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Helping Kids Avoid Pornography Online

A commentary by David Finkelhor
Director, UNH Crimes Against Children Research Center

By Kim Billings
UNH News Bureau

October 20, 2000

Editors:

The Commission on Online Child Protection delivered a report today about the issue of children and online pornography (www.copacommission.org). We offer below an op-ed for your use, written by David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. He also is the author of the Online Victimization/Youth Internet Safety Survey that was mandated by Congress and released last June. Dr. Finkelhor can be reached by phone at (603) 862-2761 or email at david.finkelhor@unh.edu. The center's url is www.unh.edu/ccrc/index.html.

The Commission on Online Child Protection has now weighed in with its report showing how deadlocked our political community is about the issue of the problem of children and online pornography. That report and most of the debate on this issue have proceeded around the assumption that exposure of children to pornography is a problem of controlling young people.

Young people are presumed to be interested in pornography, but some parents object to the way in which the Internet facilitates this access and makes it hard or impossible to enforce parental wishes. To the extent it is framed in this way, the problem may be seen as involving primarily that group of parents who wish to foil their children's sexual curiosity, and a matter of how much assistance government and public policy should give parents in an historically long-standing intrafamilial tug-of-war.

However, searching for pornography is not the only avenue by which children can be exposed; they can encounter it involuntarily as well. Increasingly, information has circulated about sites that intentionally try to trick people, and maybe even especially children,
into entry by using keywords that will capture surfers searching on non-sexually related topics (e.g. "sports") or capitalizing on common addressing mistakes (the infamous "whitehouse.com" or "disnie.com").

In a recent national survey of 1,501 regular Internet-using youth who were 10 to 17 years of age, my colleagues Janis Wolak, Kim Mitchell and myself found that 25 percent of Internet-using youth had been exposed in the last year to pictorial sexual material on the Internet when they didn't want it and weren't looking for it. About a quarter of these youth said they had been very upset by the exposure. One of the major historical changes introduced by the Internet may not be how many children get exposed to sexual materials -- youth access to at least some pornography may have already reached close to saturation with the erotic publishing revolution of the 1960s and 1970s -- but how many get exposed involuntarily. This issue relates to the question of how to conceptualize the Internet medium as a content provider. Regulatory policies in the U.S. have taken a very different stance toward television than they have toward book stores, for example, at least in part because consumers are deemed to have less voluntary control over television content, which is simply beamed into the home and whoever happens to be watching once the set is turned on. Many have considered the Internet more along the lines of a bookstore, in which consumers actively search out and bring home content that they choose. The Supreme Court alluded to this distinction in its opinion on the Communications Decency Act when it wrote, "The receipt of information on the Internet requires a series of affirmative steps more deliberate and directed than merely turning a dial."

But if, in fact, a great deal of sexual material is being viewed by individuals who are not taking "affirmative steps" to receive it, then the medium takes on more of the character of the television model. Whether or not this is an appropriate model to guide regulatory policies in regard to the Internet, there is nonetheless a very important difference for public policy if the problem is conceived as at least in part helping consumers and children avoid intrusive exposures they do not want -- as opposed to helping parents restrain children from exposures these children are actively seeking.

It would help the logiam if we addressed the unwanted exposure as a separate and priority issue.

David Finkelhor is director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. He also is the author of the Online
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