

Youth, Pornography and the Internet  
Edited by Dick Thornburgh and Herbert Lin  
Reviewed by Justin F. Kollar

There are few more controversial issues decorating today's American political landscape than the area formed by the intersecting avenues of youth, pornography and the Internet. I was expecting a dynamic read, a hard-hitting, sober look at some daunting problems. Unfortunately this book didn't quite fulfill those expectations. Firstly, it reads as if it was written by a committee, perhaps because it was. Dick Thornburgh and Herbert Lin edited this treatise, published by the National Research Council an organization with the elaborate title of the Committee to Study Tools and Strategies for Protecting Kids from Pornography and their Applicability to Other Inappropriate Internet Content. A name this awkward should at least form a good acronym, but try as I might I couldn't find one. Secondly, it spends the better part of the book leading up to its supposed findings, only to make findings that amount to "yes indeed these are sure big issues and it's up to every parent to watch what their kids are up to." As much as I might agree, I don't need the RAND Corporation to tell me about these issues and their supposed solutions. Finally, the book looks in a mincing way at issues demanding more forthright analysis.

The book presents itself as a report surveying the technical, legal, law enforcement, economic and educational problems presented by the vast amounts of material on the Internet considered by many to be inappropriate for kids. It also acknowledges up front that it doesn't make any recommendations. Unfortunately the breadth of the issue coupled with this reluctance to offer solutions might leave the reader feeling like he just watched a series of evening news segments on the various topics addressed. At the end of the book I had to ask myself if I learned anything that I didn't

already know. The source of this frustration isn't that the book doesn't do a competent job of carrying out its avowed mission, but that the mission itself might have been the problem here; the book reads like a primer instead of like a treatise. A narrowing of the scope of the work may have helped bring it some focus.

Notwithstanding the early indicators, all outward appearances lend this book an air of distinction and timeliness. Few issues push the public's buttons as hard as youth, pornography and the Internet, after all. Thornburgh, a distinguished Constitutional scholar in his own right, and Lin, an editor of some repute, have assembled an all-star cast of lawyers, technology experts and social critics in putting this work together, but in the end it comes off as dry as a piece of old toast.

The book puts itself forward as an omnibus exploration of the issues found at the nexus of these three compelling concerns, and it is. It orients the reader nicely to the relevant definitions and market structures, but for all its laborious detailing of the state of things it offers little in the way of suggestion other than to basically say what we already know: parents should equip and educate their children to make smart decisions on their own, that filters and librarians and AOL parental surrogates can do only so much on their own.

Memorably, Thornburgh and Lin repeatedly express as their example of the challenges facing parents today, the story of a child who has been directed by his teacher to write a report on beavers. The child innocently visits a search engine and types in the word "beavers" – and is met with a confusing array of research material and hardcore pornography. It is very distracting to imagine the former Republican governor of Pennsylvania turning this scenario around in his mind. Notwithstanding the awkwardness, it's exemplary of a work that seems reluctant to deal with the utterly

unique and novel set of issues at hand. By dealing with the issue in what comes of as a ham-fisted way, the editors implicitly assume a tone both patronizing and smarmy at the same time. The issues call for a somewhat more clinical tone, one that doesn't remind the reader of an awkward teenage "birds and the bees" conversation.

This might be a helpful read for an audience without any familiarity with the issues surrounding kids, the Internet and pornography. It certainly gives a well-rounded introduction to all the various legal and technical problems at hand. For all its painful earnestness, however, the book ultimately fails to offer a roadmap towards a future where these issues could possibly be resolved. The editors effectively throw up their hands, citing the vast and decentralized nature of the Internet as an almost insurmountable problem.

In a number of places, the Committee seems vexed by the admittedly significant dichotomies and contradictions inherent where intelligent people try to discuss how to best keep certain information from certain people. These problems, as the Committee understands, manifest themselves as Constitutional claims not easily addressed under any circumstances. Parents need the ability to raise their children according to their own moral compasses, but the children are living in a world filled with new technology that the parents don't understand and that the children have a terrifying grasp of. Still, Constitutional scholars should be more capable of a tight contextual analysis. For example, the authors discuss the twin problems of overblocking and underblocking (the phenomena by which existing Internet content filters inevitably either let too much porn through to kids or block too much legitimate research material). The editors treat this as a see-saw with no balancing point, and appear utterly baffled as to the appropriate solution, leaving them making the literary equivalent of head-scratching gestures. A

similar problem presents itself when the book confronts the dilemma of whether to black-list offensive material (that is, to ban kids' access to bad web-sites) or to white-list (affirmatively endorse) good websites for kids. An almost school-marmish tenor finds the editors trumpeting the advent of the .kids top-level-domain, whereby children and parents would be able to assume as a matter of course that websites bearing the suffix are kid-safe. The .kids idea might be a good one, but while addressing one narrow issue successfully, it isn't on its own going to prevent predators from other pernicious practices like mass-spamming.

To sum up, a reader with no prior knowledge of the problems surrounding minors' access to pornography via the Internet might find some helpful illumination of the topic. The technology and social zeitgeist surrounding the Internet, however, seem to shift so quickly that any but the most deft addressing will be (as this one is) obsolete within months of publication. A better approach would be more conceptual than that presented. Giving parents the tools to know how the Internet fits into their kids lives would be more productive than a long explanation of "mousetrapping" and the ways to stop it. The most positive thing to be said about this book, and not insignificantly, is that it is surprisingly evenhanded and free from right-wing pedantism at all levels. It's refreshingly free from moralizing and comes to a basically agreeable conclusion. Still, the work isn't good as much more than a basic primer, and that's disappointing. Where parents need a beacon in the dark this is just a flashlight in the hallway.