

Testimony of  
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Before the  
Commission on Online Child Protection (COPA)  
Hearing on  
The impact of Filtering, Rating, and Labeling on Content Providers

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Mr. Chairman, Co-Chair Vradenburg and Co-Chair Hughes, and Honorable Members of this Commission, thank you for the generous opportunity to testify this afternoon to discuss the impact of filtering, labeling and rating on content providers.

It is an honor to speak to the commission today on behalf of the effort to protect children from the unfortunately abundant poison available on the Internet. As Vice President of Crosswalk.com, the nation's largest Christian Internet community site, I am responsible for the development of content programming and delivery for over a dozen channels of topical programming. Overseeing the work of multiple channel editors as well as in-house and independent writers, this responsibility includes making both long term policy decisions and daily decisions in conjunction with my editors regarding appropriate story themes, words, phrases or quotes.

Each day, we deliver fresh news, features, newsletters, and unique applications to our niche constituency. Our audience depends on a firm, accurate and consistent standard in delivering this varied information. In fact, our core audience can be generalized as being very cautious, perhaps even fearful, of the negative impact the Internet can have upon their families.

In this environment, my company has taken an aggressive advocacy role for the use of filtering as a tool for families in their effort to safely invite the Internet into their homes.

My company actually chose to be among the first to offer server-side filtering available for free. We believed that filtering would strategically make our product better, safer, and more attractive to the consumers we were trying to attract.

In defining boundaries with our filtering partner, we chose to focus on filtering out content that included: (1) sites labeled as “adult only”, (2) sites advocating, promoting, or giving advice on carrying out acts widely considered illegal, (3) sites containing pornography, violence, sex or nudity, (4) advocacy of the recreational use of alcohol or controlled substances, and (5) information on the use of weapons or weapon making.

Cost was a factor. While the company did absorb significant costs in delivering a free filtering solution directly to our customers, we tactically believed that the value it represented to our audience would deliver both a financial and cultural return on investment from a growing market share and from loyal members generating increased traffic to our site.

From a customer service perspective, the company must educate our members of the values and limitations of filtering as well deliver customer service to support the filtering mechanism. This represented a great deal of man hours in initial development as well as significant man hours of labor each week for support.

In the day-to-day delivery of our content, all writers and editors at my company must be aware of the filtering standards in place. We have even had some of our own stories inadvertently filtered out along the way as the editors learned how to work within the standards in cases such as medical terminology activating a filter block.

Overall, the process of creating a broad spectrum of daily content to our audience within the boundaries of our filtering definitions has been quite manageable for our writers and editors. In the process, there has been no evidence that these boundaries have compromised the quality or accuracy of any content that has been created for our audience.

In searching for any collateral negative impact on the user experience of our members, we found very few substantive complaints about any performance problems in the speed of downloading our pages due to our filtering programs. Over time, the filtering solution we created matured to a level of sophistication and integration with our content servers that performance standards were maintained.

I join my company in remaining a firm advocate for the use of responsible filtering as an effective tool for parents in harnessing the immense value the Internet represents to their families while minimizing its inherent risks. In continuing to promote filtering as a solution to making the Internet safe, I believe that there are a few major barriers to overcome.

Historically cost has been a major factor in limiting the widespread adoption by families and public facilities. As with many other sectors of the Internet business, the costs of this service have declined dramatically in the past two years. In fact, the costs of filtering today have actually fallen to zero with some providers.

Other issues I believe have impeded the use of filtering include:

Poor performance – the results of the product were, or were perceived to be, inadequate and ineffective in measuring up to the promise of actually filtering out pornography and harmful content to children and families.

Electronic drag – many filters slowed the loading of pages and provided a poor user experience ultimately ending up in abandonment of the filtering system.

Education – A large percentage of users do not recognize the availability of low-cost or free filtering solutions that are dependable in delivering the protection they promise. The marketplace will play a significant role in broadcasting this knowledge to the public which should result in a larger segment of the population integrating filters with their Internet service.

Like filtering, content labeling using systems such as PICS (Platform for Internet Content Selection) was originally designed to help parents and teachers control the content that became accessible to children. However, as a content provider, labeling can potentially create a much more labor intensive and costly burden. In my position, I find little motivation to add a new level of individual standards and tags for my editors and writers to consider and manage when crafting new content for our members.

Beyond the black and white standards involved in filtering solutions, I fear that labeling has the propensity of leading to much more subjective definition boundaries. What my editors label as content suitable for teens but not children may not be consistent with label decisions made by other websites. Besides the potential for inconsistent standards, labeling can lead to an Internet ratings system ripe with the same shortcomings and weaknesses that the television networks have met with their attempt at creating six rating categories.

For example, besides the two children's categories the television networks have agreed to create, the ratings system includes "TV-G," "TV-PG," "TV-14," and "TV-M" ratings. With their age-based approach, these network ratings actually conceal what kind of objectionable content prompted the ultimate rating. There is no way for a parent to know if the rating was due to violence, profanity, sex, or all of the above. As another example of the confusion these ratings have created, the *Washington Post* recently quoted a 12-year-old girl in an interview regarding the ratings system. The girl said, "I read that 'TV-G' stands for 'Too Vague, Parents Give Up.'"

The explosive growth of pornographic and obscenity distribution on the Internet is terrifying to me personally as a father and professionally as a part of the Internet community. From the perspective of a content provider with a large audience, I believe the solution begins with an accessible, affordable and effective tool to empower Internet users in protecting their children from harmful material. Such a solution must also incur

minimal burdens upon the shoulders of content providers as measured in time, technology and labor costs.

Significantly, content providers are just now experiencing the significant burdens of increased staff requirements and technology monitoring regarding the new regulations implemented from the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act. According to *Internet World* magazine in its July 15, 2000 issue, one website (Zeeks.com) has recently had to add three full-time employees just to handle the permission slips that come in every day from parents who want to give children under 13 access to their site. Of course, this is to conform to the new regulations as defined in the legislation. Solutions that burden content providers substantially may decrease the effective implementation of the laws and may also inhibit the value of the Internet itself.

As a content provider, I fully endorse and support the mission of the Commission on Online Child Protection as well as the obligation of the United States government to fully uphold the existing obscenity laws and prosecute those who choose to break them. In addition, I look forward to embracing new solutions and technologies that are part of the solution to protecting the children of America from the destruction of pornography.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon to the Commission.