

The ABA's Director, Industry Performance and Review, Andree Wright represented the ABA at the UNESCO hosted international symposium entitled 'Freedom of Expression in the Information Society' in Paris on 15-16 November 2002. The event was held in preparation for the World Summit on the Information Society in December 2003 in Geneva.



UNESCO and the information society

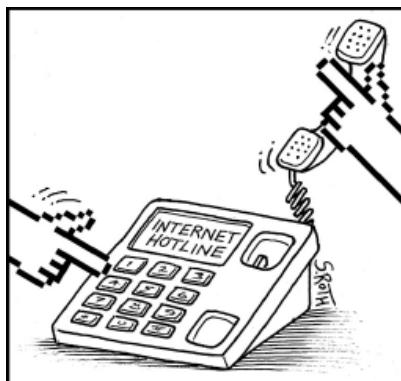
The Paris meeting convened three roundtable sessions to explore the possibilities and limitations of cyberspace in regard to freedom of expression; the obstacles that limit the exercise of that freedom; and the ways in which regulatory measures could preserve freedom of expression while dealing with cybercrimes.

The ABA's Andree Wright participated on the third roundtable session with Christophe Poirel (Council of Europe); Jean-Christophe Le Torquin (French Internet Industry Association); Pierre Trudel (University of Montreal) and Mr Chakravarti (Ministry of Communications and Information Technology). The ABA presented the Australian co-regulatory scheme for Internet content as a case study, drawing parallels where appropriate with the European Commission's Safer Internet Action Plan, e-Safe.

Both schemes place national initiatives within an international perspective, with the key components of the Australian scheme being a complaints hotline, industry developed codes of practice, and community education. Australia's scheme endeavours to balance adults' rights to freedom of expression with protection of children from illegal and unsuitable content on a global medium. It is a scheme that incorporates formal review points and mechanisms in order to maintain flexibility in adapting to technological and social changes.

The vital role played by hotlines was emphasised by the ABA in ensuring

prompt action in investigating illegal material such as child pornography, particularly when hotlines operate as an international network. A network of 16 accredited hotlines, known as INHOPE, links 14 countries: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, the United Kingdom and the USA. Some INHOPE hotlines, such as the



Internet Watch Foundation (UK) are industry initiatives; others such as the Cybertipline (USA) are community-based and privately sponsored. Others such as the ABA hotline are government-based or child welfare initiatives such as Save the Children (Denmark).

Based on the experience of the Australian scheme to date, the ABA endorsed the principles which frame the guidelines under which online complaints are investigated:

- adults should be able to read, hear and see what they want

- minors should be protected from material likely to harm or disturb them
- everybody should be protected from exposure to unsolicited material that they find offensive.

In concluding, the ABA stated that it is important to:

- build on best practice initiatives and guidelines already developed (such as the best practice principles for hotlines developed by the Bertelsmann Foundation's International Network of Experts on Content Self-Regulation)
- encourage partnerships between industry, government and the community with roles clearly defined roles and mindful of cultural considerations
- have checks and balances in place via appeal mechanisms, regular reviews and transparent processes in order to balance freedom of expression and protection of individual and collective rights in cyberspace. Promote awareness and education initiatives that are carefully targeted to particular audiences, address their needs and reach those audiences effectively in order to foster an informed Internet user community:

- review and adapt to take account of technological and social changes
- think globally, act locally.



Papers presented at the symposium and the final report are available at www.unesco.org/comnat/france.