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Chatterbox - A Standard for Chat Rooms

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Abstract / Executive Summary

The creation of a Standard is proposed to address Chat Room related problems. A number of solutions to Chat Room problems are presented and the creation of a Standard is proposed to have Third Party Validation i.e. external auditors, verify the implementation of each partial solution.

For example, logging of Chat Room conversations is known to frighten paedophiles away from Chat Rooms as it creates a paper trail to get convictions. Another example is having basic Web Cam features to make use of 'multiple identities' difficult, alarms on Chat Room logs to assist supervisors etc.

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1 Overview

Unlike other solutions this solution requires the creation of an organisation that will maintain this solution. This organisation will keep up to date with the problems associated with Chat rooms and modify the Chatterbox standard accordingly.

This solution should also monitor levels of problems i.e. it is difficult to say whether or not major problems exist. One recent murder, linked by the media to a Chat Room, later turned out to have no connection with Chat Rooms. On the other hand there are many well-documented incidents centred on chat rooms. Hopefully this organisation will be better positioned to ascertain facts about problems and then through the media warn users and take steps towards solutions.

Other reasons to create an organisation will become apparent as I describe the solution.

2 Concepts

Here follow some brief descriptions/discussions of concepts relevant to this and other Internet solutions.

2.1 Third Party Validation

On reading documentation from a foreign charity I noticed that even though this charity claimed to be affiliated with Trocaire in Ireland. Trocaire did not reference this charity on its web site. To use third party validation in this context the 'unknown' charity would have a link to the Trocaire web site, on their web site. The link would direct the user to a page in Trocaire's web site where they list affiliated organisations.

The idea is that the third party confirms the relationship on their web site. You don't need to trust the second party. They assert their honesty by displaying the link to the third party.

Other examples:

- Companies with ISO9000 could have links to their external auditor's web site i.e. a link to a page listing that company as a compliant company.

- To eliminate scams, the National Lottery could advocate other lotteries in Ireland. So lotteries that use language like 'minimum cash prize is $10,000' would have to remove the word cash here in order to be advocated by the National Lottery i.e. the above statement usually hides very low value non-cash prizes.

Suppose we create a standard that Chat Rooms can choose to adhere to. Third Party Validation means that a third party who audits a web site for compliance can list that web site on their own web site. For example, the Internet Advisory Board (in Ireland www.IAB.ie) could list web sites in Ireland that comply with this standard. If we create a logo to represent the standard then the Chat Room web site can display the logo. On clicking on the logo, a window will appear showing the appropriate page in the Internet Advisory Boards web site confirming compliance of that web site.

Web Browsers could help TPV by displaying a special window that clearly displays the home address and is created/formatted in a manner that cannot be counterfeited using web technologies i.e. it must be clear that the browser is showing the data, not a window made up on the Internet.

2.2 Legally Enforced Honesty

Legally Enforced Honesty is simply the idea that it would be illegal to display a logo without complying with the standard that the logo represents.

Legally Enforced Honesty may be necessary if paedophiles create web sites that claim to support the Chatterbox standard but in fact do not. An alternative way to support this standard is to use Fabel labels. Fabel is not describes here – see www.TheFutureIsBright.net.

2.3 *Honesty, Dishonesty and Channels of Communication*

Face to face communications allow for the greatest number of channels of communication i.e. rich channels of communication like verbal and body language.

Telephone conversations eliminate visual means of communication. However verbal communication is still so rich in data that lies, shock etc. can all be communicated verbally.

Historically text based communications were confined to letters. However with the advent of Chat Rooms, email and text messaging, levels of text based communication have increased dramatically.

Text messages and emails are usually with people we know. Chat Rooms however are open to strangers entering the conversation. The problem is that our ability to detect lies and assess levels of trustworthiness decrease as the number of channels of communication decrease.

Worse still people who want to lie or hide something will be attracted to Chat Rooms. The range of people who have something to hide include paedophiles and rapists who think using the Internet to find victims will make it more difficult for police to link them to the crime.

In the long term Broadband should help resolve the problem as Broadband will facilitate the creation of multimedia Chat Rooms i.e. Chat Rooms with audio, even video. Simply providing a poor quality image of the people in the Chat Room will deny individuals the ability to forge multiple identities, just one of the problems that arises in Chat Rooms.

However problems with text based Chat Rooms still need to be resolved.

3 Requirements

Problems associated with Chat Rooms vary according to the people using them and what they are doing. No one set solution can be adopted. Instead a number of different partial solutions that we can assemble final solutions from is the approach adopted here. Here follow a number of partial solutions:

3.1 Sponsors

Simply restrict membership of a Chat Room by having a 'sponsor' who controls access. The best example of this is a Chat Room with membership restricted to students in a particular class in school. Though children are not the only ones who can benefit from this partial solution.

Recently a woman went missing after meeting with a person she befriended in a Chat Room. Having membership sponsored could protect 'Singles' Chat Rooms, where adults meet up. Simply go to a local Internet Café where the proprietors will take your photo and copy two forms of ID (that have your address on them) and then get your membership sponsored by that Internet Café. In this way individuals who want to find victims would know that a paper trail exists to link them to their victim. Sure some people will say I'm being alarmist and that this is not necessary, but this is just what that rapists and murders will say – think about it! Since this system is optional some Chat Rooms will adopt the system while others will not. In this way people who do not want the system can opt out and market forces will shape the chat room industry. Also criteria for sponsorship will be decided by the sponsoring organisation.

3.2 Logging

It is already common knowledge that paedophiles and other predictors avoid Chat Rooms that log all conversations. This is because the log of conversations can be used as evidence to get a conviction. Also investigators can use it to find the criminal. This partial solution has two forms as indicated by the following scenarios:

Scenario 1
Chat Rooms that children and teenagers use should all be logged as minors are vulnerable to predictors and bullies. This logging should take place on the server.

Scenario 2
Adults see logging of conversations as an invasion of privacy. A work around is for Chat Client software to log conversations on the client computer. In this way users have privacy but they also have logs of their own conversations. Users need only turn on this feature if they are concerned about people they are meeting in Chat Rooms. At one end of the spectrum this could be seen as romantic if a person meets their future partner through a Chat Room. At the other end of the spectrum it could act as evidence to aid investigations and prosecutions in the event of a crime.

3.3 Alarms

A number of Police forces around the world monitor Chat Rooms. Alarms are intended to increase the productivity of police monitoring chat rooms by using software to search current and previous conversations. Increased productivity will allow Police to monitor more chat rooms. Alarms, in this context, are simply software alarms that are triggered by various entries in the conversation logs.

Examples of Alarms include incorrect spellings like 'se)(' or in this case correct spelling would also trigger an alarm. Alarms would only be appropriate for children's Chat Rooms. Adults would not want or need such monitoring.

Various levels of Alarms could be defined that will correspond to different risk levels, different levels of monitoring and different requirements. Hence the standard would indicate the level of monitoring and the level of sophistication of its alarm set. Parents could then decide whether or not to allow their children access.

Alarms could also be fitted to the Client software so parents could keep an eye on their children. Personally I prefer the approach described next, rather than allowing children to access unsafe/unrestricted Chat Rooms.

Postscript
Alarms are really a last line of defence. Personally I prefer some of the instant messaging type solutions that facilitate communication with your friends, rather than Chat Room type situations that are open to strangers. Any organisation that works with Chat Rooms should also review other Internet communication technologies as many of them are both safe and suitable alternatives to Chat Rooms.

3.4 Fabel Labels or other labelling system.

Personally I have no interest in Chat Rooms and find this kind of human interaction strange. I like to be able to hear the person or see and hear them. Some parents will agree with this and will want to deny their children access to Chat Rooms. A labelling system, for Internet Censorship, could also be used to label types of Chat Room, allowing parents and teachers to control their children's access to Chat Rooms.

Fabel is a proposed labelling system. See www.TheFutureIsBright.net for a description of Fabel.

3.5 Web Cam Functionality

One documented incident involved a teenager who used over 100 different identities in Chat Rooms. Even with 'Dial-Up' basic Web Cam functionality can be added to Chat Room software. Clearly the creation of multiple disguises is a laborious task. As such inclusion of any Web Cam functionality should reduce this type of behaviour and associated activities i.e. whatever objective the multiple identities were created to achieve.

4 Implementation

Some people will not want any of these features in their Chat Rooms. Others will want all of them. Some Chat Rooms will claim to provide these features, to get customers, and later will be found out not to be keeping or creating logs etc.

Hence, I propose the creation of a standard called 'Chatterbox'. A portion of the standard will represent each partial solution. A recognisable logo for 'Chatterbox' should be created. Then in any given region/country we can designate external auditors who will audit web sites and award 'certification for compliance with the standard'. They can then display the Chatterbox logo on their web site (or software for client based logging/alarms) and the logo will be a link to the external auditors web site i.e. Third Party Validation.

Example
The Internet Advisory Board (IAB) in Ireland could audit web sites and award certification for compliance with the Chatterbox standard. These web sites would then display the Chatterbox logo, which would be a link to the Internet Advisory Boards web site.

The logo, and the IAB validation page, could indicate the level of compliance e.g. a children's school Chat Room with server logging, monitored alarms and restricted/sponsored access could display the Chatterbox logo with a 'AAA' rating or *** rating.

Why 'Chatterbox'?
Chatterbox is relatively inoffensive. If we called it 'ChildSafe', 'KidsChat' etc. teenagers would be offended as they wish to be treated as adults and would try to avoid the system, leaving them open to predictors.

In order to convince teenagers that this system is for their own good actual incidents should be documented, so they can convince themselves of the benefits. Also where legitimate objections exist they system should be modified to address there concerns.