



BACKGROUND PAPER

30 years of the eco Complaints Office – 30 years of committed action against illegal online content

For 30 years, the eco – Association of the Internet Industry has been working to ensure a safe Internet. Internet users can report potentially criminal content or content harmful to young people free of charge and anonymously. The legal team at the eco Complaints Office examines the reported content and takes appropriate action where legal violations are identified.

The Complaints Office was founded in 1996 – at a time when the Internet in Germany was still in its infancy. From the outset, the aim was to take swift and effective action against illegal online content through self-regulation by the Internet industry, and in particular to strengthen the protection of minors.

Three decades later, the Internet has changed fundamentally. Platforms, social networks and new technologies shape the digital public sphere. At the same time, reporting centres such as the eco Complaints Office remain a key building block in the fight against illegal content online.

Key facts – 30 years of the eco Complaints Office

- **Established:** 1996
- **Organising body:** eco – Association of the Internet Industry
- **Role:** Reporting centre for illegal and harmful to young people content on the Internet
- Establishment of INHOPE, the international umbrella organisation for hotlines: 1999
- **Reports processed in 2025:** 51,358
- **Actual violations confirmed in 2025:** 30,035
- **Deletion rate in 2025:** 98.58 %, confirming the self-regulatory approach of “take-down instead of blocking” / 100 % for content hosted in Germany

One of the first reporting centres for illegal content on the Internet

The complaints office of eco – Association of the Internet Industry is one of the oldest Internet reporting centres in the world. Companies in the Internet industry founded it to effectively combat illegal online content and content relevant to the protection of minors.



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Since then, it has worked closely with Internet companies such as hosting providers, law enforcement agencies and international partner organisations. The aim is to remove unlawful content from the Internet as quickly as possible and, where necessary, to initiate criminal proceedings.

Users can use an online form – anonymously if they wish – to report content that may contravene German law. Legal experts then review the reports.

What content can be reported

The eco Complaints Office focuses its case handling on the protection of minors in the media and on related criminal offences. These include, amongst others:

- Depictions of sexualised violence against children and young people
- content that glorifies extreme violence
- incitement to hatred
- The dissemination of anti-constitutional propaganda and symbols
- Calls for or instructions on committing criminal offences
- Support for or promotion of terrorist or criminal organisations
- Other content harmful to young people

How the complaints office works

The team processes a complaint in several stages:

1. The complaints office receives a report of suspicious content, for example from a user via the complaints office's online form or via the INHOPE network.
2. Legal experts assess the reported content from a legal perspective.
3. If a legal infringement has occurred, the complaints office informs the relevant hosting provider or platform operator and requests that the content be removed.
4. In the case of criminal content, the team also involves law enforcement agencies.

If the content is hosted on servers abroad, the eco Complaints Office also works with international partner organisations to secure its removal.



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■ Self-regulation as a key building block

The work of the eco Complaints Office is based on the principle of self-regulation. Legal experts review reports from the public, and the office then collaborates with providers, platforms and public authorities to address them. Streamlined and coordinated processes enable swift action to be taken against prohibited online content.

■ The “Take-down instead of blocking” principle

For 30 years, the Complaints Office has followed the principle of “take-down instead of blocking”. Instead of merely blocking problematic content, it focuses on having illegal content removed directly at its source. This approach has proven to be more effective, as the content does not remain accessible via alternative routes. Close cooperation between the Internet industry, reporting centres and law enforcement agencies is essential in this regard.

■ Because the Internet knows no national borders – well connected internationally

The eco Complaints Office is part of the international INHOPE network. Because illegal content on the Internet often crosses national borders, effective action requires international cooperation. Through the network, reports of illegal content – in particular depictions of the sexual abuse of minors – can be quickly forwarded to the relevant hotline in the country of origin. INHOPE now connects more than 57 hotlines across six continents and sets common standards for handling complaints and the secure exchange of information. This enables the eco Complaints Office to efficiently track international cases and contribute to the rapid removal of illegal content.

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About eco

With around 1,000 member companies, eco (www.eco.de) is the leading association of the Internet industry in Europe. Since 1995, eco has played a key role in shaping the Internet, promoting new technologies, creating the right framework conditions and representing its members’ interests in the political arena and in international bodies. eco has offices in Cologne, Berlin and Brussels. In its work, eco is primarily committed to a high-performance, reliable and trustworthy ecosystem of digital infrastructures and services.