

Pearl Software's Testimony to Commission on Online Child Protection

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Pearl Software is pleased to have the opportunity to speak today about our experiences in protecting children that access the Internet. Since our beginning in 1995, we have approached this problem from that of a parent's perspective. It is generally agreed that we would like to keep our children away from influences that we, as parents and educators, consider inappropriate. At the same time, we do not want to stop our children from learning and exploring the vast, rich, educational resources that are available to them on the Internet. It is our opinion as well as our experience that an approach that combines technology with traditional parental supervision is the most viable way to instill our community and individual values upon our children while simultaneously protecting their on-line well being and privacy. This mix of supervision and technology is mirrored in Pearl Software's products and processes. Our approach of providing a tool that allows parents and educators to monitor online activity has gained wide acceptance and has been showcased at the Internet Summit as well as supported by Louis Freeh, Director of the FBI, and Bill Gates, Chairman of Microsoft Corporation. The issue with relying solely upon a technological approach to protecting children is that most solutions try to solve the problem by definitively or heuristically identifying inappropriate content and subsequently blocking the identified content. Inappropriate content is defined as that which is "unsuitable or improper". "Unsuitable or improper" content is subjective and varies in time, by culture, by geographic region and by age group.

How do we insure the parental prerogative of raising children in an age of online communications? From a parent's perspective, as our environment changes and as issues change, so must we change in our approach to protecting our children and imparting upon them behaviors that we, as caregivers in collective communities deem appropriate. When our children are young, we watch them closely while in public places or dangerous situations and we reprimand inappropriate behavior in order to alter or prevent future occurrences of that behavior. It is this traditional approach to parenting and educating that must not be lost in the equation when formatting a solution to protect children while online. This concept has been incorporated into Pearl Software's technological solution to protecting the safety and privacy of our children.

Experience and our customers tell us that parents and educators desire a technological tool that compliments their efforts in attempting to raise responsible children. Pearl Software's Cyber Snoop is a comprehensive software package that gives parents and teachers the ability to chaperone and control their children's on-line activity as well as protect their children's privacy. Cyber Snoop was developed with the philosophy that while we trust our children, we must have a means to supervise and guide them. Just as we watch our children in public places or dangerous situations, our product's monitoring

component keeps track of Internet places visited and information exchanged. If questionable Web locations are found, the parent or educator can use this monitoring tool to quick-link to that site and immediately view its content. If questionable e-mail, news, or chat activity is found, the content of these messages is easily viewed in the same manner. This technology can also be configured to selectively or completely restrict Internet access or provide no monitoring capability at all. Thus, the level of supervision is easily configured to an individual's needs and the definition of inappropriate behavior is left to the discretion of the parent or educator. This technological solution removes government censorship and First Amendment issues and replaces them with issues of parenting and educating our children.

At Pearl Software, we believe all segments of the Internet need to be addressed when considering our children's well being. The media, public discourse, and filtering solutions have placed an unbalanced emphasis on pornography that is accessible through the World Wide Web. While we agree that this segment of the Internet can pose a direct threat to our children's innocence, we consider the interactive Internet mediums to be an equal, if not greater, threat to our children's well being. Specifically, chat rooms, instant messages, news postings and e-mail expose our children not only to mental danger, but potential real physical danger. To protect our children in these interactive mediums we believe there is no substitute for parental vigilance and supervision. While a child may communicate and strike up a friendship with an open attitude, with a monitoring tool in hand, a parent may view the same interaction in a more cautious light. By providing parents and educators with insight into the child's activity, the caregiver can intercede before a seemingly innocent exchange of information and conversation escalates to a physical meeting that may have irreversible consequences.

Our technical approach in providing the Cyber Snoop solution has encompassed many design considerations. One such consideration was the usefulness of supporting a list of URLs considered inappropriate. In essence, creating a URL filter. As stated earlier, inappropriate content is subjective. As such, parents and teachers would be forced to rely upon the judgment of Pearl Software to determine what is and what is not appropriate material. We consider this to be a losing battle for two reasons: 1. The World Wide Web Internet medium continues to grow at geometric rates and 2. as humans, we are fallible and that fallibility would ultimately manifest itself in any filtering solution. One of the Internet's most comprehensive search engines, Alta Vista, has less than 16% of the existing Web pages cataloged¹. How can a company the size of Pearl Software, or its competitors, categorized 100% of the web pages that exist? It can't and to portend otherwise would be selling our customers a false sense of security. In designing Cyber Snoop we opted to place control in the Parent's and Educator's hands by supplying control mechanisms that protect the dissemination of personal information, allow time restrictions, and allow access to individually defined allowable subsets of each Internet medium.

Another design decision that Pearl Software incorporated into Cyber Snoop is the control of Internet content based on rating system standards. Cyber Snoop supports the PICs

¹ Lawrence, S. & Giles, C.L., Nature 400, 107-109 (1999)

rating system, which relies on content providers voluntarily rating the content they create and distribute. On Web pages, information exists in the header (hidden part) of the Web page that contains the rating code for that page. Cyber Snoop looks at the page rating code and compares it to the levels the parent or educator specifies as acceptable.

There are various rating systems that have been developed and are currently being used on the Internet. PICs rating systems attempt to characterize the nature of Web pages and other Internet content. Parents and Educators can use Cyber Snoop to define acceptable rating levels for each rating system available. Cyber Snoop can be set to monitor multiple rating systems simultaneously and can also be set to block any content that is not rated. The incorporation of a secure rating system control into Cyber Snoop was done because we believe this approach bolsters a caregiver's ability to determine what level of content a child has access to. The down side of this approach is that this rating system relies on content providers voluntarily rating the content they create and distribute. Though a small margin of error may be acceptable, a rating validation mechanism must be implemented to fully effectuate using rating systems on the Internet.

Throughout the past half decade, the Internet has grown quickly across borders and cultures. The Internet is too large and too dynamic to control with a broad legislative brush. In fact it is antithetical to our history and our current way of life to stifle the progression to a future that provides greater access to information and expression of freedoms. Instead our approach to ensure our collective well being in this new world of information access must continue to rely upon traditional parental values and methods that have proven effective throughout time combined with new tools and techniques that bolster and complement these values and methods.

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Select Relationships and Initiatives:

Pearl Software Education Foundation

The Pearl Software Education Foundation is a not for profit entity that provides educational resources and safety programs to the growing Internet user community. The Foundation strives to help the Internet proliferate as an educational medium while providing a means to protect the safety of those accessing it. The Foundation's emphasis is placed on responsible Internet usage that can only be achieved through education. Pearl Software, Inc. is a primary contributor to the Foundation.

EarthLink Internet

EarthLink Internet has selected Cyber Snoop for inclusion on EarthLink's TotalAccess™ and EarthLink 5.0 Internet access software CD-ROMs. EarthLink has taken a proactive step toward ensuring the safety and well being of its members by providing them with tools that enhance their Internet use and make it more productive and enjoyable. This partnership will market approximately 15 million copies of Cyber Snoop to EarthLink's target audience.

Disney & General Mills

Pearl Software has teamed with General Mills and Disney Interactive to distribute a promotional CD-ROM sampler disc. Upon purchasing selected General Mills' cereals, parents will have access to interactive CD-ROM games, limited free Internet access and Pearl Software's Cyber Snoop. This partnership will market approximately 5 million copies of Cyber Snoop to General Mills and Disney's target audience.

Compaq Computer Corporation

Cyber Snoop software has been chosen for inclusion in selected Compaq Computer Corporation LearningPaq educational solutions. Compaq's LearningPaq provides educators with tools that enrich a child's educational experience and understanding of technology.