

The Classification of Online Content

January 2012

1 Introduction

This document introduces a system that allows content providers to add a piece of technical information about the age suitability to their internet documents/content. Youth protection software which is able to read this information will be available for parents and other legal guardians in Germany in early 2012. Depending on how parents set up the filter software, children and young people will be granted access to content suitable for their age while being prevented from surfing to websites which they should not see.

Youth protection filters are already available for a long time. They usually consist of black lists containing inappropriate URLs and white lists comprising websites suitable for minors. Some filters provide rather large lists and their vendors update them frequently. However, a lot of websites are not (un)suitable for all age groups. This is where the content provider's age rating comes into play. A technical tool such as youth protection filters can never be as precise, specific and comprehensive as is the providers' assessments of their own content.

The development in Germany which ultimately led to the situation as it now presents itself is the result of a long lasting process of trial and error. The FSM is convinced that many aspects of this process can help to address youth media protection issues within the boundaries of the European Union.

Since 2003, the German law stipulates the tagging of online content as one option for providers to achieve legal compliancy. However, for various reasons this method has not been brought to life until now. One of the reasons for this deferral is the lack of state-acknowledged youth protection software: The state-acknowledgement of youth protection software is the key legal condition under German law to make the tagging of online content a valid option for providers.

The other ways for German providers to legally offer problematic content are time restrictions or the implementation of efficient technical thresholds on the website itself. Both of these options have major disadvantages, the most crucial of them being the fact that the internet is a decentralised, international phenomenon. While the dissemination of content from national providers is barred or hindered by either time restrictions or technical thresholds, content

originating in other countries can still be accessed without any barrier. This brings up the question of effectiveness of such measures. However, more far reaching, general approaches to solve this problem of unsuitable content coming from other countries often linger within the grey area of censorship.

The tagging of content can address this problem without the detrimental effects. Because it relies on the idea of user autonomous software, it can create a very effective solution on any computer where it is installed without making necessary any general constraints to the infrastructure of the Internet. The content, which is tagged in an invisible way, can still be disseminated freely to those who have no local software installed, rendering this option a pragmatic way for providers, still capable of competing economically.

In Germany, after several years of discussion and gathering experience, today the tagging of content is seen by many as the most promising way to make youth media protection more effective. The acknowledgement of youth protection software is expected in early 2012. Making content providers aware of both the legal necessity to take certain action and the available options is the key task addressed by the FSM and its age classification system.

2 About the FSM

The FSM¹ is a non-profit association under German law founded in 1997 by e-commerce alliances and companies dedicated to the protection of minors. As an officially certified organisation for the voluntary self-control of the internet, the FSM is operating a hotline that deals with reports on illegal or harmful web content that any person or organisation may report. The organisation advises its members on the legal provisions of youth protection and is widely known for industry branch specific codes of conduct.

During the discussion about the reformation of the German Interstate Treaty on the Protection of Minors (Jugendmedienschutz-Staatsvertrag – JMStV), which governs youth protection on the internet, the FSM agreed to set up a system for the assessment of a website's age suitability.

¹ <http://www.fsm.de/en/>.

3 The Age Rating Standard age-de.xml

In late 2010, the relevant German stakeholders (state-run organisations as well as self-control organisations and associations of the IT-industry) settled on a common specification for an age label of websites and other online content. The basic idea is to implement a special file (age-de.xml) in the root directory of a web server. This clearly structured file contains all relevant information on how the age rating is implemented in the respective website, or, more precisely, within the scope of a fully qualified domain name (FQDN).

Optionally, the xml-file can include the age information for one or more pages or units of a website. However, content providers, especially if they offer large amounts of rapidly changing content, may find it easier to register the age information within the HTML file (meta tag) or the HTTP header, which are the two alternatives to defining the age suitability directly in the age-de.xml file. Using one of these methods can be more flexible because the original age-de.xml file does not need to be edited: Even new or altered content will always contain its own age information.

Content providers with smaller websites or websites the youth protection relevance of which hardly ever changes will find it more appropriate to include the age rating completely in the age-de.xml file and thus finish the whole age classification process in a few minutes. Major German providers have already started to implement the system. The age-de.xml standard has proven to be flexible enough to meet the need for individually tailored solutions.

Already during the process of its creation, the international use of the standard was considered. The use of diverging age-brackets and criteria for diverse cultural backgrounds and countries is possible. The labelling of online content based on a common standard, however big the cultural differences may be, has the striking advantage that national software developers can tailor youth protection software vis-à-vis the national cultural background, which can then be configured individually to interpret the standard-information, one way or the other.

The complete documentation of the age rating standard age-de.xml is available (as well in an English version) from Online Management Kontor².

² <http://online-management-kontor.de/jugendschutz/altersklassifizierung.html>; English version of the official documentation: http://online-management-kontor.de/downloads/age-de-xml-label_definition_v3.0g_english1.pdf.

4 The Classification System

The integration of the age rating into websites or pages is a rather technical issue, whereas the other very important question is how the correct age rating can be determined in the first place. While companies from the entertainment sector are used to dealing with questions of the age suitability of their products or contents, most companies who run websites to advertise their products and services have never had any reason to assess the age suitability of their websites. The same holds true for most private websites, whether they do have some sort of adult or otherwise inappropriate content or not.

In order to provide guidance through the German youth protection system and to assist content providers in finding the correct age rating for their internet content, the FSM has set up the age classification system (www.altersklassifizierung.de). While it also contains a simple age tag generator (age suitability is known, only technical information is required), the core of this system is an interactive questionnaire which allows the users to assess the age suitability of their contents in only a few steps. The number of questions that actually have to be answered depends on what kind of content the user needs an age rating for.

A complete run-through of the age classification system consists of the following steps:

- (1) Define the scope: single page, collection of pages, complete sub domain
- (2) Choose a specific context, e.g. fine arts, health education, news, humour
- (3) Are there any films or games and if so, does an age rating already exist?
- (4) Content classes, e.g. sex, violence, etc.: specific questions only appear if applicable
- (5) Interaction, e.g. user generated content, communication
- (6) Labelling method: xml-file only, HTTP header, HTML meta tag

The idea is to provide the user with very good results in as little time as possible. It is crucial to ask only the set of questions that apply to the specific content.

The following two screenshots shall illustrate this functionality. Both pictures show the same section of the questionnaire. Note that the user chose “No” in the first picture and “Yes” in the second.

altersklassifizierung.de

AGE CLASSIFICATION FAQ NEWS CONTACT VALIDATE AGE TAG

1 2 3 4 **5** 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14

Does the content to be rated contain references to sex?

No Yes

[Back](#) [Cancel](#) [Continue](#)

Fig. 1:
Content to be rated does not contain references to sex: no detailed questions appear

altersklassifizierung.de

AGE CLASSIFICATION FAQ NEWS CONTACT VALIDATE AGE TAG

1 2 3 4 **5** 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14

Does the content to be rated contain references to sex?

No Yes

Please indicate what kind of content is included in the material you want to rate. Use the levels of abstraction provided in the chart below. Please tick one answer in each row. Does the material to be rated contain ...

	No	Yes: real images or videos, not or only slightly cloaked / alienated i	Yes: texts, audio files, cartoons i	Yes: slightly covered, extensively blurred or pixelated i	Yes: covered depiction that requires previous knowledge to understand the content as being sex related i
... sexually explicit actions? i	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... close-up views of genitals? i	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... unusual sexual practices (BDSM, harassment, violence, excrements, other disturbing behaviour)? i	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... references to fetishes? i	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
... persons posing (partially) nude?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Fig. 2:
Detailed questions appear only if "Yes" is ticked

The classification system is an instrument to help providers assess their content correctly. Naturally, the criteria and the calculation of age brackets is always a matter of controversial discussion. However, the first experiences show that these discussions are fruitfully contributing to transparency and awareness of youth media protection. Online content is and will always be content to be assessed by the provider himself – assessment procedures run by institutions, e.g. used for packaged media, cannot cope with the sheer mass of content online. The FSM thus believes that providers have to be empowered to do so. The age classification system is a tool to help them find the right age-bracket, and it generates and delivers the technical information to tag the online content accordingly.

In order to generate results that are as objective as possible, the system contains a lot of tooltips with definitions, examples and hints. The age rating is thus most independent of the individual views of the person exercising the classification process.

The FSM age classification system is also fit for the future. The trend towards user generated content becoming the predominant kind of material on the Internet has already been taken into account by the FSM. Depending on how interactively the respective website can be used and what kind of security standards are adopted, different age ratings will be issued. Due to this, a website that has no (or should not have) inappropriate content may receive a rather high age rating only because of its interactive features such as comments or uploads. However, the low age rating may remain untouched if the website contains sufficient moderation or reporting functions.

5 Final Remarks

The FSM believes that tagging of content is the future of youth media protection. It includes major advantages, such as its user autonomous approach, allowing effective youth protection without endangering the free (and uncontrollable) structure of the Internet. It leaves providers a pragmatic way capable of competing economically. Technical drawbacks, such as the danger of bypass or the accuracy of filtering, can be overcome – this is a matter of process, still this process should be started now.

Awareness is the key: Parents need to know about youth protection software, providers need to know about the possibility to tag content. The FSM is now focusing its efforts on these aspects.