# Safe handling of the internet's nasties

**Alex Byrne, Committee on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression**

Hailed as a 'killer application' by information technology commentators, the world wide web has turned the internet from a communications channel for specialists into a commonplace household and business tool. Although it is still in an early growth phase, its astonishingly rapid adoption has changed the future for commerce, education and entertainment. Teachers, for example, now have to remind school students to refer to sources other than the web; and small business is regularly warned of the competition from the web.

Not surprisingly, this rapid adoption brings fears: fears of change, of the unknown and of real nasties, lurking in the web's recesses. In popular, and political, imagination the web is a fearsome place in which poisonous creatures lie ready to expose themselves to the innocent surfer or to feed the unhealthy interests of the prurient.

There are real nasties on the web. It includes hate-filled propaganda sites (such as the Holocaust revisionists) and confronting, explicit sexual material. A recent search for 'Australia's 100 living legends' turned up hundreds of sites of 'perfect bodies'.

In Australia's pluralistic society, we expect and offer a high degree of tolerance to those of other beliefs — political, social and religious. We have learned that open access to information and freedom of expression are vital to both a healthy, democratic society and to prosperous, competitive business. However, our social compact has imposed some restrictions, primarily to reflect the duty of care we have towards minors and those who do not wish to be exposed to certain materials. Such restrictions are demonstrated in our systems of classification for films, television and computer games, our restriction of some publications and strictures on defamatory and discriminatory comments. For example, through the Office of Film and Literature Classification, we ban publications with demeaning images, child sex, promotion of drugs, high-impact violence and cruelty, bestiality, incest and other 'revolting or abhorrent phenomena'. At lower levels of offence we restrict it to those over eighteen.

These restrictions focus primarily on sex, violence, exploitation and 'strong' language, attempting to balance the essential need for openness in a democratic, pluralistic and internationally competitive nation with the duty of care. They balance libertarian views with those which favouring much greater restriction.

Should we similarly censor the web? Can we?

The web's 'info space' is multi-dimensional, interlinked, accessible day or night, from any location. It includes an extraordinary variety of information from naive personal pages and crude advertising sites to highly-organised electronic libraries. The spectrum extends to the anarchic, personal, eclectic reflections of individuals, sometimes useful, sometimes not, and to highly-structured datastores. It presents the best of our knowledge and the vilest propaganda and pornography.

Western Australia and the Northern Territory have enacted legislation to impose penalties on those who make 'objectionable' (undefined) material available to minors via the internet. The responsibility is placed primarily on the delivery channel. Others have promoted labelling systems, with 'nanny' software to screen out undesirable sites but their methods are crude, eliminating breast health together with sexually-explicit sites, for example. We can attempt to suppress or demand labelling of material which offends community standards, but its source can simply be masked technologically or it can reappear from another location.

Such well-meant legislative attempts to restrict access are extremely dangerous. They undermine the glorious freedom of access to information offered by the web, the quality which places the student in an isolated Aboriginal community on a par with a scholar in Boston. They can justify restrictions for political or ideological reasons, directly challenging the human right to know. We need to recognise that the web is a new medium and old solutions will not work (if they ever did).

This is not to ignore the truly exploitative nasties but to argue that the offence is their publication, not inadvertently providing access to them. The key lies in 'duty of care', the ways in which we promote access to high quality information and help users identify that which is of value, a core role of librarians.

As librarians, we must vigorously defend both freedom of access to information and freedom of expression while simultaneously guiding and assisting our clients to obtain the information they desire for education, work and entertainment.

*Alex Byrne is pro vice-chancellor (Information Resources) at the Northern Territory University and chairs the Committee on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)*

*...well-meant legislative attempts to restrict access are extremely dangerous. They undermine the glorious freedom of access to information offered by the web, the quality which places the student in an isolated Aboriginal community on a par with a scholar in Boston...*