

Nigel Williams, director of Childnet International, recently visited Australia to promote the Childnet awards. *ABA Update* caught up with him to find out about Childnet and how to win one of those awards.

Protecting children



What is Childnet?

Childnet is a non-profit organisation concerned with promoting children's interests in international communications.

There are two aspects to that work. The first highlights the positive ways children can benefit from changes in communications and the second is safe use of the new communications. We are talking about interactive communications, ones in which children can directly participate on a daily basis, and so therefore do not include television or radio.

We are also looking at ways to gain worldwide cooperation on these issues.

We started two years ago in the UK and our headquarters are in London, and we have an representative office in the US.

What are Childnet's aims?

We want to protect children when they use a new communication system.

In a way the Internet is like a new city that is now available for children to explore. In a conventional city parents understand the need for advice on children's safety, for example, crossing busy roads or places where it is unsafe for children to go. Our aim is to promote what will make that new city of the Internet safe, pleasant, beneficial and good for children.

How will you do that?

We are seeking to persuade and/or enable the

main players to live up to their responsibilities. There are three types of players: the industry, governments and parents. What this means is that we need to do some advocacy work, including encouraging governments and persuading international organisations to take their responsibilities seriously. So we are seeking to act, if you like, as the mortar or cement bringing these groupings together to promote the kind of dialogue that is necessary.

We are also directly seeking to provide resources and present opportunities that will be of benefit to children. We want to say, 'here is an example of what can be done'. That is why we have a site on the Web, the 'Launch Site', that has examples of really positive interactive things for kids. Parents and teachers can go there for help too. If children in Wales want to link up their school class with a class in California and another one in Sydney we want to help them do that. So the site is available and the text is in three languages other than English [Spanish, French and German].

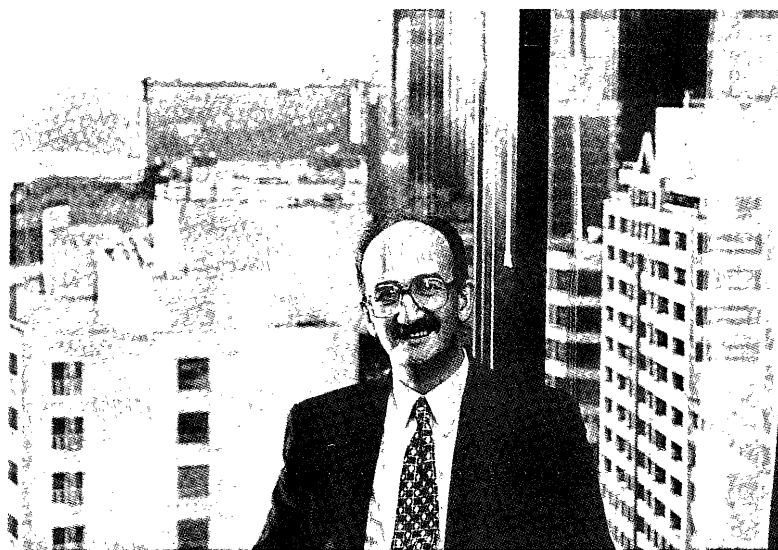
At the moment the Internet is English dominated and Childnet would like to see it include other languages.

We have also launched an awards scheme to highlight what industry, non-profit organisations, parents, teachers and children have done that is of benefit to children. It has just been launched worldwide, with the sponsorship of Cable and Wireless plc, and will soon be promoted further in Australia with support from Optus. A leaflet will be sent to every school in Australia at the end of July and the Web site is up and running already. As part of the prize, any school, individual or company or non-profit organisation who wins will go to London to accept the award.

The awards scheme is a worldwide project and we have a three year commitment from our sponsors. We would love to bring the awards ceremony to Sydney one year.

What response has there been to Childnet?

The encouraging thing for us is that the industry, and governments, have accepted that there is a need for what we are doing. They see there is a role for those whose interest is what benefits children.



How does Childnet fit in to what's already happening in Australia?

One of the advantages we have as an international organisation is that we have an overview of what's happening around the world.

I think the ABA has played a crucial role already. In terms of quality of studies done on content on the Internet, the ABA's report [*Investigation into the content of on-line services*] stands out as being better researched and more comprehensive than most.

Also, the ABA has recognised that you need to look internationally to solutions to some of these problems. Because of the constructive role the ABA has played, we feel we have been working with an ally when persuading others that we have to look internationally to solutions, and that we don't just retreat into national systems. Although some things can be done nationally the international aspect is very important and the ABA has recognised that in ways that some other countries have not.

Is there an equivalent regulatory process in the UK?

It is different in the UK. The lines that exist between the various media and their regulators are drawn in different places. The Internet industry has been seen as new and global, and the approaches to solving it have been pushed by the government to the industry, with some help from some of the existing regulators. It has not, for example, been sent to the Broadcasting Standards Council or the Film Classification Board to examine.

There had been considerable concern about the Internet, fuelled by some reports in the media about the types of information that are on the net. So the Internet industry in the UK set up the Internet Watch Foundation which is a non-profit group with a brief to isolate the material that is regarded as undesirable. It acts like a joint platform between government and industry keeping a weather eye on the Net. The Internet Watch Foundation runs a child pornography hotline and is investigating ratings systems.

What is the opinion at Childnet of ratings systems?

In general we support them although there are some areas of concern. If you are going to have a ratings system and identify an issue that is harmful to a child, you need to provide the right question so that the content provider will be inclined to answer it.

At the moment very few sites are rated, and the only rating systems available have been developed within the US culture. Like the ABA,

Childnet wants to see all content on the Internet rated in a system which is compatible with PICS and can be used in different cultures. It's a daunting task but one that is essential to protect children. The technology is in place — it is simply a matter of will on the part of governments, the industry and international agencies.

Is Childnet doing any research?

We have been looking into two main research areas. The first is how ratings systems work in an international arena. We have prepared a commentary on the European Commission paper *Harmful content in the Internet* which is a summary of our views.

We are also doing some research into international cooperation on hotlines for reporting child pornography. Childnet supports hotlines as a mechanism for Internet users to report material involving the abuse of children. But hotlines need to cooperate because they are all fishing in the same sea of the Internet. Standards need to be set for their operation because, as you can imagine, paedophiles would love to frustrate the work of hotlines or even infiltrate them.

What is Childnet's view of advertising on children's sites on the Internet?

This is another area where we want to do some more work. We are looking at sites that are aimed at children and we are particularly concerned about sites that ask for personal or financial details. Simple advertising is the first step, but advertisers have realised they can use the Internet to get personal details from children which allow them to analyse their market better. We have identified that there are problems with certain sites but there hasn't yet been a proper study. So the questions are: what information is being collected, and how is it being used?

Advertising on the Net is very different to advertising on television. It has much greater potential as it allows for accurate targeting. Internet advertising consists mostly of static images. This in itself can be an issue because the images are constantly on the screen.

What would Childnet like to see happen with advertising on the Internet?

We are looking for codes of practice. Advertisers are beginning to wake up to this issue as well in the UK. I was very disappointed when I saw the first draft of the code of practice in the UK because it did not talk about children at all — it was looking at different issues. But even if there is a code of practice for UK advertisers, it would not affect advertisers based outside the UK, especially the large brand names based in the USA.

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For more information about the awards:

Awards: www.childnet-int.org/awards