

## Coalition Still Tying to Censor Cyberspace

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If the Christian Coalition and its conservative allies really want to help parents stop their children from reading objectionable material, they should encourage the use of power to determine what is accessible on their computers. Despite all the talk about "getting government off our backs," some conservatives are now trying to have it intrude in our private lives. Ironically, they are using the Internet itself to promote censorship of the information superhighway and to encourage Congress to turn the federal government into an on-line nanny.

On Nov. 30, the Christian Coalition posted an "Action Alert" on its home page urging its supporters to call, fax and send letters to "the House and Senate members who will decide whether or not kids will continue to get easy access to hard-core porn" on the Internet "and urge them to support the only proposal that gets tough on porn, the Hyde proposal."

As one of the House members appointed to the Telecommunications Reform Conference Committee, I'm familiar with Rep. Henry Hyde's original legislation. In addition to significantly penalizing anyone sending "indecent" material on the Internet, it would have held on-line services, such as CompuServe, and their users criminally liable for the content that is transmitted by such services, even in areas beyond the services' control.

In the conference committee's most recent proposal, Hyde's "indecency" standard is combined with liability for Internet users, as well as for service providers that don't meet certain standards. This "indecency" standard replaced a better "harmful to minors" standard that is already accepted as law in 48 states.

That's why cyberspace free-speech advocates are still flooding the Internet with e-mails opposing this legislation. And that's why it's still instructive to look at the problems raised by trying to have government banish "indecent" material from the Net.

First, the "indecency" standard is so vague that it creates an unprecedented criminal situation in which people and organizations will be violating the law for private expressions that are in no sense pornographic. Great works of literature such as "Ulysses" or "Catcher in the Rye" could be banned from the Net, as could individual conversations that include profane comments or deal with mature topics that may be considered unsuitable for children. This is the cyberspace

equivalent of book burning and should be rejected outright.

Second, if members of the Christian Coalition wish to stay on a strictly family-friendly diet of reading material, it is their privilege and anyone else's. They shouldn't be able to impose their ideological and moral standards on others or get Washington to do their bidding.

The current conference proposal would place the federal government in the position of reviewing private communications between individuals for loosely defined material. We don't let the Postal Service read our letters, and we shouldn't give the government wide latitude to screen our e-mail, either.

Third, successful U.S. government censorship of the Net is a doubtful proposition. The Internet is not an American government network, nor is it a network solely owned or controlled by American companies. Because the Net is a global network, it's unlikely that censorship by a government agency would accomplish the goals set out by proponents of federal intrusion.

To get a glimpse of government nannies in action, one need look no further than the recent decision by CompuServe to block subscriber access to more than 200 computer discussion groups and picture databases. The on-line company took this drastic action after a prosecutor in Germany said the material in question might violate German pornography laws and other prohibitions against explicit materials deemed harmful to minors and adults.

On the day that these news groups were banned, the Electronic Frontier Foundation posted a list of them on its home page. Among the items that CompuServe is being forced to hide from its 4 million users are serious discussions about Internet censorship legislation pending in Congress, thoughtful postings about human rights and marriage, and a support group for gay and lesbian youth. Banning this material doesn't protect minors and adults -- but it does have a chilling effect on political and social discussion in a free society.

The German experience should serve as a warning to Congress about the consequences of on-line censorship and government intrusion in our lives.

If the Christian Coalition and its conservative allies really want to help parents stop their children from reading objectionable material, they should encourage the use of software developed by private companies that will give them the power to determine what is accessible on their computers.

According to the Interactive Working Group, America Online and Prodigy offer technologies that allow parents to block their children's access to certain on-line forums where they might find inappropriate materials. Further, a variety of software developers have produced parental-control features for home PCs, while schools and businesses have the ability to block specific sites from access by underage Internet users.

If ever a legislative proposal deserved to be deleted from a democratic political system, the ``indecency" standard is it. While the problem of children being exposed to pornography is a legitimate issue that society must address in a responsible manner, control of the Internet belongs in the hands of mom and dad, not Uncle Sam.

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