

Australians are embracing the 'Wow-mobile' revolution and many of us check that we have keys, money and the mobile phone before leaving home of a morning. Andree Wright, the ABA's Director, Industry Performance and Review, reports on a recent conference which she attended that looked at both its pluses and perils.

Mobile telephony

The London conference

The focus of a recent London conference 'Delivering Mobile Adult Content Responsibly' was on finding a balance between growth and protection of mobile Internet brands. A predominantly industry-based conference, it was attended by approximately a hundred delegates. Speakers included Vodaphone, O2, Microsoft, the Independent Committee for Supervision of Standards of Telephone Information Services (ICSTIS), ChildNet International, the European Commission, research analysts, adult content providers and companies that market technical safeguards.

Consumer take-up of advanced services is slower than predicted, with host magazine Total Telecom commenting in its February edition 'what hard going it is to make big money from mobile data, even for heavy hitters like T-Mobile ... at first glance, it all seems a hopeless cause. After all the huffing and puffing about next generation services, non-SMS (short messaging services) data applications still account for less than one per cent of all mobile revenues'.

We are in the very early stages of the 'wow-mobile' revolution; SMS continues to dominate as the communication medium of choice and barely five per cent of WAP (wireless application protocol) phones are Internet-ready. It is taking longer than originally estimated for customers to acquire the handsets and change

their usage habits, however Orange's CEO, Sol Trujillo sees Java games as a growth area and perhaps WAP services for sports updates and news. He considers this may



be because of wider availability of colour handsets, lower GPRS costs and content providers beginning to update WAP pages regularly.

The adult content industry is more optimistic, predicting that, by 2006, millions of pounds will be spent purchasing their products by mobile phone users: 'in new technologies, adult services usually make up 80 per cent of traffic. It has been so with video, the Web and DVD. Its natural to assume it'll be the same with mobile Internet' (Charles Prast, the CEO of Private Media Group).

The appeal of mobiles to children as a 'personal gateway', was acknowledged by Angus Cormie, Head of Portals and Products for O2, quoting their comments: 'Really useful. Fun. Stay in touch with those who matter – whenever you want'

and 'You'd never be without one, just like a watch'. Accordingly, he sees the new code of practice for UK mobile operators – Orange, O2, T-Mobile, Vodaphone, Virgin and 3 – as the result of a positive and responsible lesson learned early from the fixed Internet world. (While the fixed Internet industry initially argued that they were not responsible for the nature of the content carried, the UK media and public opinion makers thought otherwise, identifying and highlighting the problems and going after those they thought were responsible.) Cormie confirms that all mobile operators will be compliant with the range of safeguards that the code sets out by the end of 2004: 'We are doing it early in the mobile market evolution, and making it an intrinsic part of all future development and content thinking.'

Ruth Dixon (ChildNet International) also regards the industry code as a positive, early step since she doubts that Wilbur Wright was thinking about deep vein thrombosis in 1903! She describes the key concerns of the mobile Internet as 'content, contact and commerce'. Consumer awareness education must be a dynamic process as there are no once-and-for-all solutions, and campaigns should not frighten people off, she argues. There are plenty doing the scare stories already and 'technology should be your friend and not your enemy.' A broad audience needs to be reached and children need to learn the limits of what others can do for them.

2.5G
3G

It is also important to target grandparents (since many look after children) as well as parents and teachers, and to deal with adult concerns about not understanding the technology as an impediment: 'after all, you don't need to know how a combustion engine works in order to drive a car, but its good to know about road rules and seat belts.' (O2, for example, runs an awareness initiative 'Teach UR Mum 2 TXT').

ICSTIS regulates the content and promotion of all services offered on premium rate in the UK. George Kidd describes it as dealing with a payment mechanism rather than an industry, with mobiles being used as a currency exchange, for example, to purchase a pin number for adult content. ICSTIS commissioned research in partnership with Vodaphone in 2003, which indicated that 80 per cent of those surveyed favoured access controls over premium rate services for their children and 63 per cent wanted controls for themselves. 68 per cent of respondents expect the mobile network providers to be responsible for implementation of the access controls; and respondents also considered mobile manufacturers and government/ regulators as having some responsibility.

ICSTIS has also commissioned research from Ovum on the UK Premium content market in 2004. It asks, 'what's after SMS?' It predicts that SMS will peak in 2005, with MMS subsequently maturing to a reliable option for premium content. The availability of video will highlight the problems of content access by minors, as mobile phone access is not supervised in the same ways that fixed Internet usage is supervised in the home. Additional concerns arise from the practice of pre-paid purchase of the phones, as there are not safeguards in place such as age verification and 'opt-in' arrangements to protect children from unsuitable content.

Tina Sothall runs the Content Standards Program for Vodaphone on a global basis and knows that technical platforms are converging faster than regulatory systems. Accordingly, her company sets out mandatory standards for all Vodaphone regional operators, such as no unmoderated chat services for under 18s, and also commends a set of best practice principles for the regional operators to consider as there is a need to use flexible policies for different cultures. For her 'the Code is the start of the journey, certainly not the end of the journey.'

UK Vodaphone colleague, Annie Mullins, says that the company is advanced in the development of a technical mechanism for barring children's access to adult content and a barring solution will be in place by the UK Spring. Safeguards will include a filter, robust age verification and access to adult services will be on an 'opt-in' basis only.

From the European Commission perspective, the protection of children from unsuitable and harmful content is a question of national law and, as there is great variance within the European Union member states, there is a big challenge if the aim is for a European wide content provision. Richard Swetenham acknowledges 'the UK is ahead of the pack except possibly for Germany', which has a new regulatory body for the 'Protection of Minors for TV and the Internet.' It has approved a number of age verification mechanisms for mobile phones through the SIM card and national identification cards must be shown in Germany before a SIM card can be obtained.

Swetenham believes a single European Code would offer advantages since it would avoid partitioning the market through different national rules. The 'Television Without Frontiers' approach offers a possible model where member States must take measures to protect

minors in order to ensure that material harmful to them is not broadcast at all.

A background paper on European 3G Mobile Industry Self-Regulation (see www.selfregulation.info) was recently prepared for the European Commission by Oxford University's Comparative Media Law and Policy Program. In drawing on that paper, Swetenham says that the European Commission can provide a neutral platform. It is used to dealing with different cultures and languages and is able to formulate European public policy objectives; however he cautions 'self-regulation will only work if industry want it to work ... (and) for a system to be credible it has to be effective'.

The components of a successful scheme should therefore include an industry code of practice, adherence to that code, a complaints system, monitoring/reporting (or 'naming and shaming' as it is called). Consideration needs to be given in Swetenham's view to who designs the system, who runs the system, to whom is the system accountable and who steps in if system not delivering? Involvement by industry, network operators, content providers and industry associations is vital for success, as is that of national regulators/ self-regulatory bodies, child welfare and consumer bodies.

Given the conference's emphasis on recent initiatives and future possibilities, it is worth noting Australian initiatives. On 20 February, the Australian Communications Authority (ACA) called for interested parties to comment on draft consumer protection arrangements for users of premium rate messaging services, including SMS and MMS. The guidelines outline, among other things, how premium rate services will be classified to ensure that consumers do not access inappropriate content (see www.aca.gov.au/aca_home/issues_for_comment/index.htm) 