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Regulating Internet Pornography

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Abstract

The virtual organizations proliferate on the Internet. Among them, the businesses that are geared to sell sex-related product seem numerous and profitable. In this paper, we examine the ways to regulate the Internet porn business. In addition, we experimented with various tools that are designed to curbe the unsolicited access to those sites.

1. Introduction

Cyberporn has become inescapable topic of the Internet. In today computer technologies, both CD-ROMs and on-line system are at the center of a rapidly growing market in high-tech adult material and there will always be a thriving on-line market for adult materials. In this paper, we look at various players in the Internet regulation and report on the experiment with the tools to regulate Internet.

2. Who Is Responsible for Restricting Cyberporn?

Parents

Some believe that the parents should be ultimately responsible for what can be seen on the computer screen of their children. This view is strongly in favor by the groups who are opposed to any regulation of Internet contents on the ground of protecting freedom of speech. These group of people suggest that in order to protect children from explicit materials, parents should be able to shun them out and must be responsible for controlling what their children can see on the computer screen. As for parents who don't have the mechanism to stop kids from using computers, there are variety of ways to block the view of the pornographic materials. For example, parents can acquire software to installed at home computer which makes those offensive materials off the screen by blocking the screen view. According to Gerwig(1995), a consortium called PICS(the Platform for Internet Content Selection) is providing parents with the tools in which they need to decide what is safe for their children to view on the Internet. The group, consisting of more than two dozen major hardware and software suppliers, as well as the major online service providers, is acting to head off any attempts by Congress to regulate the online world. It is working with the World Wide Web Consortium at the MIT to set standards for rating systems and filtering software. In other words, the web sites will be voluntarily rated just like movie ratings and the software will check the rating of the certain page that a child wants to see and will let the child see if the rating is acceptable. This kind of approach is favored by computer industry and software professionals and those free-speech-minded crowd. These people view the regulation of Internet should not happen at any level. Thus basically the current status which is anything goes should be allowed as it is.

Internet Providers

Internet providers are those who provide the service to the subscribers such as WWW access, e-mail, online chatting, etc.. Companies like America online and CompuServe can be the Internet provider as well as online information providers. Nowadays more and more people are subscribing to the low-cost Internet access provider which simply provides the user the Internet address and PPP connection so that the user can get on to Internet and see WWW pages. In other words, without getting on the service of those Internet providers, there is no way that an average user can access the Internet. But Most Internet provider do not

produce the materials themselves therefore what the users see on the Internet has nothing to do with the Internet access providers. But still the ignorance of the Internet provider can not be tolerated. When the system operator notices that offensive things are going on a certain user, the system operators will first, give the notice to that person, then block any more access to the BBS of that particular person. However, BBS which is designed to aim at filthy market segment simply does not care about this and will try to hook up anybody.

Government

Those adult BBS operators will never change their contents unless there is a specific legal threat by the government. Thus even in complete free society like US, the government has the responsibility to watch over the Internet and carry out some law-enforcement works in order to protect its citizens from offensive materials. This idea runs directly into objections from freedom of speech mantra folks. But again, the government has the responsibility to protect people from being victimized and there must be a distinction between protection and regulation. Overly blatant government interference on the contents of the Internet must not be desirable, however at the same time the government should interfere with matters that can hurt its citizen either mentally or physically. Therefore, it is vital that our government should do something to prevent Cyber-crime in our society. Some materials in the Internet could make young kids traumatized and mentally disturbed should be regulated by the government in the view of government role to protect citizen. Some government around the world do take actions. For example, Singapore blocked the access to pornographic WWW sites for the purpose of maintaining the decency of its citizens(Ang and Nadarajan, 1996). South Korea tried to block WWW sites who are carrying propaganda from North Korea and somehow managed to drop the sites from the Internet(probably bought off the server or threatened to kill the operator). In other words, government can do effectively regulate the Internet by destroying the WWW sites if possible or blocking the access to the WWW sites which usually are from abroad. But government should think that its responsibility lies on protecting citizens from offensive materials, rather than actively working on thought control of its people.

3. Preventative Software and the Experiment

Restricting Access and the Experiment

In order to regulate cyberporn, various schemes and strategies have been developed by several different companies and organizations. These schemes range from ratings systems, to preventative software that restricts access to sexually oriented sites. We conducted an experiment to test various software schemes against a sizable sampling of adult web sites. A very large and prominent collection of various adult web sites were all tested to see how effective the software schemes were in restricting access.

Age Verification and Pay Sites

A large portion of the web sites require some sort of fee, paid with a credit card. A login and password to the site are then sent via email to the purchaser. From there, the client can access stories, pictures, video, and all other forms of online erotica at that site. Not only is it quite conceivable for a minor to have a credit card or a checking account, but often free pictures are given away at these sites as enticement. The majority of these sites are more concerned with profit than the welfare of youth. Other systems have also been created to validate age for a small monthly fee. These services also provide an ID and password, but they can be used at thousands of sites rather than just one. These companies make money both from the individuals who subscribe to their services and from the websites that subscribe to their services to provide authentication, thus taking the responsibility away from the sites themselves. This business has proven to be very lucrative for these people as well. Often, but not always, to subscribe to one of these services, a driver license or other proof of age is required. Thus these companies are slightly better than the regular subscription sites in their screening out minors. But again, they are more profit minded than they are good citizens.

Similar to how movies are rated from G through NC17, there are several organizations that would like to implement a ratings systems on web sites and other Internet content as well. The two major organizations involved with designing ratings are the Recreational Software Advisory Council and Safe Surf. Both of these organizations have created ratings systems for websites to adhere to. The hope for these organizations is that their ratings system will become standardized. Many of the various ratings systems have professed to fit to PICS. If the system is successfully implemented, than there will be no need for government censorship, because any software will be able to screen a PICS compliant web page for content. However, though it is a tool for parental supervision by allowing parents control over what rated sites children are allowed access to, it relies heavily upon webmasters to rate their sites. Aside from the issue of whose responsibility it is to safeguard these sites, without sites being rated, parents cannot even use the parental controls. Microsoft web browser the Internet Explorer 3.0, is one of the first web browsers to allow for PICS screening. It currently has the RSACi standard natively builtin, but can download and implement the Safe Surf ratings as well and should distribute that standard in its next iteration. The vast majority of websites however have not proven responsible enough to provide PICS certification. When the list of links at Persian Kitty were examined with Microsoft Internet Explorer using RSACi ratings, the results were positively dismal. Out of 236 sites surveyed, only 9 were successfully blocked from being accessed, which amounts to a mere 3.81%. Internet Explorer also has the ability to screen unrated sites, thereby blocking out all sites that do not definitively state that they are suitable for all audiences. Out of the 236 sites surveyed, only 151 even had legal disclaimers as sexually oriented sites. That is only 63.98%, that even warned of their nature much less protected against under age solicitors. Unfortunately too many of them have proved to be more profit minded than conscientious for ratings to be feasible.

Preventative Software

Many software companies have recognized that ratings systems implemented with PICS are not yet a viable solution. They have therefore created software based on various other strategies to restrict sites.

Each one builds functionality on top of the ratings system with a slightly different strategy, and they vary in effectiveness. Cyber Patrol and Net Nanny were both tested in this study.

Cyber Patrol by Microsystems is one of the oldest and most prolific of the software systems. It utilizes the RSACi and Safe Surf ratings systems, screening all rated sites. However it does not stop there. Cyber Patrol also utilizes what they call the CyberNOT list. This is a list of web sites, FTP sites, usenet newsgroups, IRC chat channels, and others that are known to have undesirable content. Out of 226 sites surveyed with Cyber Patrol, 145 were blocked, a percentage of 64.16%. While this was actually the best results out of any that were obtained in this study, they are still unacceptable. 81 sites were still easily accessible holding several gigabytes worth of adult material. More disturbing is that the many of the sites that displayed the Cyber Patrol logo, were not actually blocked by Cyber Patrol. This could be the result of changes to the website, frames and new functionality, or outright fraud. Of the 12 sites that displayed the Cyber Patrol logo, 9 (75%) were blocked. The other 3 were still accessible for whatever reasons.

Net Nanny by Trove Investment Corp., is a newer company but is also prominent on the web. Net Nanny is slightly different in that it does not just return a blank Access Denied page like Cyber Patrol does, but literally shuts down the entire application that causes the fault. This strict action is much more frightening to younger children, therefore is more of a deterrent, but is also much more frustrating when incurred accidentally. The key difference however is that it screens phrases that are typed in, are part of the URL, or appear in the Title section of the web page, and uses this as its primary form of filtering. Any violation detected immediately terminates the application. It becomes a liability when the phrases are not used in pornographic context, i.e. A chicken breast. Conversely, it can do nothing about conversations that use sexual metaphors and innuendoes rather than explicit words. Like Cyber Patrol it restricts what is typed as well, a child cannot search for any key phrases or engage in any discussion that has them. Net Nanny was not quite as effective as Cyber Patrol however. Out of the 227 sites visited, it restricted access to 46, 20.26%. Similarly to Cyber Patrol, not all of the sites that displayed the Net Nanny logo were blocked when Net Nanny was tested. In fact, of the 11 sites that displayed the logo, only 1 was actually restricted (9.09%).

4. Conclusion

The maintenance of public decency and the protection of intellectual property are the problems of any mature and complex society. Therefore, the regulating Internet depends on the joint effort by parents, government, online service companies and users themselves. The responsibility of regulating the Internet should be shared by all these players on the Internet since all these players have the power to control the content of the Internet to at least some degree. Since many offensive materials come from abroad, just one nation nowadays can not police the Internet content. In other words, a serious international cooperation among all the countries in the world has to be achieved.

5. References

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