

Making the Internet childproof

After being given a directive in August 1997, the ABA has released its recommendations for making the Internet a safer place for children

The Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) is currently considering the recommendations of its Children and Content On-Line Task Force which was set up to assist the ABA in carrying out an investigation in relation to online services as directed by the Communications Minister in August 1997.

The task force was requested to investigate "national and international developments in the use of online content labelling services to protect children from content which may be unsuitable for them".

A definition of "online services" was first determined in order to aid the task force. This was, "services that make content available by means of a telecommunications network which enables the transmission of information between users or between users and a place in the network via what is called the Internet". These services include email, newsgroups and bulletin boards, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), the World Wide Web, proprietary networks, Telnet, File Transfer Protocol (FTP) and Intranets. But the task force focused primarily on the World Wide Web, email and IRC services because of their ease of accessibility from personal and home computers.

Three key areas which affect children in the online environment were identified: contact and safety; illegal content; and unsuitable content.

The major contact and safety issues included protecting children from physical, sexual and emotional exploitation; protecting them from marketers seeking private/commercial information; and protecting them from being targets of inappropriate or misleading advertising.

In its recommendations with respect to contact and safety issues, the task force said that the ABA, or an alternative government agency designated by the Commonwealth government, should develop key messages for parents and children to reduce the risk of online sexual or emotional contact and address inappropriate or misleading advertising and marketing. The task force also said that these key messages should be widely publicised via a community education campaign.

Illegal content issues centred around minimising children's exposure to illegal material online and setting up an Australian body to receive reports from users about allegedly illegal content with a view to removing such material and prosecuting its originators. The task force recommended that a hotline be established to enable reporting of alleged illegal content. This hotline would be supported by various police services, the Internet industry, the Office of Film and Literature Classification, and community groups. A major focus of the hotline in its initial phase would be child pornography. Information about the hotline should be used in a community education campaign and give access to hotlines operating in other countries in order to broaden the reporting net concerning illegal content.

For unsuitable content, the task force was concerned about minimising children's exposure to it and ensuring parental or caregiver control of content. It endorsed a variety of tools and strategies to assist parents and caregivers in carrying out this task. These include:

- direct parental and adult supervision of children's use of the Internet;

- third party filtering software products design to protect children online;
- filtering software which uses the Platform for Internet Content Selection (PICS) in a manner designed to protect children online. (PICS provides a technical platform that allows Internet users' organisations and filter software companies to develop their rating or filter systems specifically, for example, sex, violence, nudity and language contained in a particular web site).
- labelling systems which might be used to search for material which may be useful for children; and
- software products and Intranets specially designed for use by children.

Its key recommendation was to make information about filtering software, rating and labelling systems available on specific web sites for Australian parents and caregivers. It also said that rating and labelling systems must be developed in accordance with the range and diversity of Australian views and values and provide information not only about content which is unsuitable but also about content which is particularly suited for children.

The task force identified community education as a key driver of any action being taken concerning children's interaction with the Internet, and recommended the development and implementation of a community education campaign to: provide information about the Internet's beneficial uses; adopt appropriate strategies to convey key messages to children and parents; to promote community awareness of the hotline function and of relevant industry guidelines and codes of practice; and give information on relevant international developments.

The "Report of the Children and Content On-line Task Force to the Australian Broadcasting Authority" was released in June 1998. It is available online at the ABA's web site:
<http://www.aba.gov.au>

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