

Statement to the COPA Commission on ratings and labeling

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Chairman Telage, co-chairs, Rice Hughes and Vrandenberg, I would like to thank you for the invitation to participate in today's hearing on rating and labeling technologies. As the first journalist to publish a story about Congress's early missteps with the Children's Online Protection Act of 1998 and how it came dangerously close to missing a year-old deadline to create the Commission in the fall of 1999, I take great joy in being here. And I thank you for the opportunity.

I'm the News Editor of eWEEK Magazine, a weekly publication that covers the hightech industry for the business user of technology. In addition to the magazine, which is read by approximately 1.6 million people each week, eWEEK has a very popular Web site, eweek.com, which enjoys about 2 million visitors a week. In my role as News Editor, I direct the coverage of our news team, but also report stories and write a monthly column for our Web site.

What I hope to bring to today's discussion is the online news perspective. From that news perspective, I would argue that a ratings and labeling system, complex as it may be to execute on a global scale, in theory, is undoubtedly a welcome addition to the other tools parents and educators have at their disposal to prevent children from viewing harmful material on the Web. Those other tools, of course, being education and adult supervision. Online news operations, like any other online site, are in a constant battle for eyeballs. We all want visitors, and we all want them to stay.

But we don't want just anybody. Like any other publication, online or print, eWEEK has a target audience. We write for the small businesses and the corporate IT manager/CIO/CEO. Of course, eWEEK online is read by far many more people than just that group. But we maintain our focus in the name of continuity and familiarization. In addition, being true to that audience helps us offer visitors more of what they want.

But not all online sites are as picky about their visitors as news operations. And they'll do just about anything, including deception and trickery, to get people to their site.

In October of 1999 I wrote a story about the near death of the COPA Commission. The story prompted one reader to send me an email about a personal anecdote his child experienced online. It read:

Mike:

My 12 year old daughter typed in "usmaps.com" while doing research for a school project. The result is what makes me very angry about the internet. There is so much positive benefit the internet brings our society and will bring our kids. There is simply no excuse for anyone, anywhere to try and trick children into viewing pornography.

Thank you for speaking up about the terrible procrastination on this important issue in Washington.

I've got to believe there is technology available that would significantly reduce the possibility of unwanted porn on the net.

Gordon Rogers
Rocklin, Calif.

What was so horrible about this story is that USMAPS.com was being run by an online pornographer who actually redirected anyone who typed in that URL to his pornography clearing house site, called DIRTBAG.com. To make matters worse, once someone entered DIRTBAG.com, it was impossible to exit without having to shut down the browser. The obvious point, is that this gentleman's daughter was not looking for pornography. She was searching for a map. I submit to you, had the pornographer adhered to a self-regulated rating program or actually been required to rate his site

as ``X," little real harm could have occurred. (Of course, had the pornographer been required to register his site as .xxx or .sex, none of it would have occurred at all.)

Therein lies what I believe is a major difference between pornographic sites and news or other general content sites: like the tobacco industry, unchecked online pornography will try to attract anyone it can, with little or no regard for the unassuming, unknowing, and completely innocent child.

I'm sure you're aware of the University of New Hampshire's recently released report called: Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth from the school's Crimes Against Children Research Center. The group polled a national sample of 1,501 kids aged from 10 to 17 who use the Internet regularly on a series of topics. Here are some of the results:

Of the 1,501,
19% of the kids had received a sexual solicitation over the Internet in the last year
25% had an unwanted exposure to pictures with sexual content without seeking it
Less than 10% of sexual solicitations and only 3% of unwanted exposure episodes were reported to law enforcement agencies, an ISP, or a hotline
About 40% of those that experienced unwanted exposure to sexual material told a parent
But only about 10% of the parents told could even name a specific authority, like the FBI or CyberTipline, to call in the first place

The report was released June 12.

If eWEEK.com were obligated to adhere to a rating and labeling system, there would be very little, if any objection. Would a ``G' rating stop those who wanted to read eWEEK from doing so? I don't think so. Would a ``G' make someone think twice about drilling into our site? I doubt it. For that matter, I doubt Michael Miller, the Publisher of our sister publication PC Magazine, doesn't object to being placed in the ``technology section' of the local news stand. People who want to read about technology go there.

Those that argue that a measure to create a universal ratings and labeling system would start us down a slippery slope, have a point well worth keeping in mind. It will take contemplative thought and discussion. And of course, it must, be done on an international level.

And there is work being done. As we heard from earlier, the nonprofit Internet Content Rating Association based in the U.K. and U.S. uses the Recreational Software Advisory Council's software-based rating system. One part of the software allows content providers to self-rate and label their sites; while another that's built into browsers such as Microsoft's IE, and filtering software, lets parents set their computers to view only specifically-rated sites. The settings provide parents with an idea about the level of nudity, sex, violence and offensive language that's on a site. The parent can also set the browser to not accept any site that is not RSACi rated. The group, which has a host of big name partners, such as Microsoft, IBM, Bertelsman Foundation, AOL, and the National Science Foundation, is at www.ICRA.org.

Another group, the Internet Content Rating for Europe (INCORE) project, being funded by the European Commission is pushing forward its message of self regulation and self rating of the content originating from and for Europe. And while the primary goal of the Internet Watch Foundation, also of the U.K. is to act as a hotline to which people can report illegal material moving across the Web, it is also offering assistance to ISPs and content providers about rating their sites.

No, these approaches are by no means airtight solutions. Those who really want to bypass filtering can find the way around it, whether it's figuring out the password to unlock the rating/filtering software, or simply going to a friend's house that doesn't use filtering. But rating and labeling is a real and positive step toward curbing children's access to truly harmful material on the Web.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to participate in this panel.