

NetAlert...

Where we go from here

The Commonwealth legislation which established Australia's internet censorship regime (the *Broadcasting Services Amendment Act 1999*) also created NetAlert Ltd, often described as a community and industry advisory body.

NetAlert's creation was announced in a press release by the Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts: 'NetAlert is an independent body established as part of the Commonwealth Government's commitment to educating communities about managing access to online content,' Senator Alston said. 'NetAlert will be responsible for researching new access management technologies and running national awareness campaigns to promote a safer internet experience for young people.'

NetAlert is a company limited by guarantee, wholly-owned by the Commonwealth Government, and its directors (currently twelve) are nominated by the Commonwealth. It has a small secretariat, based in Hobart. Its principal role is stated in its constitution as:

...to encourage and promote the use of the internet by all Australians, particularly young people and their families...

NetAlert has no responsibility for enforcement of the law relating to regulation of online content. This rests clearly with the Australian Broadcasting Authority, and the new regulatory regime is set out in two documents — the *Broadcasting Services Act*, and the *Codes of Practice* adopted by the Internet Industry Association. The latter set out obligations of Internet Content Hosts (ICH) and Internet Service Providers (ISP).

So where does NetAlert fit into the censorship picture? First of all, there are several nexuses between the role of NetAlert and online content regulation. One of these is the obligation of ISPs to inform end-users of ways in which they can control children's access to the internet — there is a clear potential role for NetAlert to provide a wide range of information to parents. Another is the requirement to consider the suitability of filters, also part of the *Code of Practice*; we are doing that now.

The basic role of NetAlert is information and education. It was established to educate communities about the management of access to the internet and to online content. NetAlert is intended to 'empower parents to take control of the internet, so that they can feel confident about their children going online.'

The core message is empowering users to achieve a positive internet experience — in particular, empowering families to manage their access to the internet. NetAlert is concerned to promote use of the internet to all Australians, and to foster the ability of the user to exercise control over his or her internet experience.

In this sense, the goals of NetAlert are very similar to the goals of other bodies involved enthusiastically with the internet. ALIA's internet goals seem best summarised as 'the best internet experience for all users'. They coincide with the goals of NetAlert, which hopes to collaborate and work with other organisations with shared goals.

So NetAlert has a vision of: positive internet use by all Australians; empowerment of users to control their internet experience; collaboration with industry; and a well-informed internet user community.

In pursuing this vision, NetAlert agreed, at the Board meeting held on 21 January, to adopt four priority programs: create a parents' help line; create a major information resource for internet users, including support for research; collaborate closely with industry and the user community; and initiate a program of community education and development.

The specific objectives of NetAlert are set out in its constitution. In summary, they say that we exist to do things like this:

- help internet users understand and minimise problems, dangers and threats posed by the internet;
- assess filtering technologies and advise on their use;
- promote responsible, self-regulatory approaches to internet content amongst all players;
- provide an advisory service; and
- consult with industry bodies on the development of codes of conduct.

There will be a strong focus on enabling internet users to avoid internet content which is objectionable, but there are also many other issues involved in empowering the user — such as privacy issues, and the importance of avoiding unwanted communication with children. Australian libraries are, quite reasonably, hostile to the use of filtering software. NetAlert will promote the use of this software in the home, but we hope also to provide a realistic assessment of what it can and cannot do.

NetAlert is a work in progress. It is currently developing an action plan for the next two years, and considering the ways in which it will focus its activities. While the broad approach is clear, the detail will be worked through for a long while yet. NetAlert is keen to work with a wide range of organisations — such as ALIA — in developing programs and activities which will enable Australians to make the internet their own. For information about NetAlert, contact the chair of the board, Karyn Hart on e-mail: hartk@uq.net.au, or phone 07 3341 8111. ■



Derek Whitehead

NetAlert director

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