

Lesley Osborne, Manager Standards, ABA, spoke at the Second World Summit on Television for Children, in London on 12 March 1998. The topic was 'Flooding the World', and an edited text follows.

# Shared responsibility

## Australia's approach to regulation of Internet content

The Internet is the most global and potentially participative of communications media. Australian children may not see Blue Peter on their television but they can enjoy the offerings of the Blue Peter Web site. Similarly, children with Internet access in the UK, Europe or South America can go to the Australian Children's Television Foundation Web site. Today such sites provide interactive activities and information associated with television programs but we are approaching the day when programs themselves will be accessible via Internet technology to children worldwide.

We see how easily the Internet will give children access to material not available to them locally. This challenges the concept of audiences, and underscores the importance of the Internet to children's program makers and broadcasters. There will also be a future regulation of broadcasting and telecommunications which is beginning to gain the attention of governments and regulators. However, I will focus on one of the immediate challenges: the explosion of all kinds of material on-line and its availability to children.

In the new territory of cyberspace, governments are treading warily. They are seeking policies which ensure that the values advanced in traditional media to protect children and enrich their experience are promoted on-line, together with other prized values as freedom of expression. In Australia we use the term co-regulation to describe the approach which recognises that governments cannot impose regulatory solutions in cyberspace. Instead there is a

shared role for industry, users and government.

Can governments control cyberspace? No. Can regulators protect children from the forbidden zones of the Internet? Again no. How then can we ensure that the values advanced in traditional media to protect children and enrich their experience are promoted on-line? The Australian approach recognises the shared role for industry, government, and users. It closely parallels developments at the international level.

### Why has Australia taken a lead?

Australia has good reason to be at the forefront of global debate regarding the Internet and its implications for communications. We have found that a majority of Australian youth was using the Internet.

Once Australians realised that children could access images and information on the Internet that were not easily available in print, television and other media, there was concern that familiar safeguards were absent in cyberspace.

### Protecting children in cyberspace

In devising a regulatory framework for the new medium, an initial concern was children's security and protection from harmful material. At the same time, we recognised that the promotion of an Australian presence on-line was an important longer-term goal in ensuring that the Internet experience is educational, entertaining and relevant for Australian children.

We focused on two kinds of material.

The first category is often called 'illegal material' and includes child pornography, excessively violent material and instruction in crime. The second category is material which may be unsuitable or harmful for children, and includes sexually explicit or violent material. This material is legal for adults to consume, but its sale or distribution to those under the age of 18 is restricted. This second category of so-called 'adult' material is more easily accessed than illegal material, although it is sometimes accompanied by warnings or credit card requirements.

To develop a practical strategy for dealing with Internet content issues, we need an understanding of the nature of the on-line environment.

Unlike broadcasters, service providers generally cannot be held responsible for material flowing through their system. This responsibility primarily rests with content providers.

### Options for action

Clearly, there are limits to the role of government, but effective and workable on-line policies can be developed with the co-operation of governments, enforcement agencies, content and service providers, and users.

Following the ABA's 1996 investigation into the content of on-line services the Australian Government will implement the proposed regulatory framework shortly. It will be based on:

- codes of practice developed by the on-line service provider industry in consultation with the ABA, and monitored by the ABA through a complaints process;

- enforcing criminal law penalising dealings with illegal on-line content;
- promoting the use by parents and teachers of filter software and content labelling to limit children's access to harmful content;
- international collaboration between government and industry organisations grappling with the same problems; and
- encouraging greater community awareness of Internet content issues.

### Codes of practice

Codes of practice are the responsibility of the Internet industry and establish general standards of behaviour for industry participants. Codes are more flexible than legislation. They enable the industry to develop appropriate practices to protect consumer interests in relation to content and other matters, while recognising the practical and technical difficulties inherent in this.

Existing draft codes demonstrate the industry's desire to establish confidence in and encourage use of the Internet. They set out procedures to deal with and, where possible, remove from Australian servers on-line material which would be refused classification in Australia. But this can only be expected when the service provider is made aware of the illegal material. The co-operation of industry, government agencies and police to implement a network of hotlines for reporting is providing a coordinated international approach in this area.

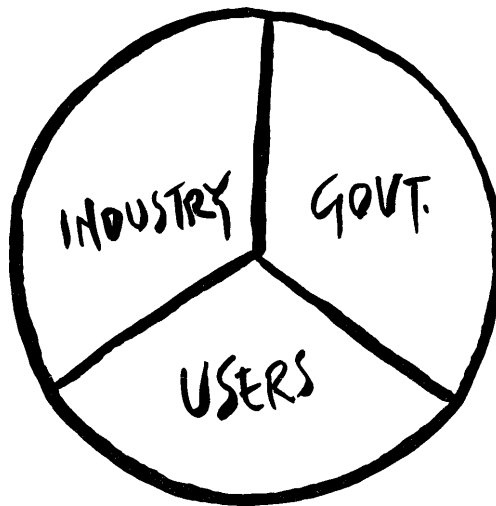
Service providers are obliged to provide information to content providers about their responsibilities and obligations regarding the type of content they can place on the Internet. They can also support systems for managing access to material considered unsuitable for children.

### Children's access

The community cannot rely on familiar systems of content classification and censorship on the Internet. The most effective means of limiting children's access to 'adult' material on the Internet can be applied by the end user. This approach also allows adults the right to access material which is legally

available to them in other media.

Parents, teachers and other supervisors must have the main responsibility for setting the ground rules and helping children use the Internet. Filter software, which relies on a third party making judgements about the suitability of content, raises questions about the criteria used for such evaluation.



The Platform for Internet Content Selection (PICS) provides additional options for parents. PICS is a technical standard which provides the possibility of self-rating or third-party labelling, using a rating system such as the that of the Recreational Software Advisory Council (RSAC). Parents with PICS-compatible software can use the labels to block Internet content according to their own values and standards. Users have a choice as to whether or not to activate these tools at their own computers.

The ABA considers that the interests of Australian content providers and users would be best served by using a labelling scheme which has international acceptance.

### International trends

The International Working Group on Content Rating is an example of the global collaboration required in the new communications' age. The ABA has been closely monitoring international developments regarding the regulation of the Internet.

The European Commission's Working

Party on Illegal and Harmful Material on the Internet has recently proposed the development of a code of conduct for European Internet service providers. It has recommended that content providers should be encouraged to label their documents with PICS-compatible labels and has made funds available to develop systems suitable for European content providers and users.

### Community education

To realise the effectiveness of these initiatives for the benefit of children, they must be supported by community education. Many in this generation of parents and teachers are not skilled in computer technology and the Internet. They have a limited understanding of the issues surrounding its use and would have difficulty applying technical and other options for protecting children on-line. While some may rely on their children for computer instruction, they do not want to surrender their supervisory role and would like to help unlock the riches of the Internet for those in their care.

I know that a number of educational projects have been initiated to help demystify the Internet and provide information and instill technical confidence in parents and teachers. But I'm sure we can do this better to reach the target audience particularly at the point when Internet access is first being organised.

The need for community education including helping kids become 'net savvy' will increase as more services tailored to children's needs for on-line, and special 'green spaces' or 'white lists' of quality content attract young users. Content creators, broadcasters and computer and telecommunications organisation are joining together to produce these services. We all have an interest in children and their families knowing about these services, and not being deterred from using them because of fear of harmful content.

In conclusion, regulation alone is not the answer. Governments must work with the Internet industry and the community to protect children on-line, in order that children positively integrate the Internet into their learning and leisure.