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Good morning Mr. Chairman and distinguished Commissioners:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss my work as Net-mom, and how my piece of the puzzle fits into the complete picture of how parents can guide their children's experiences online.

### **Who and what is Net-mom?**

Net-mom is a registered trademark, owned not by a large conglomerate, but by me. I am the author of *The Internet Kids & Family Yellow Pages*, published by Osborne McGraw-Hill. I have just completed writing the fifth edition, which will be published in October. Today I have brought copies of the fourth edition for the Commissioners and staff. The fourth edition comprises more than 4,600 annotated selections, in more than 130 major subject headings plus a Countries of the World section and a Parenting section.

The fifth edition, available in October, will sell for \$24.99 and contain about 600 pages.

I operate Net-mom as a sole proprietorship. My husband programs the database and the servers and takes care of the technical side of things, while I create the content and policy. Our teenage son acts as a marketing consultant, arbiter of humor, and author of his own section of the book.

### **How I select sites**

I collect for preschoolers through adults. I select educational and recreational Web sites based on how they measure up against my selection policy guidelines. Although the perfect site will have all these features, many of my choices are based on high points, but not full points. Here are things I look for:

- 1- Sites need to be age appropriate for my readers--Families, usually with high school kids to preschoolers.
- 2- Sites need to be current. In general, if it hasn't been updated in a year, it's out.
- 3- Sites should have some authority—for example, from NASA, or the Smithsonian, or National Geographic.

- 4- Sites should have good organization and interior navigation. They should be consistent in their interfaces and not confuse the user.
- 5- Sites should be on a stable server, they shouldn't be unreachable every other time.
- 6- Sites shouldn't have gratuitous Java, overblown graphics (too much noise, not enough signal), shouldn't go so overboard on ads that I can't find the content, shouldn't have too many distractions, especially music I can't turn off.
- 7- I don't require privacy policies, but if there is one I read it, and if it's arrogant or suspect I either note it in my annotation or leave the site out.
- 8- The site should teach me something and ideally get me excited about the subject. If it suggests things for me to do offline, so much the better.
- 9- If there's a chat room aimed at kids it should be moderated or else I say something about it in the annotation.
- 10- Puberty yes, sexuality no. No adult stuff, No bad language. No hate speech. Nothing too gross (Son of Net-mom's page of picks notwithstanding, e.g. the Belch Page.)

If I think a site shows potential but I've disallowed it for a particular reason, sometimes I write to the webmaster and explain that they have off-color jokes in their collection, or that their "preschool" game collection might stand another look, since it includes realistic Gulf war military violence. Occasionally I have written to inform them that although their site targets elementary school kids, their banner ad exchange company is sending them ads for alcoholic beverages.

Recently we estimated how many sites I have personally explored since the first edition of the book. We were stunned to discover that I have visited about 182,000 Web sites. If I looked at eight or nine sub pages for each site, that works out to about 1.5 million Web pages I have personally inspected since 1996.

I choose everything in the book. I am the only one applying my selection policy and I believe that this is the main reason I achieve consistent high quality in my collection. My readers get my personal view of what is great on the Net for kids and families. I want people to think of Net-mom as the trusted Internet brand for families.

### **How often is the book updated?**

We are constantly tinkering with the database behind the book. Every month or so, we run an automated crawler through our entire collection. Generally we run it a few times. We get back a report saying that this particular site didn't answer, or that site was not found. Then we go in and try to find out what's wrong. In most cases there's a simple fix. Usually the URL needs to be slightly changed in order to follow moves within the site's directory. Sometimes we have to go out to the search engines and search for the site again. Occasionally I will write to webmasters and ask why a server is down, or where the file has been relocated. I have also been known to look up the whois record and actually call the ISP to point out that something is broken. In a few of these cases, the

webmasters and ISP haven't known the site was dead! In comparatively few cases, we mark broken sites as "temp down" in our database.

All database updates are searchable through our Web site at <http://www.netmom.com/>. My readers just go to the updates section of our site and follow the directions to see if we have any news about where a site has gone, or why it is down.

I can't stress enough the importance of initially selecting stable sites. I believe this has allowed us to keep the collection relatively stable, too. By the end of each edition year, we estimate that less than 20 percent of the book has had its URL address updated in some way.

As far as updating content, and making sure that sites still fit the selection policy, this is done only in spot checks during the edition year. Certainly if a reader questions something, I am on it the same day. In the course of research for each new edition, I add new resources and reevaluate ones that have appeared in previous editions. I spend time at each site again, making sure it is still worthy. Over the five editions of the book, I estimate that only a handful of sites have been thrown out because they subsequently turned into porn sites. This has not happened at all in the last three editions. While some of this is due to my skill at sniffing out potentially troublesome sites, and not listing them in the first place, I can only attribute the rest to luck and good Internet citizenship skills on the part of the webmasters.

Many, many more sites were deleted from the new fifth edition, or not added, because of their overblown and offensive use of pop-up windows and multiple banner ads per page. I don't care if a site tries to support itself with tasteful use of a few banner and other ads, but I don't like to have to search very hard for content amid numerous flashing, animated marketing messages.

### **What has been the response to the book?**

The response has been phenomenal.

The book is a bestseller not only with parents, but also teachers and librarians around the world. It is available at the major chain bookstores, online bookstores, Wal-Mart, and many other places. It has sold well over 200,000 copies, which is apparently unheard-of when it comes to computer books for children. Its electronic version has also been licensed by several companies in the past, including FamilyClick. Last fall, it was also translated into a Chinese edition, and there is a pending arrangement for an edition for Taiwan.

Still, there are many parents and teachers who have never seen the book. Once they do encounter it, they see how useful the book is, and they want it.

Sites I have approved are offered the Net-mom Approved Slice of Apple Pie logo to display on their sites. Some choose to display it and some do not. Other people see this logo, or see the book, and want to know how they can be selected. I am often approached by companies that want to get their sites "Net-mom Approved," and I have even been offered money in order to ensure placement in the next edition. I stress to them that Net-mom is something of a consumer guidebook—that part of my value is that you can't buy your way into the collection.

### **What else does Net-mom do?**

Once you have written a book it's like having a four and a half-pound business card you can give away. I have done work for Children's Television Workshop, Disney Online, GetNetWise, and America Online. I have done safe surfing workshops for MCI Foundation and Ameritech.net. I currently write weekly columns for both Family Click and Ask Jeeves for Kids. I also write a free monthly e-mail newsletter for parents, which has over 1,000 direct subscribers and several thousand more indirect subscribers.

This makes me everyone's best friend on the Net. Every week I hear from parents who want to know everything from how to talk to their kids about sex to how to teach an inner-city child how to read a map. Parents ask how to get rid of spam e-mail and where to find family-friendly reviews of prime time TV shows. I often learn about new sites myself when researching the answers for my readers!

### **How can children be protected on the Internet?**

Although my interest lies mostly in creating collections of what is right with the Internet, I am often asked to comment on Internet dangers. My answer may surprise you. The biggest danger on the Internet today is not pedophiles. It is misinformation, and disinformation.

Once written in the stone of HTML and placed on the Net, information seems to stay there. Information, unlike a fine wine, does not get better with age. Recently, when writing my CHEMISTRY chapter, I came across several Periodic Tables of the Elements that were outdated by several years. They ended with element 109, and as of a year ago, several more have been discovered.

Some Web sites look authoritative, but as you read further you find there's a hidden agenda, or something not quite right. A site I visited recently about the rain forest turned into a site about the Bible. This is OK as long as the teachers don't mind a spiritual rather than a scientific paper. If the teacher is expecting science, and the kid's homework cites something else entirely, there is a knowledge disconnect.

In this edition of the book I collected many media literacy sites. I think it is of critical importance to teach kids how to evaluate information in whatever form it appears. This crucial skill will be useful to them throughout their lives, in many venues, while a filtering system is only as good as its range or sphere of influence.

But I know that today's newest filter systems, filtered ISPs, and other solutions will be perfect for some family situations. In other families, they will be too heavy handed and not granular or flexible enough to be of use. My message to families is to become informed about the plethora of tools out there, and to try some of them out. But that is easier said than done.

While clearinghouse initiatives such as GetNetWise are a start, poring through the more than 127 tools listed there is asking a lot of an already confused parent.

I do wish that a completely unbiased testing facility could be set up to run the filters through the same battery of tests and give us a reading. I don't want a lecture on the First amendment, I don't want a sermon on the evils of pornography, I just want parents to be able to compare performances. We don't need another study constructed by amateurs; we need a professional independent research facility to give us the answers we need.

There needs to be continued education on using the Internet, but dwelling solely on the dangers is not going to be a complete solution. Cautionary tales are important but scaring people away entirely is not useful. Please let's remember to also focus on media literacy and the good things about the Internet and how it can be put to best use.

I am also active on the content labeling scene, and serve on the Internet Content Rating Advisory Board. I continue to advocate the creation of a labeling scheme that is absurdly easy for parents (and others) to employ as a content selection device. I also believe it is necessary to work with the adult entertainment industry to provide a widely accepted labeling system. I would like to see every site offering free home page space encouraging its users to label their sites using the soon to be released ICRA scheme, which continues and expands the RSACi labels. I would like to see these sites offer a "label wizard" to facilitate this. I would also like to see all HTML editor programs offer a similar wizard program. I would like to see all government sites label themselves as a matter of policy.

### **What is government's role?**

In closing I would like to once again thank the Commissioners for the opportunity to state my views, and I would encourage you to ask Congress to do these things:

- 1- fund an independent filter testing lab; and
- 2- fund a wide-spectrum information dissemination path for the lab's testing results to include a web site, print materials, TV and radio; and

- 3- continue to fund such successful and effective programs as the Cyber TipLine operated by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children; and finally
- 4- encourage the creation of educational sites by children and for children, perhaps by getting libraries, schools, and homeschools involved in a public/private sponsored contest modeled on the excellent example of the ThinkQuest competition.