



Since July 1997 the ABA has been a member of the International Working Group on Content Rating. The other members of the group are the Internet Watch Foundation (UK), the Recreational Software Advisory Council (USA), the ECO Forum (Germany) and Childnet International (an international charity promoting children's interests on the Internet).

The group aims to consider and develop an internationally acceptable rating system which is appropriate for cross-cultural use. So far the group has agreed on some fundamental principles, including that the labelling system be voluntary and based on self-labelling. It has also agreed that an international labelling scheme should describe rather than evaluate Internet content, and for this reason should use RSACi as a starting point for further discussions at the international level. By providing information to users about the content on a particular site, a descriptive scheme aims to enable users to apply their own standards and values to the labels.

Representatives of the three of the group's members met recently at the ABA to discuss the next steps towards achieving the aims of the group, and to find ways to fund an international consultation process. *ABA Update* took the opportunity to ask Stephen Balkam of RSAC, David Kerr of the Internet Watch Foundation and Nigel Williams of Childnet International about what each of their organisations is up to in cyberspace.



Working groups and hotlines: the latest on the Internet

Stephen Balkam—RSAC

The Recreational Software Advisory Council (RSAC) is an independent non-profit organisation established in 1994, a collaboration of educational, industry and parental groups. Its system, RSACi, enables self-rating by content providers.

What are the new issues at RSAC?

There are three major issues facing RSAC at the moment. Of critical importance to us is the recent announcement that Netscape will soon integrate RSAC into their browser. There will be a world-wide release of Netwatch later this year and then RSAC will be in Microsoft Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator and covering 95 per cent of all browsers.

This is a real turning point for us—we have been trying to do this for two years. We expect a huge increase in the number of sites coming in to be rated, plus a big increase in the number of parents using the system, as Netscape Navigator is the majority product. We are looking now at how to promote our use in schools and libraries.

Secondly, because of this development, we are ramping up our system to cope with the increased load. We are already in the top 100 most popular Web sites. This popularity has enormous implications for our servers and the back up required. Plus, there are 4000 new sites per month coming in and rating with us.

Thirdly, and this may emerge as top priority,

we are starting a public education campaign, mostly within the USA at first, to raise awareness of the system and how to use it. That will have a flow-on effect because as more parents use it they will demand that sites not already rated, be rated.

We are not trying to get every single site in the world rated—we are aiming at families with children under the age of 12, and adult sites. We have had some pretty good take up with the adult sites: they want that protection—they don't want kids going to their sites.

What are the issues of particular concern about the Internet in the USA now?

There is an extremely active civil libertarian range of groups in the USA led by the American Civil Liberties Union, the ACLU. They were successful in overturning the Communications Decency Act and they have gone to an extreme view that RSACi is a form of censorware. The American Libraries Association also regards RSACi as censorware—they take the view that parental control in the home is fine, but not in libraries or schools.

What freedom of speech means depends on your interpretation. Now, parental control in a public space, or space funded by the government, is not a private space. Therefore a library which is publicly funded, argues the ALA, cannot



Stephen Balkam,
Recreational Software
Advisory Council



Q & A

cancel anything which is against freedom of speech—even when children are involved.

One compromise which has been suggested is to leave the computer terminals in the adult part of the library unfettered, but put controls in the kids section. This is a reasonable approach, but so far, it has been deemed by the ALA to be totally inappropriate and unacceptable.

There is a Bill in the US Senate now proposing that if a school is given cheap access to Internet, then it would be on the proviso that there must be filters. This will probably be challenged in the courts.

Our position at RSAC is somewhere in between—schools and libraries should be encouraged to create policies about filtering, and to make local decisions based on local standards. We don't believe there should be a government mandate that says schools and libraries must use filters, but we feel that the government has a strong part to play in encouraging the use of screening devices where children are involved.



What are your plans for international expansion?

We have been committed since the beginning to internationalise the system as much as possible. We got RSACi up and running pretty much in response to local issues in the USA, to offer an alternative to the Communications Decency Act. We have found that sites from all over the world rate with us: the latest count from Australia is 1600 sites.

That's why I very much encouraged the formation of the working group. Our hope is that rather than doing it on our own, we make a system that is acceptable on an international level. What we would like to see is RSACi mirrored around the world so that an Australian site, for example, would not have to connect to us, but would have a local server and Australian references and spelling.

The timescale we have given ourselves is 1999 for the IWGCR to set up the first international

office. You can describe it either as internationalising RSACi, or developing a system which takes RSACi into account. We have a base now of 70 000 rated sites and it would be foolish to start again. We need a way to take those 70 000 with us.

David Kerr—Internet Watch Foundation

Established in September 1996 as an industry-led initiative, the Internet Watch Foundation is concerned about illegal content in the Internet, particularly child pornography. The IWF aims to hinder the use of the Internet for transmitting illegal content, primarily through a reporting hotline.

Are you starting hotlines in Australia?

We are always happy to promote the case for hotlines.

Although we are here for the meeting of the International Working Group on Content Rating, we are taking the opportunity to talk to all the potential partners who would have an interest in setting up an Australian hotline. It's good for us to make use of our experience while we are here so we hope it is useful to the ABA and other parties in Australia.

We have had 18 months experience running a hotline in the UK. It has demonstrated that a hotline has a value and can achieve something on its own.

It has also illustrated two other points. Firstly, there are limitations on how much you can do in one country with a hotline. Taking things further depends on activities in other countries such as work loads, police cooperation, and dealing with originators of the material. So an important next step is developing hotlines in other countries, establishing communications with those countries and exchanging reports.

Secondly, hotlines are fine for dealing with illegal material but do not do much in preventing children's access to material which is unsuitable or potentially harmful, but legal. So the work we have done on the hotline puts a lot of emphasis on the rating and filtering systems for legal material. Each country needs to define what it wants to get out of a rating system, such a system can only work as an international system. This is why we developed the International Working Group on Content Rating.



David Kerr, Internet Watch Foundation

What is next?

The next stage of our evolution in the UK is to look actively for illegal material, rather than simply rely on reports.

That also has implications for cooperation between hotline groups. By doing that in the UK we will be turning up more material sourced in other places and certainly more than we can handle ourselves, so international cooperation will increase in importance.

What are the major issues of concern in the media about the Internet?

In the last few months, convergence has become an issue. There will be an explosion in the number of people who will have on-line access, through set-top boxes on their family televisions.

This means we will soon have a whole new audience that is unfamiliar with the medium and is less prepared to deal with some of the issues that we are concerned about on the Internet.

Nigel Williams—Childnet International

Childnet International is a non-profit organisation concerned with promoting children's interests in international communications. It has offices in the UK and the USA.

What do you hope to achieve with this visit?

As well as participating in the working group, I am promoting other aspects of Childnet while I am here: promoting dignity on the Internet for children. Last year I told you about our awards (*ABA Update* no. 56, p.8). There were two Australian winners among the nine: the first prize was won by a 15 year old boy from Queensland. He came over to London in January to collect his award. The second awards ceremony will be held next year in Sydney.

I think the NSW Education Department has taken quite an advanced approach. Every NSW school has Internet access, and one service provider tendered and won the contract to provide Internet access to all the schools. There is filtered access at the server and the schools also use CyberPatrol to determine what uses or additional blocking they want.

That kind of approach, which is very well thought out, with good policy documents, good involvement of parents, is a world beater in my opinion.

There are ways in which Australia is ahead of the game and in others it is behind, such as with hotlines.

If we are going to protect children around the world, then we need international cooperation. We approached the European Commission with a project to bring the European and American

hotlines together and look at how can they cooperate.

My aim is to spread the message about hotlines: they can work, there is a need for international cooperation, certain functions that can only happen nationally, and a country needs to consider its own needs. For example, only the police in Australia can follow up an Australian paedophile; only the industry in Australia can remove from Australian servers material that is illegal both in Australia and elsewhere. But in order to do these things, we need intelligence: reports of information that users in Australia are concerned about but also getting information from overseas.

What is a 'hot topic' in the UK now?

One area that is causing a lot of worry and concern is Internet Relay Chat (IRC). In the first week of operation of the US cybertip line in March this year, 50 of the 200 reports were about the attempted luring of children during chat sessions.

On the more positive side there has been a great leap in recognition around the world about the opportunities the Internet provides. This is particularly so in poorer countries where Internet access is more difficult: people are doing good things with quite limited resources.

There is a tremendous risk that the gap between the information rich and poor will widen—America is striding ahead and the rest of us are struggling to keep up. And the question is, how will other countries survive? Hardware requirements are raising the threshold for people to join in.

Part of our mission is to encourage larger companies to accept their responsibilities, to be generous with their resources and share those reserves.



Nigel Williams, Childnet International

At the International Working Group on Content Rating meeting at the ABA in May. L-R: Jenny Brigg ABA; Stephen Balkam RSAC, Nigel Williams Childnet International, Kaaren Koomen ABA, David Kerr, IWF and David Goldstein ABA.

