



Educating EdNA

While there is little doubt that children need to be protected from exposure to undesirable material, calls to bar access to the Internet are akin to preventing children from reading for fear that they may come across the 'F' word. The Internet may have its drawbacks, but the advantages it can and will afford should not be overlooked. Many schools are already using it as a tool to enhance the current curriculum - in the future, it could be instrumental in revolutionising the way children are taught.

The Internet's potential in education will only be fully realised once educators are made aware of how to use it effectively and creatively. According to Assoc Prof Bruce Keeper, from Sydney University, this is already happening. Students in the Bachelor of Education course spend the first year becoming computer literate and Keeper has found that each year, students entering the course have increasingly higher levels of computer literacy. For teachers already in the workplace, a recent government proposal to introduce an on-line Australian education service (EdNA), recognises the need for re-training - probably under the National Professional Development Program.

At a meeting of the Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs on 26 May, the Commonwealth, States and Territories committed themselves to the development of EdNA to provide equitable and affordable access and improvement in the education system. EdNA will link all schools, TAFE colleges, universities and other education and training providers across Australia. It is separate from the World Wide Web and will be governed by a body which will regulate its content.

Schools will then have a choice about whether to access only this educational network or both EdNA and the World Wide Web.

As well as this intergovernmental initiative (or perhaps because of it), software providers Microsoft Corporation, Netscape Communications and Progressive Networks have joined forces to develop a parent/educator controlled filtering system to bar access to unsuitable material on the Internet. They have established the Information Highway Parental Empowerment Group (IHPEG) to look at ways to classify material on the Internet, possibly using categories similar to those currently used for video, film and television. Rather than barring access to the Internet altogether, parents and teachers can make an informed choice as to the suitability of the material available and limit access to specifically designated sites. The recommendations of a report by the three software companies is due at the end of the year and is likely to be incorporated into Internet access systems by the middle of 1996.

These measures go some way toward allaying the fears most parents must have after recent media reports on children accessing pornography on the Internet. As well as putting up barriers, however, children can and should be educated regarding situations that may occur as they surf the Net. Porn does exist on the Net, though it is not as invasive as it has been represented to be, and children who are actively seeking pornography will always find it - either on the Net or in the local newsagency. This should not, however, be used as an excuse for denying children access to the many opportunities this new technology can provide. □

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Companies wanting to join IHPEG can obtain information at IHPEG@prognnet.com.

US internet provider found liable

AUSTRALIAN INTERNET service providers (ISPs) say they're not too concerned about a recent US judgment which found the Prodigy internet service liable for messages posted on its bulletin board.

On May 26, a New York State Supreme Court judge, Stuart Ains, ruled that Prodigy should be treated like a publisher in the operation of its bulletin boards since it had a policy of having people monitor its forums and using software to screen obscenities.

A New York investment banking firm had sued Prodigy for libel following comments posted on Prodigy's 'Money Talk' bulletin board. Prodigy is appealing the ruling.

Dean Gingell, business development manager of the Telstra/Microsoft joint venture, On Australia, said the case should have very little impact in Australia since the majority of ISPs have made it clear that they are not in the business of monitoring content.

He said the US case which had more relevance to the Australian scene was the unsuccessful libel suit brought against Compuserve in 1991. In that case, a federal judge in New York ruled that Compuserve couldn't be held liable since it did not edit the contents of its service. Compuserve was akin to a 'distribution pipe', according to the judge.

Gingell said the only likely effect of the Prodigy case would be for Australian ISPs to distribute on-line disclaimers, rejecting responsibility for the material they carry. An industry-run complaints mechanism could be an alternative.

Richard Frawley, president of the Internet Industry Association of Australia (IntIAA) said the Prodigy and Compuserve cases had established a legal precedent that unless an ISP chooses to mediate its content, it cannot be responsible for the material it carries. □