

# Who decides whether pornography is in the public interest?

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And you thought you were about to have a Clinton-Lewinsky-free day! The specifics aside, the episode is one of the most significant global information events this century, and one that all information professionals should thoughtfully consider. I was fortunate to be in Washington DC at the time of the release of the Starr Report. The mass global distribution of the report was extraordinary to observe in terms of its speed, its extent, and the issues it raised. Indeed, I was actually part of that global distribution, being a 'Washington correspondent' and providing comment for a public radio network in Australia as the week progressed.

The release of the Report to Congress coincided with its release on the internet, and within hours, the CNN web site was reporting that it was logging 400 000 hits per minute — that's a staggering 24 million people per hour accessing the information. The event brought on the creation of hundreds of electronic forums for people around the world to share their views, and spawned numerous public surveys. It was a major test of the internet as a tool for instant and mass dissemination of information and as a forum for public comment.

The capacity of information providers to respond quickly to the jam this created was equally staggering. It dominated radio and television coverage, with non-stop coverage, over several days. The multiple-media coverage explored every angle and every reaction, from every age group. On one international news coverage I watched, there were even subtitles showing excerpts from dialogue going on in internet chat-rooms. And in the supposed anonymity and privacy of chat-rooms, some character personifications were at least creative, if not blatant. Not even 24 hours later, the *Washington Post*, a leading national daily paper, provided a full-text uncensored copy of the report to every person — adult and child — who wished to purchase it. Within two days of the release, Washington DC bookshops had three soft-cover full-text versions of the report for sale, and at US\$9.99 per copy, the predominant comment was that cheap pornography was accessible to all. Within several days, the *Washington Post* had a two-page spread presenting the viewpoints of children and adolescents, who — given the multiple methods of mass dissemination — had no difficulty whatsoever accessing the information, de-

spite the use of technical internet filters in many schools. Equally vociferous were parents, who in their efforts to bring up their children as 'good citizens' through encouraging them to watch news reports, were having to deal with their own embarrassment when they were asked to explain aspects of the news coverage, such as 'Mummy, what is oral sex?'

Embedded in the global informing process of this event, and combined with the technologies available to saturate the world with this information, some significant issues and questions emerge. It is not just the predictable questions about the mass availability of and ease of access to pornography, but the so-called justification at a government level for the deliberate mass distribution to all — so quickly — without what appeared to be an in-depth consideration of the social ramifications of doing so. The introduction to the *Washington Post's* full-text had a startling introduction 'We recognise that the independent counsel's report contains extensive sexually-explicit material that normally would be unacceptable for publication in the *Post*. However, we have decided not to edit the text of the report because of the unique circumstances of its release...' (pA27, 12 September). This is a problem for governments in future legislation of pornography, as is the capitalising on what might be any 'unique event' to make such information available.

And there are other concerns: the issue of privacy of information versus the public right to know; provider surveillance and use of chat-room conversations for other purposes; the question of social responsibility and role of providers; the role of the media in mediating the viewpoints of society; and the capacity of people to comprehend, analyse and synthesize information in clearly what people indicated was an 'information-overload' episode, and how information agencies as providers might address this. In addition, concerns have been raised about how providers, in structuring information to facilitate access, have controlled and manipulated the development of informed opinion. Take a look at the different access structures of websites set up to help people make their way through the report, and consider how these might impact on the development of viewpoint. The event is an important opportunity for the profession as a whole to address some of these difficult questions. ■

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