

Google and Microsoft agree measures to block abuse images



Google's Peter Barron and Microsoft's Nicola Hodson say they have worked together to block and remove content

Leading search engine companies Google and Microsoft have agreed measures to make it harder to find child abuse images online.

As many as 100,000 search terms will now return no results that find illegal material, and will trigger warnings that child abuse imagery is illegal.

PM David Cameron has welcomed the move but said it must be delivered or he would bring forward new legislation.

Child protection experts have warned most images are on hidden networks.

In July, Mr Cameron called on Google and Microsoft's Bing - which together account for 95% of search traffic - to do more to prevent people getting access to illegal images.

He said they needed to ensure that searches which were unambiguously aimed at finding illegal images should return no results.

On Monday, Downing Street said the government would be monitoring that internet companies acted "urgently" .

New software

What difference have today's measures by Google and Microsoft made?

Typing "child pornography" in to Google's search engine now brings up a set of search results that include warnings that child abuse imagery is illegal.

The first three links are all related to reporting disturbing images or seeking help if you think you or someone you know has a problem with child porn.

The first link is an advert that links to a Google statement about protecting children from sexual abuse. The next link directs you to the Internet Watch Foundation, where you can report criminal online content, and a link to Stop it Now advises users how they can get help and advice.

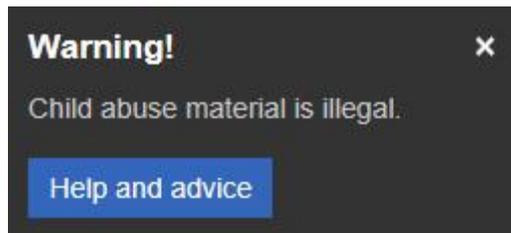
The remaining search results are mainly news stories from around the world reporting on child pornography.

Now both companies have introduced new algorithms [software instructions] that will prevent searches for child abuse imagery delivering results that could lead to such material.

Google communications director Peter Barron said the changes, which had cleaned up the results for over 100,000 queries that might be related to the sexual abuse of children, would make it "much, much more difficult to find this content online".

"We're agreed that child sexual imagery is a case apart, it's illegal everywhere in the world, there's a consensus on that. It's absolutely right that we identify this stuff, we remove it and we report it to the authorities," he said.

The restrictions will be launched in the UK first, before being expanded to 158 other languages in the next six months.



Warnings like this will appear on screen if users type in search terms related to child abuse

Warnings - from both Google and charities - will also be shown at the top of search results for more than 13,000 queries, making it clear that child abuse was illegal.

Microsoft, which in a rare display of unity is working closely with Google on this issue, says its Bing search engine will also produce clean results.

Microsoft's general manager of marketing and operations Nicola Hodson said: "Day-to-day we're fierce competitors, and we collaborate on this issue because it transcends that.

"It will be much harder to find that content on both Bing and Google. We are blocking content, removing content and helping people to find the right content or also sources of help should they need that," he said.



Former head of anti-exploitation body Ceop, Jim Gamble: "I don't think this will make any difference"

Later on Monday, the two companies will join other internet firms at Downing Street for an Internet Safety Summit.

The prime minister said significant progress has been made since his speech in July calling for action.

At the time, he said that Google and Microsoft had said that blocking search results couldn't be done but he did not accept that.

Tory MP Claire Perry, Mr Cameron's adviser on the sexualisation and commercialisation of childhood, told BBC Radio 4's Today programme the new measures were a "great step forward".

"We're not declaring victory but this is a massive step in the right direction," she said.

'Missed opportunity'

Analysis

Mark Ward Technology correspondent, BBC News

Google and Microsoft's efforts will make it harder to search for abuse images but will do nothing to limit access to what is on the deep web or held on darknets.

The deep web is simply those parts of the web not catalogued by search engines. These are the parts of websites search crawlers do not visit or cannot find.

Some deep web sites are password protected, or only give access to people visiting from certain addresses or are forums or places that block indexers or use file formats they do not log.

Darknets are stand-alone networks that sit separate to the web but are accessible to those that run the right software to get at them. Many operate on a peer-to-peer basis and can only be accessed by those invited to join them.

But Jim Gamble, former head of the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (Ceop) told BBC Breakfast he did not think the measures would make any difference with regard to protecting children from paedophiles.

"They don't go on to Google to search for images. They go on to the dark corners of the internet on peer-to-peer websites," he said.

He said search engines had already been blocking inappropriate content and the latest move was just an enhancement of what was already happening.

A better solution would be to spend £1.5m on hiring 12 child protection experts and 12 co-ordinators in each of the police regions to hunt down online predators, he added.

NSPCC chief executive officer Peter Wanless said "a concerted and sustained effort from all quarters" was needed to stay one step ahead of sex offenders that were getting ever more technologically advanced.

"This is the key child protection issue of a generation - we cannot fail," he said.

[A June report](#) by Ceop highlighted how the "hidden internet" helped distributors of child abuse images to evade detection by using [encrypted networks](#) and other secure methods.

Google and Microsoft have agreed to work with the UK's National Crime Agency and the Internet Watch Foundation to try to tackle networks which host child abuse images.



Critics have accused the government of underfunding online child protection

The two companies are also using their technological expertise to help in the identification of abuse images.

Microsoft's PhotoDNA already allows a photo to be given a unique "fingerprint" which means it can be tracked as it is shared across the internet. Now Google has developed VideoID which does the same job with videos.

Both firms will provide this technology to the National Crime Agency and other organisations to help in the work of finding and detecting those behind the creating and sharing of child abuse images.

Tasks:

1. Review and learn the vocabulary
2. Discussion: surveillance and restrictions versus freedom
How do we protect vulnerable people?
How do we protect freedom?
3. Present summary and opinions to class