

Risk and the Internet: Perception and Reality

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According to research overseen by Joseph Turow of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, fully one fourth of news articles on the Internet from October 1997 to October 1998 were alarmist in nature and two-thirds of these news articles raised disturbing issues about the nature and content of the World Wide Web (Turow, 1999). Additionally, parents express grave concerns about the content their children may encounter on the Web. Without a doubt, much exists on the Web that is troubling to parents of school-age children and to others who do not want to be assaulted by sexually graphic content. Yet, thirty years of agenda-setting research would suggest that a link exists between these stories of the prurient and hazardous nature of Web content and the concern of parents, many of whom do not completely understand what is available on the Web, let alone how to control their children's access to it.

Agenda-setting influences also lead the public-policy debate about the Internet. Concerns about the new media, driven by older media, help foster an alarmist state in which legislators define their roles in light of protecting citizens from the bogeyman of the Internet through legislative control of access to or dissemination of Internet content. Historically, however, the issue of curtailing objectionable material has not been solved by access controls; it is a long-standing social problem that will not likely be solved by legalistic or technical solutions. Politicians who might otherwise promote government

taking a hands-off approach to many social issues are seen promoting legislation to monitor, cordon off, and choke off questionable sites. While they might deplore "Big Brother" in the boardroom, they vote for the Communications Decency Act, because they desire to "protect" children from the evils of the Internet. Protectors in government and in lobbying bodies also promote the use of filtering software to keep the impressionable from the objectionable. Yet, the question arises: Why does Web content incite such fear in parents? Does it merit the press coverage it receives? Does the Web really emphasize the prurient and salacious, the vicious and the foul? Or is it, like the world around us, more a place where one must exercise caution in the dark places – but where these places are relatively limited in their number and scope?

This article is an attempt to grapple with some of these questions and to suggest public policy strategy in addressing these topics. First, we present historical background on the confluence of media scares and communication technologies, and an understanding of the nature of Internet risks and fears. Second, we present findings from a content analysis of newspaper coverage of families and the Internet, and a survey on current perceptions of the risks associated with an unfettered Web. Third, we then present new findings from our content analysis of the pages found in a popular search engine's database, contrasting the perceptions and the reality of Web