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Yahoo Shuts Many Chat Rooms As Minors Are Solicited for Sex

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Yahoo Inc. shut down all its user-created chat rooms, after a Houston television station reported that some were being used to solicit minors for sex, and several companies withdrew advertising from Yahoo's site.

Mary Osako, a spokeswoman for the Sunnyvale, Calif., Internet company, confirmed that the chat rooms had been closed within the past week, while Yahoo refines its behavioral rules for users. Ms. Osako declined to say how many user-created chat rooms had been on Yahoo's site, but Annalee Newitz, a policy analyst for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, estimated that there were hundreds. The action does not affect Yahoo's company-sponsored chat forums.

The move to shut the chat rooms followed a report last month by Houston TV station KPRC that some chat rooms were being used to solicit children for sex. The station said it found chat rooms with names such as "9-17-Year-Olds Wantin' Sex," and "Girls 13 and Under for Older Guys."

KPRC also reported that several companies had pulled ads from Yahoo's sites after being told that their ads had appeared in these chat rooms. Yesterday, executives at Georgia-Pacific Corp., State Farm Insurance Cos., PepsiCo Inc. and Countrywide Financial Corp. confirmed that they had removed some or all of their advertising from Yahoo, at least for a time.

"We were horrified," said Robin Keegan, spokeswoman for Georgia-Pacific in Atlanta, which pulled all of its ads from Yahoo, and has not yet returned. KPRC had reported seeing an ad for Georgia-Pacific's Brawny paper towels in a Yahoo chat room called "6 to 11 Years Old Girls

Into Older Men."

State Farm also pulled all its ads from Yahoo for a time. The Bloomington, Ill., insurance company resumed advertising on Yahoo, but not in chat rooms, "after being assured safeguards were put in place to prevent a recurrence," said spokesman Phil Supple. PepsiCo and Countrywide pulled their ads only from Yahoo chat rooms. "We don't want our name to be associated with any immoral or unethical subject matter," said Ken Preston, spokesman for Countrywide in Calabasas, Calif.

Ms. Osako, the Yahoo spokeswoman, declined to address whether Yahoo acted in response to the TV report, or the withdrawn advertising. "We are working on improvements to the service to enhance the user experience in compliance with our terms of service," she said. Yahoo currently requires users to agree to a list of behavioral terms, including not to "harm minors in any way" or to post anything that is "unlawful," "vulgar" or "obscene."

However, some critics say Internet companies don't always enforce their own rules. For example, a Georgia family sued Yahoo last month, alleging among other things that the company did not do enough to prevent their child's picture from appearing on a site aimed at pedophiles, said Adam Voyles, a Houston attorney representing the family. Yahoo officials declined to comment on the suit, filed in U.S. District Court in Texarkana, Texas, against both Yahoo and a moderator of the alleged pedophilia site.

"If they cannot be self-monitoring, then they're inviting the government to come in and protect children," said U.S. Rep. Ted Poe, a Texas Republican. But free-speech advocates warned that more aggressive government moves to restrict Internet content could run afoul of the Constitution.

Yahoo Pulls Plug On Chat Rooms Following Troubleshooter's Report

Houston Man Sues Yahoo For Hosting Rooms

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HOUSTON -- Internet giant Yahoo has cracked down on chat rooms geared toward luring children -- the same rooms exposed in Local 2's online investigation two weeks ago.

The move is being noticed by millions of Internet users from around the world. Many are outraged that their favorite chat rooms were shut down along with the sex-themed rooms.

 [Video: All Types Of Chat Rooms Pulled By Yahoo](#)

The Local 2 Troubleshooters first reported on May 30 that major sponsors pulled their ads after the station found the companies funding Yahoo chat rooms aimed at sex with children.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of chat rooms were shut down. A blank screen is all that greeted chat room users Monday.

The [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#) said the closed chat rooms would make an incredible difference in keeping children safe online.

Last month, the Troubleshooters found Yahoo! hosting a long list of chat rooms geared toward sex with children. They also found men lining up for sex meetings with kids or to trade lewd pictures.







The rooms were named the following.

- 9-17-Year-Olds Wantin' Sex
- Younger Girls 4 Older Guys

INTERNET SAFETY



ONLINE RESOURCES

-  [Search DPS Records: Find Sex Offenders In Your Neighborhood](#)
-  [Houston Area Cyber Crime Task Force](#)
-  [Tx Attorney General's Office Cyber Crimes Unit](#)
-  [NetSmartz Workshop](#)
-  [Cyber Angels.com](#)
-  [Natl. Center for Missing & Exploited Children](#)

- Girls 13 And Under For Older Guys
- Girls 13 And Up For Much Older Man
- Girls 8 to 13 Watch Boys (In A Particular Sex Act)

They were all listed under "education" chat rooms, which was blank on Monday.

Houston lawyer Adam Voyles has filed a \$10 million lawsuit against Yahoo for hosting the rooms, and he said the move is an admission that Yahoo recognizes children were being victimized, and now it's going to be fixed.

Yahoo is not commenting beyond the notice that's now printed for all chat users to read. It states, "The ability to publish user-created chat rooms is currently unavailable. We are working on improvements to this service to enhance the user experience and compliance with our terms of service," which means the rules Yahoo users are supposed to follow.

U.S. Rep. Ted Poe told the Troubleshooters last month that their broadcast put Yahoo on notice, and he also said tougher laws are needed so this cannot happen again.

"Unless the providers do some self monitoring of all of these different sites and shut them down on their own, of course, they're inviting the government to get involved into their day-to-day activities," Poe said.

The men Local 2 found trying to arrange sex meetings with children cannot find it in those rooms right now.

But there are new victims to the chat crackdown by Yahoo. Along with all the child sex rooms, the plug was pulled on hundreds of non-sex rooms and many computer users are sounding off on the Internet, saying they no longer have sites to chat about hobbies, games or even business ventures.

There is fiery reaction on the Internet. Some users are angry that user rooms about one topic were taken off, while rooms with opposing viewpoints were left up and running if Yahoo actually created them. Only the user-created rooms were shut down.

Yahoo is not talking about when it may unveil its new, more restricted chat service.

Yahoo has until next month to respond to the federal lawsuit filed by a victim of child pornography. The lawsuit accuses Yahoo of profiting from the exploitation of children in the chat rooms the Troubleshooters exposed last month.

Lawyers say other lawsuits are possible as more victims come forward.

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DISCUSSION

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