The challenge of on-line content regulation with a global reach can be met, according to Chairman of the ABA, Mr Peter Webb, who was addressing the Electronic Commerce Australia 1996 National Conference at the Hilton Hotel, Sydney.

International basis emerging for Internet regulation

"Internet commerce is destined to fundamentally reshape the relationship between sellers and buyers. In order to reach its full potential, such a 'marketspace' must be able to provide personalised service and this is the way things are going. But many people won't embrace this new system and take it into their homes unless there are tools available to moderate their children's use of the system,' Mr Webb said.

As it happens, an enormously co-operative industry approach has already swept the on-line services industry down the path of responsibility towards an objectively labelled, but uncensored, Internet.

Two major industry initiatives, designed to operate in together, will give individual users the power to select or block access to Internet materials in a way that best reflects their own tastes and standards. They are the Platform for Internet Content Selection (PICS), a set of standards providing an open labelling platform that can be incorporated as browser software; and a descriptive labelling system, such as the RSACi system offered by the Recreational Software Advisory Council.

'While considerable work still needs to be done on encouraging Internet labelling, there are, I believe, certain phenomena that resonate across racial and cultural boundaries as matters about which all humans are cautious of introducing to their children,' Mr Webb said.

'These things are violence, particularly gratuitous violence or extreme sexual violence; the power of language to offend; and sexuality and nudity. These matters form a core of community concerns that cut across cultural and geographic frontiers. They form a

real basis upon which international co-operation and debate about Internet regulation might be founded.'

'With international acknowledgment of these core community concerns, and equippe by industry, not by government with PICS and an RSACi-type system, all the elements of a global regulatory consensus are emerging.'

Investigation into the content of on-line services

In July 1996 the ABA completed its investigation into the content of on-line services and presented its report to the Minister for Communications and the Arts, Senator Richard Alston.

In its report the ABA recommended that a substantially self regulatory framework be developed for on-line services in Australia. One of the features of the proposed self-regulatory regime recommended by the ABA was the development of voluntary Internet content labelling schemes which will provide parents and supervisors with options to protect minors from material which may be harmful to them.

The report found that the Internet and other on-line services offer an unprecedented amount of variety, as well as quantity, of information and entertainment from around the world. However, many parents and supervisors of minors consider that some of this material is inappropriate for minors.

In considering strategies to limit children's access to material which is unsuitable for them, the ABA recognised the difficulties in attempting to apply on-line the existing classification models for television, films, videos and publications which tend to be centralised with a high level of government

input. In the ABA's view, the vast quantity of material and the decentralised nature of the Internet requires a new approach to limiting children's access on the Internet.

Platform for Internet Content Selection

In the course of investigating this issue, the on-line community brought to the ABA's attention recent international developments with content and selection software which have provided the technology for labelling of on-line material.

This technology is called the Platform for Internet Content Selection (PICS). PICS was developed by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). World Wide Web Consortium is a non-governmental cross-industry group which has offices in USA, France and Japan and comprises representatives of the computer, communications and content industries, as well as trade associations and public interest groups.

The goal of PICS is to 'facilitate the development of technologies to give users of interactive media, such as the Internet, control over the kinds of material which they and their children have access. PICS members believe that individuals, groups and businesses should have easy access to the widest possible range of content selection products, and a diversity of voluntary rating systems'.

PICS allows for flexible selection and/or blocking of Internet content. It is designed to enable individuals, whether they be parents, teachers, or administrators to set their software to select or block access, at least at certain times, to their computers from certain Internet

resources, without censoring what is available to other users who do not wish to block sites.

PICS does not provide selection software or a labelling system. It merely establishes conventions for label formats so that others can label Internet content and PICS compatible software can interact with the labels.

There is a number of ways that PICS labels can be used. Its sponsors offer the following examples of its flexibility and utility:

• the Weisenthal Centre, which is concerned about Nazi propaganda and other hate-speech available on-line, could label material that is historically inaccurate or that promotes hate;

• a teacher might label a set of NASA photographs and block access to everything else for the duration of an astronomy lesson;

• businesses may want to prevent their employees from visiting recreational sites during hours of peak network usage; and

• we may also see the rise of labelling intermediaries who pay a royalty to a values-orientated organisation, such as the Boy Scouts, for the right to label resources with the Boy Scouts logo, according to criteria set by the Boy Scouts.

Parents wishing to exercise some control over the material that a child may access can set the PICS compatible browser to block out any Internet material that has been labelled to indicate that it contains sexual or violent material.

The development of labelling schemes

The PICS system allows any organisation or individual to develop a labelling system which reflects their tastes and standards and, if they wish, share these labels with other Internet users.

Labelling can be applied directly by content providers when a site is posted on the Internet or it can be applied by a third party in accordance with an established labelling system. A number of organisations have already begun to establish labelling schemes which can interact with the PICS standards.

One labelling scheme to emerge is the Recreational Software Advisory Council (RSAC). RSAC has pioneered a novel approach to 'self-disclosure ratings'. The RSAC rating model asks producers of media products to complete an electronic questionnaire about the depiction of sex and nudity, violence and language.

The questionnaire is intended to be easy-to-use and quick to complete. It is
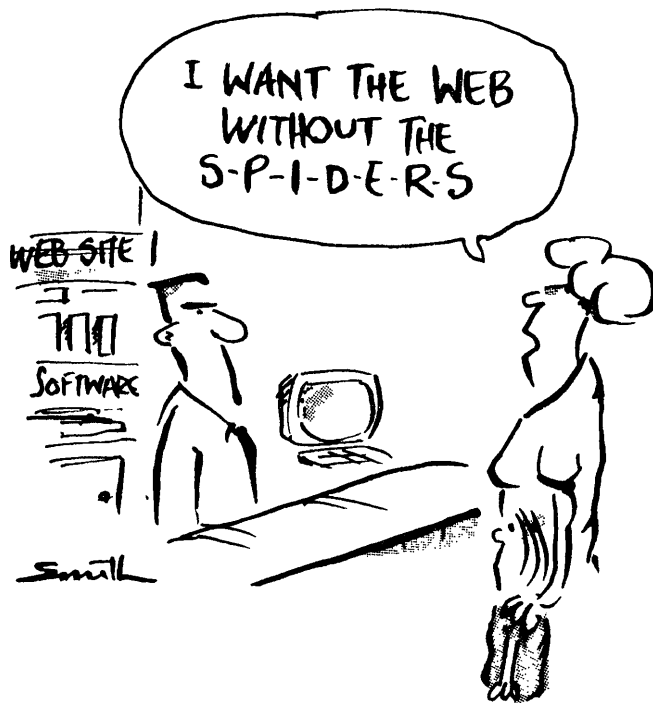
structured in a branched tree format so that the person carrying out the rating need only answer 'yes' or 'no' to a series of questions.

The answers to the questionnaire automatically determine a rating level for the particular content category, and because this model provides for the automatic determination of ratings based on a standardised questionnaire, it leaves little room for political or economic influences on the ratings process. Sites which have been labelled using the RSAC questionnaire are given a rating from one to four on the topics sex, nudity, violence and language.

It is important to note that the RSAC system has the ability to rate an entire Web site under one label, or rate individual sections or pages within a site, depending on the detail which the person rating the site wishes to provide.

Parents who are concerned about sexual content can set their PICS compatible software to block out material which has been given a high rating for sexual content. Other parents may be more concerned about language and/or violence and so can also can set their software to block out highly rated material of this nature.

Those who do not want to block their own access to Internet materials need not activate those tools, but those who wish to do so for their own sake, or for the sake of others in their care, can do so in a fashion that best reflects their own tastes and standards.

The ABA notes that Microsoft's new Browser, the Internet Explorer 3.0 has incorporated the PICS and RSAC standards. The ABA hopes that Netscape's new browser, Communicator, will also contain them. CompuServe (US and Europe) has agreed to rate all of its content with the RSAC system and organisations such as Playboy and CNet have already rated their sites.

RSAC has also been supported by popular blocking software companies Microsystems Software, Spyglass Inc. (formerly SurfWatch) and id Software, the makers of the popular video game Doom.

The ABA believes that there will be a commercial imperative for many content providers to label their content to maximise the access to those utilising PICS compatible software.

Non-commercial sites such as libraries and government entities may also rate their sites so that PICS users may gain access with confidence by those using the PICS system. ⊠