

Lesley Osborne, ABA Manager, Standards reports on the Internet On-line Summit: Focus on Children, held in Washington DC, 1-3 December 1997.

Child safety on-line

The Internet On-line Summit: Focus on Children, held in Washington DC, 1-3 December 1997, was sponsored by a diverse group of public interest, educational, and child advocacy groups and a broad cross section of the communications, Internet and content provider industries. Lesley Osborne, ABA Manager Standards, attended the Summit. Ms Osborne also attended a meeting of the International Working Group on Content Rating which followed the Summit.

The conference sponsors had joined together to find solutions to the problems of child safety on-line while realising the opportunities offered to children by the Internet. This is an issue that the Clinton Administration has highlighted, especially Vice-President Al Gore who demonstrated his active interest by attending the Summit.

The idea for the Summit followed the decision by the US Supreme Court which invalidated the Communications Decency Act in July 1997. The Summit was not simply an effort to pre-empt repressive laws. The event demonstrated genuine collaboration to find ways of making the Internet experience safe, educational and entertaining for children. This aim is based on a recognition of the decentralised nature of the on-line environment and the constraints on government intervention imposed by the US Constitution's First Amendment.

The Summit's main issues were appropriate content for children and personal safety. Speakers included Vice-President Gore, Attorney-General Janet Reno, the President of the National Parent and Teacher Association, the head of Interpol, and representatives of organisations such as Microsoft, AT&T, The Walt Disney Company, Time Warner, the Centre for Media Education and the American Library Association.

The digital toolbox

The Summit explored the development by industry of a user-friendly 'digital toolbox' of filter software. This approach had been endorsed at a White House meeting with industry in July 1997. The toolbox picks up on the idea of choice, with a range of software products and services becoming available in line with demand. This allows those responsible for children's use of the Internet to restrict access to material deemed unsuitable. Many of these products are already competing in the marketplace.

Associated with the Summit was an exhibition of technical products. There were demonstrations and comparative assessments of a wide range of products such as Cyberpatrol, Surf-Watch, Net Nanny, the Recreational Software Advisory Council's RSACi system, and PICS labelling.

Vice-President Gore congratulated those content providers who had rated their sites but did not express support for any particular filtering or content ratings scheme. He also sounded a word of warning to the industry when he emphasised the need for effective tools for parents.

Sophistication of the technology is not the only consideration. Research reported at the summit by *FamilyPC* magazine shows that families are most likely to employ filtering tools if they are easily accessible as part of the service provided by the Internet service provider, or if the software is incorporated into the browser.

The Vice-President's caution about filter software also reflects sensitivity to the continuing debate about Internet content generated by anti-censorship interests. On the one hand, organisations such as the American Civil Liberties Union and the American Society of



Kathryn Montgomery, President for Media Education (L) with Lesley Osborne, at the summit

Newspaper Editors have expressed the view that the use of filter software in educational or library settings is a threat to free speech. More conservative groups call for a tougher role by the US Government. There was wide support to help parents choose technical or other solutions to guide their children's Internet use.

Quality content

On show at the Summit were projects promoting quality content such as the American Library Association's 700 Great Web Sites for Parents and Kids at www.ala.org/parentspage/greatsites/. This site encourages children to go to good content rather than blocking their access to unsuitable material. The efforts being made to guide American parents and children to so called 'green spaces' is positive for Australian Internet users who also access this material. The Public Broadcasting Service, along with IBM and CBS, announced an educational program linked to the 1998 winter Olympics. This site will allow students to use a special Web site to learn concepts in science, maths and social studies in a fun and offbeat way.

Law enforcement

While the Summit was decidedly US-centric, announcements of other initiatives in law enforcement and community education have potential benefits for Australian Internet users.

Vigorous enforcement of the current laws against using the Internet to traffic

in obscene material and child pornography, stalk children and commit other crimes was another objective progressed by the Summit. The establishment of a hot-line to allow parents and consumers to report child pornography and predation on-line through a CyberTipLine, was announced. The hot-line will be operated by the national Centre for Missing and Exploited Children at www.missingkids.com/cybertip. The hot-line supported jointly by industry and the USA Government.

Also announced was enhanced co-operation between the Internet industry and law enforcement agencies, including international agencies aimed at achieving Zero Tolerance of child pornography on-line. Australia is co-operating with international law enforcement agencies on this issue.

Community education

The ABA will be watching progress on a number of community education projects launched at the Summit. The need for parents and teachers to be skilled in the use of the Internet and to understand how they may best guide children's on-line experience was

universally acknowledged. When the National PTA canvassed its members before the Summit, training of parents and teachers was given high priority as a key concern about the Internet. Privacy issues and the need to integrate the Internet into the mainstream curriculum were also identified.

If parents are to assist children gain from the opportunities offered, they must understand the Internet themselves. It is also important if they are to establish house rules. A number of organisations were planning training workshops, newsletters and other educational initiatives to enhance on-line safety for children. Of special interest was the national educational campaign announced by Vice-President Gore to encourage the active involvement of parents, teachers, librarians and others to work together to empower children to use the Internet responsibly. The campaign, 'America Links Up: An Internet Teach-In' uses the slogan 'Think, then Link'. It draws on the expertise of a wide variety of groups such as the American Library Association, the Children's Partnership, Disney and SeniorNet. It will be managed with the

co-operation of the US Department of Education. A series of teach-ins will be held in schools and libraries around the country in mid-1998, preceded by community service announcements on television.

Also launched at the Summit by the Secretary of the Federal Department of Education was a brochure, *Parent's Guide to the Internet*. This and other publications at the Summit were designed to empower parents to manage children's Internet experience.

To keep up with further developments go to the Summit Web site at <http://www.kidson-line.org>.

International Working Group on Content Rating

Following the Summit the International Working Group on Content Rating met. The Group is exploring the possible development of an internationally acceptable self-rating system which provides Internet users worldwide with the choice to limit access to content they consider harmful, especially to children.

The Working Group considered the November announcement of the European Commission Action Plan on promoting safe use of the Internet, in particular their endorsement of PICS compatible rating systems. The members of the Working Group based in Europe will be discussing with the Commission the best way of ensuring the group's work can fit within the Action Plan framework.

Future work will now focus on strategies for effective consultation on the concerns of users in different countries and how they might be addressed in an international rating system.

While in Washington Ms Osborne met with representatives of the Centre for Media Education, who have conducted a number of research projects on children's use of the Internet, marketing and privacy on-line. The Centre has also been actively involved in negotiations with US television networks about implementing a program content rating system. Ms Osborne also attended a meeting of the Vice-President's Advisory Committee on Public Interest Obligations for Digital Television. 

