

# MAKING THE INTERNET A SAFE PLACE FOR OUR CHILDREN TO SURF

PRESENTING THE WORK OF  
THE PARENTS ADVISORY GROUP FOR THE INTERNET (PAGi)  
IN  
SINGAPORE'S INITIATIVES TO PROMOTE INTERNET SAFETY

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**Abstract**

*To manage the fast growth of the Internet and encourage the responsible use of Internet in Singapore, the Government has adopted a three-prong approach in its Internet policy, namely:*

*Promoting online safety awareness through public education  
Encouraging industry self-regulation  
“Light Touch” regulatory framework*

*The Parents Advisory Group for the Internet (PAGi), a volunteer group, works with the Government and the industry to ensure a safer Internet environment for the children. As a support network for parents to share their concerns and ideas on promoting a safe online environment, PAGi feels that parents have the most important role to play in guiding their children to be discerning users of the Internet. Hence, parents should be equipped with the knowledge of the Internet to enable them to guide their children. To empower parents, PAGi embarks on its outreach programmes to create awareness among parents and provide them with the necessary knowledge.*

## Introduction

The Internet, a word that conjures different meanings to different groups of people. To the children, it could be a fun place to meet people and play interactive games; to the adults, a vast resource for information and knowledge; to those with ulterior motives, a place to target victims, young or old.

In recent years, technology, especially the Internet has become very much of our lives, with more people using it for education, communication and entertainment purposes. Adults and children, while able to benefit from the vast information that the Internet can provide, could also be exposed to the risks from the Internet. How then can we make the Internet a safer place for people, especially children? To encourage the healthy development of the Internet, the Media Development Authority (MDA)<sup>1</sup> of Singapore adopts three approaches which comprise joint government and industry initiatives as well as public involvement.

## Singapore's Initiatives in Promoting Internet Safety

The approaches that are used to promote a safer Internet environment are through:

- A “Light Touch” regulatory framework;
- Encouraging industry self-regulation and
- Promoting online safety awareness through public education.

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<sup>1</sup> Formerly the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA), before the official merger with the Films and Publications Department and Singapore Films Commission in Jan 2003.

## **“Light Touch” Regulatory Framework**

The MDA of Singapore, which promotes and regulates the media, adopts a “light touch” approach in regulating content on the Internet. MDA’s Class Licence Conditions and Internet Code of Practice set minimum standards for the industry and facilitate the healthy growth of the Internet. The key concerns of the Internet policy are pornography, violence as well as content that endangers racial and religious harmony. While Internet Service Providers are not required to monitor the Internet or its users, they have to limit public access to 100 websites that are contrary to societal values, as a symbolic statement of our core societal concerns.

### **Encouraging Industry Self-Regulation**

The industry is encouraged to self-regulate and set its own standards. Content providers in Singapore are encouraged to label their sites and to adopt the Industry Content Codes of Practice, which can be used to promote greater industry self-regulation and complement existing Internet content regulations.

To maintain an open channel of communication with the industry and the public to fine-tune the policies to facilitate the growth of the Internet, while ensuring that societal concerns are protected, the National Internet Advisory Committee (NIAC) was set up in 1996. NIAC, an advisory body made up of representatives from the industry drawn from a wide cross section of society, is a key group which provides regular feedback to MDA. It advises MDA on the regulation of electronic information services and the development of the Internet industry and provides advice and feedback on MDA’s policies and regulatory framework for the Internet.

### **Public Education**

The setting up of the Parents Advisory Group for the Internet (PAGi) was a major public education initiative facilitated by the then-Singapore Broadcasting Authority. Its objectives are to create a fun and safe surfing environment for the children and to create awareness of the importance of online safety among parents.

## **What is the Parents Advisory Group for the Internet?**

PAGi was set up in November 1999 with a mission to empower parents and educate the public on the positive and safe use of the Internet. It serves as a support network for concerned parents to share their thoughts on guiding children to use the Internet with discernment. Being a non-profit organisation, PAGi’s activities are carried out by its volunteers and supported by partner organisations sharing the same cause. To date, PAGi has about 300 volunteers headed by a Steering Committee, all committed to make the Internet a safer place through their contributions. The volunteers come from all walks of life and include educators, executives of corporations, retirees and homemakers.

PAGi has always believed in empowering parents with knowledge of the Internet, so that they could in turn, guide their children. Parental involvement is also of paramount importance. When parents are interested in their children’s activities, they would be able to guide them more effectively. In order to guide their children, parents need to be mature and be responsible users of the Internet as well. They need to be aware of the benefits and risks of online content, contact and commerce. With these in mind, PAGi started its various outreach programmes to create awareness of online safety and to provide the necessary Internet skills to the parents.

### **Outreach Programmes**

Since its inception, PAGi has introduced a number of outreach initiatives. These include:

- The launch of PAGi’s first website in 1999, which serves as a platform for parents to communicate their thoughts and concerns. Other than safe surfing tips that serve as guides to parents when advising their children, information on PAGi’s activities were also provided. The website was revamped in 2002 and now incorporates a Volunteer Management System to encourage more volunteers and for members of the public to find out more about PAGi and its activities.

- Together with the UK-based Childnet International, PAGi produced a set of materials for its online safety workshops which were started in 2000. The workshops, titled “Making the Internet Journey Safe” and conducted for parents by our volunteer-trainers, provided participants with hands-on experience, information on the Internet and the opportunity to clarify their doubts.
- Since 2000, PAGi has been conducting roadshows to schools, corporate companies and community organisations. It has also participated in nation-wide exhibitions. Through these, PAGi hoped to reach out to more parents to explain to them, the importance of online safety and the familiarity with the Internet before they could guide their children effectively.
- Together with NIAC, PAGi organised the world’s first international convention on online safety in February 2001 – *Safe Surfing 2001*. The three-day convention and exhibition attracted some 400 participants consisting of educators, industry players, parents, professionals and experts from the US, UK, Germany, Japan, Australia, Hong Kong and Korea. Many participants echoed the PAGi approach for tripartite efforts of the industry, government and parents to create a fun and safe online world for children.
- PAGi organised its inaugural “PAGi Families Week” in March 2003. The event saw the efforts of various parties (including schools and educational organisations, self-help groups, voluntary welfare organisations, industry players and businesses, government bodies and Internet experts) in the cause to promote Internet safety among families. The activities, designed with the theme *Building Bonds, Surfing Safe* in mind, helped create greater awareness of online safety issues and encouraged parents to be more involved with their children’s activities including surfing the Internet together as a family. These activities included public talks by PAGi volunteers and guests speakers from Childnet International of UK and Canada’s Media Awareness Network; storytelling sessions for children at various libraries located across Singapore; roadshows at shopping malls; and a carnival-cum-exhibition, SPEEDi™’s ISLE, for families on 15 and 16 Mar.

### **Multi-Lingual Initiatives to Reach More People**

In 2000, PAGi conducted a survey to understand the perceptions of the Internet among children and parents. The findings from this survey, “Uses and Perceptions of the Internet: Children and Parents’ Perspectives” were released in 2001. One of the findings indicated a low awareness level of online dangers among non-English speaking parents. With this finding, PAGi decided to embark on its multi-lingual initiatives in year 2002 to reach this group of parents.

### **Multi-lingual Online Safety VCD**

A VCD, titled “Caught in the Web” was launched. Available in four languages, English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil, the VCD featured PAGi’s mascot, SPEEDi™ which guides families on the best way to surf the Internet. The VCD, which is given free to the public, can also be viewed from PAGi’s website. The following six issues are featured in the VCD:

- Chatting on the Internet
- Becoming addicted to the Internet
- Gaming online
- Pornography on the Internet
- Hacking, viruses, hoaxes and Internet Scams
- Search Engines – Be Smart

### **Multi-lingual Online Safety Workshops**

In order to reach the non-English speaking parents, PAGi repackaged the training materials and translated them into the four official languages, namely English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, to cater to more people. The “Making the Internet Journey Safe” programme gives parents an overview of what the Internet can offer for their children, demonstrate to parents the potential dangers their children can be exposed to and also, safety measures on creating a safe surfing environment. These hands-on workshops are conducted by PAGi volunteers at schools, corporations and grassroots organisations.

## **Multi-lingual brochures**

PAGi's brochures are also available in the four official languages, bringing across the message that language is not a barrier in promoting Internet safety. These brochures contained essential information on the Internet, online safety issues and safe surfing tips.

## **PAGi's collaborations with local organisations**

Being a relatively small and young organisation, PAGi understands that importance of collaborations with other organisations to promote its cause. Together with the ONE Learning Place<sup>2</sup> (OLP), PAGi brought the online safety workshops to members of the public. Based on the training materials, OLP's trainers guided participants through a hands-on course which would provide them the necessary Internet knowledge to guide their children. With self-help groups such as the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA)<sup>3</sup> and MENDAKI<sup>4</sup>, the workshops were introduced to the local Indian and Malay communities. Grassroots organisations such as the People's Association<sup>5</sup> also conduct these workshops at the community clubs targeting at non-English speaking parents.

PAGi also collaborates with TOUCH Youth Services<sup>6</sup> on Project CruSH, a public education campaign and e-mentoring programme designed to inculcate safe surfing values in local youths. PAGi also provides parents with the necessary knowledge on online safety tips and tools. Knowledge Village, a private IT training company in Singapore conducts training courses for members of the public and schools on a voluntary basis for PAGi.

## **International Collaborations**

The effective campaigns that PAGi had launched would not have come about without the collaborations with like-minded international organisations which had rendered assistance to PAGi. With these collaborations, PAGi was able to learn from these organisations how online safety programmes were carried out in their countries. Childnet International co-developed the public education programme on online safety with PAGi. With help from CyberAngels based in the United States, a team of *Cyber Mums & Dads* was set up to source for fun and educational websites for children. These were posted on the PAGi home page. The Online Internet Institute from the United States, also spoke to local parents and educators on online safety issues. In addition, PAGi is also a member of the Internet Content Rating Association (ICRA) which gives PAGi more opportunities to learn from like-minded organisations, the strategies they have for creating a safe surfing environment for the children.

## **Family Access Networks**

Other than these outreach programmes, PAGi also encourages the use of filtering tools such as the Family Access Networks (FAN), offered by the three local Internet Service Providers (ISPs), that would help Internet users better manage theirs and their children's use of the Internet. The FAN filters out a large number of pornographic as well as other undesirable sites and provide an optional, hassle-free network solution to parents who are unfamiliar with the use of stand-alone filtering software such as CyberPatrol and NetNanny. The use of FAN is also strongly encouraged by the NIAC.

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<sup>2</sup> The ONE Learning Place (OLP) is a subsidiary of the National Library Board, Singapore which offers various computer courses to the members of the public at a low cost.

<sup>3</sup> The SINDA is a self-help group that was formed in August 1991 to address the pressing educational and socio-economic issues facing the Indian community in Singapore. Details of its objectives and activities can be accessed via its website: [www.sinda.org.sg](http://www.sinda.org.sg)

<sup>4</sup> MENDAKI was set up 20 years ago to uplift the Malay/Muslim community. Since then, many have moved up the socio-economic ladder. The community is now poised to pursue Excellence. Its mission is to navigate, empower and position the Malay/Muslim community at the forefront of excellence. Its website is [www.mendaki.org.sg](http://www.mendaki.org.sg)

<sup>5</sup> One of the missions the People's Association is to provide affordable access to lifeskill and lifestyle activities. More details on its activities can be accessed via: [www.pa.org.sg](http://www.pa.org.sg)

<sup>6</sup> TOUCH Youth Services is the youth arm of TOUCH Community Services which reaches out to students with a gamut of mentoring programmes, camps and workshops. More details could be found on [www.touchnet.org.sg/service.htm](http://www.touchnet.org.sg/service.htm)

## **Achievement**

With these outreach programmes and initiatives, PAGi had reached out to more than 50,000 parents over the past three years, empowering them with the knowledge to enable them to guide their children to be discerning users of the Internet.

## **Conclusion**

While there are tools and technologies available to assist parents to monitor the Internet usage of their children, PAGi feels that parental involvement is of paramount importance. When parents are more involved in the activities of their children, they are able to understand the needs and concerns of the children. With these understanding, they would be able to guide their children on the proper use of the Internet more effectively. In turn, parents can inculcate values in their children which will enable them to face the challenges in their life in the local community and the larger world. Notwithstanding the importance of parental involvement, PAGi feels that making the Internet a safe place for all the surf also requires a tripartite cooperation between the public, industry players and the government.

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