Meet the 'Avengers' of the privacy world: The 'Digital Defenders'

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There's a lot kids need to be wary of in the digital age, especially about their data and protecting it online. Communicating that to them can be tough. But sometimes it's even difficult getting adults to understand.

Enter European Digital Rights (https://edri.org/), an association of various civil and human rights groups from around the EU. Based in Brussels and established in 2002, it's committed to "defending rights and freedoms in the digital environment."

Their mission is as broad as it sounds, with organizations under its umbrella focusing on issues like copyright and privacy to net neutrality and surveillance, said Kirsten Fiedler, EDRi's managing director.

The association's myriad interests include children's privacy as well, leading it to release a comic book-based booklet, "Your guide to Digital Defenders vs. Data Intruders – Privacy for kids! (https://edri.org/files/privacy4kids_booklet_web.pdf)," in October 2016.

Developed for readers ages 10-14, the booklet uses a gang of colorfully illustrated heroes with names like "Johnny Random" and "Queen of Locks" to explain privacy and online safety concepts through their adventures fighting nemeses such as "Krazy Kookie" and "I.D. Thief." Think of them as a sort of "Avengers" for the privacy space.

Among the Digital Defenders' exploits are small word teasers and games, as well as basic, easy-to-grasp ways for young readers to protect themselves online. The booklet looks to teach kids why internet safety is important, while not completely terrifying young readers about the many digital pitfalls that could befall them if they're not careful.

EDRi has been planning a resource like this for long time coming, understanding a general need to move towards education — especially for children, Fiedler said.

"More than one year ago, we started to first look around, see what programs were already out there; some of our members were already doing work with schools and talking to kids," she said. After analyzing those tools that were already out there, EDRi immediately noticed a pattern.

"There was a big gap between information that would scare children and that would empower them to use communication tools," she said. "The internet really gives us enormous opportunity to communicate and connect with anyone else in the world. Digital technologies are super great and can be used for good, but there can be risk."

EDRi also wanted to target those on the verge of jumping into social media but not quite there yet, and who could also digest longer texts more handily. After a questionnaire established that EDRi should pursue a comic book as the medium for that age group, the association contacted German artist Gregor Sedlag to bring to life the characters and scenarios the group developed. As for the text, different EDRi employees took turns composing chapters, including Fiedler herself.

"We really thought about every single sentence that we put into the booklet, and we managed to achieve that balance of education and fun," Fiedler continued. "We want kids to really get their control back on their data and the info they put online, as there are people online who are very, very interested in learning more about them and building profiles."

The work was mainly funded by donations. "Even if we didn't reach our funding goal — we still have $1000 to go — we received a couple of donations after the booklet was released," Fiedler said. "People like to contribute to something concrete that they can hold in their hands."

"Like" is perhaps underselling how well the "Digital Defenders" comics have gone over with children, educators and parents. Between the booklet's release in October 2016 and now, it's been downloaded more than 30,000 times in English and over 50,000 times among all languages, not even counting incomplete downloads, Fiedler said. "I was really really surprised with people who just contacted us out of the blue. Teachers contacted us. People just love it."

The EDRi has already published Serbian, German, Italian, Greek, and Turkish translations of the booklet. Volunteers are working to get least 19 more translations released, which include Polish, Finish, French, Spanish, Swedish and maybe even Arabic editions, Fiedler said.

Fiedler is excited that kids will have the "Digital Defenders" to help them engage with online issues. "Being aware that you have a right to privacy is something crucial for the kids later on," she said. "It empowers them to be able to get hold of their personal security and make use of their free speech as well." After all, "privacy is just an enabler for all the other freedoms; it's a pillar for a democratic society. In that sense, this book is really important."