

April 2, 2007

The Honorable John Dingell  
2328 Rayburn House Office Bldg.  
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Proposal of AOL, Google, Microsoft and Yahoo!, Inc.;  
Effective Strategies for Protecting Children Online

Dear Congressman Dingell:

We are writing to emphasize our strong interest in engaging in and contributing to Congress's effort to protect children online. Over the past several years, our companies—AOL, Google, Microsoft, and Yahoo!—have collectively accumulated significant experience in providing solutions to protect children online and assisting federal, state and local law enforcement agencies' efforts to prosecute and punish criminals who exploit children. That experience has given our companies unique insight in assessing what additional steps could effectively improve these efforts and protections even further.

Simply put, we advocate a solution-oriented approach to protecting children. To contribute to the solution, our companies have collectively developed a set of legislative recommendations that provide solutions in each of four critical areas outlined below. We would appreciate the opportunity to present our proposals to you, and to discuss them in detail.

First, education is paramount. Education and tools are critical to helping children understand safe Internet practices and to providing teachers and parents the information necessary to protect children online, as well as reinforce safe behaviors. Many of our companies have already devoted extensive resources and technology tools to this effort, as evidenced by a significant increase in the adoption rates for filters overall—a 65% increase from 2000 to 2004.<sup>1</sup> But we believe more can be done to encourage and educate parents on their usage. Only 54% of families with teens use online filters to block objectionable material<sup>2</sup> and 48% are using parental controls products.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, well-established best practice guidelines offer parents tips on additional safety steps, but too many parents still have not yet adopted those safeguards. For example, 40% of teens with parents who do not use the Internet are accessing their computers in private areas of the home, which is a safety tip “no-no” that makes overseeing behavior even more difficult.<sup>4</sup> There is clearly room to improve the adoption of widely-available technology tools and safety guidelines.

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<sup>1</sup> PEW/Internet, Protecting Teens Online (March 2005), pp. 7-8.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Online Victimization of Youth; Five Years Later (2006), p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Protecting Teens Online, p.13.

Second, the key to successful investigation and prosecution of child pornography and other cases of child exploitation is to ensure a fresh and complete evidentiary trail, followed by rapid follow through by law enforcement. For example, the preservation process established under title 18 of the federal code, and followed by each of our companies, has been invaluable in alerting law enforcement to potential crime and providing law enforcement with current and useful information necessary to thwart and catch criminals who prey on children. In addition, the child pornography reporting requirements under title 42 of the code have helped law enforcement investigate, prosecute and convict numerous child pornographers. These processes should be enhanced and enforced.

Third, law enforcement resources and training are essential. Many of our companies already provide law enforcement with thousands of referrals related to cases of potential child exploitation. But while we can provide referrals, tools and support, private companies cannot and should not substitute for effective law enforcement investigation and prosecution. Unfortunately, resource challenges limit the ability of law enforcement to pursue many of these referrals. In addition, we also provide significant personnel and training opportunities to assist law enforcement in pursuing child predator cases, but we still see cases where additional training in the unique aspects of Internet crimes could be helpful. We support providing additional funds for law enforcement, not only to pursue child pornography and predation cases, but also for training so that law enforcement can ably respond to online challenges.

Finally, we must do more than catch the criminals to respond effectively to child porn and predators. We must stop criminals from future attempts to harm our children. Since recidivism rates for pedophiles are higher than those of other offenders, we support efforts to improve the ability of law enforcement and the penal system to keep close tabs on the online activities of sex offenders after release. Last year's passage of the Adam Walsh Act advances this goal in many respects. But we believe additional steps could further ensure protection.

We share the goal of protecting our children from exploitation. Pursuing effective solutions is essential to achieving that critical goal. We look forward to presenting and discussing our proposals in further detail.

Sincerely,

AOL  
Google  
Microsoft  
Yahoo!, Inc.