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Despite all the talk about "getting government off our backs," some conservatives are now trying to have it intrude into our private lives. Ironically, they are using the Internet itself to promote censorship of the information superhighway and encourage the U.S. Congress to turn the federal government into an on-line nanny.

On Nov. 30, 1995, 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 very familiar with Rep. Hyde's legislation. He wants to establish a penalty of two years in prison and up to \$100,000 in fines for anyone sending "indecent" material on the Internet.

In addition, he seeks to hold on-line services - like CompuServe - and their users criminally liable for the content transmitted by such services, even in areas of these services beyond their control.

Yes, this provision gets tough on pornography. But it also trashes the U.S. Constitution in the process and curbs free speech in the United States.

First, the "indecent" standard is so vague it creates an unprecedented situation in which people and organizations will be violating the law for private expressions that will in no sense be pornographic.

Great works of literature like "Ulysses" and "Catcher in the Rye" could be banned from the Net, as could individual conversations that included profane comments or dealt with mature topics that might be considered unsuitable for children.

This would be 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. But they shouldn't be able to impose their ideological and moral standards on others or get Washington to do their bidding for them.

The Hyde proposal would open the door to broad-based regulation of the Internet by the Federal Communications Commission. It would assign the federal government to review private communications between individuals. We don't let the U.S. Postal Service read our letters, and we shouldn't let the FCC screen our e-mail.

Third, high-technology businesses are vulnerable to lawsuits or criminal prosecution under the Hyde proposal.

For example, Netscape Communications Corp. provides customers with "browsing" software that enables them to jump from network to network over the World Wide Web. The company's executives have no control over where their customers go, but under the Hyde plan, they could get thrown in prison if people wandered in the wrong direction.

That would make as much sense as arresting a telephone operator because someone made an obscene phone call.

Fourth, 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 private, global network, it's unlikely that censorship by a government agency would accomplish the goals established 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 was ordered to take this drastic action by a prosecutor in Germany who said the material in question violated German pornography laws and other prohibitions against explicit materials deemed harmful to minors and adults.

Among the items 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 communications from a support group for gay and lesbian youth.

Banning this material won't protect minors and adults in Germany - but it will 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.

America Online and Prodigy offer technologies that allow parents to block their children's access to certain on-line forums on which they might find inappropriate materials, according to the Interactive Working Group.

Further, a variety of software developers have produced parental-control features for home PCs, while schools and businesses can block specific sites from access by underage Internet users.

If ever proposed legislation deserved to be defeated in a democratic political system, the Hyde proposal 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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