

Getting sites to rate their content is a never-ending task for ICRA's Stephen Balkam. Clare Goff asks him if technology's speed of change makes it an impossible mission

Perpetual notion

This month a loophole was found within certain mobile phone networks which allowed children to access hardcore pornography sites without a credit card (NMA 02.02.06). And barely had the video iPod hit the high streets than consumer groups were warning of the ease with which users could get their hands on adult content.

For Stephen Balkam, CEO of the Internet Content Rating Association (ICRA), each new technology provides a further challenge in the classification of content.

Amid a backdrop of religious leaders in the US telling their flock to unplug their computers and calls for censorship from parents and governments alike, Balkam's mission is to protect children from harmful and offensive material while at the same time protecting the rights to free expression of content producers and ensuring that censorious legislation isn't adopted.

ICRA's latest project is Quatro, which enables sites to give themselves a quality label. Later this month Balkam hopes to have a demonstration of Quatro-enabled search whereby sites with a quality label will be marked as the results come up. Google, Yahoo! and MSN have expressed interest in adding advanced search functions that only return sites with quality labels.

A self-regulatory body, ICRA's existing labelling system allows online content providers to classify their content in terms of the amount of sex, nudity, language, violence, chat, alcohol, tobacco or gambling it contains. A metadata label is produced that sits in the header of the home page and can be read by filters from third parties such as ISPs or by ICRA's own filter, and programmed according to local cultural standards.

The system works in conjunction with local ratings classification schemes, such as the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) and has been signed up to by the likes of MSN, AOL, Yahoo!, Playboy and Penthouse.

"It's one of the best solutions because it's scalable," says Balkam. "If you try to rate the Web you're up against the Forth Bridge problem – you get to the end and have to start all over."

Over 200,000 Web sites have been registered so far and ICRA's focus has been the high-traffic sites such as Yahoo! and AOL. But the international nature of the Web and the convergence of new technology means it's a mammoth task.

"I now get Web sites on my Blackberry. You can buy fridges in the US that are Web-enabled. It's exploding all around us," says Balkam.

The online adult industry is bringing in profits of around \$3.5bn (£2bn) a year. But far from wanting to stall its growth, Balkam wants all content providers to acknowledge their responsibilities towards keeping kids safe by labelling and promoting filtering technologies.

With a nine-year-old daughter, Balkam has a personal interest in the problem, and knowledge of the ease with which children can access adult material online with even the most innocent of searches. "I would love to be able to build a system, through ICRA, that would help to safeguard her, her classmates and friends, and this generation growing up with the Internet in a manner

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that five years ago was inconceivable," he says.

A "serial social entrepreneur", Balkam has previously worked at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, ran a community transport group in Camden and was the first director of the National Stepfather Association before he helped found an early labelling system, the Recreational Software Advisory Council (RSAC), and then became ICRA's first CEO in 1999.

A technology novice before joining the RSAC in 1994, he went through an initial steep learning curve but, after 11 years working in this area, he now considers it his "life mission".

"The intellectual challenge is remarkable. I've never come across a subject that's so global in nature, local in its application and so compelling, not least because I have kids myself."

Through his work he has met many heads of state, won the Carl Bertelsmann prize for outstanding innovation and responsibility in the information society, and seen how the media explosion has affected government policy, industry practice and the way families bring up their kids. ICRA is not only a technological answer to

the problem but also the place where technology and child protection policy can meet. The organisation runs roundtable events where technical, public policy and non-profit advocacy groups unite to try to tackle the problem.

"There isn't one single solution," says Balkam. "There are a range of technologies that have to be used, a range of public educational messages and a range of public policy responses that could be created by governments and regulators."

The biggest challenge is new media's ability to reinvent itself every six months. No sooner had ICRA advised parents to put their PCs in the living room in order to moderate their child's activity online than the mobile Internet was launched, blowing such advice out of the water.

For parents like Balkam, who grew up at a time when the only mass media were TV and radio, education is key to protecting children from the 'pornification' of society.

Recent research from the US on the first generation of young men to grow up with access to online pornography has found them to have difficulty developing relationships with women and viewing them as anything other than sex objects.

Balkam thinks that it wouldn't take much for governments in the western world to "look to the China solution. All it would take is for the video iPod to become next Christmas's present, school playgrounds to be flooded with porn and the *Daily Mail* to start a campaign and there will be a clamour for governments to do something."

Balkam has a mission on his hands, but his vision is that of the inventor of the Internet, Tim Berners-Lee, who envisioned a 'semantic Web' in which machines talk more easily to each other, find what we want more intuitively and filter out the stuff we don't want to look at.

"All of the search engines are looking for ways to get searches more directive, more intuitive, more geared to what the Web user wants to find. And ultimately more trusted." ■

CV Name Stephen Balkam **Title** CEO, Internet Content Rating Association **Age** 51 **Education** BA Psychology, University College, Cardiff **Career** 20 years in the non-profit sector including the first director of the National Stepfamily Association; 1994-99: CEO, Recreational Software Advisory Council. Stephen's blog is at <http://journals.aol.com/stephenbalkam/Livinginaflatteneddigitalworld/>