

Protecting children online

David Goldstein explains the steps being taken internationally to secure the online environment for minors

There have been several concerns raised within Australia and worldwide about some of the content available via online services, especially to children. Since the Internet and other online services have become a medium for communication, entertainment and education for the wider population there have been moves by governments and industry worldwide to provide means of protecting the rapidly growing number of children online. These concerns have centred on content that many consider either “unsuitable” or “harmful” to children, and also content that is either illegal or “objectionable”.

As the number of people online increases, so does the desire for mechanisms to protect children online from content that could be considered unsuitable for them. In late 1996, it was estimated that there were 61 million Internet users worldwide. By late 1998, Computer Industry Almanac estimated this number had jumped by almost 50 per cent to more than 147 million or roughly 3.6 per cent of the world’s population. By the end of 2000, Computer Industry Almanac predicts there will be some 320 million Internet users worldwide.

As the overall number of people using the Internet grows, so do the number of children, and the number of children online is growing at a faster rate than the number of adults. Computer Economics expects the number of Internet-using minors worldwide to grow from almost 27 million in 2001 to more than 77 million by 2005.

Two projects currently underway address some of these concerns. They aim to develop an internationally acceptable rating and filtering system for Internet content that will allow parents and others to decide what content they will allow their children, or others in their care, to see. They will also allow adults to access content that is both legally accessible or not for them and preserve their freedom of speech. One of these projects is being coordinated by an international body called the Internet Content Rating Association (ICRA), while the other is a European Commission-funded project called INCORE, or Internet Content Rating for Europe.

ICRA is an international group that consists of a number of leading Internet and communications companies who have joined together to create an international Internet content rating system that protects children and free speech on the Web. These organisations include AOL Europe, British Telecommunications, Cable & Wireless, Demon Internet (UK), IBM, Microsoft Europe, T-Online Germany, EuroISPA, Bertelsmann Foundation, Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) and the Software & Information Industry Association (US).

ICRA is proposing to develop a rating and filtering system that will be built on the Recreational Software Advisory Council’s RSACi content rating system. RSACi is already embedded in Microsoft’s Internet Explorer and Netscape’s Navigator browsers. The ICRA system will be a voluntary self-rating system that is both user and provider friendly, and culturally non-specific and objective through the descriptive labelling of content by the provider, with all subjective judgements about suitability being made by the receiver.

To develop a system for content rating that is culturally acceptable for use in all countries, ICRA will hold consultations with children’s and consumer groups, universities and interested parties internationally. Once developed, the system will be available to all Internet users as a free service.

ICRA has also developed a number of principles that both ICRA and INCORE will incorporate into the rating system. These are that the rating system should:

- be voluntary and internationally acceptable;
- protect free speech;
- be culturally non-specific and objective;
- be user friendly;
- be provider friendly;
- have some quality control measures;
- have a number of categories and levels; and
- be adaptable.

To assist with the development and acceptance of the new international system, ICRA is looking for memberships from companies or organisations that wish to join its efforts to build and manage an online content rating system.

ICRA has also formed a Reference Group that it will consult with on the development of its rating system. The Reference Group includes members from a wide number of countries and we are seeking to widen this group to include as many people from as wide a range of countries and cultures as possible.

The second project, INCORE, is a Preparatory Action for the European Union’s Internet Action Plan on promoting safer use of the Internet and is part of a set of policies by the European Union to deal with illegal and harmful content on the Internet. INCORE is focused on a project that aims to create a generic rating and filtering system suitable for European users and was originally set up by a group of European organisations with a common

interest in industry self-regulation and the rating of Internet content. Founding organisations were: the IWF in the UK which is examining rating and filtering of Internet content; Electronic Commerce Organisation (eco Forum) in Germany which is investigating the rating of newsgroups; and Childnet International which is dealing with the development of reporting hotlines within Europe.

The INCORE project seeks to do three things. Firstly, to examine how a system of ratings voluntarily applied by content producers can allow Internet users to decide for themselves what content is seen online, particularly where children are concerned. Secondly, to consult with users throughout the European Union on their national, cultural and linguistic requirements of a system. Thirdly, to test self-rating systems already available to see how well they match the requirements of European users and content providers.

As part of the requirements by the European Commission, INCORE is "required to assess the possibility of a system being put in place that permits content providers for Internet content and other online services, if they so choose, to attach a label to their content, while allowing end-users to determine the use to which the label is put in terms of their own personal criteria". It should also:

- respect the principle of freedom of expression;
- not create obstacles to free competition or the freedom to provide services;
- be appropriate for European cultural and linguistic specificities and also suitable for global requirements;
- have the support of the main constituencies involved and offer good prospects of large scale adoption; and
- deal with the issue of content that is not appropriately rated.

The INCORE project follows the announcement of the European Union's Internet Action Plan for Safe Use of the Internet. INCORE submitted a successful tender for funding under one of the four Preparatory Actions to examine the feasibility of a European system of content self-rating. INCORE is now working closely with the European Union on the project and is consulting with a Steering Group along with industry and community representatives during the project.

The Internet Action Plan follows a number of initiatives from the European Union and resulting work and papers. These include the *Green Paper on Protection of Minors and Human Dignity in Audiovisual and Information Services* and the *Communication on Illegal and Harmful Content on the Internet*, along with a web page titled *Promoting Best Use, Preventing Misuse* at http://www2.echo.lu/by/best_use/best_use.html.

The Internet Action Plan contains three Preparatory Action Plans apart from the self-rating project. These are:

- establishing a European network of hotlines;
- a review of European third-party filtering and rating software and services; and
- the encouragement of awareness actions in European member states.

Complimenting the work of the European Union and ICRA, US President Clinton and Vice President Gore announced a strategy for making the Internet "family friendly" in July 1997. The strategy was designed to give parents and teachers the tools they needed to prevent children from getting access to inappropriate material on the Internet, and to guide them towards high-quality educational resources.

In May 1999, both Clinton and Gore reiterated their support for this strategy when they announced a parent's protection page. This initiative supports the use of blocking and filtering technologies to limit access to inappropriate content including violent game sites, hate groups, and other material parents believe are inappropriate for their children.

Members of the Internet industry and the European Union have recognised that there are substantial differences between the Internet and other forms of communication, information and entertainment in looking to deal with the protection of children.

As previous forms of regulation are difficult to implement, if not nigh impossible, other forms of protection of children have been sought. To allow those with concerns about some of the content available online they may consider unsuitable for children, we believe the proposed self-rating systems offer the best option. By using a self-rating system, adult's rights to access content that is legally accessible for them, or free speech, will not be inhibited.

Information about the INCORE project is available from its website at <http://www.incore.org>.

Childnet International:

<http://www.childnet-int.org>

Computer Economics:

<http://www.computereconomics.com/new4/pr/pr990422.html>

Computer Industry Almanac:

<http://www.c-i-a.com>

eco Forum: <http://www.eco.de>

European Union's Internet Action Plan:

<http://www2.echo.lu/iap>

Internet Watch Foundation:

<http://www.iwf.org.uk>

White House - Keeping Children Safe On The Internet:

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/WH/Work/050599.html>

White House Family Friendly Internet Remarks:

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/WH/New/Ratings/remarks.html>

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