

Social responsibility on the 'net



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Internet use is escalating at an extraordinary rate. A statistical survey on Electronic Commerce released in April by the Department of Industry, Science and Tourism reported that there were some 1.6 million internet users in Australia at the beginning of this year. [<http://www.dist.gov.au/infoind/stats/ecomstat.pdf>] Research by the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) found that one quarter of teenagers reported internet access at home. When use at school and elsewhere was included, the ABA found that a majority of Australian youth was using the Internet [Alston, <http://www.dca.gov.au/speeches/kids.html>]. A recent United States survey reported that sixty-five per cent of American teenagers have used online services in the past year, representing a fifty per cent increase over a two-year period. [Net News, 2 June 1998] The popularity of this rapidly developing medium means that libraries will, at least in the short term, meet increased demands for online services from their users. Libraries will also face increased demands from some sectors in the community to supervise or limit access by minors.

While the issue of social responsibility and the internet has been raised in previous editions of *inCite*, it is timely to revisit this subject. A suit, the first of its kind in the United States, has been filed to compel libraries in Livermore, California to 'protect' children from sexually explicit material on the internet. The suit specifically attempts to force libraries to either obtain parental permission to allow children to surf the internet or to install filtering devices on computer terminals to block obscene material. The suit has been filed by the mother of a twelve-year-old boy who downloaded pornography from a library's internet terminal and distributed the pictures to other children. 'People often want us to be the arbiters of what other people read or see' said library director Susan Gallinger. 'We don't want to be in the business of policing what children or anybody else can get in the library.' [<http://www.hotcoco.com/news/tech/stories/kmn52178.htm>]

In a decision which will no doubt be considered a win for lobby groups seeking to ban certain online information, a judge of a Bavarian Court recently set a disturbing precedent by handing down a decision convicting a former general manager of the German division of CompuServe for distributing online pornography and other illegal material transmitted over the company's network by a third party. This decision is largely inconsistent with Germany's new multimedia laws which provide that internet service providers and online services won't be held liable for banned material posted by third parties unless 'they have knowledge of the content and blocking its use

is both technically possible and can be reasonably expected'. In the light of this extraordinary decision, the European Commission has highlighted the need for a global approach to internet regulation. [<http://www.news.com/>, Monday 1 July 1998] In our view library workers cannot assume the role of policing the browsing habits of both adults and children. ALIA has always maintained that the responsibility for online content should ultimately rest with content providers and users. In the case of minors, it is for parents and not librarians to supervise their children's internet experience.

So much attention has been focussed on the negative internet experiences relating to bomb-making and pornography that some people could be forgiven for believing that little of a positive nature exists. Very recent promotion of internet gambling and sites linked to youth suicide is further grist to the mill of internet critics. While there are concerns that many librarians would share about the need to protect children from illegal or inappropriate material, the task faced by our professional association is to clearly identify the legal responsibilities of our members and to identify the mechanisms (technical, political and social) available to produce the best quality of internet experiences for all users.

Greater insights into how internet services are used in libraries are required if we are to develop appropriate development strategies for user access into the next century. The ALIA Public Libraries Section is hoping to conduct an Australia-wide survey of internet use which will complement the study recently concluded by John Bertot on behalf of Viclink. [<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~viclink/report97.htm>] This Victorian study describes the extent and nature of Victorian public library internet connectivity in August 1997 and also describes feedback from users. If data for all public libraries in Australia was assembled in a similar fashion it would assist in planning for equitable access; internet training and education; funding to meet hardware, software and telecommunications costs; and advocacy campaigns.

It has been estimated that by the year 2005 there will be one billion internet users worldwide. Libraries as access providers, and in some instances service providers, have a vested interest in ensuring that any regulatory framework governing the content of online material recognises that the responsibility for online information rests with the content provider and the internet user. Even more importantly, perhaps, it is the duty of the library to maximise the educational, recreational and social benefits of the internet experience for all users. ■

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