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Internet content classification

Regulation of Internet access and content has been a concern of the community and of the Association for some time. In an *inCite* article in August 1996 on this subject, I mentioned that four government inquiries examining the issue had been held in Australia in as many years.

Currently the Senate Select Committee on Information Technologies is taking evidence on the appropriateness, effectiveness and privacy implications of the existing self-regulatory framework. As part of the Association's responsibility to bring the experience of librarians into public forums and to protect current rights of access to information, we made the following points to the Committee in a submission and in evidence last month.

Libraries play an important role in bringing Internet access to the community, providing information literacy skills, opening up rich and exciting opportunities for increasing knowledge and ensuring equity of access to information to those who could not, otherwise, afford it. Submissions to previous government inquiries have stressed the importance of the basic democratic right of unfettered access to information and the responsibility of content providers and users of online information for what is created and accessed.

ALIA supports self-regulation through codes of conduct, within a broad, simple regulatory framework. We also believe that regulatory codes are only one way in which the issue of content regulation should be addressed. There are a number of practical ways in which the library community proposes to continue its involvement in the development of appropriate mechanisms to regulate access to the Internet.

The first is through ongoing participation in public debate, such as the current Senate inquiry.

The second is through participation in and support of the evolution of self-regulatory mechanisms, such as those currently under development by the Internet Industry Association [www.iia.net.au/news/code3.html] and the Council of Australian University Directors of Information Technology [www.caudit.edu.au/caudit/codes/Code.html]. Codes should deal with illegal material and not attempt to interpret 'community standards'.

A third area of relevance (and expertise) of the librarian relates to the organisation of information on the Internet. These skills are well-recognised in the management of hardcopy information and most library users are familiar with the Dewey Decimal system or the Library of Congress subject headings used

to identify categories of information. The use of metadata (information on information) tags is being explored through the Dublin Core Program, a meeting of which was hosted by the National Library of Australia in 1997. There has been some progress towards the introduction of rating and labelling systems. Rating systems can be used to determine the level of nudity, language, sexual content or violence. The RSACi system does this on a four-level scale. Labelling systems may involve suitability ratings or just standard metadata. If the Internet is to evolve as a navigable source of information, priority must be given to developing a sophisticated system of identifying the subject matter and classification of information on the Net.

Interestingly, this debate emerged only a couple of weeks ago as the subject of an ABC Radio National Media Report, as the following exchange demonstrates:

Robert Bolton: Jeremy White [editor of *Australian Personal Computer*] says if you want to do some serious research, throw away your mouse, push away the keyboard and get down to your local library!

Jeremy White: Humanity has around 4000 years experience in cataloguing and organising information. When you go back through human history, people have always wanted to organise, the information, the resources, to which they have access. And that means that the systems that we have in place in libraries today are based on a huge amount of human knowledge and experience. When you look at the 'Net compared to that, you're talking about a medium which as a popular medium is only really four years old. If you want to keep up-to-date on a topic, or if the topic you're researching has a lot of information on it because it happens to be focussed on technology, then the 'Net is a great place. But if you're actually interested in finding out what humanity has discovered on this topic over the last couple of thousand years, then a library is going to hold that, and the Net won't. The 'Net might give you pointers to it. As you say, lots of libraries do have their catalogues online and you can go and find out where those books are sitting. But it's very, very hard to find catalogued, properly-organised information online, because of the nature of the medium. [ABC *Media report*, 2 April 1998. www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/mediarpt/]

A fourth way of contributing to the debate on Internet regulation is to monitor and clarify for the general public the effectiveness of filtering software. Filtering technologies must be acknowledged as providing, at the moment, limited controls over access to information in public organisations such as libraries. While a ▶

useful device in the home, and possibly in schools, these software programs are well documented as excising useful sites, along with the unwanted. Filtering devices also provide the misleading impression of safety, so that parents may not be as vigilant as is necessary. Experience in the United States of America has led some public access providers, such as libraries, to avoid the use of filtering technologies, because of the prospect of litigation flowing from the inability of the software to guarantee that classes of information will not inadvertently filter through the safety shield. It is unlikely that filtering devices can ever be successful without the availability of sophisticated and standardised information which accurately identifies category, class and origin of information.

A fifth, and very important, role being played by libraries (in government, education, corporate and public sectors) is in the education of the user community. Our Association believes that government support is required for a broader-based program of user education which embraces children, their parents, law enforcement agencies, teachers and librarians,

which could be directed towards issues of particular relevance to access to the Internet by children. An excellent model for such a program is provided by the Internet Online Summit: *Focus on children* [www.kidsonline.org], which was held in December 1997 in Washington DC. The goal of the summit was to address 'ways to ensure that steps are taken to make the Internet online experience safe, educational and entertaining for children'. ALIA believes that children should be given positive Internet experiences, not simply denied negative ones.

The full submission will be shortly available on ALIAnet.

One and a half million Australians accessed the Internet in March, according to Telstra estimates cited in evidence to the Committee by the head of the National Office of Information Economy, Dr Paul Twomey. Thirty per cent of Australians now use this source of information. It is opportune, therefore, that librarians are using Australian Library Week to discuss Internet use and the role and responsibilities they have in providing Internet access to their users. ∎

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