work with stakeholders in many countries to run programmes that educate young users about online safety to raise literacy standards across the board.

On the second day, the discussion was centred around more local debates and began with reflections on global practices and key policies that could be applied specifically to Thailand. A dedicated session on e-sport and online gaming drew attention both to the economic and social impact of the new industry. While this may become a major driver of the economy and create new opportunities for jobs and businesses, it could also contribute to problems such as game addiction in children and the commercialization of children as presenters (such as in cases of Youtuber, game caster, e-sport caster). Participants agree that the family plays a crucial role in understanding the changing landscape of game industry and creating the right support network for children. However, the forum also raised concerns about disadvantaged groups, without family guidance, that could easily become victims. The discussion was followed by the workshop that showcased a real online game demonstration by undergraduate students who were online game influencers. This was intended to depict what actually happens when children play online games in order to make participants understand children as users and the roles parents should play in guiding them.

Participants agreed that the most significant step is to educate young people on how to become a good digital citizen at a very young age. This can be achieved by collaboration among children, parents, the community, and schools to provide children with the right understanding and increase their resilience to exploitation and harassment. Literacy education should shift its focus to critical thinking, imagination and empathy, ethical thinking and a behavioural role, an analytical mindset, and logical reasoning for better communication. Teachers should assist children in discovering their digital skills and understanding their online place in the society.