

Advances in mobile telephony are poised to offer the consumer a new world of connections, but they have also prompted the development of consumer safeguards while a new UK study has highlighted child safety on the Internet. Andree Wright, ABA Director, Industry Performance and Review reports on how the technology is meeting the challenges

Mobile telephony:

facing the new challenge

2.5G
3G

The take up of 2.5G and 3G mobile phones in Australia is low at present but likely to increase in popularity, especially with teenagers, as more content and contact services are offered and prices decrease. Hutchinson 3G Australia, Singtel Optus, Telstra, Virgin and Vodaphone offer or intend to offer 2.5G or 3G services in Australia. Services and delivery mechanisms that have traditionally been separate from one another are now coming together in new combinations. Proposed services include short message services (SMS) chat and dating, and multimedia message services (MMS), video clips, games and retransmission of existing broadcasting services. These services could be accessed via the Internet, intranet or premium telephone numbers.

On 12 January 2004 UK children's charity, NCH, released a 32 page study, *Child Pornography, Child Abuse and the Internet* (see www.ncha.org.uk). While emphasising the role played to date by the fixed Internet as a distribution mechanism, the report's author John Carr warned, 'The Internet is about to go mobile on a large scale, supported by new, sophisticated telephone handsets. Almost all of the issues of child safety on the Internet that exist today become much more complex when the Internet goes on the street'. The NCH report acknowledges that mobile devices are 'an enormously important and valuable technological achievement'.

It also considers these phones could provide another way of accessing, storing and transmitting indecent images of children.



Since the release of the NCH report, mobile operators in the UK – Orange, O2, T-Mobile, Vodaphone, Virgin and 3 – have announced the finalisation of an industry code of practice which has been 12 months in development. It covers the consumer safeguards that the operators consider necessary if the new services are to be regarded as positive and responsible initiatives. The safeguards include:

- classification as '18' of all content provided by operators under contractual agreement which is considered suitable only for adults.
- '18' classified content to be placed behind access controls (such as PIN controlled access, barring and subscription only services) and not available until the operator is satisfied that the customer is at least 18.

- chat rooms available for under-18s to be moderated (by either a person or special technology to block personal details and keep conversation appropriate).
- parents/carers able to use filters to operator's net services to restrict content.
- operators to work with law enforcement agencies to report content that may break criminal law.
- operators to give advice on nature and use of mobile devices and services.
- code to be available on operators' websites.

The code covers new types of content including visual content, online gambling, mobile gaming, chat rooms and Internet access. It does not cover traditional premium rate voice or premium rate SMS (text) services, which will continue to be regulated under an existing code operated by the Independent Committee for Supervision of Telephone Information Services (www.icstis.org.uk).

Further consideration of consumer safeguards will be discussed on 29 and 30 January at a London conference, 'Delivering Mobile Adult Content Responsibly'. Australia faces similar challenges for safe use of the new mobile devices.

Andree Wright will represent the ABA at the conference: read her report in the March issue of *ABA Update*.

